



# *Jack's Gang*

A STONE CITY STORY

*by Hannah Grischuk*

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EDITED BY Hannah Bentley

PUBLISHED BY GRINNELL COLLEGE PRESS

*grinnellcollegepress.com*

FUNDED BY SPARC

*sparcommittee.com*

# 1

WHEN THE LAST OF THE ADULTS DIED Jack didn't really take notice. His parents had been some of the first to be taken by the plague, and by the time the rest had died Jack had been living in the streets for almost a year. He adapted quickly to his new life, stockpiling clothing, food, tools, and other things he thought might be useful. He took armfuls of supplies from recently abandoned rooms and stowed them in out-of-the-way enclaves and hard-to-find holes all around the city, all the while staying out of sight of anyone, especially those from the orphanages. For a few months into the plague, when the amount of children running the streets had become indecent in the eyes of the grown-ups, hastily prepared orphanages popped into existence. Adults attempted to pen the unsupervised children into these orphanages "for their own good," as adults are wont to do. The children refused to be corralled but instead ran, roamed, and slunk throughout the city like so many street cats, as children are wont to do.

These orphanages turned out to be a stroke of good luck for the children because it forced them to spend the rest of the year memorizing secret passages, building up their wall-climbing muscles, and in general practicing to avoid capture. These skills were dozens of times more helpful than the best orphanage could ever have been, for as the last adults faded away kids started to disappear, too. No one noticed at first, of course: gangs hadn't been formed yet so no one was keeping track of anyone else. Gradually, though, it became impossible *not* to notice. The familiar voices flowing through the window from next building would be gone one morning. The girl who was a genius trapper and always willing to trade a rabbit for a can of beans suddenly couldn't be found. Everyone grew more alert; those who were with siblings and friends started keeping watches and sleeping in shifts. Those without slept lightly and only in the most hidden places. Now that the children were on alert they started catching flashes of movement out of the corners of their eyes, glimpsing too-tall forms silhouetted against the night sky, and, worst of all, hearing the chilling clicks of metal on stone growing louder and louder as unfamiliar feet approached.

Before the plague the cityfolk and the hillfolk were, if not friends, then at least not enemies. Trade grudgingly thrived between the two and if the hillfolk found the cityfolk a bit boorish and the cityfolk found the hillfolk a bit pretentious, what difference did it make as long as the trade was fair? Therefore, when the tenth year passed without a single baby born on the hill the cityfolk said an unconvincing, "What a shame," and moved along with their day. And then, when the plague hit and many cityfolk fled the city looking for shelter on the hill, the hillfolk turned their backs with an unconvincing, "Too bad, isn't it?" and calmly waited until it was over.

Jack observed all of this from afar. He watched as city families barricaded themselves in their rooms, were repelled at spear point from the hill, or simply fled into the sea or jungle never to return. Then, later, he hid on rooftops and watched as groups of hillfolk jumped city children

in alleyways and carried them, struggling, back up the hill. He helped the kids escape where he could, but in the beginning many often escaped on their own, for children are far fiercer and more stubborn than adults ever expect. The hillfolk soon caught on, however, and they started sending only a half dozen or so of the strongest, quickest and most dangerous adults down into the city. In response the children found safety in numbers. Gangs of varying sizes formed and many settled down. Jack knew there were still a few kids on their own or in pairs, unwilling to join a gang for their own reasons, but it was impossible to keep track of them so he never knew how many were still in the city and how many had been caught. The original teenagers had made up most of the loners, no doubt because they didn't want to become babysitters, but Jack hadn't seen any of them in years. Maybe they had all been caught, or maybe they had followed the adults into the jungle, or maybe something else had happened to them altogether.

As to the fate of the kidnapped children, no one knew for sure what the hillfolk did with them, for once a child was kidnapped they never returned. No city kid had ever spotted any children while spying on the hillfolk, although admittedly these opportunities were few and far between; it was too dangerous to be that close to the lion's den. Rumors flew through the city comprised of hundreds of theories, all of them more unlikely than the last. Robbie liked only the most grisly ideas and was always going on about cannibalism and human sacrifice and daily chores. Doc suspected scientific testing but could never decide what was being tested. Wash always theorized about a large day labor force used to construct an enormous underground city beneath the hill. Jack never speculated at all. It didn't matter what happened after the kidnapping if you were never kidnapped in the first place, he reasoned, and he made it his priority to stay free.

# 2

IT WAS THE EARLY HOURS OF THE MORNING— Jack’s favorite time of day—and he was lying on his back in the dark windowsill of one of the western buildings of the city, hands under his head gazing up towards the sky. Only in the past hour had smallest and faintest of the stars begun to fade, the first hint of the approaching morning. Jack watched them one by one disappear until the last star winked out, making room for the sun.

Jack sighed and turned his head east, toward the sea’s horizon, across which a low wall of clouds hung, gray against the lightening blue sky. Suddenly Jack became aware of a light slapping sounded from below. He froze. The sound came steadily closer. It was the sound of bare feet running hard. Jack lay still and listened as the steps passed beneath him and continued away.

Stupid, thought Jack, making such a racket. I’m surprised he hasn’t

been caught already if that’s how he walks around.

This thought had only just left Jack’s mind when the sounds of several more footsteps approached, these ones moving faster and falling heavier and with the distinct click of someone with metal tacks in the bottoms of their shoes. Jack leapt to his feet, serenity gone, his heart beating fast. He knew to whom those footsteps belonged and he knew what they were doing. He jumped down from the windowsill and into the building, landing silently on his own bare feet, and scampered as quickly as he could after the footsteps that ran one floor below him.

The building in which Jack chose to watch the sunrise had, over the decades of constant disintegration and sporadic rebuilding, the very strange fortune to be two completely different buildings in one. The room in which Jack landed was enormous, large enough to fit several houses, and was completely empty. The stone floor was bare except for the occasional crack or hole where it had collapsed into the floor below, and a few piles of rubble where the ceiling had fallen in. The floor beneath, however, was a proper labyrinth of tight stone passages leading to dead ends or doubling back upon themselves so that anyone who wandered in usually wandered out a few days later, hungry and vowing to never go near that building again. It was through this maze that the chase ensued and through the empty room above that Jack followed, calculating quickly. As he kept pace zigzagging through the empty room to keep on top of the quarry, Jack muttered to himself counting the number of lefts and rights he took and how many cracks he had crossed. As he leapt over the third pile of dirt, the footsteps took a left but he veered right and dove to the ground beside a hole in the floor about the size of a manhole cover. He scooted closer and dangled his head and arms down inside the hole as the light footsteps turned and began to come back towards him again.

It was pitch black in the labyrinth but Jack hung there, his eyes wide and staring into the black, until suddenly a light-colored blur appeared at the end of the passage accompanied by the sound of quick breathing

and foot falls. The blur jolted suddenly as if it had bounced off the wall and then sprinted towards Jack. Just as it passed underneath him Jack grabbed it and, with a great heave, hoisted himself and the blur up through the hole and into the empty room. The blur had let out a startled gasp when Jack grabbed it but thankfully had not cried out. Temporarily ignoring the chase, Jack whipped out a large piece of cloth from under his shirt and laid it over the hole. He had only just managed to get it flat when the clicking footsteps turned the corner and sprinted towards them. Jack held his breath as they passed directly under him and let it out as they turned another corner and faded towards the far wall.

Jack folded the cloth back up, stuck it under his shirt, and looked around at the kid he had just pulled through the floor. The only things Jack could make out in the half-light was that the kid was small, tiny even, with sandy hair and wearing a light-colored shirt. Jack put a finger to his lips and then motioned for the kid to follow him. They padded quietly across the room towards Jack's window. The only sound Jack could hear was his own breath and the clicks zigzagging distantly below. When they got to the window Jack whispered, "This is the only way down, so I hope you're not too scared," and with that, Jack swung himself over the windowsill and began climbing down the rough stones of the outside wall. The sky had lightened considerably and when Jack landed at last upon the brick pathway at the base of the building he could see across the uneven and slightly crumbling skyline of the city framed by enormous mountains and out to the ocean where the bellies of the clouds on the horizon had turned pink: a prelude to the rising sun.

A noise right beside Jack startled him. To his surprise the kid had made it down the wall almost as fast as he himself and now stood at Jack's side, looking warily up at him. Now that they stood in the light Jack saw that the kid couldn't have been older than five, although he didn't bother to ask: no one that young would have been able to keep track of their birthdays. The sandy hair Jack had observed in the dark was actually white blond but streaked with dirt and coated in dust which dulled the

color. The kid wore a dirty white t-shirt with a ripped collar where Jack had used it for a hand-hold and brown pants with ragged holes in the knees. He couldn't be sure with all that dirt but he *thought* it was a girl.

"Oh," said Jack.

The girl's expression didn't change.

"So, who are you, then?" he asked.

The girl looked down at herself and shrugged.

"What's your name?"

The girl shrugged.

"Do you have a gang?"

The girl shook her head.

"Do you talk?"

The girl nodded.

"Okay-y," Jack ran a hair through his hair. As young as she was she was certainly very quick, for she had been able to keep ahead of the catchers. Also, she was a skilled climber; Jack hadn't yet found his equal in climbing but she had almost kept pace with him. He didn't believe that the girl didn't have a gang, though; no one so young could survive for so long without help, but, judging by the state of her clothes, it must have been a weak one without good stashes.

"So-o." Jack didn't know what to say. The girl's stomach rumbled.

"Do you have a camp or something at least?"

She shrugged and shook her head.

Jack paused. On the one hand he wanted to help this kid who apparently had nothing. On the other hand he wasn't sure who she was or if she even wanted help. "Uh, do you want to come back to my camp for breakfast?" he asked finally and uncertainly.

She looked at him for a long moment and then nodded.

"Okay. But the thing is you can't tell anyone where it is. Ever."

She nodded.

"Spit promise." A spit promise amongst the city kids was the most sacred of contracts. Anyone who broke a spit promise would be

immediately scorned throughout the rest of the city. It was safe. He spit into his palm and held out his hand. She did the same. They shook.

“I promise,” she said.

“Alright. Come on, then.”

He took off jogging for camp and she trotted along behind him, keeping up. They wound their way north over a jumbled mix of brick and stone streets.

“So, you don’t have a name?”

He glanced back and saw her shrug, not an easy gesture to make while running.

“Then what do people call you?”

“They don’t call me anything.”

“Well what did your gang call you?”

“Don’t remember.”

“You’ve been living without a gang? How?”

She shrugged and said, “I just have.”

“How long have you been just living?”

She shrugged.

Jack was impressed. He didn’t know whether or not to believe her, but couldn’t see any reason why she should lie.

They continued along in silence for a ways, the girl following as Jack climbed walls, crawled through holes, and traversed bridges.

“What’s *your* name, then?” she asked, as they balanced across a narrow stone bridge that had partially collapsed into the sluggish river below.

“I’m Jack,” said Jack.

“Jack’s gang, Jack?” she asked.

“I suppose so,” he said.

The girl didn’t reply. In fact she didn’t say anything more until they reached camp.

Jack had found the camp in his third year on the streets and deemed it perfect. Because, as far as the children could tell, the camp had been

carved out of the cliff by an underground stream, there was anywhere between five and twenty feet of stone over different areas of the camp, and when you wanted to leave you had to run for a good fifteen minutes through meandering tunnels that were originally natural but had been improved upon over many years.

Jack, Wash and Doc had worked on the camp for almost a full year before moving in, adding things like a chimney that twisted and curved enough to make their smoke untraceable, and three years later they were still making improvements. Perhaps the most surprising thing about the camp was how light it was considering it was buried beneath tons of stone. After many calculations and sheaves of blueprints, Wash had carefully carved shafts through the stone and up to the open air which let sun and fresh air in while remaining nearly undetectable from the outside.



There were only two people in the common room when they entered, both boys and both sitting by the fireplace in which an old fire smoldered. One of the boys sat on the floor, leaning up against a bundle of sticks, nose deep in a thick book. The other reclined as much as was possible while sitting on the stump just to the right of the fire and turning a large piece of snake on a spit. At first glance the boys were completely different, but, upon further inspection, it became clear that they were exactly the same. The mistake came from the permanently pinched face and hunched shoulders of the boy on the ground, who spent most of his time squinting at the pages of books in candlelight, contrasted with the second boy who looked like he had relaxation down to a science, which he did. The second most noticeable difference was that the boy on the stump seemed to be several shades darker than the boy on the ground. This impression was made partially by suntan but mostly by an



accumulation of many layers of grime.

"Morning guys," said Jack cheerfully as he entered. "Nice! I was hoping there would be some anaconda left over. Also, I brought a guest. I found her in the Double Building this morning," he added as the girl followed him inside.

"On the labyrinth floor?" asked the boy on the ground, peering over the top of his book.

Jack nodded.

"Catchers?" asked the one on the stump.

Jack nodded again.

The boy on the ground rose stiffly as if his joints pained him, stretched, and then proffered a hand to the girl. "Charmed I'm sure. If I might introduce myself. My name is Doc, and this is my brother, Wash."

"Ello," said Wash from the fireplace.

"Doc and Wash are twins," explained Jack. "Doc is, of course, our doctor, when we need one. Wash got his name because he always needs a bath."

"Don't know whatcher talking 'bout," said Wash in a falsely lofty voice. "Wot's yer name, kid?" he asked the girl.

The girl shrugged. Jack thought she looked a little exasperated.

"She doesn't have one yet," said Jack. "Do you know the alphabet?" Jack asked the girl.

She nodded.

"Do you have a favorite letter?"

The girl looked away for a moment. "Zee," she finally said.

"Zee. Hmm," he said, running his hand through his hair.

"Xylophone?" he asked, looking at Doc who shook his head.

"Too long anyway," said Jack. "Zebra?"

"Bor-ing," said Wash. "Zoo?"

"Pfft. That's more boring than Zebra," said Jack.

They all looked at Doc.

"Zygote?" he suggested.

"Euggh. Wot is *that*? Sounds disgustin'," said Wash. Doc started to answer but Wash interrupted him, "Zero."

"Not exactly flattering, is it," said Doc.

A few more minutes passed, during which Jack and Wash labeled each other's ideas as boring and Doc's as unpronounceable.

"Zee," the girl said in her quiet voice that nonetheless carried over the boys' arguments. "Just Zee."

"Hey, that's a good one," said Jack, nodding.

"It suits you," said Doc.

"Yeah, it's short," agreed Wash.

The girl smirked.

"So. Now that's done. I don't know what you want to do, but if you'd like to join our gang you're welcome to. Or you can just stay for breakfast if you like. If you do want to live here, though, there are some rules." She just stared at him, so after a moment he continued with the rules he had first laid out to Doc and Wash and then one by one to everyone else as they had joined the gang. "The most important rule is that you can't let yourself get followed back to camp. We don't want to have to find a new one if the O'Rileys or the Southerners or someone finds this one. Second, we keep everyone safe here, and we'll come looking for you if you go missing, so if you're going off don't disappear for too long without letting someone know. And, obviously, don't get caught. If you get caught there's nothing we can do, but it hasn't happened yet.

"Anyway, we have check-ins every few days when everyone is together in order to catch up on what we're all doing and to figure out what supplies we have or need so we don't run short. Now," this was always an uncomfortable part of the speech for Jack, "you don't have to do anything you don't want to do. Ever. Not even when I tell you to do things. But, you're not alone anymore, you know? You might have to think about other people when you-"

"I know," said Zee.

Jack paused. "Okay, good. Well, I guess that's all. So..."

Zee looked the room over, including the two twins by the fireside. Then she stared up at Jack, forehead wrinkled, for a full minute. Finally, she nodded. "I'll join."

"Great," said Jack. "Well, Jocco's bed is too big for him so you can bunk with him."

Zee nodded.

"Don' worry," said Wash. "Ee embathes on occasion."

Zee looked at Jack with one eyebrow raised but it was Doc who answered. "It is far less odious to share a bed with one who regularly practices personal hygiene."

Zee nodded, but Jack wasn't sure if she completely understood what he had said. Most people didn't completely understand Doc. Or Wash for that matter.

Zee was peering curiously between the twins. "Did you two grow up together?" she asked.

"Indeed. Why do you ask?" said Doc at the same time Wash said, "Course we did. Why?"

Zee just shrugged, and Jack smiled to himself. Without fail everyone who met the twins asked something similar, and without fail the twins were surprised by the question. Apparently, Doc and Wash didn't realize how differently they spoke, looked, and acted, but found themselves as similar as any other set of identical twins. Jack secretly thought their family must have been very strange to produce these two boys, but he never mentioned it. For one, he didn't want them to feel like he was making fun of them. For another, many kids were still sensitive about their parents' deaths, and so speaking casually about parents was very bad manners throughout city.

"Your room is through here," said Jack, changing the subject. He drew back an elaborately painted bed sheet that acted as a curtain between a bedroom and the living room. "Jocco's bed is this one," he pointed to a bundle of leaves and branches covered over with a sheet, "and we'll need you get you a—" he stuck his head out of the doorway and called, "Hey

Doc! Did Jocco make any more guises yet?"

"I do believe he finished a disguise just last night. It is drying on the line, if I am not mistaken."

"Oh, right. Here it is," Jack tugged a large, square cloth down off of a clothesline where it blended perfectly with the wall. The cloth was similar to the one Jack had used earlier that morning to cover the hole in the floor. One side was painted in shades of gray to resemble stones, the other in shades of red to resemble bricks.

"You'd be surprised how much this can help you if you need to hide. Jocco's a painting genius. Plus, it's handy for carrying things and stuff. Now the bathroom."

The bathroom was a smallish room with a low ceiling and only one sky-shaft set in the far wall letting in just enough light so one could move around without tripping. A steady stream waterfalled from a hole in the ceiling near the right corner of the back wall, then flowed through the room until it disappeared under the left-hand wall and out of the camp.

"This is our bathroom and where we get water. Of course you don't have to, but if you did bathe regularly we'd all appreciate it."

"Do feel free to maintain a level of hygiene!" called a voice from the living room.

"Course its only tha' first level of hygiene maintain'd by some," said another.

"And finally," he led her back to the living room, "our entrances." He pointed to the front door, from which they had entered, "You know that one. It eventually leads along the Big Brick Wall, going south." He pointed to the back door, which was much smaller and opened on a steep upward path that the gang knew had a hole to a path leading down. "This one's the northern tunnel. It pretty much gets you north west if you go up, and if you head down it you can get to the lower city pretty quickly, though you have to take the rooftops; there's no below-ground or street way. And this is the chute." He pointed to a hole in the ceiling in the furthest corner of the common room away from the bedrooms and fire. It was just large

enough for a child to crawl through and had small divots carved in the wall below which served as a ladder. "This one leads to the roof—not directly though, it's a little winding. You can see everything from up there and pretty much go in any direction if you're good at climbing. And that's it, I think."

"Food's up!" said Wash.

"Good!" said Jack. The smell of roasting meat was making his stomach growl. He threw himself down in front of the fire and propped himself up on his elbows. Zee followed him and sat cross-legged between Jack and Doc while Wash pulled the snake out of the fire and began hacking off large sections with a belt-knife.

"Snake steaks!" he said cheerfully, and got up to hand them around. As he stood his clothing was revealed: a pair of worn overalls with the suspenders tied around his waist and a stained blue blouse with ruffles at the collar and sleeves. As he tossed Zee a steak he caught her looking at him.

"Can't be a Choosy Charlie when ya go through clothes fast as me," he explained.

Zee shrugged and took a bite. She swallowed quickly and took another, enormous bite.

"Like it?" asked Jack, "Anaconda's my favorite." Not many kids hunted anaconda because they thought it was too dangerous, but Scrape and Jack had accidentally developed a strategy when Jack awoke one morning to find himself being squeezed to death. It was how they had met.

Zee nodded.

"So," he continued, turning towards the twins, "where's the rest of them?"

"Tish accompanied Jocco in his acquisition of more pigment," said Doc at the same time Wash said, "Tish n' Jocco went t' git s'more paint-stuffs." Tish and Jocco often went out together because Tish, who was eight, was fiercely protective of Jocco, who probably wasn't more than a few months older than Zee. The two couldn't remember whether or not

they were related, though they both had the same raven black hair, dark eyes, and snorting laugh, and they had been together since either of them could remember.

"Dunno 'bout Scrape 'n Robbie, though," said Wash.

"They departed ere we awoke," said Doc.

Scrape was Jack's best friend. He had known her longer than he had known anyone else, though he started living with Doc and Wash first. She was about the same age as Jack and quite tall with long brown hair usually tied back in a braid. Perhaps her most noticeable feature was her temper, which displayed itself all over her face, making it impossible not to know what she was thinking. Children in every corner of Stone City dove for cover at her slightest frown, for Scrape was an eager and excellent fighter, and she never went anywhere without a long, thin sword strapped to her back, although she was equally dangerous with her fists and feet and, well, everything really. Her name, of course, came from the huge number of scrapes she both got into and received.

Robbie was the latest member of the gang. Jack and Scrape had rescued him from a group of the notoriously violent O'Rileys, of which he had been a member. Robbie never mentioned how he had fallen out of favor with the O'Rileys, and Jack had never asked, but the boy joined Jack's gang straight away. Jack wasn't sure why Robbie joined the gang or stayed with it. He didn't seem to like any of them very much, particularly Jack, but maybe it was enough that he had found a safe place to live, and, since he was older and bigger than the rest of them and was a pretty good fighter, he was useful to have around.

Somehow Robbie didn't get on Scrape's nerves like he did everyone else's, so the two frequently hunted together. And, because Scrape and Robbie weren't the most amicable pair to happen across in a side ally, they frequently fought together too. This made Tish, who disliked violence, annoyed, Jack, who didn't want to make more enemies than they already had, frustrated, and Doc, who was in charge of bandage supplies, apoplectic.



"I saw them earlier," said Jack. "They left before dawn to go hunting while the anaconda were sleeping."

There were a few minutes of silence as everyone finished their meal, and then Zee turned to him.

"So, what do you do?"

"What do you mean?" asked Jack.

"What do you do all day?"

Jack looked around at the others. "I guess we all do different things. Wash spends a lot of time working on the camp and our 'scapeholes—our smaller, emergency hideouts—and Doc does a lot of research and experimenting..." he petered off.

"What do you do?" she asked

Jack thought for a moment. What *did* he do? He organized his gang, he made sure everyone had food and supplies. What else? Finally he shrugged and said, "I just survive, I guess. And try to make sure everyone else survives, too."

Zee nodded and turned back to the fire.

"So. Watch up to f'r t'day, brother mine?" Wash asked Doc.

"I intend to inventory our disposable medical supplies. I believe we have a dearth of the more diaphanous gauzes."

"Cuz o' Scrape always gettin' cut?" asked Wash.

"And the nasty scalp abrasion Jack suffered at the hands of that hillman."

"Aw yeah. Th' new catcher. We 'avn't seen 'im b'fore, 'ave we?"

"I think not."

"Well 'ees a dang'rous one, I'm sure of it. Smart lookin', too: big 'ead."

Doc snorted wisely. "A dolichocephalic skull does not an intelligent man make."

"Yeah but didja catch that look in 'is eyes? Clever 'ee is."

"The trap he laid *did* suggest intelligence."

"Always convince ya in th' end. It's cuz I'm the smart one."

The twins chuckled, but Jack didn't. He suspected that Wash was at least as smart as his brother. Just one discussion with Wash about practical physics was enough to show anyone that beneath the dirt and grammar was a very quick mind. Of course, all the technical terms combined with Wash's particular manner of speech made him completely unintelligible to anyone but Doc, but Jack got the *impression* Wash knew what he was talking about.

As far as the catcher goes, that was still a sore spot for Jack. The man was young—much younger than any of the other catchers. So young, in fact, that Jack had assumed he was a city kid. The man had been attempting to make a rabbit snare and failing miserably. Jack had gone to offer help, and that was when the catcher had attacked. Jack had only just got away. He hated to think of the kids who had been caught by that trap. Or would be caught in the future.

"And what engages you today?" Doc asked Wash.

"Roofwork. 'Spouse I should fin'lly put that las' skyshaft in 'Tish's room since we got a third res'dent. Already drawed up the plans n' all. Should be a fun one. Nice'n complex. Zee," Wash turned towards her, "Wocha upa?"

Zee looked confused, so Doc said, "Are you otherwise engaged?"

Jack glanced sideways at her blank face, amused. He couldn't blame her. He hadn't understood half the conversation either.

"Do you have plans for the day?" Jack translated.

Zee shook her head.

"Ex-lent. I c'd use a th'rd 'and. You any good a' climbin'?"

Zee shrugged in a way that said, "Obviously."

"Wanna help?"

Zee shrugged and nodded.

"Let's go 'n I'll show ya th' tools."

"As they walked away Jack heard Wash start to explain: "O-kee. Now

the mos' importn't thing to remember ever—an' I mean ever—is tha' physics is physics no matt'r wot you're dealin' wit. 'Ere's some tools. I made mos' uv th'tools meeself so th' may take s'm learnin' to get down, but this here's prolly th' mos' useful of th' lot. I call 'er th' Lambaster, cuz when thing's ain't behavin' she'll straight 'em out..."

"Any luck with the anti-rust coating?" Jack asked Doc. Doc's latest obsession was corrosion, and he was currently working to develop a coating that could be applied to metal to stop it from rusting.

Doc sighed. "No conclusions as of yet, but it's early and I am hopeful. And how will you be occupying your time today?"

"Well, if you're running low on bandages I could go to one of our stashes. We need more cans anyway and I think everyone could use a new shirt."

"That would be most welcome," said Doc. He sighed. "Well, I'm off to read more about iron oxides." The boy stood up and, holding his lower back, shuffled off to his room.

Jack lay back upon the floor and closed his eyes.

### 3

HE WAS BROUGHT OUT OF A PLEASANT DOZE by the echoes of loud voices approaching. His alarm changed to anger as he recognized the voices as belonging to the remainder of his gang. They knew better than to make so much noise when returning to camp.

As the group turned the corner Jack glared at them and opened his mouth, but before the remonstrance left his throat a puff of ashes ballooned out from behind him. Coughing, he turned to look towards the fireplace where Zee had just landed in the now cold ashes.

"Wash says you zygotes better quiet up or he'll cap off every one of you's skyshafts; he could here you comin' a parsec away," she said, and without waiting for a response she climbed back up the chimney.

The room was silent except for a few sooty coughs, every person staring in surprise at the fireplace Zee had just vacated.

"That was Zee," said Jack, "and why in the North were you making

so much noise?”

“What’s a zygote?” asked Jocco.

“Ask Doc. Scrape,” he said, turning to her, “what’s wrong?”

“Sorry, Jack,” she said, not looking *too* ashamed of herself, “Sally’s gang found more sugar. They want to play us, toffee for meat. They haven’t had snake in a while since Breaker got his arm broken.”

Toffee was far and away the most sought-after item in the city. Candy and other sweets had been the first to be consumed, as one would expect in a city full of children. As far as anyone knew the only person who could make sweets was Sally’s gang’s cook, Cookie. Sure, he only knew how to make toffee, but toffee was far more enjoyable than having to eat a spoonful of straight sugar. Luckily for Jack’s gang, Jack and Sally had been friends for years, trading food, weapons, favors, and toffee.

Jack grinned despite himself. Playing ball was one of his favorite things to do. Actually, it was one of everyone’s favorite things to do.

“They want to play us? When?” he asked.

“Tonight,” said Scrape. “As soon as the moon rises.”

“Excellent,” said Jack. “Let’s have a check-in now everyone’s here.”

In a moment two puffs of ash rose from the fireplace which cleared to reveal Wash and Zee. Doc wandered out from his office, reluctantly withdrawing himself from a book.

Everyone got into a semi-organized line. Jack turned to Scrape and Robbie, who were each holding the end of a heavy stick around which wrapped the coils of a mid-sized anaconda.

“First of all,” said Jack, “this is Zee.” He gestured to the girl. “I found her in the labyrinth and asked her if she wanted to join us and she said yes, so...” he shrugged. “Scrape?”

“We got a snake,” said Scrape.

“Obviously,” muttered Robbie.

“Injuries?” asked Jack.

“Scrape,” said Robbie.

“Minor,” answered Scrape, throwing Robbie a look.

“Go see Doc after check-in,” said Jack, ignoring Scrape’s rolled eyes. “Tish?”

“Um, nothing much,” said Tish. She was always nervous talking in front of everyone. “Jocco and I went to the jungle border. I gathered.”

“What did you get?” asked Jack.

“Um, potatoes, and, um, some herbs for Doc. For medicine.”

“Good. Did you find any honey?” Doc liked to spread honey over cuts to make sure the cuts didn’t get infected. Something about antibacterial something. In any case, their stock was low and Doc was starting to get anxious.

“Yes. I, uh, found a bee hive, but I, uh, didn’t have Smoke ingredients with me. Sorry. I can go after check-in.”

“Don’t worry, go whenever you have time. We’re not desperate yet, are we?” he looked at Doc.

“Not desperate, but I will need more soon,” said Doc.

“It’s fine. I don’t have anything else to do today,” said Tish.

“Okay, good,” said Jack. “Jocco?” Jocco stood up strait and puffed out his chest. He took check-ins very seriously.

“I got colors, sir,” he said in his high voice.

“You don’t have to call me ‘sir,’” said Jack.

“Yes, sir,” said Jocco.

“Okay. Well, anyway, do you have enough colors for more ‘guises? I just gave one to Zee and Scrape and I am going to need new ones soon.”

“Me too,” said Robbie.

“An’ me,” said Wash.

Jocco rolled his eyes at Wash, “You always need a new one.”

“So that makes four and maybe a few extra?”

“I have the colors, sir.”

“And how are you on paste?”

“I’ve got tons, sir,” said Jocco. Jocco made his paint by combining anything with a pigment, like flowers, mud, and stone dust, and mixing it with his own special formula he called paste. The result was colored paint

that adhered to anything and dried after only a few hours.

"Sheets?" asked Jack.

Jocco paused for a moment. "I *might* be okay," he said.

"You're not using my sheets," Tish muttered to him.

"I'll need more sheets," said Jocco.

"Okay," he turned to Doc, "Doc?"

"Inventory and research," said Doc.

"Great," said Jack. "Wash?"

"Well, I finished fixin' up the entrance of ole 'scape'ole three yesterday. T'day The Diminutive Miss Zee an' I are workin' on insculptin' that last skyshaft," he answered.

"Okay, great. I guess that's it."

"Right-o!" said Wash cheerfully, and he clambered back up the chimney, followed closely by Zee.

"I'm going to get some supplies but I'd rather go during the day when I can actually see what I'm doing, so let me know if anyone needs anything."

"Can I come with you?" asked Jocco.

"Sure, another hand would be useful," said Jack. "I'll see how many cans we need while you put your things away."

"Yay!" said Jocco, his eyes lighting up.

Jack turned to Scrape, "Really, make sure you see Doc. Doc, make sure Scrape sees you. Robbie, you're going to clean the snake?"

Robbie grunted.

"Good. But make sure you clean up after yourself this time." There were noises of assent from the others and Robbie glared. Jack ignored them and continued, "And Jocco and I are going to the stashes. So-o I guess don't get caught and we'll meet here at dark for ball."

Jack stepped back and watched the group, chatting happily, disperse.

"C'mon. Help me get this thing into the bathroom, Scrape."

"Didja see that blue I got today? It's got a purple tinge, very rare."

"My goodness, this will need five stitches at least!"

"It's not a big deal, Doc. I barely feel it."

"Come *on* Scrape, let's go."

"Um, Doc, I gathered some plantain leaves if you run out of honey."

"And the *gray*. Feel this consistency."

"Jocco, you're getting mud all *over* the place."

"Oh dear, and just look at this puncture wound. Is this how you people amuse yourselves?"

A short whistle sounded and a coil of rope fell down the nearest skyhole, almost hitting Jocco.

"Hey! Watch it!"

"Oi Tish! Tie on the ole adzey, wouldja? It's th' one tha' looks like a messtup axe."

"Really Doc, it's no big deal. I'm more upset about my shirt."

"*Scrape*. This thing is *heavy*."

"Wotcher 'eads. Sharp thing comin' up."

"This'll be the third patch, and I only got the raving thing last week!"

"What a day to have a dearth of diaphanous dressing!"

Jack retreated to the far corner of the living room to come up with a list of what they needed.

# 4

THREE HOURS LATER FOUND JACK crouched on top of a large pile of wall-debris that barricaded the tunnel leading to the back door.

“Clear. Let’s go,” he said over his shoulder, and he and Jocco squeezed through the gap between the rubble and the ceiling and skidded down the other side, where the tunnel continued as if it had never been interrupted. The boys trotted silently down the dim tunnel on bare feet, Jack because it was easier to climb barefoot; Jocco because Jack did it. A minute’s run away the tunnel split, one path going right and one left, but Jocco and Jack both knew the path well and, without talking, chose down. Jack went first, jumping fearlessly down the hidden hole and landing on his feet but immediately pitching forward into a somersault to ease the fall. Jocco followed a second later, rolling exactly as Jack had done, and together they got to their feet and began running again. This second tunnel could not have been more different than the first: cheerful

sunlight shone through small, open-air windows near the ceiling, and on the outer wall was painted a mural of the sun setting over a serene ocean, while the inner wall was painted to imitate the jungle.

“Hey, Jack?” Jocco called up to him.

“Yeah?”

“Why is Zee living with us now?”

Jack didn’t understand the question. “I offered and she said yes.”

“Why did you offer?”

“I dunno,” Jack thought for a moment. “The same reasons why I offered to everyone else.”

“What was that?”

Jack paused. “Well, I guess it’s just good to keep people safe. And everyone we have is good to have around. Useful, you know?”

“She’s tiny. How can she be useful?”

“She’s a good climber. And I think Wash finds her helpful.”

“I dunno,” said Jocco, dourly. “You don’t even know where she came from.”

“I didn’t know where you came from. And Robbie came from the O’Rileys. What’s worse than that?”

“Yeah, and look how *that* turned out,” grumbled Jocco.

“She’s really young but somehow she’s still alive and not caught, so she’s good at surviving. And no matter where she came from, *that* is a good skill to have in the gang.”

“I’m about her age and I haven’t been caught.”

“I know. And you’re in the gang, too.”

“And now I have to share my bed,” said Jocco.

“Please, that bed is so big you won’t even notice she’s there.”

Jocco grumbled something unintelligible.

“We’ll start making another bed for her,” said Jack, feeling proud of his patience. “Will that make you feel better?”

“No,” Jocco grumbled. “I still don’t like her.”

“That’s okay. But, you know, we might be helping her by taking her



in. She might not know how to fight or hunt or anything. Maybe you can teach her.”

“Yeah?” said Jocco, perking up a bit.

“Sure. Maybe you could spar with her or something.”

“Yeah, I could do that!”

“Okay, good. Now keep it down. We’re getting closer,” said Jack.

They jogged south for a few minutes until the outer wall and ceiling abruptly vanished, and suddenly the boys were running along a thin ledge that stuck out of the side of the Big Brick Wall. To their right was solid stone, and to their left open air which eventually ended in the city below, although that didn’t provide much comfort to anyone who was careless enough to slip. The boys’ only response to the change was a small smile that appeared on each face as the sun hit them. Neither boy meant to smile, but while living under hundreds of tons of rock was safer, there was nothing like open air.

As the end of the ledge neared Jack slowed down to run next to Jocco.

“I don’t know if you remember, but there’s this one stash in O’Riley territory that is really stocked.”

“I remember!” said Jocco, eagerly.

“It’s near the edge of their territory, so it shouldn’t be too dangerous.”

“I’m not scared,” said Jocco, piqued.

“Alright then,” Jack grinned down at the boy, “Let’s have some fun,” and he leapt off the ledge.

He landed ten feet down on the brightly painted bricks of Jocco’s Bridge. His bare feet slapped against the warm bricks as he jogged across the narrow bridge that spanned the Big Brick wall and the Bridge Building, which was the tallest building below the Big Brick Wall. The boys ran across the slowly descending rooftops until they had reached O’Riley territory.

O’Riley territory was in the very lowest part of the city, bordering the sea. The layout of this area was slightly less confusing than the rest—for

example, it was relatively flat so you always knew which was the ground level. For another, these buildings were free-standing, meaning they hadn’t been dug into or expanded out of the mountains that surrounded the city on three sides, so you had a sense of which window or staircase led where. Jack suspected this layout was what had attracted O’Riley in the first place, for O’Riley himself was a simple kid.

O’Riley, originally Old Riley to distinguish him from Young Riley of one of the wandering gangs, was hands down the biggest resident of Stone City. He was taller than Jocco and Jack put together and reminiscent of a particularly ill-tempered ox. If it wasn’t for the hillfolk, O’Riley would surely be the subject of every city kids’ nightmares. Even with the hillfolk he occasionally made an appearance. O’Riley led a gang of the biggest and meanest kids in the city. Years ago, no child would dare venture into the fiercely patrolled O’Riley territory, and even wandering other parts of the city could be dangerous, for O’Riley sent his gang out on what he called “reconnaissance missions,” which usually resulted in some poor kid in the very uncomfortable position of having to trade their freedom for the location of their stashes. But that was years ago. Time and success had made O’Riley overconfident, which in turn made him and his gang lazy. These days, sneaking onto his ground wasn’t too difficult, and, if a kid was particularly daring, they might even be able to sneak their way into one of O’Riley’s many stashes. This was rewarding both because the stashes were teeming with useful supplies and because it felt good to get back at O’Riley even in a small way.

Jack threw a grin over his shoulder to Jocco. “You sure you’re up for it?”

“I’ve been down there before,” said Jocco.

“All right then,” said Jack, and he sped up.

Before long the ledge became descending steps leading to the streets below, which the boys easily skipped until they were low enough to jump from the stairs onto the closest rooftop. They ran across the roof and

then crouched in the shadow of the abutting roof, which stood about ten feet higher.

Using hand and foot holds he had carved into the brick years ago, Jack climbed the wall and assessed surrounding roofs carefully.

"All good. Left or right?" Jack whispered down.

"Left," said Jocco.

"Okay."

In one quick motion Jack vaulted himself onto the second roof and took off at a sprint towards the far-right corner. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Jocco do the same for the far-left corner. Jack checked his speed so they simultaneously leapt the two-foot gap between their roof and the next. On the opposite end of the new roof a towering brick building scarred with empty windows stood, stretching at least ten stories above their heads. Both put on a final burst of speed as they reached the four-foot gap between buildings and dove, Jack through the far-right window and Jocco through the far-left. Jack tucked his head and landed shoulder first, the speed carrying him into three somersaults until he was able to stop himself. He crawled back over to the window, careful to keep his head behind the frame, and peeked out. He could see no running figures, no one who looked like they might be sounding an alarm or chasing after him. He stared straight at the corner of a roof directly in the middle of his view and let his eyes blur. It was a trick he had discovered by watching ants crawling among the brush in the jungle. All he had to do was keep his eyes still and unfocused and every movement jumped out. Three things caught his eye and he focused on each of them in turn: the first was an O'Riley kid who was strolling casually down a distant street one hand in her pocket, the other casually resting a short sword on her shoulder; the second was two kids hurriedly skirting along the edge of O'Riley territory, heading south; the third was a kid moving in a crouch from roof to roof, heading away from them. Familiar footsteps approached him from behind.

"Looks good," said Jack, turning towards him. "Don't think anyone saw us."

"Shallst we?" asked Jocco in Doc's voice.

"Sure," Jack smiled.

For the first time since leaving camp the boys walked. They padded across the floor, their bare feet not leaving a trace on the dirty bricks. This room, like every other room in the building, was square with tall ceilings and a doorway that opened to a long hall which ran down the center of every level and ended in a stairway on either end. This room, like almost every other room, was completely bare except for dirt; the exception was the room for which the boys were heading. They left the room and turned right into the stairwell and began the ascent. Brick step after brick step passed underneath Jack's feet. His breathing became labored and his legs hurt more and more with each level they passed.

"Why," panted Jocco, "do they. Have to. Keep their. Stash. On the. Top floor?"

"Because," Jack panted back, "they're dumb. They think. If they make it. Hard to reach. No one will find it. All you have to do. Is find the places. That are the most annoying to get to. They'll have. A stash there."

Finally the boys reached the top floor. Then Jack sighed gratefully, and Jocco did the same. "Okay, let's go."

They padded down the hall and entered the third room on the right. Inside was a massive mound of disorganization. "Okay," said Jack, "clothes for everyone, sheets and bandages if you can find them, and food."

"I remember," said Jocco, and the boys went to work.

"Found a sheet," said Jack after a bit. He balled it up and tossed it into the doorway.

"I have shirts for you, me, Scrape... I think I have one for everyone."

"Good. I got a second sheet. That will be enough, right?"

"It should be. I have a stack of pants too. This must be the clothing section." Balls of cloth flew towards the door from the other side of the pile.

“The food is at the back. Help me with it?”

Jocco tossed can after can to Jack who dropped them onto the pile until they had a few weeks-worth of vegetables.

“There are bandages here, too. Do you think Doc would want any of this stuff? I don’t know what it is but—”

“We’ll take it, why not?” said Jack. “I found a small dagger and I think this is a cleaver? They could be useful. Anything else interesting?”

“Hey, check out the color of this stone,” a small hand stuck out from behind the pile waving around a smooth, blue pebble.

“Nice,” said Jack, absently.

“I wonder what it’s for.”

“I think that’s all we need. Let’s get gone.”

Jocco slipped the stone into his pocket, and then the two boys each took a disguise and a piece of rope from under their shirts and bundled the goods together into two sacks. Jack tried to take all the cans, but at Jocco’s insistence ended up splitting everything evenly between them.

## 5

THE TRIP DOWN WAS MUCH EASIER than the trip up. Instead of bothering to walk down each step the boys half-fell down the stairs, bouncing off the walls of the narrow stairwell, barely keeping their feet under them and making sure to fall on the sacks when they didn’t. As there were no underground tunnels nor aboveground bridges, and there wasn’t enough room to get a running start to exit the same way in which they came, the only way to get out of the building was from the ground floor. They chose a window at random and landed almost silently on the stone street, the only sound a slight clink of cans from Jocco’s bag. He looked guiltily up at Jack, who raised an eyebrow.

The boys crept through alleyways, Jack checking around corners, Jocco keeping an eye on the streets behind them, and both regularly checking the roofs. They were still close to the center of O’Riley territory when the sound of raised voices came from a block ahead of them. Jack

and Jocco stopped short and listened.

“What do you mean you don’t know?!” shouted a deep voice. “We only let you join because your mom was a doctor. How can you not know about basic medicine?”

“Yeah, I know basic stuff,” shouted a second voice, “but come on, O’Riley, I don’t even know what’s wrong with her! How am I supposed to know how to fix it? And what does it matter anyway?”

“It matters to me, which means it matters to you! Don’t you have anti-whatevers?”

“Antibiotics? Yeah, right. There haven’t been any of those in the city in years. Look, I don’t know why you’re worried. Who cares if she dies? She’s not one of us.”

“It’s not her I’m worried about.”

“Then what are you worried about?” He sounded exasperated.

There was a pause. “I’m not worried. But if anyone else gets sick you’d better know how to fix it.”

“Look, I don’t—fine!”

“Good. Now get away from me, I’ve got better things to do than waste breath on you.”

Light footsteps ran off away from them, but a second set of heavier footsteps started towards them. Jack motioned Jocco into a nearby doorway. He tried the door handle. It opened and they slipped inside and shut the door. They waited silently as O’Riley passed, and then for a full minute after, to make sure he was really gone, before sneaking back out of the building and continuing on their way.

“O’Riley’s getting meaner in his old age,” Jack whispered to Jocco.

“Fine with me, so long as I don’t have to deal with him,” Jocco whispered back.

They had almost made it to the border and Jack had just started to breathe easy when Jocco let out a terrified squeak. Jack whirled around, pulling out his knife. He had already lunged when the stranger put up his

hands and said, “Woah, Jack. Take it easy.”

“You raving zygote, Breaker. What are you doing, sneaking up on people like that?”

“Sorry to scare you. Guess I’m just too stealthy for you all,” the boy said, grinning. Breaker was a few inches taller than Jack with big shoulders, freckles, and bright red hair; although at the moment his whole body, including hair and clothes, was covered in charcoal.

Jack rolled his eyes.

“Where’d you come from?” asked Jocco. “I was checking behind us, I swear I was,” he said, looking up at Jack.

“You should check doorways more carefully,” said Breaker.

“Well we usually aren’t looking out for chimney sweeps. What are you up to?” asked Jack.

“Oh, you know. Sally likes to keep up on O’Riley.” Jack did know this because she’d passed the information on to him.

“Anything new?”

“Naw, pretty regular. He seems a bit angrier than the last time I saw him but, you know, it’s O’Riley.” Breaker shrugged. “His gang’s been shuffling around a bit more too.”

“Yeah, we just heard him ripping apart some poor kid. Do you think they’re having problems with the Southerners?”

“Maybe, but the Southerners could never take the O’Rileys. His whole gang is ancient.”

This was definitely true. With Robbie gone, none of the O’Rileys was under fifteen.

“We’re heading back. Wanna join?” asked Jack.

“Sure.”

They set off again. Now that Breaker was a part of the group they walked a little easier. It was unlikely someone would be stupid enough to jump three people. Especially when one of them could break bones with his bare hands. He was called Breaker for a reason.

“What else is new?” asked Jack. He hadn’t seen Breaker since the boy

had broken his arm: a few weeks at least.

“Nothing much. Did you hear about Zoe?”

“Which Zoe? From Jamie’s gang, you mean?” asked Jack.

“Yeah, apparently something’s wrong with her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like she’s sick with something.”

“That must be what O’Riley was shouting about. Is it food poisoning or something?” Illness in the city was uncommon. At least any illness worth talking about. The only time Jack had ever had more than a cold was when he had neglected to mention a large cut he had sustained to Doc and it had become infected. Doc’s reaction was enough to ensure Jack would never do *that* again.

“Or maybe an infection?” he asked.

“Dunno. She got sick yesterday and she’s already pretty bad, apparently. Fever, tired, dizzy. I dunno, Jamie’s gang isn’t talking about it.”

“Well yeah. Zoe’s her best fighter, right? Especially since River got caught.”

“Jamie’s still claiming that was a panther,” said Breaker.

“Well, yeah. She’s not going to admit one of her gang was careless enough to get caught. Anyway, what else do you know about Zoe?”

“That’s it.”

“Who’d you hear it from?”

“Trip got it off of Rat.”

Trip was another member of Sally’s gang, who was mainly responsible for keeping all the city gossip straight so Sally could anticipate trouble. Rat was... Rat.

“Of course. I wonder why O’Riley was worried about it, though. It’s not like she’s part of his gang.” Jack was quiet for a moment. Zoe was Jamie’s best fighter, but more importantly she was also the oldest person in the city as far as anyone knew, besides maybe O’Riley. All of older kids had formed their own gangs, distancing themselves from the

younger ones, but they hadn’t been seen in ages. Jack wondered if this was something about which he should be concerned. O’Riley clearly thought so.

Breaker spoke, interrupting Jack’s thoughts.

“So, what’s up with you? Heard you got a new kid. Zee, right?”

“That was fast, how did you know?”

“Just ran into Tish.”

Of course, thought Jack. Breaker and Tish managed to run into each other at least once a day. Jack wasn’t sure why they were such good friends: as far as Jack could tell almost everything about them was different, but they either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

“Yeah, Zee joined this morning.”

“Good, good,” said Breaker.

“How’s everyone in your gang?” Jack asked.

“Regular. Cookie’s been making toffee all day. The smell has been driving everyone bonkers. Can’t *wait* ‘till it’s done. And, of course, we’re excited about the game tonight.”

“Us too!” said Jocco.

“Will you be able to play?” asked Jack.

“I’ll be the one-armed goal keeper,” said Breaker, holding up his left arm, which was bound tightly between two thin boards of wood.

“I’m actually surprised to see you out here with that,” said Jack.

“I finally convinced Sally to give me a job. I had to spit promise not to get into a single fight while I was out, though.” He sighed sadly.

“You’re crazy,” said Jack.

“I know, but it was the only way she would let me go.”

Jack rolled his eyes, and Breaker grinned.

“Alright, I’m heading this way,” said Breaker, pointing off to the left.

“See you tonight. Make sure you bring the toffee,” said Jack.

“Make sure *you* bring the meat,” said Breaker.

# 6

THAT NIGHT JACK'S GANG AND SALLY'S GANG met to play ball. Ball was a very uncomplicated game. It was played in a large, low room in an area of the city that had flooded some years ago with three feet of water, which both added a level of difficulty and made it almost certain that no one would happen upon them: who would take a stroll at night in chest high water? The game involved trying to get a ball about the size of a small watermelon through the opposing team's goal through any means necessary. The goals were two doorways which stood opposite each other and led to smaller, also flooded rooms. The only rule was no forcing people underwater, and the first to thirteen wins.

Both teams arrived at the same time, chanting and cheering and making a general racket. Sally's team had streaked their faces with charcoal and tied black bands around their heads. Jack's team had streaked their faces with red clay and tied red bands around their heads.

This originally designated teams because it was hard to see faces in the dark, but everyone soon learned not to trust the bands: every player on Sally's team kept a red band in their pocket, and everyone on Jack's team kept a black band in their pocket, ready to be swapped once the water washed the face paint off.

Wash led the way for his team, waving two torches about so energetically no one could see much. Jack and Scrape followed, carrying the snake between them on a stick. They had tied a red band around its tail and painted its face, too. Sally and Cookie, led by Little Michael with a torch, carried between them a huge wooden goblet that had been smudged with soot and was full to the brim with toffee. The teams gave one last cheer and lined up across from each other while the prizes were placed on a ridge that stuck out of the wall above the waterline. Then Jack and Sally met in the middle and flipped a wooden disk with a different carving on each side.

"Tree!" called Jack.

The disk plopped into the water between them, and floated on the surface.

"It's water!" shouted Sally. Sally's team cheered and took the ball towards their own goal while Jack's team gathered around theirs.

"Okay," said Jack. "Doc, goal. Robbie, Defense. Tish, Jocco, Zee, and Wash, Middle. Me and Scrape, Forward." They lined up along their wall, touching it with one hand and straining as far forward as they could for the tiniest bit of a head start. Sally's team lined up on the other side and Sally counted down, "Three. Two. One. GO!" With screams and roars the teams rushed towards each other and with an enormous splash, connected in the middle. Forgetting the ball, Jack and Scrape struggled through the mass to get closer to the far goal. Together they were brilliant offensive players, passing between themselves as if they could read each other's minds, but neither of them was particularly good at defense, so they generally stayed forward, waiting for a pass. Wash and Tish played in the center of the field and were the ones to

take on the first wave of offense. Wash's strategy was to wreak as much havoc as possible. He didn't bother trying to run in the chest high water, but instead dove from side to side, flailing around and making it impossible to see through the wall of water he created. This gave Tish the opportunity to strip the slippery ball from an opponent's arms as they splashed past and toss it to the forwards before the opponent had a chance to turn around.

Jocco made up for his size with his swimming abilities. He could swim like a fish and hold his breath for almost as long. Just when someone thought they were on a breakaway they would find themselves landing face first in the water as Jocco upended them from below. Zee, as it turned out, was almost as good a climber with wet hands as she was with dry and hung from the spiderweb of cracks in the ceiling until an opponent passed underneath, at which point she dropped down onto their shoulders, put her hands over their eyes, and clung there until they managed to throw her off.

Robbie defended like the sledgehammer he wielded, forgoing technique and simply bashing into anyone who came near. Doc wasn't the most athletic goalie, but his brain worked fast enough that he could often predict, by the angle of an approaching opponent and the psychology of the person, where the ball would be aimed.

Under normal circumstances Sally's team was an equal match; in fact, the win count which, was carved into the wall, rarely recorded a difference of more than two or three games. This was not normal circumstances, however. Sally, an excellent goal keeper, and Breaker, an excellent goal scorer, had traded places and the result was not a very effective. Sally wasn't used to carrying the slippery ball through the mess of Wash and past the quick hands of Tish, and it took her several points to get the hang of it. Breaker had a difficult time in goal: his reflexes weren't nearly as attuned as Sally's, and on top of that he could only use one hand. He tried to compensate by throwing his body in front of the ball and hoping it bounced off of some part of him, but it was a clumsy

way to defend and Jack and Scrape found it relatively easy to feint and then take a real shot once he had dived out of the way.

Surprising to everyone, however, was how well Little Michael played. The bigger kids on Sally's team usually kept possession to themselves and left the younger few to create distractions and obstructions. With Breaker out of the way, however, Little Michael shone, scoring half of the team's points on his own.

Even so, after an hour or so of hard play the score was twelve to six. In the final desperate struggle, Sally's team managed to fend off shot after shot, but it couldn't last. Zee created an opportunity by jumping down on Breaker's back when he wasn't looking, and from the center of the field Jack hurled the ball as hard as he could towards the goal. It soared cleanly through the doorway, just missing Breaker's blindly flailing arms, to end the game. A cacophonous cheer echoed off the walls and splashes of delight and disappointment filled the air. Jack proudly carved another notch under his team's column and, with much ceremony, accepted the goblet of toffee. As was the custom, Scrape hacked the snake in two, and Jack presented one half to Sally. Formalities over, the two teams chatted happily for a short while until the cold water made everyone's teeth chatter too much to for coherent speech. They made their goodbyes and each team departed in their respective directions.

Back at camp Wash started a fire and everyone huddled around it in fresh clothes, eagerly discussing the game and debating future strategy until exhaustion sent them to bed.

# 7

JACK AWOKE THE NEXT MORNING to the smell of roasting meat. He kept his eyes shut for a few minutes, relishing the comfortable smell and the coziness of his blankets. When he finally opened his eyes, he was surprised to see that his room was fully lit; he had slept in. He stumbled out of bed and into the living room to find Wash, eyes closed, splayed out in the small sunbeam cast down through a skylight. A large piece of snake was cooking on a spit over the fire, which sizzled occasionally as the juices dripped.

“Mornin’,” said Wash, not opening his eyes.

“Morning,” yawned Jack. Jack sat down on the stump and stared blearily into the fire, thinking about nothing at all. The boys shared a sleepy silence until sounds of stirring and quiet mutters began floating from the bedrooms. Jack stretched his back and pulled out his belt knife to check if the meat was cooked through. It was and he began slicing

it into evenly sized chunks. With a sigh Wash collected himself from the floor and helped Jack pile the meat onto a few smooth plates of wood. The others trickled—or bounced, in Jocco’s case—in, took some breakfast and sat on the floor to eat.

“So,” said Jocco, in a loud, cheerful voice, “what’s up for today?”

“Shh,” complained Scrape, scrunching up her face at the noise. Her hair was a tangled mess and one of her cheeks still bore the imprint of her pillow.

“Sorry,” said Jocco. He continued in a whisper, “So what are we doing?”

“I was thinking of having a lesson today,” said Doc.

“Cool,” said Jocco, brightly. Scrape glowered at him and he grimaced in apology.

“What about?” asked Tish.

“I have several options in mind. We still need work on first person subject-object pronoun distinctions, I’ve noticed.”

“Ah c’mon. We did grammar last time,” said Jocco.

“Well, it is an important lesson,” said Doc.

“What else ya got?” asked Wash. “I’m through with danglin’ participles for the time bein’.”

“Anatomy?” suggested Jack. “That lesson about veins and stuff was really good.”

“Or light,” suggested Jocco. “Especially what you said about how light makes colors. That sounded cool.”

“I did just read a very interesting book on the nervous system,” said Doc.

“You’re a nervous system,” Jocco muttered to Tish, who whispered, “Zygote,” back to him.

“Or, perhaps we can cover air pressure. It’s quite useful. Did you know, for example, that the simple act of slapping someone in the ear with a cupped hand can perforate their eardrum?”

“Sounds dangerous!” said Jocco, enthusiastically.



"It's not, really. But it can be quite painful."

"Sure, let's do air pressure," said Scrape.

"Sounds good," said Jack.

Doc pulled out a handkerchief, wiped his greasy hands on it, and then disappeared into his room. He returned a few moments later with a flat piece of black painted wood about the size of Doc himself, and a book. He leaned the board against the wall and everyone shifted around to get a good view while Doc leafed through the book until he found his page.

"Now, air pressure can be defined as the pressure of air in our planet's atmosphere."

"Very descriptive," noted Wash.

Doc glared at him. "Similar to when you squeeze a pillow and therefore put the pillow under pressure, when air is compressed it too comes under pressure."

"How do you squeeze air?" asked Jocco.

"We'll get to that," said Doc. "The reason this works is that while air might seem like nothing, it is actually something."

"Groundbreaking," said Wash.

Doc glared at him again. Wash winked.

"Air is made up of many, many particles, and when they get pushed closer together the air pressure rises. When they spread further apart the air pressure goes down."

"What does this have to do with preferring someone's eardrum?" asked Jocco.

"Perforating. And I'm getting to that," said Doc.

"Shh," said Tish.

"All of these tiny particles have weight. Now I have been remiss in that we haven't had a gravity lesson yet—perhaps we should have done that first—but bear with me. Air has weight—"

"What does that mean?" asked Scrape. "Like it's heavy, you mean?"

"I do mean. Our planet is, in essence, a sphere of rock floating in space

with a thin coating of atmosphere around it." He drew a circle, labeled it planet, and drew another circle around it and labeled it atmosphere. "So we, standing just on the surface of the planet, here," he pointed, "have all this air pushing down on us. We are actually under quite a bit of air pressure. Luckily, we also have air inside ourselves, which," he paused, thinking, "pushes back, I suppose one might say. This combined with the fact that our bodies are comprised of much fluid and other relatively incompressible materials ensures we don't explode."

"Woah!" said Scrape.

"No way!" said Jocco. "That's lucky."

"Luck has nothing to do with it. Our bodies were—never mind. That is the topic of a different lesson. The point is that it is the difference in internal and external air pressure that would cause your body to explode."

"And the perseverated eardrum?" asked Jocco.

"Air pressure is good for more than violence, you know," said Doc petulantly. "For example, it can let you know when a storm is coming."

"I already know when a storm is coming. I can feel it," said Jocco.

"Well it can let you know *why* you know when a storm is coming," said Doc.

"Okay, how?" asked Jack, trying to get them back on track.

"It is because your body can sense the change in pressure that occurs just before a storm," said Doc.

"I can tell based on the clouds," said Scrape. "And on the wind, too."

"Those things are also influenced by air pressure. Allow me to diagram an air pressure system. I think you'll find it quite useful."

They continued like this for the better part of an hour. Finally, when everyone's limbs were thoroughly stiff and their brains full to bursting, Doc replaced the piece of chalk back in his pocket, dusted off his hands, and said, "Well, that's the basics. We can go into greater detail another time, but that should do it for now."

Everyone stretched their limbs and rose stiffly to their feet.

"I wonder if there's a way to make really high air pressure somewhere

so that we can float on it,” said Jocco.

“That doesn’t sound possible,” said Scrape.

“It would be cool, though,” said Jocco.

Scrape paused. “Yeah, that would be cool,” she admitted, and stretched hugely. “Man, I’ve been sitting still for too long. Does anyone wanna go up by the northern wall and play around in the vines with me? We can practice sparring up there. That would be fun.”

“I’ll come,” said Jack.

“Me too,” said Wash.

Zee nodded.

“I’ll be in my study,” said Doc.

“I’ll come,” said Jocco.

“I’m going to bring Breaker a salve and maybe get that honey,” said Tish.

“I’ll go to the vines,” said Jocco.

“Robbie? Wanna come?” asked Scrape.

“I’m gonna clean my weapons from yesterday,” said Robbie, picking up his sledgehammer.

“Alright. Later,” said Scrape. She rolled to her feet, picked up her weapons belt, buckled it on, and walked over to the wood pile. She picked out a thick wooden stick about the size of a sword, tucked it into her belt, and then ran at the wall of the living room, leaping up at the last minute to grab the top handhold and drag herself into the chute. The others followed her, each grabbing their own practice sword and climbing one after another through the tunnel, onto the roof, and into the bright sunlight.

## 8

CLAMBERING AROUND IN THE VINES was exhausting even when you didn’t have to fend off Scrape’s wooden practice sword, so by evening the whole gang was back at camp, resting hard. Jack was lying on his back in front of the fire with Jocco lying next to him. Wash sat on the stump, reading, Scrape flipped a stick to herself, Doc was in his lab again, and Robbie was napping.

“Whatcha reading?” Jocco asked Wash..

“One ‘undred workers are being held against their will in a spice factory!” said Wash. “One worker sneaks a ‘desperate cry for help’ out in a tin o’ allspice which is found by our bumblin’-but-soon-t’-be-plucky hero. The authorities dismiss the note as fake, and the bumblin’-but-soon-t’-be-plucky hero has no choice but to rescue the slaves ‘erself! It’s called The Cayenne Affair. Wanna hear?”

“We won’t understand half of it,” complained Scrape.

“Aw, sure ya will; I’ll do I’ as Jack.”

And the gang lazed for the rest of the evening listening to an impressive imitation of Jack’s voice recount the adventure of Crystal Ginger at the Spice of Life factory.

Many hours later the common room was dark except for the glowing embers illuminating Jocco curled up in front of the fire, breathing softly. The moon had already set and, staring up through the skyshaft, Jack could see bright stars. Finally, the small glimpse of the night became too inviting. He stood up, buckled on his weapon belt, and climbed into the chute towards the sky.

Jack surfaced out of a seemingly tiny crack in a road several stories above camp. He didn’t really have a destination in mind, so he trotted aimlessly down roads and over rooftops enjoying the cool breeze on his skin, the peaceful darkness, and the quiet sound of the sea. Finally, Jack found himself in the western part of the city, leaning up against a small brick wall and staring up at the sky. A few clouds floated towards the sea, the only sign of their passing a black patch in the sky.

After a few minutes Jack heard a small rustle. He automatically pulled out a knife, but his heart didn’t even bother to speed up: this part of the city was flush with rats. The rustling sound came again followed by the quietest two-note whistle Jack had ever heard. He smiled. “Hey, Rat,” he said quietly.

A girl detached herself from the shadows and skipped over to him. Rat was about Jack’s age—however, from looking at her you might guess half that. She was very small with an angelic face and pale blond braids running down her back. She wore a plain dress, which was somehow still whitish, and bare feet. The stars shone off her grin.

“Hiya Jackio. I ain’t seen you in a ravin’ age,” she said.

“You’re not exactly easy to find,” he responded.

“Neither is you, so much.”

“Yet you never seem to have trouble.”

“Well, don’t worry yourself about that, I’m special. So, new news in

the realm of Jay?” she asked.

“Not much, I suppose. Everything’s pretty regular.”

“An’ a new kid ain’t newsworthy, ya reckon? Wot’s Zee like, then?”

Typical, thought Jack, rolling his eyes. “She seems fine. I don’t know much about her—she doesn’t talk much.”

“Pfft. As if she ain’t the best climber in the city, then? And you knowing it.”

“I dunno about that,” said Jack. “Do you know her?”

“Can you really know someone? Can you *really* know anyone?”

“Uhh,” said Jack, intelligently. He decided to change the subject. “So what’s the news?”

“Aw not much.” She peered up at the stars. “The O’Rileys are coming over all strange all of a sudden. They whisper in the streets and pretend they aren’t meeting.”

“Oh, yeah? Does it look like they’re going to start trying to take over other gangs again?”

“Can’t say, can I?”

“Well what do you *think* is going on?”

“Can’t say, can I? I just do news. Ooh look,” she pointed upwards. “That one moved.”

“Which one?” Jack looked up too.

“That starry one right there. It used to be there and then it jumped.”

“Um I’m pretty sure stars don’t do that,” said Jack, frowning. Jack had had reason before to wonder if she spent too much time crawling through dark, wet tunnels. Or maybe she was winding him up. It was hard to tell.

“Never can be *all* sure of nothin’ though, can ya, Jackie?” she said.

“I guess not. Anyway, I already knew that about the O’Rileys acting funny. What else have you got?”

“How’d you know that then, huh? You been talkina Trip, ‘ave you? Do I need to ‘ave a word wif ‘er?”

“No, no. I was down there the other day; I saw it for myself.” Jack

wouldn't wish Rat's wrath on his worst enemy, let alone a friend. He had never seen Rat angry, but he had heard chilling rumors.

"Now, now. You playin' me then Jackio? Is that the way of it?"

"No, honestly. I went down there myself."

"Alright then. Well, let's see. I'm not gonna lie to ya, I got some good news tonight."

"Yeah?"

"But first. I 'ear Wash 'as been shoring up your 'scapeholes. There a reason?"

"What," said Jack, unnerved by the question, "How do you even know about that?"

"I 'ave my ways. Any reason?"

"No. No reason, just to be safe. Why?"

"Jus' wonderin' what you know. Somefin's goin' on, Jacky. Somefin's buildin'. I dunno what but the news 'as shifed. There's a strange color to it now."

"What do you mean?"

"That catcher, the one what hit you in the brainpan with the rock?"

"How did—never mind."

"Well he's been causing some real trouble it seems. No one I know of caught yet, but he's definitely been lurking about. An' there's a second one, this lady-girl about his age. She's been doing the same. Just lurking, not catching. It's eerie it is. Can't mean nu'fing good I imagine."

"Oh. That's strange. What are they doing, do you think?"

"I jus' do the news. I got more if y'like. And this last bit's brand fresh new and harder than warm bread to come by."

She paused.

"Yeah?" he prompted.

"Well it's not coming free, now is it? The catchers I gave you outta the very kindness in my heart. I know you got some personal stake in tha' one and that's just the kinda person I am." She put a hand over her heart and gave him a magnanimous look. "*This* one, though," She

widened her eyes impressively.

"We just got a snake today; you can have some of that."

Rat stared blankly at him.

"Or cans. We might be able to spare a few."

She continued to stare.

"Alright, we won a little bit of toffee today from Sally's gang. I'll give you a couple pieces."

Rat cocked her head to the side still staring blankly.

Jack groaned. "I wasn't lying; nothing's been going on since I last saw you. Nothing you don't already know, anyway. I don't have anything to trade."

She paused. "Now I wouldn't do this for jus' anyone, Jackey, but I might jus' let you take this news on credit."

"I would owe you?" the thought was not a pleasant one. "I don't know if I want—"

"I think you do," said Rat.

Jack deliberated for a moment, but if Rat said the news was worth it, it probably was. "Alright, then. What is it?"

"Now this little scrap wasn't any sort of easy to come by. And don't be spreading it around for free or you'll drive my business into the ground."

"I won't."

She squinted into his face for a moment and then said, "Zoe, you remember the one?"

"Yeah, sure." Jack's heart sped up. "How is she?"

"Heard she was sick then, didja? Where you gettin' all your news? King in th' North, if I have competition—"

"You don't, don't worry. So, how is she?"

"Couldn't say, could I?"

"What?"

"How'm I s'posed to know how people are after they're dead?"

"She died?" gasped Jack.

"Yep. They shipped 'er out 'round moonrise."

Fear washed over Jack like cold water. He didn't respond. This was the news he had been dreading for two days—ever since he had learned Zoe was sick. Although he had anticipated it, he still felt stunned.

"How did she die?" he asked.

"How? Let's see. I think it was 'er breathing in the end wot did 'er in, but I know they couldn't wake 'er up for a good day before she died."

"She was sick for three days before she died?"

"Reckon she was, why? You know somefin I don't, Jackey?"

"No."

"Now Jackey," she looked stern. "That was some good news and you're knowin' it, aintcha. Wotcha got?"

"Nothing right now, sorry. But I owe you."

Rat paused for a moment and then nodded. "Remember this next time you do somethin' worth knowing, eh?"

"Yeah, all right then—I owe you some news."

"Good. Well," she straightened up, business-like, "unless you have some last tidbit, I have tunnels in which to listen at."

"Alright, I'll see you later."

"Cheers," and she disappeared back into the darkness as smoothly as she had appeared.

Jack stood still staring blankly ahead of him. The news of Zoe falling ill had reignited an old fear in Jack. A fear he had told himself again and again was unfounded. But what if it wasn't? What if the plague was still around, just waiting for the children to turn into adults before striking? He thought of all those older kids who had refused to join up with the younger kids, the ones who had disappeared. Jack had never given them much thought, assuming that they had gone off into the jungle or else been caught. But what if that hadn't been the case? What if they hadn't disappeared? What if they'd all gotten sick and died, too? Jack didn't want to believe it, but there was a heavy weight in

his stomach that told him the truth. Serious illnesses—the kinds that could kill—were unheard of in the city. And Zoe had been old, maybe old enough to be an adult. This would also explain why O'Riley was so worried about illness. He had heard about Zoe being sick and had come to the same conclusion.

Jack counted on his hand. If the plague was still around and killing he had maybe five years. Six if he was lucky. It wasn't fair. He balled up his fists and glared at the darkness in front of him. He had survived. He had gone sleepless and hungry and still made it through. He had trained hard, practicing running and climbing and sneaking and fighting. He had *earned* his life in the city; it wasn't fair an old unconquerable nightmare was going to take it from him. They were supposed to be beyond this, beyond all the fear and sadness. It was something that had happened, something terrible that had happened, but they had all survived. It should have been over. They should have been safe. To Jack's surprise he felt angry tears fill his eyes. He let them fall for a few moments, allowing the anger to burn inside him, and then wiped them away, took a breath, and looked up.

The stars stood out particularly bright against the dark backdrop, and he could see the smaller, dimmer ones that only appeared in the pitch black before dawn. If what Doc had said was true, these stars were hundreds of times older than anything in the city, and so far away not even Doc could imagine it. Five years to them was nothing. Just the blink of an eye. Not even close to enough. But what could he do? Six years ago, every adult in the city was asking that same question. What chance did he stand if adults who had piles of medicine and scores of doctors couldn't find an answer? How was his situation any different? Jack smiled grimly to himself. The difference was, they weren't him. They hadn't survived the chaos of the plague and the aftermath. They didn't know the city like he did. And whoever their doctors might have

been, they couldn't have been nearly as good as Doc. Doc. That's who Jack needed right now. He had no idea where to start, but Doc would have an idea, and it would probably be a good one. And with that, Jack took off running back to the camp.

## 9

THE STARS WERE BEGINNING TO FADE when Jack reached the camp. Jocco was no longer on the floor, having no doubt retreated to his bed once the warm fire died. A few embers still glowed, giving Jack enough light to find kindling. He stoked the fire into a small blaze and then tiptoed into the twins' room to wake Doc. Doc awoke reluctantly, threw a deeply wistful glance at Wash, who snored loudly under a mound of blankets, and stumbled into the living room, muttering words Jack didn't know but understood before flopping down against the stump.

"Zoe from Jamie's gang died last night," said Jack. The sleepiness lifted from Doc's face, replaced by alarm.

"What? From where did you learn this? This is quite a shock. Was it the Southerners? You know how they are with Jamie's gang."

"No," he took a breath, "I think it was the plague."

Doc looked as though someone had slapped him. "You can't

possibly mean—”

“Fever. And she was dizzy and tired.”

“But, no. There are plenty—”

“It lasted three days and then they couldn’t wake her up, but she was still alive. She couldn’t breathe at the end.”

Doc got to his feet and began pacing and muttering to himself. “Those are the signs. That is—but it can’t—she was old, how old? We can’t be certain—were any of these symptoms more common I might—but—where are the rest? There should be more. I never—I didn’t want—it is a statistical improbability at the very least, yet somehow.” After a few minutes of ardent thinking coupled with some dramatic pacing and wringing of hands, Doc stopped and turned to Jack, who sat up.

“It’s undeniable. I have never read about fever *and* depression of the central nervous system occurring as a result any other illness. Plus, the three-day limit—” he stopped and stared at Jack, eyes wide. “It’s back.”

Jack’s stomach sank. He had been expecting it, and yet—he took another deep breath. “So, what can we do?”

Doc ignored him and left the room. He returned a moment later carrying a thick notebook. He knelt down and opened it to the first page. It was covered in a younger Doc’s clumsy scrawl.

“I haven’t seen that in a while,” said Jack.

“Yes, well, ruminating with no new information is a waste of cranial capacity. Now we have new information.”

“Do we?”

Doc ignored him again. “So, naturally the primary step would be to ascertain the manner in which the plague passes amongst the affected persons. I have deliberated much on this and have come to the conclusion that every person is exposed, but the effects don’t affect him or her until he or she comes of age.”

“Everyone is exposed to the plague, but they don’t get sick until they’re an adult. Got it. What makes you think that?”

“Every single adult died, Jack,” Doc said patiently.

“Every adult who didn’t leave the city,” said Jack. There were thousands of unaccounted for adults who had left by sea or over the mountains.

“Good! Can’t make assumptions. Can’t get lazy. So, every adult *remaining* in the city must have been touched by the plague,” Doc amended, “Or there would have been survivors. Even if just a handful. There were several hundred children who also remained, and since none of them fell ill and died—”

“Until now,” said Jack.

“—we know it doesn’t affect youths. Zoe, of course, must have been around eighteen.”

“No longer a kid,” said Jack.

“Exactly. Do you know of anyone older than her?”

“Not anymore,” Jack said. “Maybe O’Riley, but besides him I can’t think of anyone.”

“Precisely.”

“Right. So now we...” Jack was trying to remember what Doc had said before.

“So, we must ascertain the manner in which the plague is spread,” repeated Doc.

“Right. So how *can* it be spread? Person to person, right?” Jack was trying to remember Doc’s lesson on illnesses.

“Yes, a handshake can be a death sentence under the right circumstances.”

“A what?” asked Jack, alarmed.

“But I have read too many accounts of early quarantine. I find it highly unlikely that *some* adults wouldn’t have survived. Until their food stores were depleted, anyway. Incidentally, it really is astounding the amount of canned and dried goods the adults kept on hand. I wonder sometimes if there wasn’t more trouble between the cityfolk and the hillfolk than we realize.”

“Huh. Yeah, there really is a lot,” said Jack. He wondered why he had

never questioned the enormous number of cans before. He supposed it didn't really matter. What mattered was that the stores had kept him alive before he learned to hunt.

Doc flipped a few pages in the notebook. "I have narrowed down the list of probable modes of contamination to two: air—"

"So we could be breathing it in?"

Doc waved his hand, dismissively. "You're constantly breathing in all manner of pathogens."

"Right." This didn't make Jack feel any better.

"And, of course, water."

"Okay. How come not food or something?"

"Very clever," said Doc approvingly. "However, it seems to me that, again, from the accounts I have read, the adults took this into consideration. Hundreds of people fell back on old stores of food: dried meats and fruits, canned vegetables, et cetera. They ate only the food that they had been safely eating for years. It is inconceivable, once again, that at least a few adults wouldn't have survived."

"Oh." They were silent for several minutes, each lost in thought.

"I should have known," Doc whispered. Jack looked over at him. The firelight reflected in Doc's eyes. "I was so focused on finding reason in the past, I didn't look to the future. I should have predicted this. Why would it have been over? Why wouldn't it still be around? It makes perfect sense. Of course it does."

"But we can do it, right? You deal with us getting sick all the time."

"Minor illnesses, yes. Known infections. Those are easy. Obvious. But no adult physician or diagnostician made any progress with the plague, or he or she didn't record it, anyway."

"You're at least as smart as they were, though."

"At the very least," Doc said, still staring unsmiling into the fire.

"So, what did they miss?"

Doc stood suddenly and began pacing again. "Yes. What did they miss? I imagine they already sent Zoe off?"

Jack knew Doc was referring to the city's burial practice of putting the deceased's body on a raft, lighting it on fire, and pushing it off to sea. He nodded.

"A waste. I could have examined—valuable samples. How can it--? What fits? It's not—unless—impossible to know. But is it? Essential to know, perhaps. We'll come back to it. A waste. How? What *is* it? Must find it. Without it we're shooting in the dark. Experimenting without a control. Vaccinating without a known pathogen. Yes." He turned to Jack. Now Jack recognized the gleam in Doc's eyes. He hadn't seen it in years. "The hillfolk were never afflicted. Why?"

"Um, I don't—"

"We must compare. That's the first step."

"Compare what?"

"The water and the air! Do try to pay attention; this is rather important. The hillfolk never contracted the plague. If the plague is, for example, in our air, we can find it by comparing samples from the hill to samples of our own resources."

"Or they could have an anti-venom for it," said Jack.

Doc stopped short. "*Antidote* more like. I should have thought of that. I've gotten lazy in my old age—"

"You're not *that* old."

"I might not get much older," he muttered, and began pacing again. "An antidote. Yes. Very possible, which means they know. Or it's accidental. No, we must eliminate one theory at a time. Not get ahead of ourselves."

"What if the plague is in both samples, though? You'll never find it."

"I have books. Many. Published well before the plague. They list the common molecules found in streams, the air, et cetera. It's possible I can identify the substance that does not belong."

"Oh."

"I should think that's enough to be getting along with."

"Okay," Jack jumped to his feet. What do we do?"



“Samples. Weren’t you listening? The plague is back, Jack,” said Doc. He could almost have been excited. “The horn has sounded. The only question is, who is the hunter and who the quarry? I’ll fetch some supplies, unless—” he eyed Jack suspiciously. “When was the last time you had a real sleep?”

“I’m fine.” He swayed a little on his feet.

“Bed.” We can’t have you bumbling around the city making mistakes.

“I don’t bumble!” said Jack.

“For goodness sake. Sit down before you fall and give yourself a contusion. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Fine.” Jack sat back down against the stump, fully intending to think over his and Doc’s conversation to see if he had any more ideas, and fell asleep immediately.

# 10

JACK FELT SOMEONE NUDGE HIS ARM, and he opened his eyes. Soft morning light filled the living room as did the smell of roasting meat. Someone had stoked the fire and placed a few chunks of snake on the spit. Jack tried to look up at the person who had woken him but he was stopped by a stiff pain. He groaned and grabbed the back of his neck.

“That’s gotta be the most uncomfortable position I’ve ever seen someone sleep in,” said Scrape, sitting down beside him. Jack groaned again. He had fallen asleep sitting hunched over with his chin on his chest. He raised his head with difficulty and then stretched out his back.

“Morning,” he said.

“That it is.” Scrape smiled at him. “No one else is up yet. I wouldn’t have woken you up but you were giving me a backache.”

“I’m glad you did. Ouch,” said Jack, rolling his head around.

“I know what would help you stretch out,” said Scrape, grinning

wickedly. She reached behind her and grabbed two of the wooden practice swords.

“I just woke up, that’s not fair!”

“I just woke up, too, Zygote. C’mon.”

“Scrape,” he groaned, “King in the North, it’s way too earl—” and he pounced, grabbing for the swords, but Jack and Scrape had been fighting together too long for his tricks to work. She did a reverse somersault and sprang to her feet. Jack jumped to his feet too, shrugged off more stiffness, and grinned back at her. She threw him a sword and said, “Rules?”

“None.”

“Excellent,” she said, and grinned wider, her eyes gleaming.

They moved carefully towards each other keeping an eye out for the smallest sign of attack. They tiptoed closer and closer together until they were five feet from each other. Then, at exactly the same time, they lunged. Scrape jabbed toward Jack’s belly, but he parried the strike and in the same move swung at her leg. Scrape jumped back and Jack followed, taking advantage of her retreat. She backed up slowly, parrying blow after blow as she went until her back hit the wall. Jack swung and she ducked under his blade and jabbed at his belly again.

“Oof.” Jack couldn’t help the sharp exhalation as her strike landed.

Scrape grinned and leapt to her feet. “First hit.”

“And last,” Jack assured her, and he flew at her. Scrape twirled sideways out of Jack’s reach and jabbed again. They struck and parried and dodged around the room, exchanging blows to the arms and legs and ribs as they went. After many minutes Scrape managed to back Jack into a tight corner where his range of motion was limited. Jack tried to fend her off, but he could tell it was useless. Instead, he leapt towards her sword arm, knocked the sword out of her hand, and pointed his own at her chest. She started to raise her hands in defeat but then dove at Jack’s legs, toppling him. The swords flew out of Jack’s hand and clattered away. There was a mad struggle for a moment and then Jack felt himself being

flipped onto his stomach with his arms pinned to the ground.

There came the sound of footsteps, and then a huge yawn, and then Wash stepped into the living room holding a book. He stopped short in surprise.

“Morning,” said Scrape, cheerfully. Jack tried to wriggle free but she redoubled her grip.

“Ain’ it a lit’l early?”

“Never too early to win a fight,” said Scrape.

“Yeah, maybe,” said Wash blearily. “But you’re forgettin’.”

“Forgetting what?” asked Scrape.

“These!” Wash’s sleepy manner evaporated. He dropped his book and leapt for the swords. He grabbed one and reached for the second, but Scrape snatched it away. Jack, now free, scrambled to his feet and grabbed a sword-sized stick from the pile of wood next to the fire. The fighting resumed. With Wash now in the picture all semblance of order crumbled. Scrape and Jack managed to corner Wash near the third escape hatch. He countered by leaping up, grabbing a handhold, and swinging his feet around, forcing them to back up or risk getting kicked in the face. Jack and Scrape resumed fighting each other while Wash leapt down and joined Scrape against Jack, until, a few minutes in, he changed his mind and started fighting on Jack’s side. They carried on that way for while, until a tousle-headed Tish poked her head out of her curtain and asked, “Are you guys burning something?”

As one, the fighters turned towards the fire. Smoke curled lazily up from the charred bits of meat clinging to the spit. As they watched, a piece fell into the fire, sending up a cloud of ashes and sparks.

“Oops,” said Scrape. She exchanged her sword for a belt knife and began carefully cutting the remains off the spit. Jack grabbed a plate and held it under the spit.

“These might still be good,” said Jack, poking at the plate with his knife. “Once you cut all the black off.”

“I’d eat it,” said Wash, peering over Jack’s shoulder.

"No surprise there," said Scrape. "I'll go get some more." She disappeared into the hall. Wash sprawled out on his back, staring up through the skyshaft. Jack sat back against a bunch of branches and began cutting the worst of the burned meat away. He threw the rejects into the fire and alternately tossed a good piece to Wash and ate one himself.

"Doc 'ad me up in th' wee hours this mornin'," said Wash in a martyred voice, "'elpin' 'im find some book or anu'vah. Just once, I'd like t' 'ave a peaceful night's rest."

"When do you not have a peaceful night's rest?" asked Jack.

"Las' nigh'."

"And?"

Wash paused and then said "Well isn' one enough?"

"So did he find the book he was looking for?"

"Hard tellin'. Fell back asleep," said Wash.

Jack laughed.

Scrape reentered and began her second attempt at breakfast at the same time Doc entered, several books under his arm, and sat down next to Wash. "Morning all," he said.

"Morning." Tish, now with brushed and braided hair, sat down on Wash's other side.

"Morning," said Jack, sitting by the fire with the rest.

"You two look tired," said Tish, looking between Jack and Doc.

Jack gave Doc a look. "Went for a walk last night."

"My readings occupied me until late into the night," said Doc, catching on.

"What are you reading now?" asked Tish.

"Monoliths, Manuscripts and Manuals Errata Volume Six," said Doc without hesitation.

"Now *tha'* sounds like a fascinating read," said Wash, grinning. "Do make sure they've got the punctuation righ' or I migh' jus' forget myself in the deluge of emotion and write a strongly worded letter to the editor."

Doc rolled his eyes at him. "Well then, what are *you* reading?" he asked Wash.

"Watchin' Paint Dry Part II: After th' Primer," said Wash. Doc gave him a look. Wash laughed. "Well I jus' started The Complete Known History of Stone City,"

"Ah yes," said Doc. "Charles Palaverous. A classic."

"Eh. I dunno 'ow much I like it. I already know 'ow it ends, y'know? Sorta spoils the fun."

Doc rolled his eyes again.

"What's everyone up to today?" asked Scrape.

"Breaker and I are uh going to the northern jungle. We're hoping to find mushrooms," said Tish. "Cookie said he could take his cast off today." She smiled.

"We'll see wot' The Diminutive Miss Zee wonts to do, but I think we're plannin' on gettin' those blueprints for 'scapehole four sorted out. Not enough airflow in that one," said Wash.

Doc didn't answer, for he was already immersed in his book, which was answer enough.

"I don't know yet," said Jack. "I suppose I'll take a nap at some point."

"I have some things for you to collect for me as soon as you're ready. Just for general study," said Doc over the top of his book.

"I'll go if you like, so Jack can nap," said Scrape.

"Nah, it's fine," said Jack quickly. "How much snake do we have left?"

"Couple day's worth."

"What should we get next?"

"Boar?" said Scrape. "A big, fatty one. Snakes don't have enough fat on them."

"You and I can go tomorrow, if you want," said Jack.

"Great!"

Scrape handed out breakfast. Jack and Doc ate quickly.

“Are you ready to collect my samples?” asked Doc.

“Sure.” Jack stood up and followed Doc out of the room.

Doc had individually wrapped a handful of corked, glass test tubes and bundled them and a wax pencil together in a disguise.

“The wax pencil is so you can label each tube with the location from which the encapsulated sample came. Now remember that air pressure can be a tricky thing. The denser—”

“The denser air sinks to near the ground and the less dense air rises up.” Jack remembered the lesson.

“Precisely. If the plague is in the air it would stand to reason that it would sink low to hang over the city. Currently, I believe the air is our best bet. Try to get a sample from as low as possible, just to be sure we don’t miss it.”

“Right. Is that everything?”

“I think so. Do try not to break any of the tubes. They’re the only ones I have.”

“I’ll try.” Jack turned away, leaving Doc to organize his paper-strewn desk.

# 11

IT WAS A GLOOMY MORNING; the skies hung low over the city, and a long bank of clouds stretched out over the horizon. A cold wind blowing off the water raised the hair on Jack’s arms. Jack was in a good mood. He passed only one person as he ran. It was a lean girl who sprinted past him with a dagger out. She ignored him completely, and he put his own knife away and ran on, finally slowing as he reached the border of O’Riley territory.

He crossed into the lower part of the city, slinking from building to building, staying in whatever shadows he could find. Finally, when he was deep in the heart of the territory, he chose a doorway, set the bag down, and pulled out a tube and a cork. Doc hadn’t told him how exactly to collect an air sample. Uncertain, Jack waved the tube around a bit trying to make sure all the old air had been replaced, and stuck the cork in tightly. He wrote ‘Lower City’ on the tube with the wax pencil and bent

to replace it in the sack. He heard a faint whistling.

He shot up straight, his eyes darting around, and his knife in his hand. The whistler hadn't yet come into sight, but Jack had no doubt it was one of O'Riley's gang; no one else would dare to make so much noise in this part of the city. He backed further into the doorway until his back hit the thick wooden door, but he was still far too visible when the whistler turned the corner. It was a tall, willowy, blond boy Jack knew by sight. His long legs carried him quickly through the streets despite his lazy gait. He whistled aimlessly as he walked and tossed a short dagger to himself, catching it first with one hand and then the other. Jack stood as still as possible, holding his breath and hoping the boy wouldn't look around. The boy made a bad toss and the dagger came towards his hand, point down. He yanked his hand out of the way just in time, and the metal clinked against the stones, coming to rest a few yards from Jack's bundled disguise. The boy bent down, grabbed the knife handle, and began to straighten up but paused. This is it, thought Jack. He moved to step from the shadows when the boy looked at the roof high above Jack's head.

"Hey, Meg!" he called.

Jack froze.

"Hey, Zygote!" a girl's voice called back. That had caught on fast, thought Jack. "I could hear you from two streets away. You *tryin'* a get jumped?"

"Come on, I'm in the middle of the lower city! Who's gonna jump me here?" he said.

Jack didn't hear the reply, but the boy said, "Fine!" and headed away grumbling, but no longer whistling. Jack exhaled. Delicately he picked up his sack and turned out of the doorway and ran straight into someone's chest. He leapt back, dropping his sack, and leveling his knife at the stocky boy in front of him.

"Well, well," said the boy, grinning menacingly. "You don't belong here, do you? Hey, guys!" he shouted, "We've got an intruder! So, what

are you doing here, then?"

Jack cursed himself. He had been paying too much attention to the blond boy; he hadn't been listening for anyone approaching from behind. Well, he thought, there was nothing for it.

"Checking the place out," he said. "Seeing if it's worth taking over. It's not."

The stocky boy glared at him. "You think you're funny."

"You think you're tough. Maybe we're both wrong."

"Whatcha got there?" asked a voice from behind Jack. The blond boy had returned.

"Intruder," said the stocky boy.

"Yeah, you mentioned that." Jack could hear the eye roll in the boy's voice.

Someone jumped from a window above Jack's head and landed in the street beside him. This one was a girl with short hair and a smirk. She stood up and took out a knife of her own. Now they had Jack surrounded.

"What's in the sack, then?" asked the first boy. "You been stealing from us?"

"Does it matter?" asked Jack. "You're just going to try to beat me up anyway."

"No *try* about it," said the boy, and he lunged. Jack dove out of his way and straight into the blond boy, knocking him over. Jack rolled off of him and stood up, and was immediately knocked down again by a punch thrown by the girl. His dagger flew out of his hand as he landed on the stones. He leapt to his feet and ran back a couple of steps. The blond was on his feet and all three were coming at him. Jack thought about running, but his sack was still in the doorway and Doc had said they didn't have any more test tubes. The girl came at him first. She slashed at his chest with her dagger but he ducked and punched her in the stomach. She doubled over, but the stocky boy was on him. The boy lunged, arms out. Jack ducked but too late. Jack landed on his back, the

boy on top of him. Jack grabbed the boy around the waste and spun so now Jack was on top. He drew his arm back to punch, but someone grabbed his wrist. Jack looked around to see the blond boy grinning at him. Jack dove at him. The boy, who had expected Jack to try to run, released him in surprise and backed up several steps. From the corner of his eye Jack could see the girl and the stocky boy both getting to their feet. Jack ran. He snatched his sack from the doorway as he went and then took off. The O'Rileys chased him for a few blocks, but Jack soon lost them in the maze of the city. Eventually Jack slowed and then stopped in the shadows under an overhang to catch his breath. Well, he thought wryly, I guess that's why we don't go into O'Riley territory. After a minute he continued his way back to higher and safer ground, stopping only to duck under a bridge and fill a second test tube with lower-city water.

Jack headed west, following the general path of the main river, which led right through the center of the city. At the base of the Big Brick Wall he took another sample of water and at the top he took another sample of air. He debated for a moment continuing up the hill but decided to drop off the samples he had before leaving the city. Not wanting to be hampered by running into hillfolk, southerners, or catchers, he took the more complicated but less traveled high rout, jumping from roof to roof and running along the narrow roads that bridged buildings. By the time he reached the skyshaft above the camp, the wind had shifted and the clouds were moving out to sea.

He stuck his head down one of the living room skyshafts and heard a thud and a loud crack followed by Wash's yell of, "Ay 'Ay! Physics is physics no matt'r wot you're dealin' wit' an' tha' includes my tools!" Jack withdrew his head and found the correct skyshaft. He drew out the filled and labeled tubes, carefully re-wrapped them, and dropped them one by one down the hole. He heard them plunk softly as they hit bed, and heard Doc's surprised squeak, but he was off before Doc had a chance to look up.

Jack scampered up the roof clutching at the rough stone with his bare toes and occasionally his free hand. He reached the peak and stood, one foot on either side, gazing over the city. The camp he had chosen was in an area of the city that had been dug into a large cliff at the base of the hill which was rimmed by the Big Brick Wall. From his roof he could look down across most of the city and out onto the ocean. When he turned around, his eyes were level with top of the crumbling city wall, still a good distance away. Jack did a cursory check to make sure he couldn't see anyone who might be trouble, and then skipped and slid down the other side of the roof and across the broad bridge that connected his roof with the next. It had taken some time, but Jack had worked out a path from his camp to the jungle that he could take without ever having to leave the roofs. He headed northwest, walking carefully over the top of decorative arches that arced high over the roads below, jumped from chimney to chimney, clambered up sloping roofs. Finally, he reached the last building. He crossed a sturdy bridge which connected a stairway on the outside wall of one building to a stairway on the outside wall of the other. Instead of taking the stairs down several stories to the ground Jack grabbed onto a few wayward vines that had escaped the jungle and lifted himself over the ledge onto a steep roof. Jack scrambled, and then slunk, and then crawled up to the peak. The farther up he went the lower down he stayed. It was unlikely he would see any city kids hanging around this close to the wall, but that was because the hillfolk had the unfortunate habit of creeping out from behind the wall when kids least expected. Lying flat, Jack poked his head over the peak just enough so he could see over it and let his eyes blur. He waited for two full minutes without seeing any movement aside from a few casually fluttering birds. That was a good sign, Jack thought. Distressed birds meant something dangerous was around; casual birds meant all was good in their world. Of course, his world was different than bird world, but they had a few similar enemies.

There was a narrow stairway circling down to the ground to Jack's left but he ignored it and vaulted over the peak and skidded down the other side barely staying in control until he skidded right off the edge of the roof. He landed on top of a huge boulder that had dislodged itself from the wall and then down to a smaller boulder and then a smaller boulder until his feet hit the ground.

Jack stilled and quieted his breathing to better listen for a whisper of cloth or the click of a metal tack on stone. He tried to quiet his thumping heart, too, but that hadn't worked yet and it didn't now. With each inhaled breath he smelled the air carefully: soap was a luxury only the hillfolk enjoyed which made them easier to pick out of a landscape of scents. A chipmunk chattered loudly near Jack's ear, startling him. It glared at him in a way only chipmunks could and leapt into fissure that ran all the way through the wall. It popped back out and chattered at him again and disappeared again. That confirmed it: if he was the only thing around a *chipmunk* had to worry about, he was pretty sure he was safe. He climbed in after the chipmunk, turning sideways so he could fit in the crack, and squeezed himself out into the jungle. From the outside the wall was unrecognizable. So unrecognizable, in fact, that unlucky kids who didn't know the area had trouble finding it again. For one, it was the wrong color: sure, vines hung sporadically down the city-side of the wall, but it was nothing compared to the hill-side which was *covered* in green. For another, trees and shrubs and vines and leaves grew so thickly in the jungle that after three steps the wall disappeared and you were surrounded by a jungle of indistinguishable plants.

Jack did know the area, however, and he set off confidently into the trees while the chipmunk chattered what sounded an awful lot like curses at his retreating back.

## 12

IF JACK KNEW THE CITY LIKE THE BACK OF HIS HAND, then he knew the jungle like the back of Scrape's hand at *least*. The only reason he didn't know it perfectly was that, like any living thing, it was constantly changing. Things like shrubs and vines and bird nests were useless as landmarks because in a matter of days the vines could grow and become unrecognizable, flowers could die, and a flock of birds could arrive and fill every tree with nests. The most effective way Jack found of navigating the western jungle anyway was by using the topography. Heading up the hill on the northern side meant you walked up a gently sloping hill covered with young, springy growth that let in the sun. The southern side of the hill also sloped lightly downward until about halfway down the hill when, without warning, it dropped off into a sheer cliff. The cliff was wide, stretching across a good half of the mountain, but it was only high enough to make you dizzy at the southernmost end. Most of the

cliff was barely tall enough to clear the trees that stood at its base. And then, running down the mountain, cutting it neatly in half, was the river. It started at a spring high up on the hill, down from which it coursed fast and wide. The hillfolk diverted some of the water into channels which they used to irrigate their crops, but the rest of it tumbled all the way down almost to the city wall before splitting into three branches, crossing under the wall and then splitting again and again, each finger twisting and curving, carving its own path through the city and eventually spilling out into the sea.

It was dark and the air was close under the cover of trees. The dense underbrush slowed Jack a bit and prevented him from taking a straight path, but he didn't care. He tied his sack around himself. He veered northwest, heading for the more gradual slope and an easier run.

After about an hour Jack turned south again so that he would run across instead of up the mountain and eventually hit the river. He slowed his pace to a light jog. Now that he was moving slower he could focus on his surroundings instead of what was right in front of him. Up this high, the trees grew tall and widely spaced. Long vines hung down from branches in curtains and crisscrossed between trees like spider webs. The dense canopy blocked most of the sun so only thin rays shone down from between leaves, making small, bright patches on the moss and dirt. The air under these trees was cool and damp; occasional drops of water hit the leaves around him with a dull popping sound, as if old drops of rain were just now getting through the last layers of leaves up high. Unseen birds chirped happily all around Jack. It was almost impossible to see the birds when they were perched in amongst the shadowy trees, but when they flew Jack loved watching them; they flitted gracefully between vines and branches, moving just the right amount at just the right time to weave through jungle without slowing down. The way they flew reminded him of the way he ran. Jack even thought that maybe they had learned it from him, or he from them, but he couldn't be sure; he and the birds had been moving like that for as long as Jack could remember.

# 13

JACK HEARD IT BEFORE HE SAW IT: a rustle that could have been anything, growing into a rustle that was definitely something, which finally grew into that unfailingly cheerful sound of water flowing over rocks. He hid in the shadows outside the clearing for a full minute, making sure no one was around, and then for another minute making sure no one *else* was making sure no one was around. Then he stepped forward into the sun. The clearing was filled with yellow light. Water gurgled and gushed out from between rocks into a wide, swirling pool before cascading down a steep rock face and down the mountain. Jack set the sack down in a cluster of plants with violet buds and pulled out a test tube. He then rolled up the cuffs of his pants and with a deep breath, walked into the pool. Despite himself, Jack let out a small gasp as the icy water burned his feet and legs. Within seconds he felt the deep ache in his bones but he kept walking until he was up to his knees. He was still near



the edge but the water flowed surely past him and he figured there was no need to go swimming to get a good sample. He filled and corked the tube and then limped out on numb legs.

He labeled the tube, deposited it back in the sack and pulled out another, which he waved around briefly before corking and labeling. Once finished, he rolled the legs of his pants back down, lifted the sack over his shoulder and walked around the high side of the springs and pool before taking off at a light jog back into the forest towards the southeast.

This area of the jungle was far less familiar to Jack. He knew, generally, where the four main hill clearings were and where the smaller encampments up in the southwest were, but there had never really been a point in getting near besides curiosity. Jack and his gang never went hungry, and there were more than enough clothing and other necessities stashed away that he didn't need to steal from the hillfolk. Jack had faced off with catchers on several occasions and had always escaped relatively unscathed, but there had never been more than three at a time, and a hillfolk clearing was *full* of grownups. Really, there was no point in risking it. So, Jack knew the general layout of the area but wasn't sure he could find the nearest clearing on his first try. Instead he headed southeast, diagonally downhill. He remembered that the top of the cliff formed the eastern border of what he called the main clearing. If he headed down the mountain he would eventually run into the cliff and be able to follow it.

He did so, and after a half hour of walking Jack could see a bright patch ahead of him. He slowed his pace until he was close enough to see the clearing through the trunks and vines.

This clearing was the only one of the hillfolks' that wasn't covered in gardens and fields, but instead had a sloping expanse of grass, thick but trimmed short, with several wooden buildings painted white surrounding it. On one of the few times he had been up here he had seen a tall, well-

fed man, who had referred to himself as Your Mayor, standing on the porch of a house speaking loudly to what looked like the entire hill. Doc said that mayor meant leader and Jack figured the leader would probably give speeches in the main clearing, so that's what they called it.

Jack could see the mayor today, standing amongst a small group of people, talking casually. As was hillfolk custom, all the hillfolk wore black pants or skirts and white shirts with long sleeves and buttons up the front. As Jack watched, a young man identically dressed and as tall as the mayor stepped out of one of the smaller buildings and went to join the group. As the young man turned to say something to the mayor, Jack saw his face. It was the young catcher who had hit Jack in the head with the rock a few weeks ago. Jack glowered at him from under the safe cover of the trees.

He circled the clearing until he was behind the largest building in the area. It was distinct, both because of its size and because of the fact that it had been built atop the ruins of an ancient stone building, so its foundation and part of the first floor were made of stone. Its other three stories, however, were made of wood like the other buildings, and its four levels of windows were covered in wax paper to let the light in and keep the bugs and rain out. The back of this building was only a few dozen feet from the edge of the jungle and Jack ran to it. He needed a good air sample, and he wasn't about to get one in the close air under the trees. Plus, despite himself, Jack was curious about the strange place. He wanted a look around. He shimmied up the drainpipe and lifted himself over the gutter and onto the roof. The roof was made of black painted shingles, which were hot on Jack's bare feet and hands. He got onto his knees and elbows and had begun crawling up the slope when he heard something coming from inside the building that made him pause. It sounded like a child crying. Jack froze. He felt his heart in his throat. The only reason there would be a child on the hill was if someone had caught them. He backed carefully down the roof, took the bag of jars

off his back, and placed it in the gutter. Then he slid himself head first over the eave so that he hung down by his waste, head level with the first window. Jack took out his belt knife and very slowly slit the waxed paper that ran along the upper sill until he was able to peer inside. Despite the windows, the inside of the building was much darker than the outside, but after a minute his eyes adjusted. His mouth would have opened in surprise if he hadn't been hanging upside down. The room was thin and long and had an impersonal, gloomy feeling. A dozen empty beds ran down the walls on either side, each with a thick metal bar for a headboard and attached to each one was a long chain ending in a manacle. And there, sitting on the floor at the foot of one of the beds looking completely dejected was little Michael. Michael's lips were pressed tightly together but his shoulders were shaking and Jack could still hear the unmistakable ragged breathing of his crying.

Jack slit the wax paper down one side of the window frame and then the other. It curled silently upon itself and hung below the lower sill, leaving the window open. The extra light in the room made Michael turn his head just in time to see Jack swing through the window and land carefully on the wooden floor. The floorboards creaked under Jack's weight and he winced and held still, but he heard no running feet or surprised voices from below. He tiptoed over to Michael trying with some success to avoid more creaks, and crouched down next to the boy. Michael certainly seemed to be the worse for wear. He had a cut lip and a black eye. He was covered in dirt except for the tear tracks on his face, one sleeve of his shirt had been torn off entirely, and both knees of his pants were torn. His hands were tied behind his back to one of the legs of the bed.

"Michael, North, what happened to you?" Jack whispered.

"Got caught," Michael whispered back, hoarsely.

"I can see that. Come on. Let's get you outta here." He pulled his knife out again began sawing at the rope around Michel's hands.

"Hurry. He said he'd be back in a bit to see if I've changed my mind," Michael whispered, sounding panicked.

Jack didn't bother asking. He continued hacking at the rope while cursing himself for letting knife get this dull. Suddenly, over the sounds of the occupants below, Jack became aware of heavy footsteps climbing the stairs.

"Jack!" whispered Michael.

Jack didn't respond, but redoubled his efforts. Finally, with a snap, the rope broke. Jack's knife slipped and narrowly missed Michael's hand but Michael didn't seem to notice; he was already tiptoe-running for the window.

The boys leapt onto the windowsill together and then froze. Below them a hillman stood frozen in surprise and looking right at him. The man was wearing black and white but his clothes were dirty and he had a floppy hat on his head and a burlap sack over his shoulder. Jack guessed the only reason he hadn't already sounded an alarm yet was because he was too surprised. The footsteps had reached their floor behind them. A door opened.

"Roof. I'll boost you," Jack whispered. He grabbed either side of the smaller boy's waist-band and lifted him as high as he could. Michael's legs disappeared over the eave. Jack grabbed the gutter and followed just as someone inside the room they had just vacated let out a roar. Once on the roof the boys paused, and Michael looked at Jack for the next move. Jack heard shouting from behind them, and looked towards the ground. The farmer had dropped his bag, but instead of running, he was shouting towards the front of the building, calling for help while standing between them and the forest.

"Do you think you can jump to the trees?" Jack asked. There were a few thick limbs that Jack was certain could hold their weight.

Little Michael shook his head, looking like he was about to cry again. Jack wasn't surprised: he wasn't sure *he* could have made it to the trees.

An enormous head appeared in the window. It looked down at the farmer, who pointed up at the roof. Jack grabbed Michel and they scurried back up the roof.

"It's okay, we'll find something else," Jack said. He peeked over the other side in time to see a perimeter being set around the building. "Grout. We should have risked fighting the farmer. I bet he doesn't even know how to fight." Jack mentally kicked himself. He scanned his surroundings again, desperate for some way to escape. There! He saw it: a pulley on the roof that led to—he scurried forward—a clothesline! He slid back down to Michael who was looking around in terror.

"Michael!" he whispered. "On the other side of the roof! There's a clothesline. It's on a pulley. We can go down it!" Michael was still staring wide-eyed down at the hillfolk. "Michael! Clothesline! Go!" Jack hissed, and began pulling him up the roof. Michael came out of his daze and began half-running, half-crawling up the roof towards the other side. Jack was about to follow him when something in the gutter caught his eye. "Grout," Jack said again, and skidded down the roof, grabbed the bag of tubes and followed Michael.

As Jack crested the roof he saw Michael clinging to one of the lines with his arms and legs as he zipped over the heads of the hillfolk, across the edge of the lawn and towards the jungle. Jack moved to follow him, but, with a small "ping," the line snapped. Michael hit the ground skidding and rolling until he came to a rest against the tree to which the clothesline was attached. He leaped to his feet and looked back at Jack, horrified. Jack saw the young boy take a few hesitant steps back towards him.

"Go! Run!" Jack shouted to him, gesturing for the boy to flee. After another second of hesitation, Michael turned tail and sprinted off into the jungle.

By now there were hillfolk on all sides of the building and Jack could hear movement in the window. He hoped desperately the large man couldn't lift himself onto the roof. Jack glanced around again one final time, but knew there was no other escape; he would have to try jumping to the trees. He listened carefully to the noises of the man, judging how much time he had, and at the same time thrust his hand inside the sack

and pulled out the last test tube. He uncapped it and waved it around as he clambered up to the roof peak. When he reached the top he thrust the tube back in the sack, secured the bag around his shoulders, took a deep breath, and sprinted down the roof. As he pushed off he heard the gutter crunch under his feet and then he was in the air reaching towards the jungle, straining to grab hold of something, anything. His hands closed around the tip of a branch. It bent with him and then snapped off in his hands. He snatched at another branch as he fell and managed to grab it with one hand. He could only hold onto it for a split second before it sprang back up, out of his grip, but it had slowed his fall enough for him to catch a third branch with both hands and swing himself up onto it. It took him one blink to assess his situation: the nearest hillfolk had circled around back of the tree so he couldn't escape into the jungle, and more were running around the house towards him. He was level with the second story windows, one of which had been torn apart by the gutter, now hanging from the eaves. Jack made a snap decision and stepped off the branch. He caught and released several more on his way to slow the fall, landed and rolled, and was off running before he was even upright. He turned right, heading straight at the hillman who was running towards him. It was the young catcher. Both boys were running full out, quickly closing the distance between them. Neither slowed. The collision was going to be painful. They were feet away and Jack could see the triumphant light in the catcher's eyes. They had almost reached each other when the catcher sprang, feet leaving the ground, arms ready to tackle. Jack reacted: he dove low, skidding across the grass on his belly, and the catcher soared over him, his feet just brushing the top of Jack's sack, making the glass clink. Jack skidded for a few feet and then sprang up. He chanced a glance behind him and saw with delight the catcher lumbering to his feet, his chin bleeding. As he turned back, however, he saw something that made him stumble. Several small, wan faces were watching him with wide eyes from the torn window. Jack tripped over his own shock and fell to his hands and knees. He leaped back up, but his

mistake had given the catcher almost enough time to reach him. He took off again, feeling a tug on the tail of his shirt as it was ripped from the hillman's hand. He headed across the lawn at a dead run, aiming for the gently sloping jungle to the north instead of the cliff he knew bordered the eastern side of the clearing. Blood pounded in his ears, glass clinked alarmingly on his back, and the catcher's footsteps were closing in. Jack sensed rather than saw the catcher's hand reaching out towards him and he cut right. Jack's bare feet skidded on the grass, but he managed to remain upright, barely. The catcher cut, too, without any trouble. That's why hillfolk wear tacks in their shoes, thought Jack, for grip. Now the catcher was between him and the northern jungle. Jack looked quickly to the right and saw the other hillfolk closing in on him from the west and south. He glanced behind him and saw the young catcher close on his tail and grinning. He knew he had Jack; there was no escape. Jack was thirty feet away from the cliff and still running full out. He was twenty feet away. He could see the tops of the trees and tall bushes that grew below; they were level with the clearing and looked like a field of leaves and vines stretching out beyond the edge. He was ten feet away. He swung the sack of jars around and cradled them against his chest. He was five feet away. He glanced back over his shoulder one more time and smirked at the catcher. The catcher's smile turned down in confusion. Jack was at the edge of the cliff. Stretched out below him he could see the jungle canopy descending away, and off in the distance he could just make out a sparkle of sun glancing off the sea. Jack threw himself head first over the edge of the cliff. Suddenly he was crashing through the canopy, leaves and thin branches whipping his head and arms as he fell through them. The lashing branches stung, but Jack didn't care; the branches were thin enough to let him through but thick enough to slow him down, and that's what mattered. Then with a jolt he hit the first of the vines. The vines were thicker and wetter than the branches and he fell heavily through them, each one whacking him hard. The closer he got to the ground the more tangled the vines became until, with a dull

thump that knocked the breath out of him, he hit a net of them thick enough to stop his fall. He lay there for a few seconds, catching his breath and listening for sounds of another falling body which would indicate the catcher had followed him. The only noise came from a few ruffled birds squawking their indignation. Jack felt around in his sack but could amazingly feel no broken glass. With one hand he cradled it to his chest and with the other he lifted himself out of the tangle and dropped the last eight feet to the jungle floor. Jack was elated. For a long time now he had suspected that if he were careful to jump between trees that he would miss the thicker, bone-breaking branches and still be able to catch himself on the thinner ones, but he had never before been brave enough to test the theory. He tilted his head back, raised his fists in the air, and let out a whoop of delight, loud enough, he hoped, that the catcher could hear him. Laughing to himself, he swung the sack onto his back and trotted off into the jungle towards the city.

# 14

BY THE TIME JACK REACHED THE WALL, the euphoria from his incredible escape had faded and his thoughts had returned to Little Michael and the faces in the window. They were children who had been caught—that much was obvious—but why were the hillfolk keeping them locked up in a building? Was every kid who had ever been caught in there? What was the point of catching children if they were just going to keep them locked up? He needed to talk to Michael.

Jumping off the cliff had cut a lot of time off the trip back to the wall, and Jack was sure he had made it back before Michael, so he decided to wait. Michael was small and not a very good climber, which narrowed down the likely options of where he could cross the wall. Jack chose one of the larger tunnels dug under the wall near Sally's camp, and staked it out from a low branch of a nearby tree. Sure enough, fifteen minutes later Michael appeared and walked right under Jack's tree without

noticing. With a sigh Jack jumped down behind Michael, who gasped and jumped several feet into the air.

"Michael, you have *got* to be more careful. Especially when you're out on your own," said Jack.

"I was trying," said Michael, looking up at Jack earnestly, "I was looking all around. I was."

"I know you were," said Jack. "Just don't forget to check the trees and roofs, too. You'll get better at it. Come on, I'll walk back with you."

The two crawled through the tunnel and began walking the deserted streets back to Sally's camp.

"Michael," began Jack, "What happened? How did you get caught? And what were you doing in there?"

"Breaker took me out with him last night to the southern jungle. He was teaching me hunting, you know, since his arm is broke and he can't do any big hunting for a while. We mostly practiced making rabbit traps and stuff. Then it started getting morning out and we left for home. We were almost there and I had to, you know, use the river, so he went ahead and I ducked into this tunnel that ends in a stream. Then I was on my way back out and I didn't even see them and they jumped me. I tried to shout for help, but one of them stuffed a rag in my mouth so I couldn't yell, and the other tied my wrists and threw me over his shoulder. Twice on the way up I got the catcher to drop me but both times I had barely started running when they tackled me again," Michael winced, "they were *heavy*."

"So once you were there they brought you to the building and tied you up?" asked Jack.

"No. First they put me in this small room with a couple other kids who had just been caught, too. They kept us in there *forever*, and then—"

"That was the building I just got you from? The one with all the other kids?" Jack interrupted.

"Yeah. There were a bunch of them. They were all clean and not beat up, so I think they had been there for a while. They wore black pants

and a white shirt with buttons, just like the rest of the hillfolk, though, so maybe they were the hillfolk's kids."

"The hillfolk don't have kids," said Jack.

Michael just shrugged. "Anyways, so finally this fat man with a big mustache comes in with some food, which was great cause we were all *starving* to death, and then he starts talking and telling us about how great our life is going to be with them and everything. It was weird because me and the other kids were pretty sure we were gonna get eaten, but he went on about how we were going to become part of the hillfolk whatever—"community" I think he said —and how eventually we were gonna get a family and stuff and it'll be all lovely. The other boy I was in there with was all nodding and looking really pleased and everything, but the girl Maggie and me, we didn't trust them. We talked about it after the man left. The boy was a real zygote; he was just happy he wasn't gonna be dinner and was ready to do anything they said. They took him away pretty right quick. Then it was just me and Maggie left with this old guy. He started giving us this lecture about how our lives are gonna be different and that we're gonna learn to work hard and learn manners and weren't gonna be *savages* no longer, whatever that means. And then he gives us brooms and tells us we can start by sweeping out the bedrooms. Anyway, so he drags us up about six flights of stairs, right?"

"Six? That building was only four floors."

"I'm pretty sure the room they kept us in was underground. Anyway, he shoves us in this huge room with tons of beds and tells us that we'll be sleeping in one of these rooms tonight and that we'd better start sweeping if we wanted lunch, and then he left. Maggie and me checked out the bedrooms and they were all exactly the same and all the beds were made perfectly and it was really freaky. Maggie wanted to peek downstairs at the other kids we passed on the way up so she snuck down and I followed her."

"What were the kids doing?" asked Jack.

"I dunno. A lot of the ones I saw were sewing clothing, I think.

Like patching knees, and making new shirts and stuff. And some of them were sewing leather. I dunno what they were making, though. But you should have seen them! They didn't look like kids anymore! No one was talking or playing or nothing; they were all just sitting there silently working. And not even good work, either: no one was fletching arrows or skinning rabbits or building anything or *nothing*. They were all so serious and quiet and miserable they looked like grownups—I thought they were at first but they were all too small."

"Did you recognize anyone?"

"No, but I barely had time to look before this huge guy saw us. We ran up the stairs faster than he did and Maggie had time to hide under a bed, but he grabbed me before I could hide. He ripped my sleeve off but he caught my ankle. Then he hit me and asked me where Maggie was," Michael's voice broke, "and he was really strong and it hurt a lot so I told on her." Michael was looking at his feet, and Jack saw a few tears drip off the end of his nose.

"Hey, don't worry about it," Jack said softly, "He would have found her anyway; it's not like she could have escaped."

"Yeah, but I *told* on her." Michael was really crying now.

"Michael you got caught. No one expects you to be all brave and heroic when you're getting beat up."

"You and Sally would have," Michael sniffed.

"Maybe, but we're about twice your age. Plus, we've never been caught; you never know what we'd do. You never know what anyone would do. No one's ever escaped before to tell us what it's like. But you did! That's pretty impressive. Sort of makes you a hero."

Michael nodded and wiped his face on his remaining sleeve. "I can't believe it. I thought I was a goner for sure. Thanks for helping me."

"You're welcome. Just don't get caught again."

"Okay."



The sun had set by the time Jack dropped Michal off at the entrance to Sally's camp. He would have stopped in to say hi, but Sally's gang would have a lot of questions the two of them, and he wasn't in the mood to chat. Instead, he walked slowly back to his own camp, mind buzzing.

# 15

"HERE YOU GO." Jack tossed the sack of test tubes on Doc's empty bed. "What are you up to?"

Doc was squinting into a microscope and blindly jotting down notes in his thick notebook. He turned towards Jack.

"I am studying the water sample you sent down."

"Anything?"

"As far as I can tell, nothing abnormal. But it's early yet." Doc turned back to his microscope.

"We're gonna have a check-in in a second. Just so you know."

"I shall be in attendance in just a moment."

"Hey, where have you been all day?" asked Scrape from in front of the fire. She was just pulling a flank of boar out of the flames when Jack entered the living room.

"Went for a walk," said Jack.

Scrape's eyes darted over the small cuts covering Jack's body and the tears in his clothes. Her eyebrows drew together and she opened her mouth to speak, but Jack gave a small shake of his head.

"Do you want dinner?" she asked instead.

"Yeah. I'm starving. Let's have a check-in first, though." Now that he was safe in camp Jack was surprised to find himself a little unsettled. He couldn't get the faces of those trapped children out of his head, and he had a sudden and strong desire to make sure his own gang was home safe and accounted for.

Scrape laid the meat carefully on the hearth and stood up, grabbing Tish's hand and helping her to her feet. Jocco and Zee put down their paints and went over to join her, trying not to touch anything with their colored hands. Zee nudged Wash with her foot as she passed him, and he grunted and sat up, rubbing his eyes sleepily. "Whassup? Can't a guy close his eyes around here for five—oh," he cut himself off when he noticed the check-in line and went to join the group.

Doc joined the line, head down and muttering to himself.

"Robbie," Scrape called in the direction of her and Robbie's room. "Check-in."

Jack was sure Robbie had heard her but it took a couple more summons for him to appear in the doorway. He looked grouchy as usual and went to stand next to Scrape.

"You know where I am. Why have I got to be here?" grumbled Robbie.

"You don't," said Jack.

"But you will be anyway, you're part of the gang, so stop complaining," said Scrape, and she turned to Jack "We're getting low on meat. We'll make it through breakfast but someone should go hunting tomorrow."

"Right," said Jack. "Anything else?"

Scrape shrugged. "Everything seems to be regular out there. Haven't heard anything strange."

Jack nodded. "Tish?"

"I ran into Breaker last night on his way to the south jungle. He said, uh, he said he has been watching the O'Riley gang lately since, uh, his arm, uh, you know. Anyway, he said he overheard some of them talking about O'Riley. They said he was sick. He said they kinda sounded worried."

"Huh. Okay," said Jack. He stopped himself before he could glance at Doc. "Anything else?"

"Um, yeah. We're getting low on potatoes. I was thinking that maybe, um, I could get some tomorrow? And I think Doc maybe wants to go gathering too. He mentioned he needed some things." Tish had turned bright red and glanced at Doc, embarrassed that she had spoken for someone else.

Jack nodded, "Good. Robbie?"

"Nothing to report, *sir*," he said sarcastically.

"Right. Jocco?"

Jocco was standing up so straight he was practically on tiptoes. "Painting, *sir*."

"Have you been practicing fighting?" Jack asked, thinking of Little Michael

"Um, a bit, *sir*," he said, looking a little dejected as if he were being chastised.

"That's good," said Jack. "Zee? How about you?"

Zee nodded in agreement.

"Wash?"

"Well *someone* broke The Lambaster," he said, glaring at Zee. She smirked at him. "So I been lookin' fo' the parts fo' another. An' I spose I aughta be acruin' some tools of 'er own so I 'ave some left by th' end o' buildin' season. 'Sides that though we finished up all th' skyshaftys 'n we'll be startin' on really tunin' up some o' those 'scapeholes."

"Sounds good," said Jack. He turned to everyone. He paused, not sure how to begin, and then decided to just go for it. "Little Michael



from Sally's gang got caught early this morning" Cries of surprised and indignation filled the room until Jack put up his hand for silence. "Luckily, I was up near the hillfolk's main camp and I saw him being held prisoner there." Jack saw Scrape's eyes narrow in suspicion but she didn't ask. "I was able to free him and we both escaped."

"What?!" cried several voices.

"You guys escaped!?" shouted Jocco. "From the *hill*?"

"How?" asked Tish, wide eyed.

Jack told them the whole story, starting from when he heard crying in the building and ending with all the information little Michael had told him.

"So they're using the children as *slaves*?" asked Scrape. Her face was stormy and her fists clenched.

"Yes," said Jack. He noticed his fists were clenched as well. He relaxed his hands.

"They couldn't have kept all the caught kids ever there, could they?" asked Tish.

"I don't know. Michael said the building kept going underground."

"But that's like a hundred kids!" said Jocco.

"I told you everything I know. But yeah, there must be a hundred or so kids in there. Unless they put them other places, too. North."

"At least we know we won't get eaten if we're caught," said Jocco.

"Humph. I'd rather get eaten than be forced to do the same thing all day, every day," said Scrape.

"Me too," said Jocco, quickly.

"You like painting all day," said Tish.

"Not when someone makes me," countered Jocco.

"Exactly," said Scrape.

"Well, anyway," said Jack. He wanted to wrap the meeting up so he could talk to Scrape. "Wash and Zee, you guys are going to get more tools—"

"Migh' could use some 'elp carryin' 'em. Dependin' on how much

we find," said Wash.

"I'll go," said Robbie.

"Me, too," said Jocco.

"Tish and I will be gathering," said Doc.

"Is Breaker meeting you?" asked Jack. Neither Doc nor Tish were great fighters, and Jack was feeling a bit nervous still.

Tish nodded.

"Good. Scrape and I will go hunting. If that's good with you." He turned to Scrape.

She nodded.

"Alright, let's eat."

Jocco and Zee washed off their hands and everyone crowded around the fireplace for dinner. The dinner conversation revolved around the hillfolk and, as Wash had coined it, the Children Factory. The news of the triumph over the hillfolk raised everyone's spirits and they happily discussed their favorite aspects of the escape while Doc expounded at length upon the most economically efficient ratio of laborers to supplies, much to the gang's annoyance.

At the end of the meal, everyone broke off into their various relaxing pursuits. Wash was trying desperately to finish what he called a "readable but no' enjoyable," book; Jocco, Tish, Robbie and Zee struck up a game of poker using their remaining toffee as betting chips; and Scrape and Jack lounged in front of the fire in a comfortable silence. Doc disappeared into his room but returned a minute later carrying a short, thick branch and joined Scrape and Jack by the fire. He held one end of the stubby branch in the fire for a minute until it started smoking, and then retracted it.

"What are you doing?" asked Scrape, as Doc twirled the smoking branch idly.

"I'm smoking. I have happened upon the practice several times whilst reading, and it is described as a great soother of tensed nerves and a contemplative aid. I must say I agree. Already I feel my thoughts

clearing.” Doc smiled satisfactorily as he watched the smoke curl towards a skyshaft. The three children lazily watched the smoke trickle upwards for a few minutes before Scrape finally turned to Jack and raised her eyebrows.

“It’s bad,” said Jack.

“I figured,” said Scrape.

“Okay. Well you know how Zoe died recently?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“I think it’s the plague.”

“Yeah, I do too,” she said.

“What? Really?” asked Jack, taken aback.

“What, you think you’re the only person who noticed? We all went through it, you know.” She looked slightly irritated.

“Yeah, well, anyway,” said Jack, “Doc figured the plague must be either in the water or the air, so today I went and collected some samples of them in the city and on the hill, since the hillfolk—”

“Aren’t getting sick,” Scrape finished.

Jack smiled. “Right.”

“What about food?”

Jack looked over at Doc, expecting him to chime in but the boy was staring up at his trickle of smoke and muttering to himself. Jack turned back to Scrape. “Doc said a bunch of the adults only ate old, canned food, so there would have been some survivors.”

“Huh. Makes sense.” She paused. “That news about O’Riley is big, too.”

“Is it?” Jack said, “He was getting old. It’s just more evidence for the plague.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Scrape, and Jack was surprised to see a grin spreading across her face.

“What?” Jack asked.

“But now O’Rileys only got a couple days left. Once he’s gone that whole gang is gonna fall apart. I can’t wait to watch.”

“Meghan will just take over,” said Jack.

“You think? She’s getting on in years, too, you know. Half that gang is. O’Riley was like a raving god for them. Once he jumps the twig they’ll figure no one is safe. It’ll be raving anarchy. It’s gonna be great.”

“Huh,” said Jack. “I didn’t think about that. That might be a good opportunity to relieve them of some food and clothes and stuff.”

Scrape grinned. “It might. So, the Children Factory. Thoughts?”

“It’s messed up,” said Jack, more strongly than he intended.

“It’s a raving nightmare. Can you imagine being trapped there? Locked inside all day?”

“I guess it explains the catching. They don’t have children of their own to do the sewing or help with farming or anything.”

“Do they help with the farming, the caught kids? Wouldn’t they just escape?”

“Dunno. When do we ever go near the hill anymore?”

“What I don’t get is, why don’t they get the grout get out of there? They could overpower those hill zygotes, right? Especially since there’s got to be a dozen kids in there who are grown-ups by now.”

Jack shrugged. “They probably die once they turn eighteen, too. They *are* city folk.”

“Oh yeah. North, this bites.”

“Yeah. It’s worse than I thought it would be,” Jack agreed.

“What did you think they did with the kids?”

“I guess I didn’t really have any ideas. But not this. Forcing someone to do something? *Slavery?*”

Scrape was quiet a minute, and then she said, “I guess it doesn’t matter. What can we do about it without getting caught? Worst case scenario, we become a hillfolk. Best case scenario, we die of the plague before that can happen.”

Jack shook his head at her in bafflement.

“So,” Scrape turned to Doc, “The plague problem. I imagine you have been studying the air and water. Wha’daya got so far?”

Doc tore his eyes away from his smoking stick, blinking. “What? Oh, yes. Well I only received the final samples before dinner. I need more time ere I can shed light upon the mysteries of the plague.” He waved his stick with a flourish to emphasize the mystery.

Jack grinned to himself and then cleared his throat. “Yeah, so do you need more time tomorrow? If you don’t want to go gathering Tish can probably get some stuff for you.”

“No, no I couldn’t. Bright as she is, Tish does not have the experience. I entrust such essential gatherings to no one but myself. What if, for example, she gathered hemlock instead of wild carrots? Where would we be then?”

“Uh,” said Jack.

“Dead,” said Doc, as if this was patently obvious. Then, in a quick motion he flicked his stick into the fire and stood up. “I must get back to work.”

“You’ve been working non-stop for what—two days?” said Jack. “Have you even been sleeping?”

“Of course. The mind cannot properly function without sleep, though do I resent it.” He stood up and walked off to his room, muttering again and holding his lower back.

“So we wait now, huh?” said Scrape, lying back on the floor.

“I guess,” said Jack, copying her. “Until Doc finds something. And if he doesn’t—I don’t know what we’re going to do. Get food samples after all? Run away? Maybe we can figure out how to build a boat, like they used to have.”

“Woah, woah,” Scrape interrupted. “When I said wait, I meant wait. It’s the end of the day and I have some relaxing to catch up on. Come on, let’s play checkers.”

“You seem awfully relaxed about the whole thing.”

“Yeah, well, what’s one more thing that wants to kill us? Let’s just make it through the next five years. Then I’ll start to worry.” She winked at him and he rolled his eyes.

# 16

THE MOON HAD SET HOURS AGO. In the pitch black of the night a small girl’s hair and teeth still found enough light to glow. Another girl, unrecognizable in the dark but unusually tall, sat on a low wall, her face level with the smaller girl’s.

“Someone freed Michael from the Domestication Facility,” said Jacobsen.

“Tha’ ain’ news, now is it? ‘Appened hours ago.”

“Who is the other boy?”

“Who’s Jack? Who’s to say, really?”

“Uhh.”

Rat’s hair tilted to the side, and she said nothing.

“Do you know where we can find Jack? Or Michael?”

“I do news. I’m no’ a rat.”

“Okay, what’s the news?”

"Wotchew go' for me, then?"

"What do you want to know?"

"How is ole JB doin'?"

"He's pretty angry right now."

"An' 'ee 'as a plan, dunnee. JB always 'as a plan. For every eventuality."

Jacobsen hesitated. "Yes. He wants to reinforce the Domestication Facility. Don't ask me how, he hasn't shown me the drawings, or talked to me about anything."

"You get this news from Good-Friend-Allen."

"Yes."

"I think this is some news well paid," said Rat. "In return, I present you with: O'Riley is sick."

Jacobsen was silent for a moment.

"And Meg? Isn't she second in command?"

"Coming into lead like the voices of the news suspected."

"And she's afraid for herself?"

"Couldn't say."

"But now would be a good time?" Jacobsen's voice sounded excited in the dark.

"I jus' do news."

"This is good,"

"I may 'ave more, if you're willin' to pay."

"What is it?"

"Big. And of particular relevance to you, I suspect."

"Okay, yeah. I'm interested."

"Spit promise you'll give equal return?"

They spat and shook hands.

"There is a boy, Robbie. 'E's from Jacks gang, but 'ee's none too pleased about I'."

"What do you mean?"

"Tha's what I mean. He's un'appy. Disgruntled, if you like. More importantly, 'ees *old*."

"Do you know where I can find him?" she sounded excited.

"Find 'im yourself. 'ees big. Carries a sledgehammar. And goes around alone mos'ly."

"Okay."

"Now, wot 'ave you go' for me?"

Jacobsen paused for a moment. "I could give you the antidote. A years-supply when you get old enough."

"I deal in news." Rat's voice was cold.

"I could talk to someone. Maybe get you more than a year's worth."

"No." Her bared teeth gleamed.

"You'll die without it."

"I'll die with it, too."

"You'll die sooner without it."

"I'll die when an' 'ow I like without anyone 'oldin' it over my 'ead, thank you. My death is my own."

Jacobsen paused. "I can't think of any other news."

"Oh, can'cha? You made a spit promise." Something far more dangerous than hair and teeth glinted in the dark. "Maybe you'd like to be indebted to me?"

"What do you mean?"

"You owe me. Either this is a problem or you can be indebted to me."

Jacobsen was bigger and a good fighter, but something about Rat was beyond unsettling.

"I'll owe you."

"Good. I'll come find you when you've got news. It won't be long now."

The dangerous glint disappeared, and a moment later so did the glow of teeth and hair.

# 17

WHEN JACK AWOKE the next day, it took him a few panicked seconds to orient himself. He had slept harder than most rocks and had the sort of vivid plague-dreams that he hadn't had since he was seven. He sat for a few moments, breathing deeply, relieved to be back in his familiar bed in his familiar world. Then he clambered out of bed, tousled and sore and still feeling a little disoriented. The feeling was intensified when he looked up at the heavy, thunderous clouds through the skyshaft, which gave him no indication of how long he had slept. He was halfway through pulling off his tattered shirt to exchange it for a new one when he remembered he would be boar hunting today, an activity known for being hard on clothes. He ambled out of the room.

"Hey, lazy." The living room was empty apart from Scrape, who lay in front of the cold fireplace, sharpening the head of a long spear.

"Morning," said Jack.

"As if," Scrape snorted.

"Where's everyone else?"

"Where they said they'd be, probably. They all left ages ago. I saved you some breakfast; I practically had to knock Robbie out to get it. It's gotta be cold by now, but," she shrugged.

"Great, thanks," he said, and flopped down onto the tree stump to begin eating. The snake was cold and chewy, but Jack didn't mind. Compared to the things he ate in his first couple years as an orphan, a bit of cold snake was a delicacy.

"So how are things going with you?" Jack asked. It had been several days since the two had had a real conversation.

"Pretty good. Robbie is being a raving fusspot as usual, so that's annoying as usual. That Zee kid seems pretty cool. She doesn't talk much, but I offered to help her up the Big Brick Wall. I swear she almost knocked me over with a glare," Scrape chuckled to herself. "Besides that, I dunno. I guess I've been kinda bored lately. The last good fight I had was that snake you're about to finish off."

"There's more to life than fighting, you know."

"Well, yeah. There's sleeping."

"I'm serious, Scrape. Have you thought about what I said before? About—"

"Getting different hobbies, yeah. But, I mean, what would I get into? Gathering? Painting? Cooking?"

"If you took up cooking then maybe we could get our own toffee supply," said Jack, pretending to like the idea. Scrape threw her whetstone at him. "But seriously. It's safer now than it used to be. You can relax a bit."

Her face turned defensive, and he knew he should have left it. She opened her mouth but he interrupted.

"I have a feeling there'll be fights enough for all of us soon, so don't give up on it yet."

"Once O'Riley dies."

“Yep,” said Jack.

“We should come up with a battle plan. You know, keep a lookout and then the second he dies we all head for the best stashes.”

“Not before hand? The O’Rileys could be a mad dash for the stashes once he dies,” he said.

“I doubt it. They’ll probably be too busy fighting for power amongst themselves. Breaker said he’s been overhearing tons of talk about who will take over if he dies. They’ve been making alliances amongst themselves.”

“Wow, is Breaker doing nothing but spying on the O’Rileys?”

“Suppose so. Anyway, he also said that the O’Rileys have been keeping constant watch and doing rounds and stuff. They don’t wanna look weak with their leader sick.”

“Okay, we’ll do your plan. That sounds smart.”

“Smart,” she scoffed, “it’ll be fun!”

“You and Breaker should hang out more,” said Jack, shaking his head and smiling.

“So how have you been doing?” she asked him.

His smile disappeared. “I don’t know. Fine I guess.”

“Yeah, right,” she said. “So that look of intense worry you’ve been carrying around lately is just a headache, then?” he looked at her in surprise. “Re-lax. I’m sure no one else noticed. I just know you.”

“I’m fine. What else can I be?”

“I dunno. Nothing I guess,” said Scrape. “You done?”

“Yep,” Jack stood up.

Scrape followed.

They grabbed their weapons and together started for the front door. They entered the doorway and Jack became aware of the sound of pounding feet. The footsteps echoed off the passage, making it impossible for him to tell how many people were heading towards them. Jack unsheathed his sword and belt knife, and at the same time Scrape pulled her sword off her back and leveled the long spear towards the echoes. Jack could feel his heart pounding in time with the rapid footfalls

as they came nearer and nearer. Suddenly a group of people burst around the corner, running flat out. The person leading stopped short at the sight of the weapons and the followers plowed into him bowling him over and then tripping and landing in a squirming, cursing heap on the floor.

“What are you guys doing?” growled Jack. The moment of fear had turned to fury.

“You raving zygotes!” growled Scrape at the same time.

“Sorry, sorry. Only jus’ bare’ly heeled it outta there,” panted someone from the bottom of the heap. He kicked a few limbs off of him and stood up, revealing himself to be a very dirty, very sweaty Wash. The other bodies untangled themselves and became Jocco and Zee.

“North, Wash! You know better than this! Why the grout—” Jack stopped short when Wash shoved something into his hand. It was a tough piece of animal skin and on it was branded a picture that looked eerily like Jack. Underneath were the words, “WANTED. LARGE REWARD.”

“Raving grout,” muttered Scrape over Jack’s shoulder. Jack just stared.

“There was one for Michael, too,” said Jocco, holding another square of hide up. Scrape took it and held it out for herself and Jack. The burn looked just like Michael.

“Okay, this is definitely something. But that doesn’t mean you can come tearing in here like boars on a rampage. Someone might have seen you. This camp could be compromised.” The thought hadn’t occurred to Jack until he said it, and he gripped his blades tighter. Scrape noticed and turned her back to the wall so the other entrances were in view.

“We weren’t followed, Jack. I’m *sure* of it,” said Jocco. His eyes were wide.

Jack turned to Wash and raised his eyebrows in question.

“Don’ think we wuz, Jackey. We wuz out there gettin’ ready t’ continue work on ‘scapehole four when we ‘appened across these,” he gestured to the wanted signs. “So we grabbed ‘em down and ‘eaded back

'ere but we barely got nowhere when we wuz jumped. Dunno who they wuz. Southerners maybe. Well we fights 'em off, obviously, but a whole load more of 'em appear 'n we bunked. We lost 'em pretty quick. They wasn't familiar with our area o' the city I suspect. Then we wuz all careful an' stealthy like fleas 'till we're sure no one wuz around. But we wanted to catch ya afore ya went on out so we legged it."

"And Robbie?" asked Jack.

"Ooh yea' I forgot 'bout the lout. Well 'ee broke some ribs, you know, the usual. Then when reinforcem'nts showed 'ee split off so as the southies would 'ave to divide. 'Eel be back soon, prolly. Though 'ee mighta hunkered down in one o'the 'scape'oles. But the real bummer 'o the 'ole affair wuz I 'ad to leave behind all the new tools!"

Zee stepped forward, took the disguise which she had tied into a sac off her back and threw it at Wash's feet. It thudded in a very heavy manner.

"Wot th—" Wash yanked the disguise apart to reveal what must have been forty pounds worth of tools. "How th—" he struggled for words. "These 'ere tools prolly weigh as much as you!" he finally spat out.

Zee just shrugged. Jack thought she might have looked pleased with herself but it was hard to tell. "I'm hungry," she said, and walked past the group and into the living room.

"No kiddin'," muttered Wash, and, still looking stunned, he followed her.

"Whaddaya think?" asked Scrape.

"Well, I guess my life just got a little more complicated," he said, looking down at the wanted sign. Jack felt as if a boar was sitting on his chest. He was a good fighter, maybe even a great fighter, but he had never realized until now just how much his sense of well-being depended on his and his gang's obscurity. He didn't live in open hostility like O'Riley or in wary friendliness like Sally. He lived in the shadows and knew how to maneuver the city to stay out trouble. Sometimes he loved it and sometimes he hated it, but always he survived. But now. Now

there was a target painted on his back. The hillfolk had singled him out, a dangerous prospect in and of itself, and had set half the city against him too. He and he alone. Well, and Michael too, but really, Jack thought, he was a little kid; he didn't count.

"You still wanna go hunting?" Scrape asked.

"What—yeah, of course," he said.

"I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to lie low in a 'scapehole for a while. We could tell everyone you're, I dunno, doing recon on the hillfolk for a few days."

"No, no it's fine, thanks, though." Jack suddenly felt an overwhelming feeling of gratitude towards Scrape. Scrape didn't put up with cowardice from anyone, even the little kids. Her offer made Jack think that Scrape might have an inkling of the feeling of isolation and disquiet that was making a home in his stomach. "Seriously, thanks," he said.

She nodded. "I guess we should probably go to the northern jungle, then."

"Sounds good."

Jack walked back into the living room, took out his smallest knife, and used it to pin the hide onto the soft stone above the fireplace. He turned around, smirking untruthfully to face Wash and Jocco, who were sparring, and Zee, who was lying on the ground sucking on a toffee.

"I thought there was something missing in our decor," said Jack making Zee snort. "Well, Scrape and I are going hunting. See you all later."

Wash stopped mid fight to face Jack which gave Jocco an opening for a good punch in the stomach, which Jocco took advantage of with gusto. "Oof! You're goin'? Whaddarya, a zygote? You got a price on your 'ead. You can't jus' go on 'bout your daily bus'ness like tha'."

"Why not? It's not like I'm going to let myself get caught," said Jack.

"I'll go wit' Scrape," said Wash.

“No. I’m going. These signs don’t change anything. We always go around carefully anyway.”

“Brick and ravin’ mortar, Jacky. You’re gonna get yourself killt!”

Jack thought for a moment. “Okay, if for some reason we’re not back by—” he looked at Scrape.

“Tomorrow morning?” she shrugged.

“Tomorrow morning.” He hesitated. “I guess just try and make sure no one else gets caught.”

They turned and ran out the back door, ignoring the curses Wash shouted at their retreating backs.

# 18

“UNDERGROUND OR OVERGROUND?” asked Jack as they crossed over the pile of debris.

“Underground we stay out of sight. Overground we have more space to run. And we have the high ground.”

“Let’s do underground,” said Jack. The desire to stick to the shadows was stronger than usual.

They reached the fork in the tunnels and went left, where Jack and Jocco had gone down to the O’Rileys, and came out on the north west side of the city.

“Ah, this feels good,” said Scrape as they broke out into the sun. “Hey, there’s Odd and Strange!” she waved at the twin boys, who waved back in unison.

“Careful,” said Jack.

“Please. Those milksops? We could take them blind.” She paused for



a moment and then said, “You know, I know there’s more to life than just getting into fights, Jack. Just give me time to figure out what it is. And I might not be the only one who needs a hobby.”

Jack paused. “We’ll figure it out. After we figure all this other stuff out, of course.”

Scrape grinned. “Of course.”

They reached the northern wall without incident. The northern jungle was the most difficult and most dangerous jungle to traverse and so the area was usually empty of city kids. Long ago, even before the plague had hit, vines had scaled the northern wall and begun to wind themselves into and around the nearby buildings. Now they grew so thick that it looked as though a gigantic spider had wound a web between the wall and the buildings. On occasion Jack and the gang would climb, traverse, or jump into the web both for fun and for practice, but today they wanted to make it through as quickly as possible. There were many ways to go about reaching the wall but there was only one best way. Together, Jack and Scrape threw themselves down on their bellies and wriggled their way under the vines through a hole in the wall and into the jungle. They had to continue crawling for quite a ways before the vines thinned enough so they could stand—however, they didn’t do so at once. At the same time both hunters slowed their crawl and then stopped, quieting their breath and peering through the undergrowth. Birds chirped cheerfully overhead and the underbrush rustled occasionally as a chipmunk or rabbit scurried by.

Scrape raised her eyebrows at Jack, who nodded, and together they silently stood up and began walking, Jack constantly checking the trees above them and Scrape the jungle behind. They walked for at least a quarter of an hour without incident. The tension in Jack’s chest eased. It was dim under the tight canopy and he and Scrape had to pick their way carefully around thick brambles and poisonous plants, and yet be constantly on the alert for signs of predators or prey. There was no room

in Jack’s mind for worries about wanted signs or plagues; his brain had shut off and his instincts had taken over. He was now just one more dangerous animal prowling the dark jungle.

“Boar at seven,” Scrape suddenly breathed from behind him.

Jack stilled. “Plan?”

“He’s young,” whispered Scrape.

Jack didn’t reply but he knew that Scrape knew that he knew what that meant: young means smaller and with a thinner hide. In short, easier to kill.

“I’m behind, you’re attack,” said Scrape. Jack felt the handle of the spear brush the back of his hand and he took it. He heard Scrape’s soft foot falls retreating, or maybe he was imagining he could hear them. Every one of Jack’s senses was tingling. He felt like a bow pulled taught. Painstakingly, Jack turned around the face the boar behind him, pulling a stone out of his pocket as he did so. It was an adolescent boar, its bristles still soft and its skin not so leathery. It was about fifty feet away and grazing on the underbrush, stripping branches of leaves and snapping twigs. Achingly slowly, Jack leveled the spear at it and waited, swaying ever so slightly like the trees around him. A bird call sounded from behind and to a little to the right of the boar, and in one swift movement Jack hurled the stone at the boar. It hit him in the shoulder. The boar jumped and gave a snort of surprise, and then it saw Jack. It charged. Jack grabbed the spear with two hands and braced himself for impact. Scrape sprang out of the bushes, sword out, preparing to force the boar down the channel between herself and the thick undergrowth to the left of the boar and right onto Jack’s spear. It was thirty feet away, then twenty, ten. Suddenly with a deep bellow the boar veered off course straight into the dense brambles, its momentum carrying it through the undergrowth until it burst out on the other side and tore away, still snorting, into the jungle.

“Grout,” said Scrape as she reached Jack. “Should we go after it?”

“Nah, it was kind of small anyway,” Jack replied.

“Well we’ll have no luck around here now. Not with all that noise.” Scrape sheathed her sword and they began walking again.

The jungle grew darker the farther into it they walked. After half an hour it could have been nighttime and they wouldn’t have known the difference. The noises changed, too: the cheerful chirping had been replaced by husky caws and deep hoots. Jack could still hear the rustlings of small animals but they seemed muffled now. The ground, which had been fairly flat before, rose more steeply and Jack and Scrape were breathing heavily. There was a rustle to the left. It sounded just like any other rustle, but for some reason Jack had instinctively tensed and leveled his spear at it. Scrape saw this and reached for her sword, but before her fingers could touch the hilt a gigantic black panther sprang out of the bushes and hit Scrape in the chest, knocking her to the ground and pinning her there under its huge paws. It snarled at her and then whipped its head around to face Jack. Time seemed to have stretched for Jack. He watched the panther attack in slow motion, whipping his spear around as fast as he could but still too slowly, his mind screaming at his body to speed up. The panther looked him in the eyes and its gaze seemed to snap him back into real time. With an incomprehensible shout Jack leapt at the panther spear first, throwing his whole weight into the strike. It moved at the last moment so that instead of stabbing it in the chest, he hit its shoulder. The spearhead punctured an inch of sinewy muscle before hitting bone and snapping off. Jack kept the broken shaft in his left hand and drew his sword with his right, but before he could strike again the panther growled and leapt off of Scrape and onto Jack. Its weight was incredible. All the air flew out of Jack’s lungs and he struggled for breath. The beast’s momentum carried it past Jack, which gave him time to roll onto his knees and look around desperately for the sword which had been knocked from his hands. The cat skidded to a halt, digging its claws into the dirt, and then ran at Jack again. Jack raised the dull stick of wood at the last moment, but the cat jumped right over it and knocked him back to the ground. White light filled his vision as

his head hit a rock, and he lost track of the fight for a minute. When he finally sat back up Scrape was on her feet, just barely managing to keep the panther at bay with her sword.

“If you’re done. With your nap. You could help. You know,” she panted.

Jack looked around hastily, located his sword, and grabbed it up. He swiped at the panther’s back, leaving a deep cut, but the pain only seemed to enrage the panther, which turned its back on Scrape and leapt on Jack for the third time. This time he managed to keep his sword outstretched and he thought he saw it bite into the panther’s belly before he was flat on his back again, large yellow fangs dripping a mix of spit and blood in his face. The panther opened its mouth and growled again. Jack closed his eyes but could still smell the blood and feel the hot breath on his face. The growl cut short with a whine. A heavy weight dropped along his body, and thick, soft fur filled his mouth and nose. He turned away, breathing deeply. As he did so, he became aware of thick, hot liquid flowing down his neck and soaking his shirt. Scrape cursed loudly and then the weight was off of him. Jack sat up, shook his head roughly, and then wiped his face and neck off as well as he could on his slightly less bloody shirttail. He looked around. The panther was on its side, mouth still open mid-snarl, blood matting its sleek black fur. Its throat had been cut.

Jack looked around for Scrape. She was still cursing fluently and at the top of her lungs as she stomped around picking up their fallen weapons. Jack turned, crawled over to the panther and looked down at it. It was so, Jack searched for the word, *elegant*. The last time Jack had heard the word “elegant,” he had been five and his mother was pointing out woman wearing fine clothes. But this panther’s elegance wasn’t in a dress; the panther’s elegance was in itself. The lustrous coat that was both beautiful and perfectly suited to its job, the paws which were so unbelievably huge and yet the most delicate things that padded the forest floor, the jaws which could have crushed his head but could carry a sleeping cub so gently it wouldn’t wake, that was elegance.

"You gonna help me or what?"

Scrapes voice jolted him back into reality. Jack heaved himself to his feet. He felt numb: the excitement dulled the pain of his injuries, but Jack knew that wouldn't last. He turned to Scrape. She had cleaned all the weapons and found a heavy stick and a thin, tough vine.

"What are—?" Jack looked at her, brow wrinkled.

"Whaddaya mean? We got our meat," said Scrape, gruffly.

"Oh, right." Jack looked back at the panther. It would be wasteful not to eat it, but the thought made him sad.

"You okay?" asked Scrape. "You look kinda funny. And you scared me when you didn't get up after you hit that rock. Maybe you should sit down."

"No, no, I'm fine," said Jack. "I only got stunned. Are you okay?" Jack really looked at Scrape for the first time since the fight. She was a mess. Her left sleeve had been torn off at the shoulder, exposing three parallel gashes that ran the length of her upper arm. Her mouth and nose dripped blood and two black eyes had begun to form. Most alarming of all, her shirt was in bloody tatters over her right hip and a dark stain was spreading down her pant leg toward the cuff. "You look terrible," he said. He grabbed a small knife from his waistband and began cutting off the legs of his pants at the knee, and then his sleeves at the shoulder. He flipped the knife to Scrape, who caught it deftly, gathered up his scraps and began examining Scrape's hip.

"Don't worry about it, it's not a big deal. I'll be fine. It mostly got my 'guise," she protested.

"Don't be a zygote. Hold still." Scrape had been bitten; Jack could make out marks from the panther's incisors in Scrape's skin. He couldn't tell how bad it was through all the blood, and, in any case, he couldn't do anything about it if it was bad. Not out here in the jungle. Jack pulled his disguise out from under his shirt and folded it up like a pad.

"Hold this here," he told her, and put the pad over the wound. He then ripped the sleeves and legs in half length-wise and knotted them

together to make a rope and bound the pad tightly to her.

"Here," he said, handing the dagger to her. "Cut off your pant legs." While she did so he tore off her remaining sleeve and began examining her left arm.

"It's not bad," said Scrape. "It barely hurts."

Jack rolled his eyes, "You'd say that even if your arm was torn off."

Scrape shrugged and handed Jack her scraps. He ripped them into strips and tied them one after the other down the length of her upper arm.

"Your turn," she said, holding up the last sleeve scrap.

"What do you mean? I didn't get cut,"

"Now who's a zygote. You're bleeding like a waterfall down the back of your head."

"Am I?" Jack hadn't noticed. He was, after all, drenched with panther blood. Scrape tied the sleeve tightly around his forehead to cover the gash Jack couldn't detect.

"And I think you've got some on your chest. Its claws were out when it jumped you." Jack lifted up his shirt to examine himself. Sure enough, fresh blood was seeping down small punctures in his chest, mingling with the panther blood.

"They're not deep. Let's get moving."

They bent over the panther again and began tying its feet together around the stick. They had almost finished when, from the bushes, came the highest, least intimidating growl Jack had ever heard. He and Scrape both moved automatically for their weapons, and then, out of the bushes leapt a baby panther. Its paws and ears were too big for its body and its fur had more brown in it than its mother's. It roared again. The sound sounded more like a squeal. Then the bushes rustled and another cub leapt out, landing on the first and sending it sprawling. This seemed to distract the first for a moment and the two cubs fought, rolling on the jungle floor, until they rolled right into their mother. They stopped fighting at once and began sniffing and nudging their mother with their

noses and pouncing lightly on her back. Jack's stomach dropped. He felt as though he had been doused in icy water.

"Oh, grout," breathed Scrape. "Oh grout, oh grout, oh grout, oh grout..." she whispered over and over again. Jack looked at her and the look of shock and horror on her face was startling.

"She—she was just protecting her kids," Jack said. "And we killed her for it." He felt like he might throw up.

"What do we do?" asked Scrape. Her eyes were wild with panic. In the hundreds of fights they had fought together, Jack had never seen Scrape panic. "What do we do, Jack? What will happen to them without their parents looking out for them? Other adult panthers won't take care of them; they'll probably kill them. Or else they'll starve. They don't know how to feed themselves yet and they're too young to learn it on their own."

"We did," said Jack.

Jack thought she was going to punch him. "We had stocks of food left behind so we could get by! And there were a few hundred of us! We could look out for each other. They don't have anyone. They'll die."

"What could we have done?" asked Jack, desperately, "She was attacking us—"

Scrape did punch him. She hit him in the mouth so hard his lip split and he tasted blood again.

"We just killed somebody's mother!" she shouted. One of the cubs looked up at the loud noise which gave the other the opportunity to pounce on its head, and they started fighting again. They reminded Jack forcefully of the fight between Wash and Jocco they had just left. He stood up, turned his back, and walked away. He stood facing a tree without seeing it. All those nights he had cried himself to sleep and then was awoken by nightmares. All those long days he had spent sad, scared and alone wishing desperately, heart-achingly hard that he could have his mother back even for a day. He had just given that to someone. Made that someone's reality. A loud thunk made Jack turn back around. Scrape

had slashed at a tree with her sword so hard it had gotten stuck. With a great heave she freed it and returned to the mother panther and finished tying her feet. Jack joined her.

"It's done," she said, hard and emotionless. "We may as well use her to keep us alive."

They lifted the panther so the stick rested between their right shoulders and began walking. They hadn't been walking for a minute before, with a small rustle, the panther cubs popped out of the bushes and began following them. Neither Jack nor Scrape said anything, but Scrape drew her sword and began hacking at branches viciously as she passed. As the adrenaline faded they moved more slowly, being extra careful not to trip or lose their way. Jack felt dizzy and he had the beginnings of a splitting headache. He was sure Scrape felt no better. The cubs followed them the whole way back to the wall. They broke out occasionally into tussles and were lost from sight for a few minutes, but they always reappeared squealing playfully. Where Jack and Scrape had to crawl and then wriggle to make it under the wall and surrounding vines, the cubs pranced happily through. They seemed to delight in the fact that Jack and Scrape were now at their height and began to pounce on them too.

"Ouch!" said Scrape, as one bit down on her ankle. "They've got *sharp* little teeth." Jack looked around and smiled in spite of himself. The cub's jaws were clamped down on Scrape's ankle and it had set its feet in the ground to pull her back. It skidded along behind her as she pulled herself along. "Ow, hey!" Scrape yelped as the second one also grabbed onto her ankle and attempted to stop her. She dragged them like that to the edge of the vine web where she stood up and shook them off. She inspected her ankle, but the cubs had barely broken the skin.

"Let's go," said Jack, amused at Scrape's look of annoyance.

The sun was setting as they headed out into the city. They continued walking slowly and quietly but their careful efforts were somewhat undone by the snarls and squeals emanating from the happy cubs. The

adrenalin had fully left Jack's system by now and he ached all over, particularly his head, which was pounding painfully in time with his heartbeat. His sweat- and blood-drenched clothes chilled him, and he shivered in the cool breeze coming off the sea. And, worst of all, the happy cubs occasionally took a break from sparring to sniff confusedly at their mother's back, which hung just out of reach above them. Every time this happened he felt a stab of shame and regret again so strong it almost doubled him over. The walk through the city was a miserable one, but, thankfully, an uneventful one, and when they finally ducked into the dark passage to their living room it was with great relief.

Soft, orange light flickered a short distance down the hall, and, when they made it to the doorway, they were greeted by a heavenly wave of dry heat and the peaceful chatter of the gang. The peaceful chatter was cut short by a gasp and a loud curse. Everyone turned their heads towards the door where Jack and Scrape stood, cold and exhausted, dripping blood onto the floor. Several people spoke at once.

"Wot 'appened to you?"

"Wow. Did you almost get caught?"

"Oh dear, thank goodness I've a full stock of fresh herbs!"

"Did you get dinner? 'Cause we only got vegetables and I'm starving."

Jack raised his voice to interrupt the questions, "It's fine, most of this is panther blood. We got into a fight with a panther and killed it, so that's what we've got for dinner."

"Oh, wow. I've never had panther meat!" said Jocco.

"Me neither," said Jack distractedly. Dizziness had overcome him. He needed to get out of the living room before he puked or toppled over. "Robbie, will you come and take this for a second?" Jack asked, nodding to his end of the panther stick. As Robbie approached, a high-pitched but determined growl came from Jack's ankles. The panther cubs were crouched between Jack's feet, facing Robbie with bared teeth.

"What th—" Robbie began, but was interrupted by Jocco who squealed in delight and crawled closer for a better look.

"Awesome! You brought us pets," he said.

"No, we didn't," said Jack in surprise. "They just followed us here."

"Awesome! We should get them some food; they might be hungry. They can sleep in my room if they want. Or maybe they wanna sleep in front of the fire."

"What? No!" said Jack. "Jocco, these are wild animals, not house cats. We can't keep them."

"I bet we could. I bet Doc has a book on it or something. And they just eat meat or whatever, right? Oh, and we can tie leashes to them and they can guard the door."

"NO!" Jack shouted. "No leashes. Not ever. And that's not what I meant. It wouldn't be *right* to keep them."

"Why not? They followed you home."

"Jocco!" Jack tried to quiet his temper, but the headache was making it difficult.

"Jocco," came Tish's soft voice. "How much do you like to run around? A grown-up panther is twice as big as you and probably ten times as strong. You go crazy if you're stuck inside for more than a day, and the panthers will need a lot more room. And they're not gonna want to be stuck underground either; they hang out in trees and stuff."

"Well then we'll take them out into the jungle with us. We can go for walks like dogs in books. So they can get exercise and be outside."

"Go for *walks*?" Jack was outraged, but Tish interrupted. Jack vaguely registered that that was the first time he had ever heard Tish interrupt anyone.

"Do you think that would really be good for them? Animals don't go for walks. No one does. Animals explore, run, wander around. If someone decided to keep you as a pet they could probably train you to stay inside all day and eat only maggots for every meal and never paint or fight or anything. They could train you to do it, but what kind of life is that? Or they could train you to be a catcher, and to try to kill and eat all of us. You can train anyone to do anything probably."

"They could never train me!" said Jocco, crossing his arms.

"Whatever, that's not the point," said Jack. "We don't force anyone to do anything. That's for the hillfolk to do."

Robbie snorted.

"You can leave whenever you want," growled Jack, too loudly, but he didn't care.

"Wot are we gon' do wit em?"

"Grout, I don't know. Tish, you're in charge of them. I'm going to get raving clean."

Jack gave Robbie and Scrape a hand laying the panther on the hearth.

"We're not taking it into the bathroom?" asked Robbie.

"Its throat is cut. It bled out on the walk. It won't be messy," said Jack, and he turned away.

A dull thunk and a curse made him turn back around. Robbie lay on the ground, stunned, as Scrape pulled back her fist again. "You can't raving cut up their raving mother in front of them you raving zygote!" she yelled.

Jack leapt forward and grabbed Scrape's arm as she pulled it back for another punch.

"Tish'll take care of it. Let's go get clean."

With the curtain pulled shut and nothing but moonlight coming through the skyshaft the bathroom was almost pitch black. Jack took the upstream side and Scrape the downstream side.

It took them a while to wash off, mostly because they couldn't see so they had to keep going back. Finally, they changed into clean clothes which stuck to their wet bodies, pinned their filthy clothes in the stream with rocks to soak, and walked back into the living room. Scrape had put on a sleeveless shirt and was holding the hem of it above the large bite in her side. Jack was trying to stem the flow of blood from his scalp, which had been renewed during the washing, to no avail. At least punctures in his chest were no longer bleeding. Together they walked to Doc's lab, where he had laid out all the necessary medical tools.

Scrape's bite, to Jack's relief, was fairly shallow. Unfortunately, it was too wide for stitches, so Doc packed it with a fragrant poultice and tied a bandage around her middle to hold it on. The claw marks on her arm were another story, but Doc stitched them up and gave her strict instructions not to do any heavy lifting or fighting until further notice. Then he turned to Jack. Jack got five stitches in his head and instructions to lie down and not get up for at least three days.

"What?" said Jack in horror.

"You are concussed. It is a very serious matter. If you do not let this heal properly you will probably get another concussion next time you bump your head against some overhang, and then where will you be?"

"Uh,"

"With brain damage at best," chastised Doc.

"Oh. Right. Okay, then, thanks," said Jack sheepishly, and he and Scrape left the room.

Panther steaks were already sizzling on the fire but rest of the panther was out of sight, and everyone was watching the cubs explore their new surroundings with delight.

"You gotta admi' it. Them cubs are pre-y adorable," said Wash as Scrape and Jack took places next to him by the fire. He was right, Jack thought. The cubs delicately sniffed their way throughout the room, sometimes pouncing on an ant and sometimes leaping back in fright from a particularly large piece of dust. Their coats had collected a few leaves and a lot of dirt on the journey to the camp. Jack assumed that their mother would usually have been the one to clean them. Jack glanced sideways at Scrape. The regret on her face was painful. He glanced around and saw Tish looking at Scrape in concern.

"Foodsup!" cried Wash as he pulled several large stakes out of the fire and began cutting them up. They were too hot to hold at first so everyone lay around, drooling as they inhaled the wonderful smell of roasted panther.

"What are the kittens gonna eat?" asked Scrape.

"Oh yeah, they must be hungry," said Jocco.

"Robbie, I know you've got some extra jerky hidden," said Scrape, turning to the suddenly mutinous-looking Robbie.

"I do not," he growled.

"You can refill your stash with panther meat if you feel like you need to," said Tish, reasonably.

"Yeah and what if panther meat is gross? Why can't the stupid animals just eat this stuff like the rest of us?"

Jack grabbed the back of Scrapes shirt. "Robbie, we'll get you more meat tomorrow if you don't like it. Please just get it," he said.

Grumbling, Robbie went to retrieve the boar jerky he had stashed away.

Robbie had nothing to fear. The panther meat was delicious. It was far more tender than boar meat, and quite juicy and sweet. By the end of dinner almost everybody seemed to be in a good mood, wiping grease off their chins and sighing contentedly. The warm fire soothed Jack's aching muscles and after dinner Doc disappeared for a moment before coming back with a few sprigs of powder-blue leaves.

"Chew on these," he said, handing them to Jack. "They're for headaches."

Jack laid down and felt with relief as his headache relaxed into a dull ache. And the next thing he knew the room was quiet, cold and dark. Jack kept his eyes closed and didn't move; his muscles were so stiff he wasn't sure he *could* move. A low crackle came from the fireplace behind his back, but he could barely feel its heat. He was debating just staying on the floor to sleep when he heard a soft voice.

"How are you doing?" It was Tish.

"Fine," said Scrape.

"That must have been pretty scary, getting attacked by a panther like that."

"It wasn't bad. It's all instincts, you know. The worst part was when I thought Jack had been killed. I was scared."

Jack was glad they thought he was asleep. He had never heard Scrape admit to being scared before.

"That would have been awful. Seeing your friend die like that. Not being able to help."

"Yeah. I suppose we got lucky."

"Lucky to have lived through it," Tish said quietly. "Unlucky that the fight had to happen in the first place."

There was a pause. Then, "It's so *unfair*," Scrape mumbled. "Why did we have to walk in that exact spot? We could have been a quarter mile to either side and nothing would have happened. And why did she have to attack us? We weren't gonna touch her kids. It's not *fair*."

"No, it's not fair," said Tish. "It didn't have to happen; it was just an accident. A really terrible accident."

"But we ruined those cubs' lives. They're orphans." Jack thought he might have heard Scrape's voice crack. He cracked his eyes open the tiniest amount. Tish and Scrape were sitting next to each other cross-legged staring into the dying fire.

"The same thing happened to you. And you're doing okay, right?" Tish asked.

"Well, yeah," said Scrape, "but that doesn't mean I don't wish..." she trailed off.

"The plague..." Tish paused. "The plague was terrible, too, but it wasn't the end of the world for you. There are still good things and good people and animals and good accidents. Bad things will always happen. So will good things."

"But how do I—I don't—" Scrape seemed unable or unwilling to ask the question, but Tish seemed to know what she was thinking.

"Is sadness such a terrible thing to feel?" she asked. "Is it so awful to have a hard time? To cry about terrible things?"

"Crying's not gonna do anything useful."

"I think it probably would make you feel better."

"That's not useful. None of this is useful."

“You don’t have to protect yourself from *everything*, you know. Sometimes it’s okay not to be okay. Being sad is hard but, really, would it be right if it was easy? Some things deserve sadness. Like this. And that’s a good thing. It means they were important.”

Scrape didn’t say anything.

“It’ll get better,” Tish repeated, “But it’s okay that it’s not right now,” and she placed her hand gently on Scrape’s forearm. Jack expected Scrape to shake Tish off but instead she just bowed her head, hiding her face from the light of the fire, and suddenly Jack was embarrassed. He wished he hadn’t woken up, wished he hadn’t seen or heard any of this very private conversation. He closed his eyes and willed himself back to sleep before the two girls could start talking again, but he needn’t have worried. It seemed that neither had anything left to say. They sat together in silence, Tish’s hand on Scrape’s arm, until Jack finally relaxed and slipped back into sleep.

# 19

JACK AWOKE HOURS LATER, comfortably warm but uncomfortably stiff. Someone had draped a blanket over him while he slept and the fire was still going. He rolled onto his back to see the blue light of the predawn sky through the skyshaft above him. He lay there for a minute before he finally sat up and stretched, groaning.

“Feel like grout, huh? Me too.” Jack looked around and saw Scrape sitting up against the wall.

“I feel like I got run over by a panther,” said Jack, trying to sit up straight as his back muscles protested. “Boy, I don’t think I’ve felt like this since the first time I went hunting.”

“Here,” said Scrape, tossing him a small jar. “Tish made us some cream for soreness. It’s got hot peppers in it.”

Jack opened the jar and began liberally smearing the cream on himself. The soothing burn felt good on his muscles, but it did nothing to ease



the tightness in his chest. Scrape held out some of Doc's headache herbs to Jack. He took it gratefully and looked at her. She looked haggard. Jack wondered if she had slept at all.

Before he could say something, he had no idea what, Wash and Doc walked in. They nodded, one sleepily and one distractedly, to Jack and Scrape, and Doc plopped himself in front of the fire with his notebook and Wash went to put another log on the flames.

Jack stood up to retrieve his and Scrape's clothes from the river and hang them to dry, but Doc tugged him back down.

"What are you doing up? You cannot be walking around with that concussion," chastised Doc.

"Oh yeah, I forgot," said Jack. He sat back down. "So how did you guys make out yesterday?"

"Dandy. After we saw 'ya we jus' stayed in. I read a book to 'em while Jocco painted 'n Zee mess't wit' 'er new tools," said Wash. "Nice to relax for a bit wit' all this baddish business runnin' about," said Wash. "Speakin' o' which, forgot to mention yesterday but according to Tish according to Breaker, the plague 'asn't got O'Riley yet. Significantly ill but distinctly alive."

"How did you guys know about the plague?" asked Jack, glaring at Doc who didn't notice. "I mean, I figured Doc would tell you, but Tish? Does anyone else know?"

"*Everyone* else knows; whaddaya talkin' about, Jackey? Breaker an' Tish figured it out for 'emselfes and told Jocco an' Zee. Scrape also figured it out an' told Robbie. And Doc, naturally, told me."

"Oh. I thought everyone—or the younger ones anyway—would have been more scared."

"Those young ones barely don' even *remember* the plague. It's us elders you gotta watch out for. Us what remembers. Might snap from the strain at any time, we might."

Jack rolled his eyes and then said, "But no one's even seemed worried. Though maybe Robbie's been a bit more unpleasant than usual."

"We know you're on top o' it, Jackey. If we need to do something, you'll let us know."

Jack knew he should have felt—well actually, he had no idea what he should have felt, but he did feel inexplicably annoyed.

"Nothing!" Doc said suddenly, punctuating the word with a snap as he shut his notebook.

"Still?" asked Wash.

"Even yet," grumbled Doc.

"Nothing what?" asked Jack.

"I have tested all of the samples. It is clear to me that there is no difference in the samples between the hill and the city; however, I can't find the plague among them! What is it? Is the plague hiding, disguising itself as a normal molecule? Is it simply that my equipment isn't powerful enough to see it? Or have we been wrong this whole time and the plague is passed in a completely different way? Regardless. I have nothing."

"Grout," said Scrape.

"So what do we do?" asked Jack.

"Die a grim an' 'orrible death, I imagine," said Wash, stoically.

Doc ignored him. "This is more difficult than I imagined. With my new microscope and these test kits you found in the O'Riley stash I thought finding the plague would be easy."

"So, what? We *are* just going to die?" asked Scrape.

"Did I say we should give up?" said Doc, looking shocked. "A difficult puzzle is only that much more rewarding when it is solved."

"Specially when we don't die at the end of it," added Wash.

"I propose we do this scientifically," said Doc.

"We oughta take this one thing a' a time," said Wash at the same time.

"Exactly. Good science is never rushed," said Doc.

"Exac'ly. Seems like the thing to do, dunnit?" said Wash at the same time.

"I propose we assume that plague is in both the hill's and the city's

resources and I simply cannot find it. That seems to me to be the most likely scenario. There are, after all, countless molecules, many of which I am unused to identifying, and, as I said, my equipment isn't flawless. So now, instead of looking for something that seems out of place, I think I will review the effects of the plague on a human and attempt to deduce from that exactly what the plague looks like and therefore what I should be looking for. Then perhaps I will be able to see it."

"Good," said Jack. "Is there anything you need?"

"Mind and time," said Doc, sticking the end of a short stick into the fire.

"I wonder how the plague got into our resources in the first place," said Jack. "I mean it wasn't there until six years ago, right?"

"I could see the hillfolk poisoning the water or something on purpose," said Scrape.

"I find that unlikely," said Doc. "If we're right and the plague is in both samples, they would have to be poisoning themselves. That would be quite the risk. Their lives would rely on taking an antidote very regularly to survive."

"And anyway, why wouldn't they just poison down-stream of themselves?"

"Maybe they thought someone would check," said Scrape, "Or maybe they poisoned the air and couldn't control it."

"Maybe," said Jack, doubtfully. Then he sat up. "Wait. Doc. How many hillfolk are there, do you think?"

"A hundred or so," said Doc.

"Well no matter how the plague got there, if it is both in the city and on the hill that means the hillfolk are making an antidote if they want to stay healthy. Especially if they're breathing it in every day. They'd have to be taking it a lot, right?"

"Presumably," said Doc.

"Well, that would be a whole lot of antidote for them to be making."

"You think it's being made in the Children Factory?" said Scrape.

"Why not? And if the cure to this is just sitting up there in the Children Factory—"

"Just sitting up there," snorted Scrape. "It's the Children Factory, remember? Six years' worth of kids, with no escapes."

"One escape," said Jack.

"One accidental escape," said Scrape. "Even if we're not wrong about any of a million things and there is an antidote, do you really expect us to just go and take some?"

"Fine, if you *want* to die," Jack snapped.

"Ey, go easy, go easy! We got an 'ouse full 'o sleepin' kids," said Wash. "An' Jackey, I'm wit' Doc. You ain't leavin' 'ere 'till you're all 'ealed up. We can' 'ave you out there pickin' fights wit' the 'illfolk jus' 'cause you got an 'eadache. Doc, you got anymore o' those plants for Jackey? Knowledge o' one's imminent demise as a way of makin' the ole brainpan ache."

Jack took the leaves Doc proffered and mumbled a few curses while he glared into the fire.

"Ya know. Th' plague spread pretty slow," said Wash, from where he was now lying on the hearth.

"What. No, it didn't," said Scrape.

"It did. If the poison go' int' the wa'er or air e'ery one would 'uve died in three days. Not little bits at a time over a year."

Doc quickly sat up and reached for his notebook. "Indeed. It did happen rather slowly." He flipped through it. "According to the doctors it was the elderly and the sickly who died first. It took several months before the healthier adults started dying. At the end it was only the very strongest left—of course, they eventually succumbed, too."

"Which means I' took longer t' affect th' healthy," said Wash.

"Or else, at lower levels the healthy adults could fight it off," said Doc

"An' the plague grew stronger over the year, yeah."

"Why would it have grown stronger?" asked Scrape.

"Evolution, perhaps," said Doc.

Scrape raised an eyebrow.

"The stron'est bits of the plague survived and made more plagues, while the weaker ones die out without reproducin'. Strong makes stronger an' it keeps on goin' an soon you've got a super-plague."

"Oh," said Scrape. She looked unsettled, but the news didn't bother Jack. It didn't matter to him how the plague started; it was more important to finish it. He rubbed his temples.

"I'ma start breakfast." Wash stood up.

"I'll help," said Scrape, and they went off into the hall to retrieve some meat.

Jack looked over at Doc, who was playing with the smoking stick, apparently lost in thought.

"Why are you so calm about this whole thing?" Jack asked, half irritated, half exasperated. "If we don't figure this thing out we're going to die. Do you know something else or do you just have a death wish?"

"Of course I don't have a death wish," said Doc, placidly.

"Then why aren't you worried?"

Doc looked at Jack. "Because anything is possible with the right knowledge."

"What makes you think we'll ever get the right knowledge?"

"We have you."

Jack's mind went blank. "Oh," was all he could think to say.

Scrape and Wash reentered carrying a large flank between them. "Doc, will you hold the spit for us?" asked Scrape. And the three of them set about roasting breakfast.

Jack sat there, staring into the fire, thinking. The plague was a matter of life or death; there was no other outcome. Jack fully believed that if Doc had the right information and the right tools, he'd come up with a solution. Getting Doc the right information was Jack's job, and so far he had failed. What made Doc think they could figure it out what a city of adults couldn't? Well, he thought, he had been right before. They did have five years to solve the problem. That was a lot more time than the

doctors had. That was like forever. He hoped.

Jack's thoughts were interrupted by a soft rustling behind him. He turned and noticed the curtain of his room was twitching. This was particularly strange since he didn't share a room.

"What—?" he began, but with a loud ripping sound the curtain tore in half. The bottom half fluttered to the ground revealing the two panther cubs, who began pouncing on the fallen cloth.

"We let them sleep in your room last night, since you didn't," explained Scrape.

"I noticed," said Jack, dryly.

"Well now you have something to repair while you remain indoors for a week," said Doc.

"A week? You said three days!"

"Irritability is another symptom of concussions. Your head injury is clearly more serious than we originally thought, so I've added some extra time."

Jack groaned and lay back, closing his eyes. It was going to be a long week. "I guess it's smart to let this 'wanted' thing die down, anyway."

"That's right," said Doc, satisfied.

The little panthers, apparently delighted that Jack was now on their level, scampered over to him and began pouncing and rolling around on his chest. Their claws weren't out so he let them play as the smell of sizzling breakfast washed over him. The smell woke the others who trickled out of their rooms, tousled and rubbing their eyes. Yawns mingled with sleepy pre-breakfast chatter. Jack listened passively, staring at the ceiling and trying his best to not be irritable in the hopes it would help him to heal faster.

# 20

JUST AS WASH was removing breakfast from the fire, several sharp whistles echoed through the hallway and into the living room.

“Come on in,” called Jack from the floor. It was Sally’s call but he spilled the panthers off of him and grabbed up his sword just in case.

“Everything’s okay,” came Sally’s voice. It was common courtesy to prevent panic unless panic was absolutely necessary. Sally entered the room followed by Breaker. Sally’s blond hair was tied in two long braids down her back and her green eyes were alight with excitement. Breaker’s arm was no longer in a cast and he was covered head to toe with brick dust and mud. Everyone greeted each other cheerfully and Sally and Breaker were immediately invited for breakfast. The gang and the guests all clustered back around the fire as Wash hacked the roast into pieces and began handing them out.

“Careful! Hot!” he said, tossing a steak to Breaker, who quickly

wiped his hands off on the back of Jocco’s shirt before catching it.

“Hey!” cried Jocco. Breaker winked at him. Jocco shook his head and rolled his eyes as he caught his own steak.

“So what’s going on with you guys?” asked Jack. “And hey, Tish. Don’t we have food for these guys? You know something other than—” he gave Tish a meaningful look as he held his steak out of reach of the jumping cubs.

“I got it,” said Scrape. She disappeared in her room for a moment and reappeared with a fist full of boar jerky. She threw meat at the cubs, who turned their attention from Jack, pounced on the same piece, and began fighting over it.

“Aw, where did you get these guys?” asked Breaker, his voice high and soft as he reached out to pet a cub.

“We accidentally killed their mom, and they followed us home,” explained Jack, gruffly.

“Er, right,” said Breaker. “Sally, you wanna tell ‘em why we’re here?”

“Oh, yeah,” began Sally, but Jack was still looking at Breaker, who was now feeding the cubs. He suddenly understood a little better why Breaker and Tish were friends.

“So O’Riley jumped last night, and Meg has already taken a group of the older kids in the gang and they’ve joined the hillfolk.”

Scrape spat out a mouthful of meat.

“They’ve *what*!” several voices shouted.

After a moment of coughing and spluttering Wash managed, “I think I mis’heard you.”

“I know, right?” said Sally. “But apparently she got in contact with the hillfolk or else they got in contact with her or something, I’m not sure—”

“They got in contact with her,” said Breaker. “I think the hillfolk must have some spies in the city ‘cause they knew O’Riley was sick and that Meghan was second in command.”

“Yeah, well, anyway,” said Sally, “Apparently it got back to the

O'Rileys before O'Riley got sick about Zoe, and then when O'Riley himself got sick it really freaked them out. That whole group is, like, ancient, you know, so they're all worried that this is the plague back again and they're gonna be the next to jump it. And then when Meghan got approached by that catcher, you know, the young one."

"Oh, yeah, he almost got Jack a few times," said Scrape. Jack stuck his tongue out at her.

"He? No, this one was a girl," said Breaker.

"Really?" asked Jack, in surprise. "I haven't seen her around."

"She was also the one who was going around asking kids to give you and Little Michael up in exchange for rewards," said Breaker, pointing to the wanted sign still pinned above the mantle.

"Who cares who it was," said Scrape, annoyed.

"Wait," interrupted Jack. "They've been *talking* to kids? Talking to them without catching them?"

"Yeah, they want you bad, apparently," said Breaker. "Anyway, Meghan and this hillgirl talked for a while and then they—"

"Did you hear what they said?" Jack interrupted again.

"What they said? Uh, yeah, the hillgirl was saying that all the O'Rileys were gonna get sick and die soon 'cause they're so old, but that if they went up and joined the hillfolk then they could live and become one of them. And then something about saving all the city kids 'cause the city kids are just little kids and need looking after, and—hey, I didn't say it, I'm just repeating!" said Breaker, hands in the air, as every member of Jack's gang glared at him.

"Anyway, he heard that conversation and then this morning overheard some of the younger O'Riley kids talking about how Meg and a bunch of them went up last night to join the hillfolk," said Sally.

"I didn't see them pass though so I don't know exactly when. So this morning one of the kids was saying they were crazy but the other one was thinking that maybe he should have joined them, so, yeah. That's what I heard." Breaker took a large bite out of his steak and his eyes

widened. "Is is 'ood!" he swallowed. "Wow Wash, you cook a mean steak. We should tell Cookie," he said to Sally.

"How have you been overhearing all this?" asked Jack.

"Our buddy Jocco," said Breaker. "When we all go gathering together he's been teaching me about his colors—how he makes guises and stuff. Whadaya think?" he asked, turning to Jocco.

"Very good," said Jocco, nodding approvingly.

Now that Jack looked closer Breaker did indeed look like the brick side of a 'guise.

"Huh, that's smart, painting yourself in it," said Jack.

"Jocco again," said Breaker, and he took another large bite of panther. Jocco looked pleased with himself.

"How's Little Michael doing?" asked Jack.

"He's fine," answered Sally. "He was a little shaken up at first, but he's gotten over it. We've been keeping him at camp, though, ever since the wanted posters."

"Explain more about the posters," said Jack. "You said that catcher was talking to kids?"

"Yeah, she talked to Cookie, actually," said Sally. "She was all like, 'tell us where we can find these kids and we'll give you protection from the plague and we'll take you in so you don't have to live on the streets' and stuff. Y'know Cookie, he just kicked her in the stomach and ran, but—"

"What *is* it with them and wanting to bring kids to the hill?" asked Scrape, indignantly. "They've got a whole Children Factory full of kids, why do they need more?"

"Children Factory," chuckled Breaker, "Is that what you've been calling it? I like that."

Sally shrugged, "They're hillfolk. Do they ever make sense? Anyway, Breaker, we ought to go."

"Yeah, sure. I'm about ready to pass out anyway." He shoved the last large bite in his mouth and stood up.

"Hey, when O'Riley dies we're gonna—well, actually, now that Meg's gone, maybe we should go now." Jack glanced at Scrape, who nodded. "Right, so today we're sending a raiding party to go for a bunch of O'Riley's stashes. You guys interested?"

"Ee!" Breaker swallowed, "I'm in!" he said.

"It might be a madhouse," warned Jack.

"I know." Breaker grinned.

"You said you were about to pass out," said Sally.

"Yeah, but Sal, it's gonna be a *madhouse*," he said. "And I just got my cast off. And what's another day without sleep anyway?"

"You want in?" Scrape asked Sally.

"Sounds alright," said Sally, shrugging.

"Okay. We'll come by and pick you up on the way," said Scrape.

"Right on. Later!" Breaker left, waving cheerfully.

"All right! Raiding party!" cried Jocco excitedly once the visitors' footsteps had disappeared.

"Yeah," said Jack, dispirited. "Scrape, how are you feeling?"

"Good enough for a raid," she said.

"But—" Doc began.

"Doc, I swear not to get into too hard a fight. And you can redo all the stitches I pull out when we get back. Come on," she wheedled.

"Fine," huffed Doc. "But you had better procure yourself a new shirt while you are out. That one will be covered in blood by the time you return, stitches torn asunder!"

Scrape grinned.

"Who else wants to go?" asked Jack

Hands flew into the air.

"Right. Scrape, you're in charge, obviously. Jocco, you know where a lot of the O'Riley stashes are, right? You can help choose the right ones. Tish, you want to keep lookout? The roofs?" She nodded. "Wash, stick with Jocco. Zee," Jack paused. He still didn't know much about Zee.

"On the roofs with Tish," Zee told him.

"Right. Doc? Not interested?"

Doc sighed, "Apparently, I'll be spending my time disinfecting more thread for Scrape's wounds."

"That won't take all day," said Scrape, dismissively, but they all knew Doc wouldn't have gone anyway.

"And Robbie?"

"Not interested," he said.

"Really?"

Robbie shrugged.

"Well, okay then."

Everyone stood up to get ready. Jack turned back to Scrape. "Make sure you've got plenty of weapons; it might be rough out there now Meghan's left with all their best fighters. The Southerners will probably be trying to take over some more territory."

Scrape rolled her eyes.

"But you knew that. Just try not to pull all your stitches out, okay? Doc will have a conniption. And don't—"

"I'm gonna be fine, kid," Scrape said, and patted him on the head as she went to find her weapons.

"I'm going out," said Robbie, heaving himself to his feet.

"Oh, okay. Where're you going?" asked Jack.

Robbie shrugged. "Just going for a walk."

"Alright," said Jack. He lay back down, resting his head on his hands and staring up through the shaft at the bright blue sky, trying not to wish too hard that he was going raiding with everyone else.

# 21

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG for everyone to clear out of camp, leaving Jack and Doc alone in the quiet. Jack watched as Doc dropped a long strand of thread into a can of water and then put it on the fire.

"Okay, sit up," said Doc.

Jack did as he was told. Doc took Jack's head in his hands and carefully inspected his wound.

"Well done, well done. Your stitches are in perfect condition. How is your headache?"

"Still here."

"I'll make you a more potent headache soother. It should help."

Doc disappeared into his room and returned with a handful of herbs. After a few minutes, he pulled the thread out of the water with a long pair of tweezers, hung it on a nail over the fire to dry, and threw the herbs into the still boiling water. He took the can off the flames with a

forked stick and set it in front of Jack.

"Drink this when it is cool enough and chew on the herbs."

"Great, thanks Doc," said Jack, and he lay back down, watching the steam curl up out of the tin and wondering if the others had reached Jocco's Bridge yet. "Doc, can I borrow a book?"

"Anything in particular?"

"Something fun."

"I'm sure I can manage that," said Doc, and he returned to his room. Jack heard several thuds and an "aha!" before Doc returned. "This is a pirate adventure. Very fun, lots of swashbuckling."

"What's a pirate?"

"They sail about on the sea and steal from other ships."

"You know, I wish we had some ships."

"Why?"

"It might be nice to leave for a while. Things are getting too complicated here."

"Things get too complicated regardless of one's location. Just be glad you don't have scurvy with which to contend." He dropped the book into Jack's lap.

Jack scooted over so he could lie against a bundle of branches and began to read. Doc was right: it was fun, and Jack passed the morning and most of the afternoon engrossed in *The Adventures of Captain Shiver and her Crew of Thieving Roaches* until his own thieves returned.

"Hiya Jack!" cried Jocco as he skipped through the door. "You wouldn't believe all the great stuff we got, look!" Jocco showed him a large bowl brimming with toffees. "They were hording tons of this stuff! My whole bag is full of it!" Jocco delightedly threw himself down next to Jack and opened his disguise to reveal an enormous heap of toffee.

"Nice!" said Jack, appreciatively.

"Jack, you should have seen all the canned vegetables they had," said Tish, emptying the tins out next to Jocco's sweets.

"Vegetables, tuh!" said Jocco dismissively.

"Just *try* to survive on toffee and meat," said Tish, "And then, come the next game of ball, Little Michael will be able to swim laps around you."

"Will *not*," said Jocco.

"Then try it," said Tish.

"I don't feel like it," said Jocco, crossing his arms.

"Doc," said Scrape over Jocco's huffiness, "We got a whole heap of medical supplies. I don't think the O'Rileys knew what to do with them, though. They were all just tossed in the back with the little kids' clothes."

"The louts," said Doc happily as he examined the pile of small bottles, bandages, and shiny metal tools Scrape had dumped out. "And it looks like it is just in time," he said, looking Scrape up and down. Sure enough, blood dripped down Scrape's left arm and the bottom half of her shirt was stained dark red.

"Tools, tools, tools," sang Wash as he dropped an armful of tools on the floor with the others' goods.

"Clothes," said Zee, dropping a huge armful of cloth on top of Wash's tools.

"Wow, you guys did great!" said Jack.

"And Breaker and Sally brought home a bunch of stuff too," said Scrape.

Tish stacked the cans of vegetable into the corner, Jocco lay on the floor divvying up the toffee into eight equal piles, Wash grabbed a rag, whetstone, and a tin of oil from his room and began cleaning and sharpening tools, Scrape followed Doc into his room so he could stitch Scrape up, and Jack and Zee sat in front of the fire organizing clothes by size and by who needed what.

"No, give that to Jocco," said Zee as Jack held up a small shirt.

"Really? The one you're wearing looks terrible," said Jack, taking in the many oil stains.

"You're too kind," she said.

Jack grinned and dropped the shirt into Jocco's pile. "Here's one for

you. Jocco doesn't need two."

"Good call," said Wash, looking up and smirking. "The blue'll really bring out your eyes, Zee."

"I was going to say the same thing about your apron," she replied seriously.

Jack and Wash both snorted. Wash was wearing a frilly apron decorated with a pattern of butterflies and ladybugs to keep the oil off his clothes.

"So how was it out there?" asked Jack. "Lots of kids? Any fights?"

"S'not s' bad," said Wash. "Couple kids from the South'r'n gang tryin'a cause trouble. 'N we ran int' this catcher—"

"What?" said Jack, dropping a large pair of pants.

"Ah, she didn' wanna catch us. She was jus' wondrin' if we'd seen ya. Obviously we says no and trots off."

"And she didn't try and stop you?"

Wash shrugged, "She kept shoutin' at our backs, somethin' about our inevitably painful deaths, but seems t' only be after you. Reckon' if she goes on tryina catch the res' of us she'll scare us away an' no one'll talk to 'er."

"King in the North. What do they want with me?"

"They wuz a tight kid-catchin' system 'fore you broke in'n ruined it. They's gotta git their reputation back."

"You think this is about reputation?"

Wash shrugged, "Who can really know the mind of an adult?"

Jack looked at Zee.

She shrugged

"Wuz there anathing you saw that they don' want seen? Secrets discovered?"

"All I saw was the Children Factory."

"Yeah, well," Scrape plopped herself down next to Jack and began helping with the clothes. "If they're trying to get city kids to defect up the hill they're not gonna want you spreading it about how they keep 'em



inside all day and force them to sew clothes.”

“Oh yeah.”

Scrape cleared her throat and held up a long, floral print dress, looking at Zee with her eyebrows raised.

“Robbie,” said Zee, and she turned back to the overalls she was holding. Scrape busted up laughing and tossed it in the scrap pile for Doc’s bandages. “Where is Robbie, anyway?”

Jack shrugged. “He went for a walk.”

“Okay-y who wants to play dice?” asked Jocco, dumping large piles of toffee and five dice in front of each of them.

“Me!” said Jack.

I’m in,” said Scrape

“Me too,” said Wash.

“Yep,” said Tish.

“Coming,” called Doc.

Zee nodded.

Jack, Zee and Scrape dumped the piles of clothes into each person’s room and everyone gathered in front of the fire in a circle to play dice.

“All-l right a-and *roll*,” said Wash.

Everyone rolled their set of dice and cupped their hands around the results so no one else could see.

“I bet two pieces for eight twos,” Wash said, putting two pieces of toffee into the center. Everyone else did too.

“Raise you one piece for ten twos,” said Scrape, and everyone else put in another toffee.

“Three pieces for eleven fours,” said Zee, tossing in three pieces.

“Woah, I’m out,” said Wash.

“Me too,” said Doc.

Scrape and Tish also folded.

“Five for twelve fours,” said Jocco.

“Liar,” said Jack. Jack, Jocco, and Zee all threw in their pieces of

toffee and everyone uncovered their dice.

All together there were eleven fours. Everyone who folded got half their pieces back and Jack and Zee split the rest.

“Grout,” said Jocco, who hadn’t gotten any of his toffee back. “Okay-y *roll*.” And everyone rolled again.

“Three for three sixes,” said Scrape.

“Weak,” scoffed Wash. “Four for five fours.”

“Weak,” countered Zee, “Six for seven fours.”

“I’m out,” said Jack.

“Me too,” said Doc.

The game went on until everyone agreed they were too hungry to continue playing with food without eating it. Scrape went into the bathroom, grabbed some meat.

“Let’s have kabobs for a change,” she said. “Do we have any onions?”

“Here.” Tish crawled over to the pile of gathered vegetables and grabbed a few potatoes and onions. She and Scrape cut up the food and skewered it onto smaller sticks, while Wash built the fire back up and Tish and Jocco pried open eight cans of beans and placed them in front of the fire to warm. They stuck the food near the fire to cook while everyone counted their winnings.

“This bites,” said Jocco. He had lost about half his toffee.

“Grout happens when you bet all your candy,” said Jack.

“Humpf.”

“Hey, Robbie. What’s going on?” said Scrape.

Robbie was climbing down the ladder into the living room.

“Nothing. Just went for a walk. There are posters of you *all over* the city, you know,” he said to Jack.

“Yeah, I know,” said Jack. As if he needed to be reminded.

“We’re having kabobs!” said Jocco.

“Yeah, cut the meat up into a different size. Whole new meal,” said Robbie, sarcastically.

“Here’s your toffee and I put a bunch of clothes on your bed,” said

Scrape, pushing the final untouched pile towards him.

"Thanks," he said, and popped a toffee in his mouth and sat down.

Robbie looked more downcast than usual, Jack thought, but he knew better than to ask about it.

"The beans are warm," said Tish. She covered her hand in a rag and placed a can of beans in front of each person. Wash passed around the kabobs and everyone drank their beans and chewed their different-sized meat contentedly.

"How long do you think this panther is going to last us?" asked Jack. said Scrape as she drained the last of her bean juice.

"Few more good days at least."

Doc sighed dramatically, staring at her arm. "I shouldn't have even bothered with stitches if you insist on tearing them out every day."

"Ah, quit mugging, I'm healing despite myself. Check it out," she pulled her shirt hem around so Doc could see, "no blood stains!"

"Oh yes, isn't that the apogee of the medical world," Doc grumbled sarcastically. "My studies have reached their zenith. No blood stains at last! And now off to my restful retirement."

"Ah yes, restive retirement," sighed Wash, dreamily.

"What hobby will you take up in retirement?" asked Zee.

"Yeah, you can't jus' sit 'round doin' nothin'. You'd get bored," said Wash.

"You should take up beekeeping," said Zee.

"Cept for the occasional great medical mystery for which you emerge, withered but brilliant as ever, from retirement and bring an end to the panic," said Wash.

"Write a biography of your medical greatness," said Scrape.

"That's *autobiog*—" began Doc before he was interrupted.

"Baking! We could use some more toffee around here," said Jocco.

"Knitting?" suggested Tish.

"Good one," said Jack. "If you start now you may be able to make sweaters for everyone by winter."

"I'd sugges' readin' but tha' wouldn' be much of a retirement for ya," said Wash. "'Ow about gardenin'? Think o'it. Gettin' all tan 'n liver spotty under th' sun. Your 'nees creakin' every time you try an' stand up but you keep on keepin' on 'cause th' garden is your heart an' soul. We'll carve you out a cane if'n you like, t' shake at children 'n rabbits 'n the like wot try to steal your lettuce."

Doc rolled his eyes at them all.

Wash grinned and then turned to Jocco. "Jocco, 'ow many guises can you make? Only I just shredded the grout outta mine carryin' stuff."

"Um, I probably have enough sheets for about ten of them, I'd say. I don't think I have that much red, though, let me check."

"Me, too," Zee called as Jocco disappeared into his room.

"Me and Jack both need them," called Scrape.

"Jack and I," said Doc and Wash together, Doc seriously to Scrape, and Wash grinning at Doc.

"I have enough paint for at least five of them. I'll work on those tomorrow. If you need one before they're ready have a spare," said Jocco.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" Jack asked Wash.

"Reclinatin', probably," said Wash. "We finish'd the skys shafts an' 'scape'ole ahead of schedule. I'm tellin' ya, this one's good to have around." Wash kicked Zee lightly. She punched him back. "'Scape'ole five be shored up, but I'm readin' a mystery and it jus' got good. Unless you don' think you can wait a day to use these new beauties." He patted a small pickax fondly and looked up at Zee.

She shrugged.

"What's the book? I haven't read a mystery in ages," asked Scrape.

"Aw, yeah, it's just your type, lemme show you." Wash left for a moment and returned with a small paperback, which he started describing to Scrape.

"Do you need anything else?" Jack asked Doc. "Seeds to plant in your retirement?"

“We’ll need more ingredients for headache tea in a few days, but nothing immediately. This new stock is wonderful.”

“Oh good.” Jack closed his eyes. “We’ll need more wood soon, too. Not for a few days. Maybe when they go hunting.” And Jack fell asleep in front of the fire, once again listening to a passable imitation of his own voice reading *The Case of the Ill-tied Shoe*.

## 22

THE NEXT FEW DAYS passed peacefully. No one did much of anything at all. Jocco painted guises. The younger kids sparred with Wash, who also spent a lot of time reading aloud. Doc, of course, sequestered himself in his lab. Tish and Scrape, Jack noticed, chatted a little more often than they used to. And Jack spent most of his time lying down and sipping his headache tea. His stitches, Doc declared, were doing wonderfully and would be ready to come out in another few days. Scrape’s were doing less wonderfully and would have to stay in a good deal longer.

The panther cubs were growing at an alarming rate. Wash, Jocco and Zee had had to make daily trips to the wall for rabbits and chipmunks to keep up with their voracious appetites. Already their paws were looking less awkward and their coats glossier.

On the morning of the fourth day Scrape declared that they were out of meat. “And I’m going hunting,” she said.

Doc opened his mouth in horror.

"I'm sorry, Doc. I've rested really well, but now I'm going out. I'll be very careful. If we don't have any easy luck we'll just get rabbits or something."

Doc closed his mouth again, looking dissatisfied.

"Do you want to come?" Scrape asked, looking at Robbie.

"Sure," he said. There was something off about him, Jack thought, but he dismissed it. There was always something off about Robbie.

"I'm going," said Zee.

"No," said Robbie, flatly.

"I don't know if that's a good idea," Jack hedged.

Zee raised her eyebrows at him. Even though she was a full foot shorter Jack felt as though she was looking down at him.

"Ah, the Diminutive Miss Zee be fine," said Wash.

"I don't wanna take her with us. She'll just get in the way," said Robbie.

"Come on Robbie, It'll be fine," said Scrape.

Jack nodded.

"Hey, that's not fair!" cried Jocco, "How come she gets to go hunting when I never get to go hunting?"

Jack looked at Tish.

She paused, looking worried, and then said, "You can go next time."

"Oh. Alright," said Jocco, looking mollified. "I need more red anyway."

"I shall accompany you," said Doc. "My stock of herbs is being rapidly depleted."

"I'll go, too," said Tish.

"Well that still leaves me and Wash. I guess we can find something to do around here, unless you'd rather go off with one of them."

"Nah, I'm good reclinatin' here," he said. Doc snorted.

"Okay then. Doc before you go will you leave me some more of those herbs for tea?"

"Naturally," he said, and he got to his feet.

Everyone bustled around for a few minutes, collecting weapons and disguises. Doc put a can of water on the fire for Jack and then they were gone, leaving Jack lying on the ground and Wash tossing pebbles at the wall, trying to get one stuck in the crack.

Something glinted over by the wall. Jack walked over and picked up the small stone Jocco had found weeks earlier.

"What is this thing, anyway?" he wondered out loud.

Wash glanced over. "Rock."

Jack rolled his eyes. "I know that. I mean, why was it in the O'Riley stash? It's pretty, I guess, but what is it good for?"

"You're supposed to wear it."

"Huh?"

"Tha's what grown-ups used t' do. Wear rocks like that."

"Didn't that get heavy?"

Wash shrugged. "They didn't care, I s'pose."

"And what did they do with them?"

"Jus' wear 'em. That's all. An' the more you 'ad the better you were."

"Better than what?"

"Jus' better. Better than everyone else, I guess."

"What were they better at?"

"Nothin', jus' better."

"What use was that?"

"I dunno, but everyone wanted it. Betterness, I mean."

"Okay. But there are rocks everywhere."

"These ones are special. Small n' pretty like tha'. Don' ask me about their structural integrity, though, I have no idea. Anyhows, there ain't a lot of 'em layin' about, so to get your 'ands on one you 'ad to do stuff like clean someone's 'ouse or kill a bunch of boars for someone. Then they'd give you a rock an' you'd go off better than you were when you went in."

"Because you had killed someone a boar."

"No, no. Because you 'ad the rock."

"I see."

"Do ya?"

"No."

"Exactly. As their own singular little person units, adults were alrigh'. But when they traveled in herds, they could do some strange thinking. 'Alf the things Doc reads outta books don' have two iotas of sense to rub together."

"Huh. Grown-ups are weird."

"It's th' only thing tha' makes sense abou' 'em," said Wash.

The tiniest of yawns sounded from Jack's room and the two panthers toddled out looking sleepy.

"What in the North are we going to do with these guys?" sighed Jack as the cubs plopped themselves down in front of the fire. "We shouldn't be getting them used to humans."

"Well th' firs' night wit' 'em Scrape started tryin'a train 'em t' hunt."

"Really?"

"Yeah, you wuz asleep. She caught a bunch o' rats for 'em. They did really good, too. Doc sayz that's normal. Little kitties learn crazy fast. Like little birdies. They jump outta the nest an' 'fore they hit th' ground they know howta fly. You let some rats loose an' two seconds lat'r they caught almost all of 'em."

"*Almost* all of them?" asked Jack.

"Well, they're still wee babes. What canya expect?"

"Where exactly did she have this training session?"

"In your room. Aha!" he said as he finally managed to get a rock stuck.

"Oh, that's great," grumbled Jack.

"I know, right?" said Wash, pretending to miss the sarcasm. "Next she's gonna take 'em outside an' let them find their own rodents. So as they learn stalkin', ya know. An' they're already got fighting down pretty

good, since that's pretty much all they do wit' each other."

"What about getting them used to people?"

"I dunno Jackey. We ain't panther experts here. Scrape reckons as long as they know howta fend fer theirselves they'll be fine. I reckon she's right. Everyone's born able to take care of 'emselves, you jus' gotta give 'em time to practice in their own way."

"I just don't want them killed by the hillfolk or anything because they don't know to run away."

"Pfft. The hillfolk? They might be good at catching an' terrorizin' kids, but they're total milksops when it comes to panthers 'n snakes 'n stuff. They've gone soft up there they 'ave."

"I suppose," said Jack. He threw the herbs into the boiling water and took it off the flame to cool. One of the panthers sniffed the hot can. The other bumped him and the first panther's nose brushed the can. He yowled in surprise and pain and ferociously attacked the second. Jack rose, stepped around the panthers, grabbed his tattered curtain and some thread and needle, and returned to the fire. He added a few logs to the flames, took a sip of tea, and began his repairs.

Jack's mind drifted to his gang. They would still be in the city, heading towards the western jungle. It was getting strange out there. There were still catchers, but then there were also hillfolk trying to make deals with kids and even inviting them to live on the hill. The O'Riley gang had fallen apart, which was one enemy down, but Jack had a feeling that the southern gang might rise up now that O'Riley wasn't a threat. The O'Rileys had been mean, but they had also been lazy. The Southerners were anything but lazy. The end of O'Riley might actually cause more bad than good. And most disturbing of all was the fact that he, Jack, had been singled out by the hillfolk and was now hunted presumably by both them and most of the kids in the city. Well, he thought, at least Doc, Tish, and Jocco would be okay. They rarely had contact with any gang but Sally's so it was unlikely anyone would connect them with Jack. And of course Scrape and Robbie would be just fine. They were two of the

best fighters in the city; Jack was confident they could take anyone and protect Zee if she needed it. His mind flashed back to the scornful look Zee had given him when he had hesitated in sending her out on a hunt, and then the appraising look she had given him before deciding to stay with the gang. Somehow, he didn't think she needed it.

A panther broke Jack's reverie by rolling into his cup. Hot tea sloshed over the edge and onto the second panther, who yowled in pain.

"And that," Jack told them, "is what happens when you don't pay attention." The cubs ignored him and continued to roll around, but Jack noticed they kept a good distance between themselves and his cup. After a few minutes Jack moved the cup a few feet to the right. The cubs continued playing, but they continued to keep a safe distance.

"Hey, look. They're learning," said Jack.

Wash glanced over. "Like I said. They got somethin' goin' on in those mind-baskets. Let's make anuth'r."

Wash and Jack went around the camp gathering cans and filling them with water and placing them randomly around the floor of the living room. Some they left cold and some they heated. The panthers left off fighting and began exploring the maze of cans. It didn't take long for them to learn to approach each can carefully to test its heat. They avoided the hot ones completely and knocked over the cold ones to drink and play with.

An hour later Jack was on his knees among the cans, his sewing abandoned. Wash had disappeared for a few minutes and had returned inexplicably with half a dozen live rats which he had let loose before Jack could object. Now both the boys and the panthers scurried around the room, dodging cans of water and trying to catch the rats. The panthers were definitively better ratters than the boys, but Wash and Jack had caught a few. The boys released their rats so the game could continue. The rats caught by the panthers were not so lucky.

The sound of off-kilter footsteps stumbling down the hall reached

their ears. Wash and Jack leapt up, looking around for their weapons, but before they could even lay eyes upon them the panthers had bolted for the hallway.

"Oof. Hello?" came Scrapes voice from just outside the door.

Relieved, Jack abandoned his search for weapons and skipped over the cans to the door.

His relief was short-lived. One look at Scrape told him something had gone horribly wrong. Her hair was heavily matted with dirt and blood, and red stains had soaked the entire top half of her shirt and were still spreading. The two panthers, who had been growling as they ran out to greet the intruder, were now butting up against Scrape's legs and yowling in concern.

"What—?" asked Jack, aghast. Before he could finish his question, Scrape swayed dangerously. He moved forward to steady her but she waved him off, righting herself against the wall.

"I'm fine," she said weakly, and then vomited.

"No, seriously Jack. I'm fine," said Scrape, wiping her mouth and pushing Jack away again.

"Don't be a zygote. You'd do the same for me," he said, and helped her inside.

"Brick an' ravin' mortar, Scrape," said Wash, eyes wide. "Wot 'appened?"

"Robbie," she said.

"Yeah?" said Jack. "Robbie what?"

"He hit me."

"Wot? You guys don' figh' usually," said Wash. "An' where's Zee?"

"This isn't just a fight," growled Jack. The amount of blood soaking Scrape's shirt was alarming. Sure, his gang fought each other; it was normal. This was different: these were serious injuries. "Where is Robbie, I'm going to raving kill him."

"Get in line," said Scrape. "But he's gone, anyway. I was keeping a lookout, you know? And I hear this loud thunk and I turn around and

Zee's on the ground and Robbie's standing over her with a rock. And I didn't get it at first. If I had been faster I could have done something, but, it was *Robbie*, you know? He's part of our gang."

"Was," corrected Wash. For the first time Jack could remember, Wash looked dangerous.

"And so before I could do anything he hits me in the back of the head with the rock. He didn't knock me out, but I was totally laid out. I couldn't move at all. I thought he might have broken my neck at first. And then I couldn't do anything, and he grabbed Zee and ran off."

Jack kicked cans out of their way, sloshing water everywhere, and eased Scrape down to lay up against a pile of branches by the fire. Wash quickly built the fire up and began putting the already full cans on to boil. The panthers sat down against Scrape's legs and watched her earnestly, as Jack stood up and began thinking out loud.

"Okay, so, your head is still bleeding. We need to do something about that, right? What would Doc do? Oh grout, I wish he was here. I messed up letting him go with the little kids—"

"Hey, hey Jackey. Relax. You know what't do."

"How would I know what to do? This is Doc's stuff! I can't *believe* I never asked him to teach me. What kind of leader am I that I don't even know medicine."

"Jack, you raving brickbrain," Scrape's voice was worryingly weak. "How many times has Doc had to patch you up? How many times have you watched him patch me up? You know how to do this. Wash. Hand me that can."

Wash handed her the can just in time for her to vomit into it.

"Okay Jack. I'm jus' gonna pass out now. You do your thing," she said. Her eyes closed and she slumped over.

"Right," said Jack. Watching Scrape pass out seemed to have jumpstarted Jack's brain. The panic vanished. Scrape was right. He had watched Doc do this for years. He could do this. "Wash. Get me the water once it boils."

Jack grabbed up his half-repaired curtain and tore out all his stitching in one motion. He began cleaning off Scrape's face and neck with the smaller half. When it was finally revealed Jack saw that her face was whiter than the sheets, although admittedly the sheets hadn't been white in years. Jack half ran to Doc and Wash's room and grabbed the wooden box in which Doc kept his medical supplies.

"Ere," said Wash, when Jack returned. "These two 'ave already boiled." Wash was pointing to two cans on the floor next to Scrape. Jack dunked the other half of his curtain in them, ignoring the pain from the scalding water. He wasn't sure that was enough to disinfect the cloth, but it was the best he could do. He started cleaning Scrape's head. It took a few minutes to find the cut, there was blood everywhere, but when he finally spotted it he felt his stomach convulse. A huge swath had been scraped away by the rock and he could see Scrape's skull through it. He distantly registered that he was glad he hadn't eaten in a while: throwing up right now would not be helpful.

"More boiling water," said Wash, putting a few more cans next to Jack.

Jack grabbed out a wad of bandages and shoved them into the cans. He left them there to soak, grabbed Scrape's belt knife out of her sheath, for Scrape more than anyone kept her weapons sharp, and began cutting hair away from the wound. He then returned to careful cleaning as Wash continued rotating cans through the fire. Jack poured several of the sterilized but cooler cans over Scrape's head and finally he could see the extent of it.

"Okay, I don't know if we're going to be able to sew this thing up."

"Lemme see," said Wash, skootching over to the back of Scrape's head. "Woah! Baddish business back 'ere."

"Yeah. Okay so we're just going to whatever—pack it—for now. Here," he handed Wash a fistful of dry bandages. "Try to dry her head as much as you can."

"Still blood comin' outta this general area, y'know."

"Yeah. That's what the 'try' was for," said Jack as he rummaged around in the medical box.

"Oh awesome!" Jack exclaimed, holding up a small, glass bottle. "Rubbing alcohol."

"Good find!" said Wash.

Jack folded the clean bandages together into a thick pad.

"Ready?" he asked Wash.

"As we'll ever be."

Wash poured the alcohol into the wound and Jack clapped the bandage down.

"Ouch! You raving, thick-skulled hillman!" cried Scrape.

"Glad to see you're awake," said Jack, tying the bandage around Scrape's forehead.

"What are you tryin' to do? Kill me?" she asked. Her voice was weak.

"That was the rubbing alcohol," explained Jack. "Now you won't get bugs in your head."

"Might notta been worth it," she grumbled, closing her eyes again.

"Hey, woah, stop that," Jack told Scrape, "Aren't you not supposed to go to sleep when you have a concussion?"

"Thought that was insomnia," she mumbled, eyes still closed.

Jack looked at Wash.

"Don' lookit me. You're th' Doc now," he said.

"Fine." Jack stood up and hurried back into Doc's room. This time he returned with a thick book entitled "Basic Medicine." He checked the index, found concussions and flipped to the page. "Okay," he said, "It says here she might have a concussion if she is vomiting."

"Check," said Wash.

"Slurry speech."

"Check."

"Passes out."

The both looked down at Scrape, who was once again unconscious.

"Check," they said together.

"Is confused," said Jack.

Wash nudged Scrape. "Oi. Scrape! You feelin' confused?"

She mumbled again without opening her eyes. Jack thought he could make out a few curses.

"Um," said Jack.

"Jury's out," said Wash.

"Is agitated."

"Definitely," said Wash, as the cursing subsided.

"Has unequal pupils? What's that?"

"Part o' your eyeball." Wash nudged Scrape again. "Oi. Open yer lids for a sec."

This time they could hear the curses distinctly. She kept her eyes stubbornly closed.

"Right. Uncertain," said Jack. "Has a seizure."

"What's a seizure?" asked Wash.

"How am I supposed to know," said Jack.

"You're *holdin'* a ravin' *medical* dictionary," said Wash.

"Oh, right." Jack consulted the index again and found Seizures. "Apparently you go stiff and shake a bunch. And you smell weird stuff."

"Smell weird stuff?"

"Well I think we'd have noticed if she'd started shaking and stuff."

"Less call it a concussion then. Whada we do?"

"Alright. Well, she has to stop doing anything and just rest."

"Check."

"Put ice on her head."

"Ice? We ain't gonna see ice for two seasons at *least*."

"Okay we'll skip over that one. Someone should stay with her at all times to monitor symptoms."

"Kay. Wot 'appens if 'er symptoms change?"

"Uh. Notice it?"

Wash nodded, as if that made sense.

"Oh grout, it says here she should rest until her condition gets better,



which could be hours, weeks, or months. Months! What, do they think she's just gonna sit around for a month?"

"They clearly've never met Scrape," agreed Wash. "We could tie 'er up I s'pose."

"Well it's not like she's going anywhere soon. She'll just pass out."

"Thas 'elpful," said Wash, nodding again.

"It doesn't say *not* to sleep. So I guess she'll be fine."

Okay, he thought, that's all we can do for her right now. What about—

"Th' others?" asked Wash.

"I dunno," said Jack. "What could he possibly be thinking?"

"Robbie? I never got the impression 'ee does at all," said Wash, frowning. "We need to find 'em. All of 'em."

"Yeah," agreed Jack. "Get everyone in one place and figure this grout out. Scrape," he nudged Scrape. "I'm sorry but this is important. If you need to pass out again you can, just try to tell me anything you know about what Robbie was thinking or where he was going before you do."

"I dunno what that rock-headed zygote was thinking," wheezed Scrape. "I wasn't even paying much attention to him, I was focusing on Zee 'cause she's young an' all."

"Sure," said Jack.

"I dunno. Maybe he had a grudge against Zee or something. But I dunno why he had t' hit me. S'not like we didn' get along—"

"Right, right," said Jack. "So do you know which way he went?"

"West. We were just outside the western wall. We went through the Small River Hole an' had jus' turned south. An' after he grabbed her he headed west. I should've gone after them. I should've stopped him."

"Wot were you gonna do, hurl on 'im?" said Wash.

"Don't worry about it it's fine. It's better you came here. Wash and I are going to go out and look for him and the others. We'll all meet back here in a couple of hours, max."

"Good, I'll come with," said Scrape. She made to sit up and Jack pushed her down.

"Don't be a complete zygote. We'll be back before you wake up probably." Answering questions seemed to have sapped the last of Scrape's strength. Her face was now a sickly gray color and her eyes were half-lidded.

"Look, you should probably eat something as soon as you think you won't puke it up. Wash, will you open some cans for her?"

"No prob," said Wash and he grabbed a can of beans and a can of corn and began opening them with his knife.

Jack grabbed an armful of logs from the far corner of the room and added a few to the fire so that it blazed hot. He then fetched a blanket and draped it over Scrape. "There's a bunch of logs here if the fire starts to die, and the food is right here."

"Thanks, Jack," she murmured.

"Don't worry about it. It's all in my own self-interest, anyway. I need you. We've got fighting to do."

"Don't have too much fun without me," she said, smiling weakly, and closed her eyes again.

She was asleep before Jack and Wash had gathered their weapons. Jack looked back as they walked out the back door. The panthers had curled up on either side of Scrape, still watching her intently.

# 23

“KAY, ROBBIE AN’ ZEE FIRS?” asked Wash as they clambered up the steep northern tunnel.

Jack looked at Wash questioningly.

“S’okay. Zee’s the one in danger righ’ now. The others are prolly fine. But you know tha’ Robbie knew tha’ Scrape would coman’ tell us immediate, right? He’da ‘ad a plan.”

“Yeah, I know. And he headed west. Towards the—”

“Hillfolk,” Wash finished. “Why’d he take Zee ‘n not Scrape? Or you, even?”

“Can you imagine him trying to drag Scrape to the hillfolk?”

“She’da killed ‘im,” Wash nodded.

“So, I dunno. I guess they’re just picking us off one by one?”

“Weakenin’ us,” agreed Wash. “Y’know, s’prolly wot ‘ees been doin’ on all those long walks. Walkin’ righ’ up the hill to conspirize.”

“I wonder why he didn’t just tell them where our camp was in the first place? Then he wouldn’t have to do any work.”

“Yeah, tha’ is strange,” said Wash.

“And why’d he do it, anyway? What’s he getting? Or does he really just hate us that much?”

“Maybe ‘ee’s pullin’ a Meg. ‘Ee pretty old.”

“But we’re *working* on the plague. He knew that; Scrape told him.”

“I dunno, Jacky, I dunno.”

They came to the fork in the tunnel

“Let’s take the aboveground way,” said Jack, suggesting the faster but far more visible rout.

“We don’t wanna get caught. Not now, specially.”

“We won’t,” said Jack.

“Now that’s the kinda optimism I like to hear,” said Wash. Both boys turned right and in one movement leapt up, grabbed an overhead ledge, and heaved themselves into the bottom of a tunnel that led straight up. They climbed quickly, using handholds Wash had carved years ago, a patch of daylight far above their heads lighting the way. The further up they climbed the more difficult it became to find holes big enough to grab, and both boys were forced to slow down. Feet from the top a handhold crumbled beneath Jack’s fingers and he fell a few feet before managing to catch himself on Wash’s pant leg.

“Ay! Wotcher self! Pants don grow on trees ya know.”

“Wash, what’s going on with this tunnel?” Jack asked, reorienting himself on the wall.

“Extra security. You’re ‘avin’ difficulty gettin up. Imagine climbin’ down.”

“Somehow I don’t think I’ll be trying that, thanks.”

A few minutes later the boys had reached the top. Wash’s feet almost broke Jack’s nose as Wash heaved himself over the lip. Jack ducked just in time and then followed Wash over the edge. They came out on the roof of the highest building in the city. The roof was made of old clay

shingles and Wash and Jack ran across them carefully so as not to lose any as they passed. At the western edge of the building both boys put on an extra burst of speed and leapt the large gap to the next roof.

“Seriously, Wash,” Jack panted, “I don’t know why you bother with that extra security. It’s too much of a pain for anyone to come this way anyway.”

“Famous second t’last words,” panted Wash.

“What are the last ones?”

“Oh, if only we’d listened t’ Wash,” he said grimly.

Jack gestured Wash to a rusty iron ladder. Jack wouldn’t have trusted it but Wash had told him it was “Struct’rally sound as any struct’rally sound ladder,” and Jack trusted Wash.

Sharp bits of rust bit into Jack’s fingers and the soft skin between his toes as he climbed, but the ladder remained solid and he remained in one piece.

“Which way do you wanna take, Jackey?” asked Wash when they both stood on the ladder’s landing, which was also the top of a staircase.

“Left,” said Jack. “That gets us closest to the Small River Hole.”

“Shoulda knowed,” said Wash, rolling his eyes. Wash hated being on ground level and the left path spent a lot of time on the ground. They ran down seven flights of stairs before reaching ground level, and continued running through the streets as silently as they could to avoid making echoes. They made it most of the way to the wall without seeing another soul, but then, as he was turning a corner, Jack heard a noise. His body reacted before his mind knew what was happening. He skidded to a stop, grabbed the back of Wash’s shirt and forced himself and Wash up against the wall. They stood silent for a few seconds, Jack listening as hard as he could over the sound of his beating heart. Wash looked at Jack and raised an eyebrow. Jack frowned. He must have heard something. He wouldn’t have reacted like that to nothing. And then someone nearby spoke.

“Whatdaya think? Northern or western?” said a high voice he didn’t recognize.

“Let’s do northern. No one hunts there much. Better game left,” said a second, slightly lower voice. The speakers were a block away, walking perpendicular to Jack’s and Wash’s street. The fact that they weren’t bothering to keep their voices down meant that they were incredibly stupid or incredibly sure of themselves.

“Jack’s gang hunts there sometimes,” said the first voice.

“Well, then, all the better for us if we run into some of them,” said the second. Jack could hear the smile in it. He clenched his fists and glared at the stones under his feet.

“But they have good fighters.”

“Not for long. Not with all those posters around. They’ll all be caught soon enough.” The voices had passed their street and were heading away now.

“I bet they have some good stuff,” said the first, “Stashes of food and weapons and stuff.”

“Maybe we can get one of the little ones before they’re all caught. We can make them give up their stashes. Think of all the...”

The voices faded away into unintelligible echoes. The anger that had been building in Jack’s chest was at bursting point. His fists were shaking and his jaw was clenched so tight his teeth hurt.

“Iss okay, Jackey. No one’s gonna get any of us. Tha’ wuz probly Southerners anyway. You know them, they’re all bloodthirst an’ no brains.”

“If we didn’t have to—” Jack began. His voice shook with the strain of not shouting.

“If we didn’t ‘ave to nuthin’, Jackey,” Wash interrupted. “You don’t go gettin’ into fights jus’ for some stupid word garbage. It jus’ colors everythin’ bad to not know what’s goin’ on. Come on. Less get everyone back togeth’r. Everythin’ll look better.”

Wash tugged on Jack’s sleeve until he started moving again. Wash was right, Jack thought. He wouldn’t have even thought about fighting those Southerners normally. He was just... he didn’t know what he was.

Stressed, sure. But he had been stressed plenty of times before. Jack hated to admit it even to himself, but the real reason for his anger was that he was afraid. Afraid for his gang and afraid for himself. And, most distressingly, afraid that what those Southerners had said were true. *They'll all be caught soon enough. Maybe we can get one of the little ones... Make them give up their stashes.* That wouldn't happen. It couldn't happen. Jack thought of Robbie hitting Scrape on the head and running off with Zee. Maybe it already was happening.

"Come on, Jacky," panted Wash. "We're goin' too slow."

Jack sped up, realizing he wasn't the only one who might be afraid.

The boys ran flat out the rest of the way to the wall. They didn't see anyone else along, but if they had Jack knew no one could have detained him for long. He had fire in his veins.

"Small River Hole," said Wash, pointing. "I'll go over."

Jack nodded and paused while Wash scrambled up the wall.

"S'all good Jackey," said Wash in a loud whisper. "No one on either side, far as I can see."

Jack didn't respond but jumped into the stream and splashed straight through to the other side. Wash landed softly beside Jack, and the boys spread out to scour the jungle floor, looking for any sign of Robbie's large footprints. They continued moving south until a shout from Wash made Jack look up.

"Over 'ere! Blood!"

Jack ran over. Before he had even reached Wash, Jack had taken in the slick of blood, the disturbed leaves, and the dislodged rock with a dark stain on it, and he knew they were in the right place.

Wash was crouching down staring at the disturbed ground, but Jack didn't join him. Instead he began walking circles around the area, searching for footprints.

"I can't find any footprints. Grout! Forget this, it's a waste of time. We know where Robbie's going."

"Jack. We think Robbie took Zee to the hillfolk, yeah?"

Jack nodded.

"Hate to say it, but maybe we should leave off on Robbie an' Zee an' focus on the others righ' now."

"But if we can catch up to them before they reach the hill—"

"You think we're gonna? Robbie's got a massive head start."

"But he has to carry Zee. That'll slow him down."

"Barely. It's odds on 'ees already there. The hillys'll be waitin' f'r us. If we want t' be free animals this time tomorrow," he paused. "Let's get the others and make a plan."

Jack hesitated. "Okay," he finally said. "They went to get what color—? red. He needed red."

"Ee' gets reds from the clay down near the southern'st river fork 'fore it comes into the wall."

They turned south and ran. The further south they got the thicker the undergrowth became. Finally they were restrained to a walk, as they used their swords to clear thin branches and forced themselves through what they couldn't cut. Jack, frustrated by the delay, swiped furiously at even the smallest branches until Wash said, "Oi, save it, Jackey. If we 'ave to fight an' you're too tired to even raise your arm imma have some words to say." Jack sighed and continued hacking at branches, but with lessened ferocity. Slowly, incrementally, the underbrush cleared until the boys could return to a run. Buoyed by the new headway they sprinted full out the rest of the way to the southern-most river branch.

As soon as Jack burst out of the trees into the clay deposit his stomach sank. He tried to stop short in alarm but he slipped on a wet patch of clay and fell onto his back. Wash, who had tried the same thing to similar effect, fell with a dull thump next to him. With two wet sucking sounds both boys sat up and looked around.

"This isn't good," said Jack.

"No kiddin'," said Wash.

The clay field was a mess. The surface had been torn up so badly that it looked like waves on the sea during a storm, and in many of the small

hollows which would fit a child's body perfectly were dark red smears that were undeniably not the red color of clay. Jack and Wash unstuck themselves and began walking around trying to make sense of the scene.

"This has got to be Tish or Jocco right here," said Jack, looking down at a set of small, bare footprints.

"These ain't. These feet 'ad shoes," said Wash.

"These too. There must have been at least two hillfolk."

"Maybe three. Can' tell though. Oh an 'ere's Doc," Wash pointed to a dent in the clay where someone had fallen over. "I can see the outline of 'is belt."

"*This* one is Jocco. These feet are tin—whoa!" Jack leapt back in surprise. He had trodden on something that was certainly not clay. For one thing, it was warm.

"What? Whadja find?" Wash squished over to Jack, who had knelt down to investigate.

"I don't know," said Jack, hesitantly. He and Wash began clearing away clay until they could make out a small frame.

"I think it's Jocco," Jack breathed.

"Is 'ead was above clay. He might still be..." Wash didn't finish. Both he and Jack began feverishly scraping clay from Jocco's face. Jack, remembering what Doc had done in these situations, felt around Jocco's neck for a pulse.

"Wash, I don't feel—help me find a—"

"Ees breathing!" cried Wash in relief, one hand hovering over Jocco's mouth.

Jack felt his body relax. "Oh, thank the raving North," he breathed. Jack began feeling up and down Jocco's arms and legs. "I don't think anything major is broken. But—oh. There's something wrong with his shoulder."

"Wot about 'is spine?"

"I don't know." Jack ran his hand down Jocco's spine. "It feels okay. I don't know what a broken spine feels like, though."

"S'pose it dosn' matter," Wash said gruffly. "Broken or no we've got to get him an' his spine home."

"Okay. Yeah. Okay." The surge of fear and then relief had sapped Jack of his fury-fueled energy. He felt drained and his head had begun pounding again. He rubbed his forehead with the heels of his hands.

"Okay, Wash. Can you carry Jocco on your own?"

"Course. No prob—"

He was cut off by a low moan from Jocco followed by a louder one. Jocco tried to sit up but Jack stopped him.

"Jack? Jack, what happened?"

"Tha's exactly wot we were wondrin," said Wash.

"Oh North, my shoulder hurts," there was panic in the young boy's eyes.

"What about the rest of you? Can you move your feet?" asked Jack.

Jocco did.

"That's good, right?" Jack asked Wash.

"Why wouldn't it be?" said Wash.

"Does anything else hurt?" asked Jack.

"No—but there's something wrong with my shoulder—what's wrong with it?"

"I dunno, sit up and let's look at it."

Jocco did so, helping his right arm, which hung limply, along with his left one.

"It's alright. It looks dislocated," said Jack. "Wow, okay. This is pretty much the best thing that has happened all day," said Jack.

"What does that mean?" asked Jocco, his eyes brimming with tears.

"Don' worry, it's easily fixable. I'll hold 'im still."

"Hold me—"

But Wash had already grabbed Jocco in a tight bear hug and Jack quickly popped Jocco's shoulder back into place, like Doc had for him on more than one occasion. To his credit, Jocco stifled his scream.

"Better?" asked Wash.

The boy nodded and wiped his eyes with his left hand.

“So what happened? Where are the others?”

“I don’t—we were gathering clay for red when suddenly there was a noise and we turned and there were these catchers. We went to fight them, but they were big and they grabbed Tish and Doc and started to run. One of them grabbed my arm and pulled and I felt something bad happen in my shoulder and I fell and then—I don’t know what happened. It hurt so bad.”

“You passed out,” said Jack.

“No worries, it ‘appens to the best of us,” said Wash, kindly.

“How long ago did it happen?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know how long I was passed out.”

“Right,” said Jack, standing up. Wash, you take Jocco back to camp. I’ll go after the others.”

Wash sighed in exasperation. “Yeah, you, beat an’ alone, go aft’r three grown catchers who are soon to be surrounded by every ‘ill man, woman, an’ child. I’m sure you’ll do great. Sen’ me a postcard from th’ Factory.”

“The hillfolk don’t have children. Where have you been for the past... ever?”

“It’s a figure of talkin’! Now git offa your heels an’ less get this kid ‘ome!”

“No!” said Jack. He could hear the desperation in his voice. “No, they can’t have made it back to the hill yet. I could still catch them.”

“Tha’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard you say,” said Wash. There was no smile in his eyes.

“What?”

“They’re gonna beat you back to the ‘ill, even with Doc an’ Tish. You go up there an’ we’ll lose you too. Then where will we be? They’ve got my brother up there. We’re not messin’ this up.”

“I’m not—”

“You gotta take time to blueprint before you can build. Otherwise all you’ll get is a collapse and some broken tools. We’re the tools in this

operation, an’ I plan on the lot of us remainin’ distinctly unbroken.”

“Wash! I—”

“Jack!”

Jack glared at him for a moment and then nodded. Wash helped Jocco to his feet, and they began their trip home. They walked this time, partly because Jack knew Jocco’s arm would still be very sore and partly because they no longer had anywhere to run. They didn’t speak as they went; Jack felt as if his brain had been filled with rocks and his headache was getting worse. Worry for his gang gnawed at his stomach, but he forced the thoughts away. They would all plan what to do next when they got back to camp. He wouldn’t think about it until then.

The sun must have been close to setting because with each step the jungle became gloomier and their path harder to distinguish, and by the time they reached the wall all color had faded from the sky. The boys took the ground way home without discussion; it was the far easier path and the darkness gave them an added cloak of safety. Finally, when they were almost home, Jack spoke.

“Hey Wash?”

“Ayea.”

“What’s a postcard?”

Wash did another quick check around them before he spoke. “Accordin’ to Doc, back in the olden days of adults they would talk to each other by writin’ down what they had to say on little gubbins of paper, an’ there was someone whose job it was to carry the little gubbins from one person t’ another.”

“And that’s a postcard?”

“Yeah. Postcard, letter, invite, pamphlet. It all means th’ same.” He glanced around again. “Anyways, this paper gubbin thing died out when the plague hit. Guess when you’re starin’ at death you suddenly remember you ‘ave more importan’ things to do then jabber away to a bit o’ pulpy tree.”

“Weird,” said Jack. “Although if you want to get a message to

someone. Like if you wanted to get a message to Doc or something...”

Wash glared ahead of them. “When that ‘appens I’ll lean over, kick ‘im awake, an’ give ‘im the message with me own vocal chords.”

They entered the living room to find Scrape still lying in front of the fire, but awake. The panthers were now asleep on the floor next to her.

“What the grout happened to you?” Scrape said to Jocco.

Jack glanced at the boy and noticed for the first time that he was covered head to toe in clay.

“Nothing,” muttered Jocco. He had kept quiet the entire journey back to camp and Jack suspected he was embarrassed for fainting, or maybe for being unable to help the others.

“Catchers,” said Jack.

“And the rest?” asked Scrape.

“Catched,” said Jack, grimly.

“No,” Scrape whispered.

“What happened to you?” Jocco asked. “And where’s Zee?”

As Jack explained, Jocco’s expression grew dark. “That raving zygote.”

“Yeah, well, why don’t you go wash off. Wash, will you grab some clean clothes for him? I’ll start packing. We need to get out of here.”

“What? Why?” asked Jocco.

“Robbie’s heading for the hill. For all we know he’s already there and told them where our camp is. They could be on their way now.”

Jocco’s eyes went wide and he hurried into the bathroom.

“If you git dizzy, fall in an’ drown yourself after all that work we did findin’ ya, I’ll kill ya!” Wash called after him.

## 24

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?” asked Scrape, also standing up. Wash grabbed her arm to steady her.

“A ‘scapehole,” said Jack. “One of the ones near the wall. That way we’ll be closer to the hill.”

“The southern one is big,” said Scrape.

“Robbie knows about that one. We’ll have to go to one of mine.”

“Seven?” suggested Wash. It was near the northern end of the wall.

“Yeah. That one will be safe. And it’s closer,” said Jack, looking at Scrape’s pale face.

“Jack, I’m fi—” she said.

“Start moving.” Jack ripped Doc and Wash’s curtain down and tossed it to her. “Start packing cans. Make it heavy; I’ll carry it. I’ll grab Doc’s medical supplies. Odds are we’ll be needing more before we’re through with this. Wash, you’re on clothes. It’s still cold out sometimes

so pack some sweaters, too. I'll get weapons."

"But what about the panthers?" asked Jocco.

"What about them?"

"They're not here. They won't know where we've gone."

"It's probably for the best. They're wild animals, not pets. They should be on their own." Jack turned away and walked into Wash and Doc's room. He grabbed all the books on Doc's desk, plus a few more that were out, including Doc's notebook, and put them into his disguise. He added Doc's medical kit and all the herbs and salves he could find and tied the disguise shut.

"What clothes do you want, Jacky?" asked Wash from the door.

"I don't care; whatever you can find," he replied.

Jack grabbed a spare disguise from Jocco's room and emptied the bedrooms of every weapon he could find, and a few of Wash's more dangerous-looking tools for good measure. He met Wash in the living room, and Jocco soon joined them, clean and freshly changed. It hadn't taken ten minutes.

"I'll take the weapons," said Jocco.

"You don't have to," said Jack. "I can—"

"No. it's fine."

"Okay then. Ready?" asked Jack.

They all nodded. Jack picked up the sack of cans, Wash grabbed the sack of books, Jocco took the weapon sack gingerly with his left arm, and Scrape had the clothes.

"Let's get going."

They hefted their respective sacks on their shoulders and headed for the door.

Jack took one more look around at his home of three years, and then turned his back on it and followed the others.

"Maybe we should have waited until dark," Scrape whispered to him as they clumsily traversed the daylight streets.

"Couldn't risk it," Jack whispered back. "We haven't run into anyone

yet." He shifted the cans into a more comfortable position on his back and continued walking.

"Don't say that!" hissed Scrape. "Now it's bound to happen."

They both looked around quickly, but the streets were still empty. They were more than halfway to the 'scaphehole, but it was slow going.

"Maybe we shouldn't have brought so much stuff," whispered Jack. "Jocco, how are you doing? Do you want me to take those?"

"I'm fine," panted Jocco. He shifted the weapons slightly and the point of a knife poked out through the guise.

They continued walking, and, despite Scrape's predictions, they ran into no one the rest of the way.

"Are you sure this is it?" Jocco's voice came out of the darkness behind Jack. They were crawling single file through a narrow tunnel that was the entrance to one of Jack's private 'scapheholes.

"Ouch! Hey, why'd you stop?" came Scrape's voice.

"Hold on, I'm in. I'll get a light."

Jack searched his pockets until he found a box of matches and the stub of a candle. He dragged a match across the stone at his feet and burst into light, revealing a low-ceilinged room with a fire pit in one corner and a neatly organized pile of cans in the other. A few old bundles of dried out branches were stacked next to the cans. They wouldn't make for comfortable seating, but they would be better than rocks. Jack lit the candle and stood up. He could hear the others follow. Jack handed the box of matches to Jocco.

"Here, will you get a fire started?" he said.

"Won't we get smoked out?" asked Jocco, looking at the low ceiling and the small tunnel that was the exit.

"Course not," said Wash, dropping his sack down near the fire pit and undoing the knot. "This one's one a mine."

Jocco grabbed the matches and got to work. Jack took Scrape's sack from her and laid out a few logs around the fire. She sat down and Jack pulled the medical dictionary from Wash's disguise.



“Okay, Scrape.” Jack sat down next to her, dragging the medical dictionary into his lap. Holding the candle aloft, he opened the book, and looked at her. “What’s going on with you?”

“Don’t worry about me, I’m fine.”

“Look, Scrape. This isn’t the time to be tough; tell me what’s going on? It’s not whining or anything, I just want to make you better. But first you have to tell me how you’re sick.”

She hesitated.

Jack looked around. Jocco was busy with the fire and Wash had started unpacking.

“Come on, it’s *me*. I’m not going to tell anyone,” he said in a low voice.

“Okay, well, I puked up the corn, but kept down the beans.”

“Okay. That’s good. Or something.” Jack flipped back to the concussion page but it didn’t say any more than it had before.

“And I’ve got a massive headache, now. This headache could topple buildings.”

“Okay that’s less good. But I suppose it’s to be expected after walking through the city. Let me see your eyes.” She opened her eyes wide. Jack examined them carefully with no idea what he was looking for, but the flickering candle reflected off of her eyes too much to see anything, anyway. “Are you confused?”

“About what?”

“You know, just confused in general.”

“I’m confused by the question.”

“I don’t think that counts. What else do you feel?”

“I want to kill Robbie.”

“Perfectly healthy. Although irritation *is* a symptom. Do you want to kill me?”

“Only when you’re being really annoying.”

“Right. Well, since unhelpfulness isn’t a symptom I think that’s all we’ve got.”

Scrape checked to make sure Wash was out of hearing range. “Think we can make some of Doc’s headache thing?” she whispered.

“Hopefully,” he said. “I need some like a, uh,”

“Boar needs underbrush?” she supplied helpfully.

“Or a Southerner needs brains.”

“Or Doc needs big words.”

“Or a cantilever needs moment!” called Wash from over by the cans.

Jack and Scrape looked at each other and shrugged.

“I grabbed a bunch of Doc’s books that were out, so I’m hoping we have the right one. He just made it for me just before he left.”

Jack grabbed all the books they had.

“Okay-y,” he said, lowering himself to the floor and spreading out the books between himself and Scrape. He lit a second candle, passed it to Scrape, and held his own over the books. “This one can’t be it, can it? They don’t have recipes in history books, right?”

“I dunno. What’s it called? The history of headache teas? This one’s ‘Basic Medicine.’”

“That’s the one I was just reading from, you zygote.”

“Oh, yeah. Well you never know. How about this one? ‘Applied physics?’”

“That’s mine,” said Wash, sitting down next to them. “Equations, not recipes.”

“Here,” said Scrape. “This has got to be it, right? ‘Herbs and their Uses.’”

“Or this one,” said Jack. “Clinical Applications of Plants.”

“Or this ‘un,’” said Wash. “Medicine of the Natural World.”

They each opened their respective books and began searching.

“Got somethin’!” said Wash.

“Me too,” said Jack. What does yours say?”

“You chew on this big word, apparently.”

“Mine you grind up and smear on your head,” Jack said.

“Hah! I found tea!” said Scrape. “Although I don’t know what any

of these words mean.”

Jack leaned over and looked down the recipe list. “Um, are there any pictures?”

Scrape shook her head. “You’ve taken it before, though. Which of these plants look like they might be the right ones?” she gestured to the pile of herbs.

“Oh, no. I’m not doing that. Where would we be if we mixed up wild carrots and hemlock?” said Jack.

“Dead,” they all said together.

“Although my recipe doesn’t call for wild carrots *or* ‘emlock,” said Wash. “An’ there are pictures.”

“Oh, yeah? Let me see,” said Jack. They all leaned over Wash’s book.

“Well this one here,” Jack pointed, “has got to be this plant, right?” He held up one of the twigs.

“Looks like it,” said Scrape. But I don’t see any of the other ones.”

“Ere. I reckon this is this one.” Wash picked up another plant and compared it to one of the drawings in the book.

“Well that’s good enough probably,” said Scrape. All we gotta do is take a few leaves from each and chew on them.”

“I don’t know if this is a good idea,” said Jack.

“Doc does it all the time,” said Scrape.

“Okay, let’s try it.” Scrape and Jack plucked two leaves from each dried stem and began to chew.

“Anythin?” asked Wash.

“Not really,” said Jack.

“I think my mouth juth went numm,” said Scrape.

“Huh. Mine too. Thrange. Ith thith’ a good thing?” asked Jack.

“Wha’ ith thith rethipe for?” asked Scrape.

“General pain relief,” read out Wash.

“Well my mouth thertainly doethen’t hurt,” said Scrape.

“Did it bethore?” asked Jack.

“No.”

Jack rolled his eyes.

“Got it!” cried Jocco, as a fire burst into being.

His expression changed from satisfaction to confusion as he looked around at them. “What happened to you guys?”

Jack glanced at Scrape whose tongue was hanging out. He quickly wiped drool off of his chin and said, “Athidentally took thome medithine.”

“Well, if that’s what you do in your free time...” said Jocco, and he began making one-handed dinner.

The dry wood was caught quickly and was giving off a lot of heat. Jack skootched back a bit so he wouldn’t get singed.

“Okay, tho. Thcrape, you’re thtill pretty much out uh athion. A leatht ‘or a couple more dayth.”

Scrape glowered at the fire.

“Jocco lookth pretty good, though. I wath never thore for very long after a dithlocathon.”

“A what?” Scrape asked, grinning.

Jack rolled his eyes at her. “We need a plan, and we need to get going. North, I hope thith medithine clearth up thoon,” he added.

“Where are you going?” asked Scrape.

“To get the gang back,” said Jack.

“Jack, they’ve been caught,” said Scrape.

“I know that,” snapped Jack. “But we got Little Michael back didn’t we?”

“That wath an accident,” said Scrape. “Ith impothible. Maybe we can fight catcherth when they’re in the thity, but oneth they reach the hill... they’ll be in the children factory. And the hillfolk will be exthpecting you thith time.”

Jack thought he could start to feel his mouth again, but his brain was getting fuzzy like it had in the first day of the concussion. “That doethn’t matter,” he said. “What do you want me to do? Just sit here?! Well, I can’t! That’s our gang that just got caught! My gang!” he was shouting now.

He took a breath. “Scrape, I brought all of them into this mess. I invited them into this gang, and they joined because they thought it would be safe here. They trusted me, and I put them all in danger.”

He would have said Scrape’s eyes looked sad. “No, you didn’t,” she said.

“Yes, I did,” said Jack. “I’m the leader; I’m supposed to keep them safe. So I’m going to get them. I have to.”

There was a pause. “Alright,” she said.

“So what’s the plan, Jackey?” asked Wash.

“Um, okay,” said Jack, trying to concentrate. “I guess we should find out what we’re dealing with? See what the defenses are like, maybe try to double-check our gang is actually in the children factory. We might be able to climb the drainpipe to check. If they’ve put it back up, I mean.”

“They will have,” said Wash.

“How do you know?” asked Scrape.

“To the right grownup, a gutter can be endless entertainment. Fixin’, cleanin’, lengthenin’. Literally endless.”

“Well, good then,” said Jack. I suppose we should do recon during the day. It’s more dangerous but we’ll be able to see better. What do you think?” Jack turned to Scrape, expecting a response, but her eyes were closed.

“Scrape?”

Wash peered at her. “Asleep,” he concluded. “Ow much o’ those planties did you take?”

Jack could feel that his eyelids were half closed, but he didn’t have the energy to open them. “Two from each them,” he said. He could only see blackness now.

He heard Wash mutter, “Huh, int’restin’,” and then nothing.

## 25

JACK CAME TO THE NEXT MORNING groggy, confused and irritated. It took him a minute to realize that he was awake and he wasn’t at home. It took him another minute to realize why he was so irritated.

“Ah! Get away from me, Wash. What do you want?” Wash had been repeating Jack’s name loudly in his ear.

“You’ve slept long enough already. We gotta go.” There was something funny about Wash’s voice but Jack was too busy trying to orient himself to think about it.

“We gotta go where?” he asked, looking around. Scrape was on the floor next to Jack, still asleep. The bandage tied around her forehead sparked something in Jack’s memory. “The hillfolk. The others. Jocco?”

“Ees fine. ‘Ee just went to peek outside, see what the day is holdin’. C’mon. Time for us to be out doin’ a recon.”

“Okay. Right. Um,” said Jack, unsure of what to do next.

“Ere, drink this. I’s jus’ ‘ot water. Maybe clear your ‘ead a bit.” Wash thrust a hot can into Jack’s hands and stood up. Jack stared down into his water, mind completely blank. A few minutes later Wash placed two more warm cans in front of Jack.

“Drink an’ eat or I’ll upend tha’ water over ya,” Wash said through a full mouth.

Jack drank and ate hurriedly, and by the time he finished he did feel a bit more awake.

“Did Jocco eat yet?” he asked Wash.

“Yep.”

“Good. Are you ready to go? Am I ready to go?” Jack looked down at himself. He was wearing the same pants and shirt he had yesterday, but no knives.

“Ere are your weapons.” Wash handed him a couple belt knives and a sword. Jack looked at him and frowned. Wash looked different. He had worry lines in his forehead and the humor had gone from his eyes. Jack realized that while he and Scrape had had a plant-induced sleep Wash had had the whole night to stay up worrying. It looked like he had done so.

“Thanks.”

Jack felt suddenly nervous. He felt like he should be able to say something to make Wash feel better. Or at least optimistic. “We’ll get them back, you know.”

“I know, Jackey.”

Jack hesitated, cleared his throat, and walked over to wake Scrape and let her know they were leaving.

Jack stuck his head out into blinding sunshine. He narrowed his eyes and waited for them to get used to the sudden light. He knew he could see the sea just past the lower city, but he didn’t look at it; the dancing reflections off the water were like daggers in his eyes. Instead, he stared off into the darker northern jungle as Wash and Jocco clambered out beside him.

“Cold,” commented Jocco, rubbing his hands over his arms.

Jack ignored him and turned to Wash. “Which path, do you think?”

“Stickin’ northerly will prolly be safest.”

“And take the longest.”

“Better careful than caught.”

“Alright then, let’s do it.”

“Hey, Jack?”

“Yeah, Jocco?”

“If we happen to kill a boar on our way home I wouldn’t complain.”

“Veggies’re good for ya,” said Wash.

“Yeah, just like grammar’s good for me, right?” said Jocco.

“Exactly,” said Wash, ignoring the sarcasm. “Now let’s git a move on, huh?”

They ran through the city at a slow trot this time, both out of consideration for Jocco and because it would be a long run and they didn’t want to get worn out too quickly. To Wash’s satisfaction, Jack agreed that they should stay either well aboveground or well below ground at all times, and so ran into no one. They crossed the wall at the corner of west and north and continued running up the gradually sloping hill.

“This is great running,” said Jocco, who had never been to this part of the jungle. “Tons of space, not too steep, cool birds.” He pointed to a bright blue bird flying just over their heads.

“Yeah, it is,” said Jack gruffly. Wash didn’t reply at all.

After an hour they reached Jack’s favorite area of jungle. Far less light shone through the heavy trees but the thick canopy blanket seemed to keep heat in well because it was just as warm and humid as ever.

“This is great!” said Jocco.

“Remember why we’re ‘ere, kid,” said Wash. “We can come back an’ do some sightseein’ when we got the whole gang wit’ us.”

“Right.” Jocco looked back at the trail and affected a serious look.

The boys stopped at the river and drank for a while.

“Okay,” said Jack, sitting up and wiping his mouth. “Our goals for this mission are, one,”

"To sus out the security situation," said Wash.

"Right. Two, to try to confirm our gang is in the Children Factory."

"How will we do that?" asked Jocco.

"The Children Factory is near the southern edge of the clearing. If they're not guarding the back—and there are no doors in the back—"

"So?" asked Jocco. "I thought you said there were windows."

"Grownups on'y use doors for gettin' places. The don' appreciate jus' 'ow utilitarian a window kin be," said Wash.

"Oh." Jocco looked surprised for a moment, but then he turned his attention back to Jack.

"So anyway, the windows all have waxed paper covering them, which'll be easy to cut through. There are a couple ground floor windows, so we can check those first, and we can climb the drainpipe for the upper ones. We're just looking for confirmation our gang is there and not in some other building, okay? Number three,"

"Rescuing our gang?"

"No, not this trip. I told you, this is recon."

"What's recon?"

"Oh, sorry, I didn't realize—well, it just means gathering information."

"Wot if they're righ' there just waitin' to get rescued?" asked Wash.

"Okay it'll be a judgment call if we rescue them this trip. But grout, Wash if you get someone out it had better be the easiest, most straightforward—"

Wash raised his hands in appeasement. "If I 'ave to use one curse to do it I'll leave off. Distinctly unbroken, remember?"

"Good because I'd much rather wait until Scrape is back up. We can't lose any of us, so we'd be zygotes to go in before we're ready."

The other two nodded.

"Okay, what number are we on? Four?"

They nodded again.

"Alright, number four will be."

"Tailin' it?"

"You mean high tailing it?" asked Jocco.

"High, low, whatever," said Wash.

"Yeah that's a good one. Four is getting away safe. So we try not to split up if we don't have to; that will just make things more complicated. But if they're close on us, splitting up might be smart. Also. The best escape from this main clearing is off the eastern side. The cliff is there, and it's so far up you're at the tops of the trees. That's the best place to jump off because they'll never follow you over the edge."

"I see a flaw in the brilliant escape plan," said Wash.

"It's *fine*," said Jack. "I've done it before."

"Yeah, but you're a madcap hatter," said Wash.

"Those trees have thin, bendy branches that slow your fall so by the time you start hitting vines you'll be able to catch hold of one," explained Jack. "But that's a last resort, anyway. Best case, we see what we need to see and all just run off together with none of the hillfolk the wiser. Maybe even with a few of our others."

The other two nodded.

"Number five?" Jack asked, looking around at them.

"Get a boar on the way home?" asked Jocco.

"We'll see if that's number five once we're on our way home. Wash, you and I are going to go in from the northwest, get a look at the general security, and then see what we can see in the Children Factory. Jocco, you're lookout. Go to the south side and whistle if anything seems to be off. Anyone going around the back side of the building, a bunch of people gathering, just anything weird at all."

"Do you want a bird, chipmunk, or human whistle?" asked Jocco.

"I guess bird. There are a ton of song birds at this elevation so it won't attract attention," said Jack. "Everyone got it? Grout, it *is* cold. Let's get moving."

They set out. When the clearing was in sight Jocco broke off to get a good vantage from the south and Wash and Jack circled around until they could see the Children Factory.

"Do you see any guards?" whispered Jack.

"Can' tell. Those shirts o' theirs blend nicely with the paint," Wash whispered back.

"Let's get closer."

Wash and Jack both got down on their bellies and dragged themselves to the treeline on their elbows.

"They don't have guards," breathed Jack. "I don't believe it."

"Lookit over there. There's someone."

"Yeah but she's all the way by that other house. How could she be keeping guard?"

Wash shrugged. "Either way we don' wanna git seen by 'er."

"She's reading a book; what's she going to see? Anyway, we'll be hidden if we go to the back of the house."

The boys slunk through the jungle until they could see the papered over windows of the back of the Children Factory. Once again, they crawled on their elbows to the edge of the clearing.

"I can' see a one, Jackey."

"Me neither."

"They could be inside lookin' out though."

"They can't be; they have wax paper for windows."

"Don' mean they can' be lookin' through a crack or sumthin'."

"Oh, yeah. Well, we can't know either way. Should we risk it?"

"What else're we here for?"

"Wait!" Jack hissed, grabbing Wash's arm. A child's leg had just punched through the paper in one of the second-floor windows. With a barely audible rip the hole widened, revealing Zee, a look of determination on her face.

"Tha's my girl," whispered Wash, as Zee beckoned for someone behind her, and then Tish's and Doc's faces appeared in the window. Tish was looking behind her and muttering fast to the others. Doc peered down over the window ledge and visibly paled. Jack looked over at Wash.

"Should we do somthin'?" whispered Wash.

"Let's wait and see," replied Jack.

They turned back to their gang. Now Zee was speaking to the others, pointing down over the ledge. Then she pointed to Doc. Doc raised his hands up in the air and stepped back. Zee took a step towards him, they couldn't see her expression, but Doc nodded weakly.

"C'mon Doc. You got this," muttered Wash.

Doc eased himself slowly and carefully over the window ledge until he was hanging by his fingertips, and then he dropped. He hit the ground hard, but rolled to the side to ease the impact. He scrambled to his feet, glanced around quickly, and then looked back up toward the window. Tish was already hanging over the windowsill by her fingers. Like Doc she hit hard, but also like Doc she rolled to the side and got back to her feet.

A bird whistled.

Jack looked towards the porch of the other house, but couldn't find the hillwoman who had been reading. He leaned sideways to get a better angle, but the porch was completely clear.

"Wash, we got a problem," said Jack.

"I noticed," said Wash, not looking at the neighboring porch, but at the Children Factory. Zee was halfway down the drainspout and climbing fast, but that wasn't the problem. Slinking towards their gang on either side of the building were hillfolk carrying clubs and ropes.

"There's too many of them. We'll never be able to take them," said Jack.

"An' they're feet away from th' gang. Our guys won't 'ave a runnin' chance," said Wash. "Whaddawe do?"

"We're doing it. This is recon. Now we know where they're being kept, and we know there are roughly," Jack did a quick head count, "grout, there are at least eight hillfolk."

"Given the proper channels we can work wit'—no!"

Jack looked around quickly and saw the hillfolk pounce, but that wasn't what Wash was looking at. Across the clearing and rapidly getting nearer sprinted a small figure, a knife in his hand.

"Oh tha' raving, thickskulled—Jack!"

Jack hesitated: if he and Wash joined the others they could all get caught. But they were running so low on gang members that they were already crippled. Soon they'd be paralyzed.

"Let's go!" he said. "You get Jocco. I'll get—" Wash had already sprinted away. Jack ran towards his gang, towards the surprisingly tumultuous fight. Jack smiled grimly as he ran; his gang wasn't going down easy. He didn't slow down when he neared the fight but plowed full force into the hillwoman that had Doc in a headlock. He knocked them both to the ground and Doc sprang free.

"Run, Doc. 'Scapehole seven!" he shouted as he pulled out one of his belt knives. The woman's hand shot towards Jack and he slashed at it and stood up. Doc was still standing next to Jack, half turned to run.

"Now!" Jack roared, and Doc turned tail and fled into the jungle.

"Jack!" he heard Tish shout. Jack turned around to see a hillman running back towards the front of the building, a struggling Tish over his shoulder, but two more hillfolk were running towards him.

"It's Jack!" one cried. It was the young woman who had been reading on the porch.

Jack dodged them and began running for the opposite side of the house, where Zee was still standing and fighting. As he watched she kicked one of the hillman hard in the shins. He doubled over, grabbing his leg, and Zee slapped her hand against one ear as he went down. He screamed and clutched at his head. Before she could turn around, before Jack could reach her, the other hillman—an enormous man with a scar on his face—swept her legs out from under her with his club and then picked her up under his arm, pinning her arms to her sides and began running back towards the front of the building. Jack sprinted after them. He thought he might reach them when Zee slammed her heel into the man's stomach, making him trip in surprise and pain, but he righted himself and Jack's small legs were no match for the huge man's. They were through the children factory door by the time Jack turned the corner. Halfway across the lawn Jack saw Jocco and Wash fighting more

hillfolk. As Jack ran towards them, he recognized one of the men as the young catcher. Footsteps thundered behind Jack as he sprinted towards the last fight. Jack reached them just as his chasers caught up to him. He stopped short, dropped to the ground, and curled into a ball. He felt one pair of legs and then another trip over him and fall. He stood up, untangling himself from the legs. Now there were three kids against six adults. The fallen adults rose quickly and as one all six of them turned towards Jack, recognition in their eyes. Jack retreated several hasty steps.

"Jacky! Grab Jocco an' get outta here!" shouted Wash. He kicked viciously at the knees of two hillmen, both of whom toppled. Another one leapt at Wash, who skipped back and shouted, "We need you free, Jacky! Get outta here!"

The three remaining hillfolk had spread out in a clear attempt to surround him. One made a grab for Jocco, who ducked just as another hand narrowly missed Jack. He stabbed at it and felt his knife connect but he didn't bother to check. He stuck blade back in his, grabbed the back of Jocco's shirt, and threw the boy from the fray.

"Jocco! Southeast side! Go now!" and Jocco took off. Jack leapt on the back of the reading catcher, who turned to follow the younger boy, hit her in the temple, and leapt off her back before he was crushed. He started after Jocco, but someone grabbed his arm before he could run more than a couple steps. Jack looked back in time to see Wash throw a newly acquired club hard at Jack's assailant, and Jack was free.

"Jacky, if you don' get outta 'ere righ' now I'm not savin' you! Outta pure," he ducked and a club flew over his head, "spite!"

As Jack sprinted away he could hear the sounds of Wash fighting, no longer to protect himself, but for Jocco and Jack.

Jack caught up to Jocco quickly and kept in step with him, checking back over his shoulder to see that no one was following. Wash had done his job well but six to one was no fight. Three of the hillfolk had grabbed Wash and were carrying him to the Children Factory with difficulty. Jack almost stopped right there and followed, but the remaining three

hillfolk were now running towards Jack and Jocco. They were closing the distance, but the two boys had reached the cliff's edge.

"Jump!" shouted Jack.

"Jack, I don't think—" but before Jocco could finish his sentence Jack had grabbed him by the waistband and collar and chucked him over the edge. Jack dove in after him, feeling the guilt grow with each stinging slap.

## 26

JACK LANDED AT BOTTOM OF THE CLIFF covered in scratches but unharmed. A soft rain of leaves fell onto him and the surrounding ground, torn loose from his violent passage through them. He got to his feet, turned to the nearest tree and punched it savagely. Above, a bird's angry wings fluttered away. He felt a hot stinging on his knuckles and knew he had torn them open but he didn't care. He and Wash had been the only free and relatively healthy fighters left and now Wash was gone. He had *let* Wash go. A big part of Jack wanted to scale the cliff and reenter the fight, but he knew the others would be locked in the Factory by now.

"Jack?" came a voice from behind him. Jack turned around to see Jocco, his clothes shredded, covered in scrapes and looking a lot smaller than usual. "Jack, I'm—"

"We have to go. They'll be circling around the cliff."



“Jack—”

“Now.” Jack took off running east and Jocco followed. They ran in silence all the way back to camp. It was mid-afternoon and sun was shining gloriously over the city, but Jack wasn’t in a mood to appreciate the weather. His mind’s eye kept replaying scenes for him: the scene of Zee, helpless but resiliently struggling in a huge man’s arms, Tish thrown over a hillman’s shoulder but still trying to punch him in the kidney, just like Doc had taught, and Wash taking on six fully grown catchers just so Jack and Jocco could make a getaway. When the two boys entered the ‘scaphole it was to find a fire roaring and Doc hovering over Scrape, looking concerned.

“—definitely one of the worst I’ve seen, and that’s saying quite a bit considering I’ve been stitching you up for going on three years now, but it looks like Jack has gone beyond himself. This is well tended, quite well tended indeed. Do I smell rubbing alcohol?”

“Yeah,” said Jack. “I used a bit of it before we put the bandage on.”

Doc and Scrape turned towards him, but Jack turned away and began taking off his weapons in silence. The other three didn’t speak, either. As far as Jack could tell they hadn’t even moved. Jack checked his arms, felt his face, and lifted up his shirt to examine himself. The thin material hadn’t helped a bit in preventing cuts to his chest and belly, but he wasn’t bleeding anymore. He dropped his shirt and clenched his fists—his hands were shaking again—and turned back around. All three children were staring at him.

“No one else,” he said shortly.

“Jack, I’m—” Jocco moved towards him holding out a placating hand. In one impulsive movement Jack grabbed the front of Jocco’s shirt and pinned him to the wall.

“You’re sorry?” he growled. “You had one job. I *specifically* told you not to move. And now you lost us half our remaining fighters. This isn’t like playing ball where you can mess around all you like and it’ll only cost us some extra food. That’s our gang up there being held captive. That’s Tish! Aren’t you taking this seriously?”

“Yes! But I thought—”

“Thought what?”

Jocco didn’t speak.

“What?!” roared Jack.

“You’ve always gotten us out of everything before. I just thought—”

Jack snarled. “What *is* it with everyone—” He took a breath. “Jocco. Do you have any idea how outnumbered we are? They’ll be adding more guards now. Who knows how many; Doc says there’s probably a hundred hillfolk. This situation was bad enough with only me and Wash to fight. How are we gonna rescue them now?” He let go of Jocco. “I don’t know if we can.” Then he turned around, walked to the far corner of the room, and sat down in the shadows. After ten minutes or so Doc walked over to him, holding some bandages and looking solicitous.

“I’m fine,” Jack said, and stared up at the ceiling.

Anger still burned inside Jack, but his hands had stopped shaking and his breathing was returning to normal. As the anger slowly faded it was replaced again by fear. He had never had a problem he didn’t think he could solve. Never in six hard years had it ever gotten bad enough that he didn’t think he could fix it. But in those six years no one had ever escaped the Children Factory. Well, he reasoned, Doc and Michael had escaped. But Scrape was right. Michael was a fluke. Pure chance. Good luck. And Doc had got out on his own. Neither escape had nothing to do with him, so how would he be able to make it happen again? Should he even try? Well, *he* was going to try; he *had* to try; the others had trusted him to protect them. Trusted him to continue to protect them. But was it irresponsible to lead the remainder of his gang into what would probably result in slavery? Maybe he should tell them not to come. Like they would go along with that. He could force them to stay, but, no, he would never do that. Jack groaned. This was too complicated. What was the right thing to do? He had no idea. No, that was wrong. He did know. He would give them the option. They would come, he knew they would. But it would be their choice.



Jack could hear the others muttering to each other. Jocco's voice was taught. Jack suspected the younger boy was holding back tears. It made him feel guilty. He didn't want to make the kid cry. But hopefully Jocco understood now.

"Well, what do you want? You messed up. You should have stayed hidden," Scrape was saying.

"I didn't want to make it worse," said Jocco. His voice had a pleading note in it.

"Course you didn't. No one thinks you did. But you still messed up."

"Jack's always running around, fighting, and saving everyone. I just wanted to..."

"I know."

"And I didn't think—I know Jack said we were just doing recon, but he always makes everything work out. But now—what if we can't save them?" The fear in his voice was plain.

"I dunno, Jocco, but one way or another something's gonna happen. Now hand me one of those cans, no not that one, I just threw up a bunch of corn. Those peas look good, though."

There were a few minutes of silence until Doc suddenly roared, "What in Peoria have you irreverent philistines done with my medical kit?"

Jack rose to join the others by the fire.

## 27

Jocco looked up nervously as Jack approached the fire. "Can I get you some food? We have beans and corn and, uh," Jocco shuffled the cans around looking for different labels.

"Corn would be great, since apparently Scrape won't eat it," said Jack.

"So the mission went well, huh?" she asked.

"Oh yeah, it was glorious," Jack responded, "Thanks," he added, as Jocco handed him an open can of corn. He tipped half of the can into his mouth; he hadn't realized how hungry he was. "I think you're right, Jocco," he said through the kernels, "we should get some meat soon. These vegetables don't keep me full for very long. Hand me another can. Whatever's closest."

Jocco passed Jack another can, practically bouncing with giddy relief. "It's okay, Jack. Vegetables aren't so bad. They're pretty good, actually."

"Oh, yeah?" Jack smiled. "Well, there's nothing wrong with a well-rounded diet."

"That's true," said Jocco.

Doc's grumbles came from the far side of the fire. "You could easily have done the same work with half the amount of alcohol, and that's a conservative estimate. And the mess! Bandages everywhere, nothing where it belongs, if I didn't know better I would have said the panther cubs—"

He was interrupted by a growl from the doorway. Jack whirled around to see the two panther cubs trotting boldly through the entrance, each holding a mouthful of something furry. They walked right up to Scrape, opened their jaws, and dropped two dead squirrels each into her lap.

"Wow! How did they find us?" asked Jack.

Scrape shrugged. "Smelled us, maybe?"

"That's amazing!" said Jack.

"How long have they been hunting for you?" asked Doc.

"This is the first time," said Scrape, looking surprised. "This is amazing."

"Awesome! Meat!" cried Jocco. He paused. "For a well-rounded diet, you know."

"Intriguing," said Doc, from the stump. "They must recognize that you are injured. Curious that they respond as caregivers, not as predators. Perhaps you've become a mother figure, or perhaps they see themselves as your mother figure. Of course I cannot discourse upon panther psychology having never studied the topic, but they certainly are curious."

"That they are," said Jack, and he knocked the last few beans from the bottom of his second can into his mouth. "Alright, let's check in."

Everyone looked at him.

"You do know there are only four of us," said Scrape.

"Doesn't mean we shouldn't all be on the same page," said Jack. "Scrape, you first."

"Well I haven't thrown up in a while," she said. "I've got a wicked headache but that's, you know, whatever. I get dizzy whenever I try to move, but I'm working on that."

"How?" asked Jack, skeptically.

"By trying not to be dizzy," she said.

"Naturally," said Jack.

"That's all I got," she said.

"You checked her out?" Jack asked Doc.

"Yes. And I must say, despite the callous overuse of bandages and the shameless treatment of my medical kit, you did a very good job with her. Excellent I dare say."

Jack grinned. "When will she be up and running?"

"Impossible to know."

"Have a guess," said Jack.

"The nausea seems to be fading, is that correct?"

Scrape nodded.

"I imagine the dizziness will fade, too, in the next twenty-four hours. You'll be having headaches for a fortnight at least, particularly during physical exercise or emotional stress, anything that excites a cardiovascular response."

"Blood pumping through the brain won't be comfortable for a couple weeks. Right," said Jack, mostly for Jocco's benefit.

"The injuries to your arm are healing nicely, though," he told Scrape. "I expect I will be able to remove the stitches in the morning. The side is a bit trickier; you have developed a minor infection, but I have the supplies to deal with it."

"So, in conclusion?" asked Jack, hoping for a more definite answer.

"Under normal circumstances I would recommend one week of bed-rest minimum with another week of only the most basic activities."

Jack waited for a 'but' he really hoped was coming.

"But, there is work to be done." He turned to Scrape. "Do at least wait until the dizziness has faded."

"Well of course," said Jack, "she'd be useless in a fight otherwise."

"Would not," countered Scrape, "I could fall over on people."

Jack turned to Jocco. "Anything to report?"

"Not much. I peeked into the window of that main house, you know, the big one with the flagpole out front?"

"Yeah. I think the leader guy lives there," said Jack.

"Yeah, well, there was this huge table in there with a million chairs around it and paper pinned up to the walls and more stacks of paper on the desk."

"An office no doubt," said Doc. "Perhaps a conference room."

"Sure, where all the in charge hillfolk meet to talk about stuff," said Scrape.

"Okay. Anyway, that all seemed pretty normal but along the bottom of the house on the outside there were all these big squares of hay."

"Hay bales," said Doc.

"Whatever. And they were really dry. Like they were underneath the actual house a bit so they don't get rained on or anything. And I saw more bales up in the eaves. I don't know what that was about."

"Insulation perhaps," said Doc. "To keep out the cold."

"That's good to know, though," said Jack. "They would light up easily. Maybe we can set that house on fire for a distraction or something."

Jocco looked pleased.

"Anything else?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Right, Doc." Everyone turned to the boy. "What happened?"

Doc put the end of a short stick into the fire. After a moment he pulled it out again, blew the flame out and watched the smoke curl towards the ceiling. "Well, as you know, we were gathering herbs and colors. We decided to stop for colors first—Jocco wanted red and so we went to that area where the southernmost—"

"Yeah, we know where you went," said Jack.

"So we were gathering colors when there was a sound behind us. I turned—"

"You didn't have anyone keeping watch?"

"Jack, would you like to hear this or not?" Doc retorted, twirling his stick impatiently.

"Alright, sorry. Go on."

"I turned and there were two catchers—the two young ones who have been frequenting the city of late. They seemed as surprised as we were, and Jocco took advantage and ran at them with a knife—"

"Surprised? Why were they surprised? Didn't Robbie set you guys up?"

Doc looked surprised. "No, I don't think so. They did seem quite surprised. And they didn't seem to know we were part of your gang until after Robbie looked in on us and confirmed. And in any case, when would he have passed that information along? We decided to go only directly before leaving."

"Oh, yeah. I guess I just assumed it was Robbie."

"Hey—let's not forget that Robbie isn't entirely guiltless," said Scrape angrily.

"Of course not," said Doc. "Shall I continue?"

"Please," said Jack.

"Anyway, a fight ensued and Tish and I were thrown, quite unceremoniously I might add, over a shoulder each and taken to the hill. Once they got us to the Children Factory they put us in a small, underground room and began by telling us about the lovely life we were going to have in the factory—only, they called it the Domestication Facility."

"What's domestication?" asked Jocco.

"To domesticate means to tame or to make accustomed to living in a household," said Doc.

"Eugh," said Jocco.

"In any case, before too long Robbie stuck his head in. He told them we were part of Jack's gang, too, and they grew visibly excited. They left us alone for what seemed like an eternity and then this giant of a man—the LummoX, I call him—stomped in looking ill-tempered and demanded to know where you were, Jack."

"Robbie must have told them where our camp was," said Scrape.

"Thank the North we left when we did. We probably just missed them," said Jack.

"Yes, in any case," said Doc, looking annoyed at the interruption. "They started a renewed line of questioning. They were quite easy at first: negotiating, persuading, bribing. It was almost pleasant. By the end of the day they had escalated to threats. No doubt they'll begin the torture soon."

"Torture?" squeaked Jocco.

"It's classic interrogation. Wash read an excellent book a few years ago on the interrogation technique called *Torture in Your Every Day Life* and he recounted much of it to me. Incidentally, did you know—"

Jack cleared his throat.

"But perhaps this is not the time. Where were we? Yes. That evening they shackled us to our beds, which, I must say, is quite an undignified way in which to sleep. However, they didn't seem to think it necessary to have guards in the bedrooms, so we all talked freely. That is when we discovered Zee and learned of Robbie's betrayal. And the other children told us about their lives in the Children Factory..." he paused dramatically to relight his stick.

"Well?" asked Scrape impatiently.

"Well, indeed," said Doc. "It seems that all that talk about how lovely the Children Factory is was just the beginning of the brainwashing."

Jocco squeaked.

"The *what?*" cried Scrape and Jack together.

"Yes. It seems everyone who gets caught goes through it, and that we were only exempt because they thought we might have vital information about Jack, although I imagine once the questioning is over... Anyway, it seems they keep you alone in one of several interrogation rooms below ground. The disorientation due to lack of windows helps."

"Huh?" said Jocco.

"You can't see what time of day it is. It throws you off," said Jack.

"So, they keep you in these rooms and don't allow you to eat or sleep for several days and all the while the brainwashers are there at all hours, telling you how horrible the city is and how horrible all the adults in the city were to leave hundreds of children without parents—"

"They died!" said Scrape, "It's not like they wanted—"

"Scrape, we know. Shut up and let him talk."

"And they go on to say all the children of the city are savages and need to be retrained to be civilized for their own good. And then after a couple days of that, a man the children call Mustache—though I doubt it's his real name—comes in and behaves kindly and motherly—giving food and water and such—and tells you that if you behave then you will get a family and live happily ever after. Or some such thing. They repeat the cycle a few times, and once they think you're on your way to becoming a hillfolk they send you into the factory to work. If you misbehave you go back for harsher brainwashing. According to a boy named Grayson, who was in the bed next to me, the record is held by a girl name Trick, who has been brainwashed nine times. They say she's going for fifteen."

"Well if they had to brainwash her nine times, that means it must not work very well," concluded Jack.

"It depends on the individual's psychology, but over time I imagine it would be very hard to resist. Indeed, I believe I saw evidence of its success. Some of the children were far more docile than one would think."

"North," said Scrape.

"Indeed," said Doc.

"Right," said Scrape, straightening up. "Then we should go tonight."

"Go where?" asked Jocco.

"To rescue our gang, zygote."

"No," said Jack. "We're not ready. We need more information."

"Like what?" said Scrape.

"Jack is right," said Doc. "The hillfolk were fully intending to use us

as bait. They were already discussing adding guards to the factory. Now that I've broken out, I cannot imagine they haven't heightened levels of defense."

"Exactly. We need to do recon again and then come up with a plan."

Scrape hesitated but she couldn't get around the sense that made. "Yeah, okay," she said finally. "How did you hear all that, Doc? They just talked about their plans in front of you?"

"They spoke in code so they assumed it was safe. Unfortunately for them, the code was simply a complicated vocabulary."

Jocco burst out laughing.

"What?!" cried Scrape and she began laughing too.

"Those zygotes!" said Jack, grinning. "Big words? They must think we're really stupid. So, did you overhear anything else?"

The others calmed down laughing and Doc shook his head.

"Okay. How about anything else. We need to know everything we can before we make a plan."

"Hmm. Well there are three brainwashers: the LummoX, the Mustache, and a man named Joseph. Besides them there is an elderly couple that resides on the ground floor of the building. They maintain order in the Children factory. It seems they pretty much give everyone instructions and if anyone gives trouble they call the LummoX. The layout is quite simple. I don't know the number of below ground levels but the second is where we were kept. The first seemed to be some kind of forge. As I said before, the ground floor houses the elderly couple. The fourth floor, as you know, is bedrooms. The third is for making clothing—"

"So Michael was right? It really is a slave factory?" said Scrape.

"Judging by the quantity of textiles, the Factory is supplying clothing for the entire hill. Grain, too, by the looks of the mill."

"What was on the second floor?" asked Jack.

"Ah, yes. The second is for shoes and..." Doc paused dramatically again and reached for something in his pocket. He pulled out his hand to

reveal a small white circle about the size of his fingernail.

"It's a pill," said Jocco, confused.

"Indeed," said Doc. "I picked it up off the ground as we were passing up the stairs."

"You don't—do you think—" Jack could feel excitement growing in his chest.

"What?" asked Jocco.

"I do think," said Doc.

"Think *what*?" demanded Jocco.

"The plague," said Jack, grinning. "I can't believe this. Do you think it really is?"

"It could simply be normal medicine. A fever reducer or something. But it might not be," said Doc. He, too, was smiling. "If this is for the plague, this means the hillfolk have concocted a way for them to survive past adulthood. And I see no reason why it wouldn't work on cityfolk, too. Perhaps the attempt to civilize the children is simply to make a more docile work force, but threats and violence could probably achieve the same end. I wonder if the hillfolk aren't trying to make the city kids into hillfolk."

"What?" cried Scrape.

"It makes sense," said Doc. "The hillfolk can't have children; they'll be extinct in a few decades. If they can turn the city kids into hillfolk they'll have a whole new generation to carry on their society."

"That's not right," said Scrape, looking disgusted. "And anyway, they wouldn't be hillfolk, would they? They'd still be city kids, they'd just live on the hill."

"Wouldn't they? If they'd be living amongst the hillfolk and behaving like the hillfolk, maybe even thinking like the hillfolk, would they not be hillfolk?"

Scrape paused. "I don't know. But North. How could any of the city kids join *them*?"

"Indoctrination is a powerful thing," said Doc. "Brainwashing," he

added to Jocco, who had looked confused.

"It doesn't matter," said Jack. "What matters is that this might be an antidote. And if the hillfolk can make it, we sure can. Right, Doc?"

"I don't see why not," said Doc, eyes gleaming. "I'll need some of my equipment to test it, though."

Jack paused. "Doc, I don't know if we can. It's not safe; they might be waiting there for us."

"But—what?—but Jack, I can't run tests without my equipment."

Jack hesitated, "Let's get our gang back first. Then we can figure out this antidote."

"But—yes, fine," said Doc, looking devastated.

"Okay, guys," said Jack. He took a deep breath. "We need to talk."

All heads turned towards him.

"I'm going to try to rescue the others. I have to. They're part of my gang. But it's going to be dangerous. The odds are I'll just end up a slave like the rest of them, but I have to try. And I'm not asking you guys to come with me."

Scrape opened her mouth, looking outraged, but Jack held up his hand.

"You can, of course, come with me. But, seriously, think about it for a second. Kids don't escape from the hill. It just doesn't happen. Not only is there no guarantee this is going to work, there's practically a guarantee it won't. So really, I'm not asking and I don't expect you to come."

There was a moment of silence and then Jocco spoke.

"Well I'm going. Tish is up there. And so are Wash and Zee. That's my gang too."

"Obviously," said Scrape, nodding to Jack. "I can't believe you had to even raving say anything."

"We're all in this together, as they say," said Doc. "Mind you I don't believe we have a shot in the North, but the odds were made to be broken, were they not? And, anyway, as if you could do it on your own."

"Hey, I've done a lot on my own!" said Jack.

"And now you don't have to," said Scrape.

"Well, that's settled. Now we need a plan," said Jack. "And we had better go soon. If they're being tortured..."

The gang fell into silence, each lost in thought. Okay, Jack thought. First, to get inside. If we could sneak in that would be best. But Doc said there would be guards so we'll probably need to do some fighting. For that we need fighters. There's me, I'm pretty good. There's Scrape. He looked over at her where she stared into the fire. She would fight and might even fight well, but she was nowhere near her usual form. Jocco was pretty good at fighting for his size, but he was still so small. And Doc. Jack hadn't seen Doc in a fight in years. Doc would be good for the planning stages, and then afterward if anyone got hurt, but how much help could he give them in a fight? Jack felt the sudden urge to laugh. Even with his full gang in perfect health he wouldn't have taken on the Children Factory, and now with half his gang in very imperfect health he had to. But wait, he thought. Maybe they didn't have to do it alone after all.

"Do you think Sally and her gang would help us?" asked Jack, breaking the silence.

"We could ask," said Scrape, "but she's careful. I doubt she'd send her gang into someone else's fight."

"Yeah, you're probably right," said Jack. "But we should ask anyway, just in case. Breaker might be interested; Tish was caught."

"Sally would be mad."

"We'll ask anyway. So, we know they're going to have guards around the building," said Jack. "Do you know how many?"

Doc shook his head.

"We'll have to do a recon run so we know exactly what we're dealing with. But for now let's assume guards on the front door and some in the back."

Jack noticed Scrape rubbing her forehead.

"Doc, did we bring the right plants for a headache cure for Scrape? Not the general pain relief ones though. Those are a little weird."

"Yes, I noticed you finished off my stash. I imagine that's why we had to wait so long for the rescue."

"What? We were there within half a day! And anyway, Scrape and I barely used any."

Doc reached over and grabbed a few twigs out of his med kit. "I'm going to throw in a few mushrooms as well," said Doc. "It will help with the nausea."

"Why didn't you give me that before?" asked Scrape.

"You would have thrown them up," Doc answered. "I need a can and some water."

"I'll get it," said Jocco. He stood up, grabbed an empty can from the pile next to the full cans, and crawled out the exit tunnel.

"Okay, assuming we can beat the guards in the back, we should be able to get in through the windows."

"And what if they have guards on the inside?"

"Hmm, yeah, they might. But we also know there are a hundred kids stuffed in there. It's going to be really crowded. That could be helpful."

"You mean blend in? Pretend to be a slave-kid?"

"Oh. Uh," Jack hadn't been thinking that at all. He was thinking more about using the kids to create a distraction in some way. "I don't know; would that work?" said Jack. "From what I saw, all the kids were wearing hillfolk threads. You know, black pants and white button ups." Scrape and Doc nodded. "But I don't know if we have any like that. The black pants part anyway. Maybe I can find a white t-shirt."

"Clothing like that was used only on formal occasions in the city," said Doc. "I think it's a good idea no matter the plan to blend in as much as possible with the other children. We'll make do with what we can. Scrape will have to brush her hair, though. For that matter, you could use a brush, too," he told Jack.

"Why?" demanded Scrape, "What's wrong with it like this?" The

lower parts of Scrape's hair had a few small tangles, but the upper part was a mess. Pieces stood straight up from where Jack had hacked away chunks, and she still hadn't managed to get all the dried blood out of it.

"The caught kids were well groomed. Perhaps not healthy and robust, but at least well groomed."

"Okay, so we'll have to get white button ups and black pants. I wish I'd brought some paper." He rubbed his aching forehead.

"I have some," said Doc, pulling a sheaf of paper and a pencil out of his medical kit.

"'Things to Do Before The—' before the what?" he asked. "What should we call it?"

"Rescue mission?" said Scrape.

"Suicide mission?" said Doc.

"Attack Mission?" said Jocco, who had just popped out of the tunnel, full can in hand.

"I think we'll go with rescue mission," said Jack, writing it down as Jocco placed the can carefully on the fire and then added more wood.

"So far we have: one, recon their new security." Jack wrote quickly as he spoke. "Two, maybe find hillfolk threads. Three, clean ourselves up. Four, see if we can get Sally's gang, or at least Breaker, to join us. Five, make an actual Attack Plan. Anything else?"

"We need meat," said Doc. "Scrape lost a lot of blood. She needs iron and for that she needs meat."

"I don't want to risk hunting for a boar right now—" said Jack.

"Squirrels and birds will suffice," said Doc.

"Okay then, number six, hunt."

"How many potatoes, cans of corn, and cans of peas do we have?" asked Doc.

Jocco shrugged. "Some."

"We should get more. It will be important to have plenty of energy for the Rescue Mission, and starches will help."



“That won’t be a problem. We can just raid our stashes. That’s why they’re there.”

Everyone nodded.

“Okay-y,” said Jack as he finished writing number six. “Do we have a number seven?”

Everyone was quiet for a minute. Jack looked down at his list, trying to think of anything they’d missed, Jocco bit his nails, Doc twirled his smoking stick, and Scrape frowned at the ground.

“I guess that’s it then,” said Jack. “Jocco, you and I should get started on this list. We’ll try to get some meat and we’ll stop at one of the stashes on the way back. Doc, do you want to come too?”

“Do you need me?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I’ll remain behind. I can attempt a blueprint of the Factory.”

“Great. Jocco, ready to go?”

“Sure.” He stood up, tied his guise around his waist and together the two boys crawled into the chilly air of the city.

## 28

“WHERE ARE WE HUNTING?” asked Jocco as they got to their feet in a deserted side street. “Let’s go close. We’ll just jump over the wall and hunt there.”

“But if we get caught we’ll be awfully close to the new camp. The hillfolk might find it.”

“True,” said Jack, “but if we stay close we’ll have less chance of getting caught. What do you think?”

Jocco thought carefully for a moment. “Well I don’t want to get caught...” he said finally.

“Nearby it is,” said Jack. They were so close to the wall that the boys made it into the jungle in minutes, and within an hour they had trapped or speared a dozen squirrels.

“Wow, these things are *everywhere* up here,” said Jocco, holding up the twelfth by its tail.

"Yeah, they like it near the north. That's probably enough for now; we don't want them going bad before we can eat them."

"Right," said Jocco, stuffing the lot into his guise and throwing it over his shoulder. "Which stash?"

"There's that big one up in the northern wall."

"You mean the one that's actually in the wall?"

"Yeah, that one. We've refilled it since we last used it, so there should be plenty of stuff in there."

"Unless someone else has got to it by now."

"It's possible," said Jack, but he doubted it. In six years of exploring the city he had found hundreds upon hundreds of nooks and crannies. The odds of someone finding this small, out of the way stash in a city full of hidden holes were not very good. They walked through the jungle in companionable silence. It took about half an hour for them to find the right section of wall.

"Is it there?" asked Jocco, pointing to a large boulder that had shifted slightly away from the wall.

"No, not that one. It's got a really easy area to climb above it, almost like a staircase. That's why Scrape and I put it there. We figured anyone nearby would use the stairs and never bother about with what was going on underneath. There! It's that one there." Jack pointed.

Jocco dropped his bag of squirrels dove excitedly for the opening into the stash.

"Uh," Jocco's hesitant voice echoed out of the stash.

"What?"

"I think you figured wrong." Jocco's head poke out from under the wall, forehead wrinkled in concern. "There's nothing under here, Jack."

"No way. That one's never been raided before." Jack wriggled his head and chest into the opening and saw, in the dim light shining in from around his body, nothing but rock.

"Grout," he said. He tugged himself out and looked back down at the opening, frowning.

"It's okay, it'll be fine," said Jocco, nervously. He looked nervous, as if afraid Jack would start yelling again.

Jack grinned at him. "Calm down, Jocco, of course it's okay. These things happen. Come on, I have an old one I've never used in the northwest corner."

They set out again. One of the benefits of traipsing around the northern part of the city was that the vines were so thick and tangled kids rarely bothered to venture up this far. One of the drawbacks was that the vines were thick and tangled. By the time Jocco and Jack had wrestled through the vines to the second stash, the sun was very low in the sky and Jack's stomach was grumbling.

"It's around here somewhere," panted Jack as he pushed a heavy knot of vines out of his way.

"Ouch! What's it look like?" asked Jocco, pushing away a vine that had just slapped his cheek.

"It looks like a hole in some rocks," said Jack.

"Right. I'm glad I asked," grumbled Jocco.

"I think this is it—oh, no, never mind."

"Could this be it? No wait," Jack looked over at Jocco who had his arm stuck down in a crack. "No, this one only goes as deep as my elbow."

"You should be able to crawl in I—ah!" Jack had taken a step and the ground had disappeared out from under his foot, leaving him sprawled on the rocks and vines, one leg still in the hole. "I think I might have found it," he told Jocco. Jack pulled his leg clear and stuck his head down the hole. It was difficult to tell in the fading light, but Jack thought he saw something glinting inside. "Yeah, I think this is it."

Without waiting for Jocco, Jack crawled head first into the hole. The minute his head entered the stash, Jack was blind.

"Jocco," Jack called, his own voice booming in his own ears as the echos returned to him. "Do you have the matches?"

"Yeah," Jocco called back. "Hold on a sec. Lemme reach you."

He felt Jocco nudge Jack's side and Jack stuck his hand out behind

him. Once he had situated himself a little better he struck a match against the rock, pulled a stubby candle from his pocket, and lit it. The stash was small, as Jack remembered, but well stocked. The glinting Jack had seen had come from a sizable stack of cans and he shifted over to better reach them. Many of the labels had rotted away over the years but Jack grabbed a few that he was sure contained corn and peas, brushed the mouse nest bits off of them, and passed them out to Jocco, before scrutinizing the rest of the stash. There were two daggers propped up against the wall. Jack grabbed them, too, and passed them out. As far as he could see the only thing left was a small pile of extra clothing, but they already had enough.

“Okay, I think—” Jack paused. The sputtering candle light had landed on another pile of clothing.

Jack grinned, grabbed them, blew out the flame, and wriggled his way out of the tunnel.

“Check it out,” he said, holding up the bundle in his hand.

“But we already have a bunch—oh. Where did you get those? They’re not—”

“Yeah, they are. I got them ages ago; I totally forgot until I saw them.” He stood up and grabbed the bundle of cans and daggers Jocco had made. Jocco took the clothes and they began struggling through the vines again.

“It couldn’t have been a year after the plague. I was in the jungle trying to learn how to hunt boar and I ripped my pants wide open. I was pretty upset about it, too, cuz I wasn’t very good at sewing yet. I was heading back when I saw a hillman hanging a bunch of clothes out on a line—I was stupid, and was hunting *way* too close to the hill. But it was in one of the outer clearings and no one else was around, so...” Jack shrugged.

“You stole them from the hillfolk?” asked Jocco in awe.

“He had turned his back—”

“He was *outside*?!”

“Yeah,” smiled Jack. “He had turned to go back into the house, so I ran in and grabbed the whole line.”

“All of them?”

“And the line itself. I cut it down. It turned out to be very useful.”

Jocco whooped with laughter. “I can’t believe you stole a hillman’s threads right out from under his nose!”

Jack looked around to make sure there was no one nearby, and grinned again. “I know, right?”

“Did he chase you?”

“Of course, but it was easy to get away. Incidentally, that’s also when I learned that grownups are rarely willing to chase you full out through the forest. I think they don’t like the cuts from branches. And all the tripping.”

Jocco was still chuckling. “I wish I could do something like that.”

“If everything works out you’re going to do something a lot better than that.”

“Oh, yeah,” Jocco’s faced didn’t look so happy anymore.

“C’mon,” said Jack. “Just imagine the looks on their faces when we steal three *kids* right out from under their noses. It’s gonna be great.”

“They’re gonna be so-o mad,” said Jocco, cheering up again. “This is gonna be the best, uh,”

“Heist?” offered Jack.

“The best heist ever! I can’t wait! Come on, let’s hurry back so we can do some planning. And also, I’m starving.”

# 29

BY THE TIME JACK AND JOCCO RETURNED the sun had set, and the breeze coming off the dark water was bitter. As Jack entered the passage he could feel warm air drifting towards him, and when he rose out into the cozy camp it was with a sigh of relief. Firelight filled the room with a mesmerizing, dancing light, and at first Jack had difficulty spotting the others among the moving shadows.

Scrape was still laying by the fire but to Jack's surprise her hair was blood-free and tied once again in a neat braid. The two panthers were sitting on either side of her, snoring softly. Doc was kneeling over several sheets of paper with a pencil in his hand.

"Here," said Jocco, and he stood up from the pile of new and old empty cans, holding a large one. "Wash calls this can a tenner. We can make stew in it." He sat down by the fire, pulled his and Jack's guises towards him and began opening cans.

"Are we going to need more water?" asked Jack.

"Doc got us a bunch already," said Scrape, pointing to a line of cans.

"Good. Guess what I got, Scrape," Jack said, smiling.

"What?" she asked suspiciously.

Jack held up the black and white clothes.

Scrape gasped, "Are those them? The legendary 'I mooned a hillman as I stole his threads' clothes?"

"You mooned him!" asked Jocco, eyes wide.

"I told you I had split open my pants," said Jack, smiling.

"No way!" Jocco said, and he burst into fresh laughter.

"Anyway, we can wear them when we get into the Children Factory."

"Are they gonna fit us? That guy was an adult," said Scrape.

"We can cut them shorter. And maybe sew in the shirts so they'll fit us better."

"Do you know how to do that?" asked Jocco, sounding impressed.

"I've done it before. It doesn't look great, but it works," said Jack.

"So now we have..." said Scrape, leaning over to read the Rescue Mission list. "Two and six down. And I've done three," she said.

Jocco upended a can of water into his tenner can and began cutting four of the squirrels into chunks. "What else can we do tonight?" he asked.

"I think the only thing we can do from here is number five. Start to make an attack plan," said Scrape, searching the paper. She looked up. "So, any ideas?"

"Let's start with getting inside. We've already decided there will probably be guards in the way, and I don't know if there's a way we can fight them quietly."

"We could dig underground," suggested Jocco, as he put the tenner can, now half full of water and squirrel, onto the fire.

"We could, but I don't think we'd be able to dig that far without Wash. Not if we don't want tunnel caving in on us," said Jack.

"It would take too long anyway," said Scrape. "Go from the trees? Right over the heads of the guards."

Jack nodded. "Yeah, that might be the best way. We're not going to make it by jumping, but maybe if we used a rope we could swing over to the roof or something. Then we just go in through the upper windows, like I did before."

"Or we could go down a chimney," suggested Scrape. "Do they have one?"

"Yeah, I think there's a big one," said Jack, trying to remember. "But I don't know if that's a good idea. We don't know where it's going to lead us."

"Out of my light," Doc ordered, and Jocco shifted over so he could dump beans into the tenner can without disturbing Doc.

Jack grabbed four cans of peas and began prying them open with his dagger.

"Alright. Say we get inside. Two floors below ground for interrogation and four above for sleeping, right Doc?" asked Jack.

"Indeed," said Doc.

"So, we can go in at night when they might be in the bedrooms and might be in the interrogation rooms. Or we can go in during the day when they'll probably be in the interrogation rooms, and the rest of the factory will be full of people working."

"It's not like they're not going to notice a group of kids wandering from room to room, even if we are dressed in threads," said Scrape.

"Good point. Okay, let's say we go at night. We swing onto the roof, climb in the window, and free our gang."

"Unless they're still being tortured," said Jocco.

"In which case we'll go find them and bring them back up to the fourth floor. Where it'll be easy to get to the roof. And if we've tied the ropes off to the chimney or something we could just swing back into the jungle."

"How would we get the others back? You think we can just throw a heavy piece of rope back to the roof with no one noticing?" asked Scrape, skeptically.

"Oh," said Jack.

"A bunch of ropes?" suggested Jocco. "So everyone can have one?"

Jack passed around peas. He took a large swig, draining it of juice and cutting his lip a bit on the sharp edges of the can. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and said, "We could just get to the ground and run for the jungle."

"And just hope they aren't faster than us?" said Scrape.

"If no one realizes we're in there they won't be expecting us to come out," said Jack. "We might be able to make it down the drain pipe and into the jungle before anyone notices. Or at least before they have time to get backup. One or two hillfolk wouldn't be a problem if we have everyone. We'll bring weapons for the others. And if they are expecting us..." he trailed off.

"Wash will be with us then. There's still the tunnel idea," said Jocco.

"Scrape's right. It would take way too long to tunnel out of there," said Jack.

"We could create a distraction," said Scrape. "Like lighting the building on fire."

"Yeah, that's good. We'll keep it in mind. We don't want anyone killed, though. Especially the other kids. Maybe set the mayor's house on fire, like you said, Jocco."

"Or if we get Sally's gang involved we could stand a chance fighting our way out even if they do call for backup," said Scrape.

"Yeah. They could all hide out in the jungle until it's time for us to get out of there, and then they cover us," said Jack, nodding. "That's pretty good. We still have to do recon to see how many guards they have. But if we can convince Sally and get our gang back that's, what, fifteen kids? That's a lot of people."

"Fourteen," said Scrape.

"Huh?" asked Jack.

"You counted Robbie," she said.

"Oh."

“Um, if he’s in there—?” Jocco didn’t finish.

“He’s staying in there,” said Scrape immediately.

Jack didn’t respond. Of course they wouldn’t rescue him. He had betrayed them, and it was his own fault if he was in there. But still. He was facing slavery.

“I didn’t see Robbie in the bedroom,” said Doc, without looking up again. “Of course, there is more than one, but I didn’t see him.”

“Good,” said Jack. With any luck Robbie was somewhere else entirely and they wouldn’t have to deal with it. He supposed he would just see what happened.

He tilted half his peas into his mouth. They were cold but nicely mushy. It felt good to touch something that wasn’t hard and painful. He looked over at Jocco, who was stirring the stew. Jack could just make out the beginnings of a black eye in the firelight, and he was sure they would both be covered in bruises from the vines by tomorrow morning. They were just bruises, but Jack took another mouthful of peas gladly.

“We’ll start tomorrow. Tomorrow morning I’ll go see Sally and then stake out the hill. I guess I should bring some food so I can stay up there overnight.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Jocco at once.

“You don’t need to. It won’t be dangerous and you’ll get really bored. Plus, Doc and Scrape might need your help,” Jack said.

“Oh,” Jocco thought for a moment, “alright, then. Can I come with you to see Sally?”

“You might want someone watching your back,” agreed Scrape.

“Yeah, I probably will. King in the North, when did all this get so complicated? We used to walk around this city easy as anything. Well anyway, we’ll go see Sally and get Doc’s stuff first thing. Jocco, is the stew almost ready? I could eat a boar.”

“Nother few minutes,” Jocco said.

Jack spent the time before his meal untying a large bundle of twigs

and spreading them out on the bare rock for a bed. When the stew was ready everyone ate voraciously. Then they each retired to their own dry, uncomfortable beds. Jack fell asleep well before the fire died.

# 30

JACK SPENT THE WHOLE NIGHT RUNNING. Dreams morphed into new dreams, and he ran through each one, sprinting as hard as he could but never fast enough. He didn't know if he was chasing someone or if they were chasing him, all he knew was that he needed to run just a little bit faster.

He woke with a start, heart pounding and disoriented. It was black all around him; he didn't know where he was or how he had gotten there. He could feel the panic shoot through his veins. He was crouching somewhere, he knew that. Somewhere that had a stone floor. And it was dark. Impenetrably dark. His camp didn't get this dark even at night. Not with all the skyshafts in it. What had he done yesterday? Tried to rescue the gang. Got Doc back, but lost Wash. Gone to stashes for more cans, and brought them—" Jack let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding. He knew where he was. Now that he was listening he could

hear the quiet breathing of Jocco and Scrape, and the soft snoring of Doc. He felt around until the stones under his fingers grew warmer. He had found the fire pit. He dug into his pocket for a moment and then lit his candle. He shut his eyes against the light. Without looking directly at the flame, Jack used it to find the small stack of wood Jocco had placed by his side. There was very little kindling, but Jack held the candle under a smaller log and the dry wood eventually caught. With a sigh, Jack stood up. Now that he could see, his brain shifted to other matters. How long had he slept? Was it even daybreak yet? Was it the afternoon? For all he knew it could be a week later. He crawled head first out the exit tunnel. The light at the end was very dim. He crawled out, tripped over his own hands and landed with a splash, sprawled out in the street. Rain pattered down halfheartedly as he stood up and looked around at the dreary streets. Even with the overcast sky Jack could tell it was well before dawn. Unused to the cold after a night by the warm fire, he began shivering. He crawled back into the tunnel and returned to the darker but much cozier camp.

Jack changed into a dry shirt and put on a wool sweater and wool pants for good measure, and then set about making another stew for breakfast. He diced up four more squirrels, dumped in two cans of corn, and emptied the last few water cans. He then sat down by the fire to sharpen the two daggers they had taken from Jack's stash the previous day. The daggers were rusty, but they were made well and Jack was able to get most of the rust off using his whetstone and some fat from the squirrels as oil, but he finished the task too quickly and was soon looking around for something else to do. He tried sharpening his own weapons but they were already so sharp that he was afraid he would dull them, working in the dim light. Instead he passed the time watching shadows dance on the wall and trying to figure out how Wash had gotten the smoke to vent. After what seemed ages, he pulled breakfast out of the fire and nudged Jocco.

"Ge' off, Jack. Leeme alone."

"Come on Jocco. Breakfast is ready and I'm leaving in ten. If you want to come still you've got to get up."

"Gimme a break. It's not even light out. Don't you ever raving sleep?" complained Jocco, but he sat up and rubbed his hands over his face.

"It is light out, actually," said Jack.

"Yeah, light maybe, but knowing you the sun hasn't even risen," grumbled Jocco.

Jack filled a smaller can with stew for Jocco.

"Thanks," said Jocco, holding the can in his lap and staring down at it blearily.

Jack poured a can for himself and began eating.

"Come on," he said when he had finished his stew, noticing Jocco hadn't taken a sip of his. He bent low to peer at Jocco's face and saw that the boy had fallen asleep again. Jack was tempted to let Jocco sleep and go out on his own, but he knew the younger boy would be devastated, so he kicked Jocco lightly. "Hey! I'm leaving in five minutes. You coming or not?"

Jocco jerked himself upright. "I'm coming, I'm coming," said Jocco. He downed his stew in two gulps and stood up, still chewing, to look for his things.

"You're going to want a sweater or two. It's raining out there."

"Good. Just what I need. A raving shower," Jocco mumbled.

"We probably do need it, actually. Clean us up a bit. Just make sure you grab wool, they keep you warm even—"

"They keep you warm even when they're wet. I live with Doc too, remember?"

Both boys belted their weapons on and then turned to the sleeping figures.

"Should we wake them up?" asked Jocco.

"Nah. Let's just throw on a few more logs. And grab the stew, we'll put it next to the fire, here, so it stays warm."

And with that they left.

"I was right, wasn't I?" said Jocco, wincing as he tried to assess the sky through the raindrops.

"Not sure," said Jack, who was checking carefully around for any people.

"Oh, come on, Jack, who's gonna be out today?" asked Jocco.

"Hopefully no one. Come on. Let's go to Sally's first."

Much to Jocco's irritation and exasperation, Jack took them on an aboveground route to Sally's.

"Jack it's all windy up here," complained Jocco as he sheltered in the left side of a chimney. "Can't we at least take the ground level?"

"No one in their right minds would be up here—" began Jack.

"Yeah, I'm beginning to see that," muttered Jocco.

"So we probably won't run into anyone," Jack finished, ignoring Jocco.

And, as Jack predicted, they ran into no one on their way to Sally's.

"Hello!" called Jack, down the very narrow passageway that led to Sally's camp. "Hello?"

"How could they not be in? It's miserable out there," said Jocco.

"Let's go see," said Jack. An unpleasant feeling had settled in his stomach, but he tried to ignore it. "Sally? Breaker? Anyone?" Jack called, turning sideways to squeeze himself around a corner. "It's Jack!"

"H-hello?" came a very small voice.

"Hey, we're coming in if that's okay!" he called back.

"Okay," said the voice.

Jack sped up and within a few seconds had squeezed himself out the other end, right into the center of Sally's camp. He checked around quickly and then stepped further in so Jocco could follow.

"Michael?" asked Jocco.

"Michael? Are you okay? What happened?" Jack asked, for something had clearly happened. The little boy was sitting in the middle of the room, hunched and hugging himself. He looked like he had been crying.

"I don't know," said Little Michael, his eyes filling up with tears.



"Everyone left. Sally and Breaker were taking Jimmy, Jim and Trip hunting, and then they were gonna drop the Jims and Trip off and go spy the southern gang for information or something."

"Recon," Jocco told him, nodding wisely.

"And Cookie was supposed to go to the stashes to see for more cans. I stayed here cuz of the Wanted signs and all, but they left yesterday morning and haven't been back since."

"They've been gone since *yesterday*?" Jack asked.

Little Michael nodded and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"Do they stay out overnight a lot?" asked Jocco.

"Never. None of them have before now."

"This is bad. Pack up, you're coming with us," said Jack. "Jocco, check around. See if there's anything that might be useful."

In the two minutes it took Michael to throw on a sweater and grab his knife Jack had found a lethal-looking sword and Jocco had found a hand full of belt knives and a bowl of toffee.

"Ooh, Jack, can we take it? Please?" pleaded Jocco.

"Jocco, that stuff isn't ours."

"We're taking their weapons," countered Jocco.

"Only so we can use them to free their owners. Then we'll give them back."

"It's okay," said Little Michael in a quiet voice. "You guys should take it. In exchange. Sally would want you to." Michael's voice cracked and he looked down.

"She can give it to us herself. Let's get gone," said Jack, and he led the way out of the narrow passage and into the wet streets.

"We'll take the roofs again," Jack said.

"Wha—seriously? Jack, there are three of us."

Exactly, he thought. He didn't think he could protect a second kid in a fight.

They walked to their new camp with the same care as they had used walking to the abandoned camp, and made it without incident.

Doc was awake when they walked in, but Scrape was still asleep.

"She needs her rest," whispered Doc, motioning for the three boys to be quiet. "And where did you pick up Little Michael?" he added in surprise as the boy peeked out from behind Jack.

"Sally's gang is gone. Disappeared. Michael was the only one left."

"Oh, dear! Do we know where the rest are?"

Jack shook his head.

"So, caught," said Doc.

"Definitely," said Jack. "I guess it's not a secret we're friendly. And Robbie knew, of course. Or maybe they're just rounding people up. Here, have Scrape take care of these weapons when she wakes up. It should give her something to do." Jack grabbed two cans at random from the pile and shoved them into his pants pockets. "I'll be back tomorrow morning," he said.

"Am I coming?" asked Jocco, looking uncertain.

"Do you want to?" asked Jack. "It doesn't look like it's going to stop raining any time soon."

"Do you need me?" he asked reluctantly.

"It might be more useful if you practiced fighting with Michael," said Jack. "Just wait until Scrape wakes up."

Jocco nodded.

"Here," said Doc, holding up the remainder of the breakfast stew. "I can cook more for Scrape."

"Thanks," said Jack and he drank it.

"Later," Jack said around a mouthful and headed for the door again.

# 31

ONCE AGAIN, JACK SAW NO ONE as he padded quietly towards the wall. Granted, it was a short walk, but Jack was still grateful. Once in the jungle he started running, but had to stop almost immediately to transfer the cans from his pants to the pockets in his shirts. Even with the help of his belt, the extra strain of the cans was pulling his pants down. After that he could run properly, although all the wet leaves slapping his face and the slippery ground still gave him some difficulty, and he was glad when he finally reached the clearing. He sank to his hands and knees at the edge of the trees and crawled into a large bush to peek out through the leaves so he could remain unseen.

As he suspected, one guard armed with a thick stick and with a knife hilt sticking out of his belt stood on next to the door to the Children Factory. More large sticks stuck up out of the ground several feet from each other. They seemed to encircle the large building, but Jack couldn't

see why; they didn't look pointy like spears and they weren't close enough together to form a wall. Jack shifted to get a view of the rest of the clearing. He couldn't see guards near any of the other buildings, nor any more sticks. He withdrew and ran around the clearing to where he knew the back of the Children Factory would be and crawled towards it. One more guard stood in the rear of the building and another one on each side. They all stood straight and peered out from under the brims of their hats towards the jungle. Every so often the rear guard would glance around furtively and then jump up on her toes a few times, rubbing her arms. Jack leaned forward and squinted through the rain at the guard. She wore a thin black sweater with too-short sleeves, heavy black boots, and Jack thought her pants might have been cotton instead of wool. What was she doing out here dressed like that? thought Jack. He shook his head.

More sticks lined the back side of the building, and from this distance Jack could see that the ends were charred black. They were giant torches. He withdrew again and walked around until he thought he was near the mayor's house, and peered out from the bushes at the back of a large, white house only a few feet in front of him. Jack moved forward slowly, looking around. He couldn't see the outdoor guards from this angle, which meant they couldn't see him. He moved quickly out of the bushes and flattened himself against the back of the house. He waited a few beats and then inched himself to the right until he was beside one of the ground floor windows, and looked over at it. The corner nearest to Jack was hanging loose, curled slightly away from the wall. This must be where Jocco looked in, Jack thought. The paper was only held onto the window with a thick, gummy substance, so he eased the corner back and peeked inside. It was just as Jocco had said: a heavily polished wooden table large enough to hold at least twenty people filled most of the room. Around it, chairs were scattered randomly as if they had been carelessly vacated, and on it laid an enormous piece of paper, or maybe it was many pieces of paper lying next to each other, Jack couldn't tell. The room was

deserted, so Jack pulled the paper back a bit farther and leaned in for a closer look. The paper looked like something Wash would recognize. Neatly drawn squares and lines covered the paper with little numbers and notes written in around the lines. Across the top was printed 'Expanded Domestication Facility Including Heightened Defense.'

He withdrew his head and went to the next window. He peeled back the paper on this one, too. The room it revealed was smaller than the other, but far more interesting. A large fireplace stood on one side with a fire burning merrily in the grate; Jack could feel the heat on his face even from this distance. Near Jack's side of the room stood a desk and a chair facing away from him. On it were neatly stacked sheaves of paper which Jack couldn't read, and two squares of hide with faces printed on them which Jack recognized. On the wall to his right, within reaching distance from the desk chair, was a large and very detailed map of the city. Wooden pins painted different colors stuck out all over the map.

Jack was on the point of peeling more of the paper back to get a better look at the map when a low, clear sound made him jump. He dropped the paper and looked around wildly for the source of the noise. It came again. Jack looked up to see the huge bronze bell which hung in the steeple above the building next door swinging robustly back and forth in its enclosure. Jack had seen bells before, he knew what they looked like, but he couldn't remember ever hearing one this large ringing. It was beautiful. Jack heard the front door of the mayor's house slam shut and footsteps walked into the small office. After seven low notes the bell stopped ringing and another set of footsteps came down the stairs. He heard someone walk behind the desk and sit heavily down into the chair.

"Yes, Allen," came a deep voice from directly behind the window paper.

"Sir," said another man's voice, this one slightly higher. "There is nothing to report, sir. Night watch says all was quiet. The day watch is in place."

"Good, good. And did you get a sense of how the other sentries feel about their new duty?" asked the lower voice. Jack thought he must be the mayor, or at least in some position of leadership.

"Sir?" asked Allen.

"Well, this is a new development, after all, is it not? I am merely wondering how our community feels about doing guard duty once a week. I would hate to cause anyone any inconvenience." The rain had picked up, making it harder for Jack to hear the conversation, but he thought he could hear a deadly note concealed under the pleasant question.

"No, sir," Allen said quickly. "Everyone is doing just fine. They're pleased to do it. "This is for our future, after all."

"Yes, it is." The voice held a note of satisfaction. "And I assume you and Jacobsen did not have any luck finding Jack last night?"

"No, sir."

"Well, I expect the little problem will try another attempt at rescuing his friends soon. Tomorrow I would like you and Jacobsen to join the day watch instead of returning to the city."

"Sir, we're your best fighters; you don't want us to split up? Cover night and day?"

"Jack is a child. Children are afraid of the dark, and since they are city children they are too uncivilized to have the discipline to master their fears. Though, speaking of uncivilized, perhaps you should make a point of looking in on the night watch. We are pulling from the western clearings and I have never trusted the western clearings. I put it down to the thin air up there. Now off to bed. I'm heading that way myself; I was up all night working on expansion plans."

Jack heard a chair pushed back and two sets of footsteps leave the room. One left through the front door, and the other walked heavily upstairs.

"Wendolyn! Send the girl down, there are footprints all over my office," Jack heard Sir call.

At those words Jack's heart sped up. A girl? Not in the factory? Jack

should watch to see where Allen went, and, in any case, according to Doc any child who was with a family would have been brainwashed already, so it wouldn't be Tish, Zee or one of Sally's. Not so soon. But just maybe... Jack pulled back the paper and peered in, waiting for the girl. The rain beat so heavily down now that Jack didn't hear the girl's footsteps at all and was surprised when she turned the corner and stepped into the room. She wore a clean dress with an apron, carried a rag and a bucket, and was utterly unfamiliar. Jack released the paper and splashed to the right side of the house. He looked around the corner just in time to see a door swing shut on the opposite side of the clearing.

Jack withdrew into the jungle once more and came out again behind Allen's house. Like all the others, this house was white shingled with wax paper windows. Unlike the others, this house stood much closer toward the center of the clearing and much farther from the jungle. Jack wondered if he should risk exposing himself for so long, but, as he stood thinking, the skies opened up and what had once been a steady rain was now a torrential downpour. Rivers of water ran into Jack's collar and down his back, making him shiver. He pushed his hair back and tried to wipe water out of his eyes to better see, but gave up. As he squinted around, Jack discovered that he not only couldn't see the sentries through the almost solid wall of water, he couldn't even see the Children Factory. He risked it.

Voices from the left of the two ground floor windows drew him to it and Jack wondered if he dared peek inside while people were in there; it would be useful to know what Allen the catcher looked like. He decided against it.

"You look better," a woman's voice was saying. She spoke loudly, raising her voice over the sound of the pounding rain.

"It's good to get out of those wet clothes." Jack recognized Allen's voice. He too was speaking loudly. "Man, am I glad I'm not on watch right now. Starting tomorrow we're joining day watch."

"Oh yeah? Waiting for Jack to try and rescue his friends?" said the

woman's voice, who Jack assumed was Jacobsen. He was now listening to a conversation between the two best fighters on the hill. "Why didn't he split us up? Here, I made tea while you were talking to J.D.,"

"Thanks. He says kids are afraid of the dark. But he wants us to check on the night watches. He doesn't trust the Westerners."

"If he just treated them better they wouldn't have such a problem with him," she said angrily.

"Shh! What are you doing?" Allen's voice was lower.

"No one is around. Hilt is over at the facility."

"Still! You're a Westerner. That kind of talk would get me whipped; I hate to think what would happen to you."

"I'll be careful. Don't worry. And I'm also going to bed. G'night."

"Did you eat anything?"

"Don't have any food. Had to spend all my money on that uniform. And let me tell you, that sweater did nothing to keep me warm. Maybe the little ones that made it couldn't knit right or maybe it's just crummy wool—I'd bet on the latter—but either way it wasn't worth a handful of scratch. If it's still raining tomorrow I'm wearing my own sweater under it."

"That could get you whipped, too, probably."

"I don't care. It's *cold* out there. J.D. should stand out in the pouring rain all night in the scraps he gives us and see if he doesn't want an extra sweater. And we'll be checking on night watch."

"Yeah, well, we're Defenders. It's part of the job."

"We won't even get to sleep late."

"Now you're just being complain-y."

"Am not. I just think all this stuff is stupid. Give the kids back. We have enough already and when they turn eighteen they'll be out of our hair."

"Hill on fire! You can't say stuff like that! Here. Take some of this chicken," said Allen.

"Nah, don't worry about it. I'll be fine."

"Don't be a stupid. When was the last time you ate?"

"Right before I learned I needed to buy a uniform."

"That was three days ago, you rockhead! And you just spent a full night running around the city in the rain!"

The words flowed easily, as if this was a familiar conversation.

"Easy for you to say. J.D. gives you all your uniforms for free."

"Yeah, well, he is my father." Allen grumbled. "Here, eat this. Seriously. This is for me as much as you. What would I do if you keeled over from starvation?"

"Alright, fine. But I'm paying you back for this. Oh, *man*, this is good."

Over the rain Jack heard the sound of chairs being pulled out, and then the voices were just on the other side of the paper.

"Yeah, well, I imagine tree bark would taste good if you hadn't eaten in three days."

"Don't think I haven't thought about it—or even catching a bird or something—but in the end I decided I'd rather be hungry for a few days than get locked up for a few years for unauthorized hunting and gathering."

"Yeah, s'pose so."

They were silent for a few minutes, presumably eating chicken and drinking tea.

"How's your family?" asked Allen.

"Furious. But what do you expect? All the Westerners have been angry for years. Ever since J.P. started making all these laws. Angry and restless. This is just one more thing."

"Well *I'm* glad you're not nomadic anymore, anyway."

"You should try it sometime. If we can ever go again. Maybe if we get our hands on—"

"You know that's not going to happen."

"I can dream." Jacobsen sighed.

There came sound of a chair scraping across the floor again.

"Thanks, Jay," Jacobsen said. At first Jack thought there must be a third person in the room, but when Allen answered he realized Allen and Jacobsen must be last names.

"You're welcome. And next time just tell me you're hungry."

"Alright. G'night,"

"Night, Lil."

Jack listened to Jacobsen's footsteps ascend a set of stairs until they disappeared amongst the hammering of rain on the roof. After a few minutes Jack heard Allen get to his feet and walk to the other side of the small building. A door closed, and after ten minutes snores started up in the first floor bedroom.

Rain still sheeted down. Jack crossed back to the forest. He started another circle of the clearing to check on the day-time defenses. The same number of guards—one on each side—surrounded the Children Factory still. Jack made a quick investigation of the remaining buildings. The one with the bell in a steeple on the roof was large—the largest by far next to the Children Factory—and was filled with rows and rows of long, empty benches. The other three buildings were houses.

Jack returned to his original spot and wiggled his way to the center of a leafy bush so he could watch the front door and also keep an eye on the rest of the clearing, and thought about everything he had seen and heard. Knowing how many guards there were was important—especially that there were two guards on the inside. Knowing that there were two rounds of watches was good too, much more relevant than anything in the conversation between the young catchers which was, factually, almost useless, and yet Jack couldn't stop thinking about it. In Jack's mind the hillfolk had never really been people before, just one united and very bothersome hive in which everyone worked in sync to capture city kids. He had never considered that some of the hillfolk might not be happy, and he had *never* suspected that their lives might actually be difficult. Imagine being forced to trade away all your food for a useless sweater, he thought. And not allowed to hunt. Not *allowed*. When he went hungry it

was because he had failed to catch dinner, not because someone wouldn't let him. If anyone tried to force him into a bad trade he would fight them. And no one could ever make him stand around in the rain for hours. Granted, he was doing it right now, but at least he had chosen to. He did things for his own reasons, not someone else's. That was the difference. He thought back to what the mayor had said: *Since they are city children they are too uncivilized to have the discipline...* Uncivilized, he thought. I think I'll take being uncivilized, thanks.

But the most disturbing part of the whole conversation had been the way Jacobsen and Allen talked to each other. They were casual, comfortable, even caring. It reminded Jack inescapably of himself and Scrape. It was disturbing to think that he could have something that he valued, something he relied upon, in common with a catcher. Jack felt yet another piece of his certain and structured life break apart.

He lay in the bushes, watching and thinking, occasionally walking laps around the clearing to keep himself warm. The rain lessened in late afternoon and by the time the sky started darkening it had become a fine mist. As he was opening the cold cans the bell rang again. He shoved his cans aside and scooted forward on his belly to see the guard change. As he watched, seven adults dressed in uniform emerged from the forest at random intervals. Jack thought that these must be the farmers and other tradesmen who have to serve on the watch once a week walking from their homes in other clearings.

Then the door to the catchers' house open and a figure stepped out. Its back was to Jack as it moved aside and held the door open for another figure carrying another torch, this one on fire. Jack's cold brain was so mesmerized by the fire that he didn't notice what he was seeing at first. The person holding the torch was the young woman who had been pretending to read while she kept lookout. The figure holding the door turned and began walking with her and now Jack could see his face too in the firelight. Jack's mouth dropped open. It was the young catcher. The one who had almost caught Jack several times. The one Jack had hated

so much. How could the catchers with whom Jack, despite himself, had begun to sympathize, be *these* two catchers? The gears in Jack's brain had ground themselves together and stuck. Mouth still open, he watched Jacobsen go from stick to stick, lighting each of them.

The bell began to ring again as two hillfolk entered the building and the other four took the place of one of the standing watchers. The relieved sentries met out front in a circle, though Jack noted that no guards exited the Children Factory. They must only have guards in there at night, he thought. All the watchers who had been posted outside were hunched and rubbing their hands together. Jack wondered why they were all standing around in the cold until Jacobsen and Allen, who had been talking in turn to each new sentry, joined the group. Whatever was said in the group, it was kept short, and soon the six watchers broke off in pairs and singles and disappeared off into the jungle.

Allen and Jacobsen turned to go, too, but then heard a shout from the door that Jack could barely hear. An enormous man with broad shoulders, muscular arms, and a jagged scar down his face was jogging to catch up with them. It was the man who had re-caught Tish. Jack could practically feel the ground shake as the man ran. Once he joined them, the other two resumed walking, apparently chatting easily with the giant. The three hillfolk walked closer and closer to Jack, who strained his ears hoping to catch some snippet of conversation, but it wasn't until they were almost back at the house that he could hear anything.

"I'm surprised you're off now," Jacobsen said to the giant.

"I'm exhausted. I've been up since dawn trying to get some answers out of them."

"Are they talking?"

"Not yet, but they will. They're just children, after all."

Just children, thought Jack grimly. You're in for a surprise.

The trio disappeared into the catcher's house. Jack stood up and headed for home.

# 32

AN HOUR LATER JACK ducked into the tunnel and entered a wonderfully warm, dry camp. He gave a violent shiver as if his body had just realized how cold it had been and padded quietly over to the fire. The others were dead asleep and didn't wake, even when Jack stoked the fire into a splendid blaze. He practically ripped his clothes off in his eagerness to put on dry ones and then, more slowly, arranged them around the fire to dry. He grabbed the handful of flying squirrels he had caught on his way back and piled them on top of the cans, and then sat cross-legged in front of the fire, feeling his body slowly warm up from the outside in. He fell asleep like that, chin on his chest and a blanket wrapped around his shoulders.

"Ouch!"

"Shh, keep it down. He's still sleeping."

"I stubbed my toe."

"That's no reason to wake half the city yowling like a milksop."

"I am *not*, you zygote."

"You sound like one. Are you going to make the stew or what?"

"Fine, but we're having corn."

"Zygote."

Jack blinked a few times and then painfully lifted his head; his neck had seized up in the night. He looked around. Jocco was glaring down into the tenner can into which he was emptying a can of corn, Scrape was glaring at Jocco, Little Michael was looking down at hands, and Doc was nose deep in his notebook.

"Good morning, Jack," said Doc.

"Hey," Jack responded thickly. "Anything to report?"

"Yesterday was uneventful. We stayed in camp."

"Yeah, I thought you seemed a little stir-crazy."

Jack stared blearily into the fire until Jocco pronounced the stew finished and served it up.

"Thanks, Jocco," Jack said as he took his can.

"Hey, Michael. How are you doing?"

Michael lifted his head. His face was pale. "Fine. Miss my gang."

"So do we. But we'll get them back."

"So whatdja get?" Scrape asked Jack.

Jack sighed deeply and shook his head clear. "Okay. At all times they have four guards surrounding the place—one on each side—and at night they have two on the inside, and there are torches stuck up all around the place. The watches change twice a day—a couple hours after dawn and about dusk. Oh, and I saw the LummoX—he was leaving the Factory in the morning, so he must have been there all night. That part's going to be tricky. We don't know when the brainwashers will be there. Umm..." he tried to think back to what else he had seen. "I think that's it—oh! There was a girl in the mayor's house," said Jack, excited. He had only just remembered; Allen and Jacobsen's conversation had driven it out of his

mind. "She was young, too young to have been born on the hill, and she was cleaning the house. So it's true—they do give you to a family if you get brainwashed. Although she seemed more like a servant than part of a family. They were making her clean and stuff."

Perhaps those were her chores," suggested Doc.

"They called her 'girl,'" said Jack. "Wouldn't you call your daughter her name?"

Doc shrugged in a 'probably' way.

Jocco shivered. "When are we going?"

"Scrape, can you run?" asked Jack.

"She did laps all around this raving camp yesterday," complained Jocco.

"Only a bit of dizziness afterwards and no nausea," said Scrape.

"Headache?" asked Jack.

"Nothing I can't handle.

"Can you fight?"

"Yes," she said, immediately.

"Right. Well, hopefully we won't have to fight much, anyway. Doc, how are you doing?"

"Fit as a fiddle. No conclusions on the antidote as of yet, but," he sighed, "I suppose that is of lesser importance, considering."

"Jocco?"

"Great!" he said.

"Michael," Jack turned his whole body to face the younger boy. "You don't have to come with us, you know. You can just stay here and wait for us to come back with your gang."

"No, I wanna come. If I can be helpful. If you could use me." He sounded hopeful, almost pleading.

"Yeah, of course we could use you," said Jack. "So, we're going tonight. I think we should go way late when all the guards will have been on watch for a long time and are hopefully tired. Just before it starts getting light."

"Will you be able to calculate that accurately, Jack?"

"Why wouldn't I? Couldn't you?"

"Living in the complete darkness of this cave has thrown off my circadian rhythm."

"Your what?" asked Jack.

"When light is altered unnaturally, one's body becomes confused of the time of day."

"Oh. Well, uh, I dunno. We'll just have to hope for the best, won't we."

"We'll stand watch outside," said Scrape. "The stars will still be there, even if our circadian rhythms are off."

"Yeah, good call," he paused. "Well, Scrape, why don't you use your new-found health to go catch us some squirrels. Take Little Michael."

"Yes!" cried Scrape. She jumped to her feet. "Come on Michael. I hope you like running."

"If you get yourselves caught I'll kill you," warned Jack.

"Yeah, sure." Scrape wasn't listening. "Do you have your own weapons?"

"We all shared weapons," said Michael.

"Really? Well then go over there and take your pick. Take a few if you want. You're gonna need 'em tonight. Let's get gone."

They left, Scrape leading Little Michael at a run.

"Okay," said Jack, "Turning back to Doc and Jocco. "Let's start planning."



# 33

BY THE TIME SCRAPE AND LITTLE MICHAEL returned with a handful of squirrels each, the others had come up with a rough plan.

“Check this out,” Jack said as the hunters dropped their weapons belts and sat down with the rest to skin the squirrels.

“What am I looking at?” said Scrape, looking blankly down at the paper Jack had passed over.

“It’s a map of the clearing. See? There’s the Children Factory,” Jack pointed.

“This is really good,” said Scrape as she perused the piece of paper.

“Jocco drew it,” said Jack. Jocco beamed.

“So we’ve got Children Factory, Mayor’s house, and catchers’ house—catcher’s house? This house is small.”

“Only three people live there, as far as I can tell: Allen and Jacobsen—the two young catchers—and the Lummo,” said Jack.

“What about the other catchers?” asked Scrape.

Jack shrugged, “I don’t know. I didn’t see any of them. It doesn’t matter, anyway. There’s still a hundred hillfolk, and even if they aren’t good at fighting they *are* bigger than us.”

“Right. And these other buildings?”

“That first one is like a meeting hall or something,” said Jocco, who had also investigated it when he should have been keeping a lookout.

“And these ones are just houses,” said Jack,

“Looks good.” Her stomach growled. “Who’s cooking tonight?”

“I will,” said Little Michael. “Just stew again, right?”

“It’s easiest,” said Scrape, tossing him the tinner can.

“Have we any fresh potatoes left?” asked Doc.

“Um,” Jack craned his neck to peer through the semi-dark at the pile of food. “I think we have a couple sweet potatoes. I don’t see any white ones.”

“All the better. More vitamins,” said Doc. “What time is it?”

“About noon, I guess I would say.” Scrape looked towards Little Michael, who nodded.

“We should save the sweet potatoes for dinner. And include corn and peas. This way everyone will be as energized as possible. In fact, you should put some corn in that batch, Michael. We don’t want to leave anything to chance.” Doc’s voice was getting higher and higher as he spoke.

“Doc,” said Jack.

“It’s basic chemistry, Jack. The body is a big system of chemical reactions, one just has to balance them correctly to produce a perfectly working machine.”

“That’s—”

“Imagine trillions of biochemical processes taking place inside your body right now, just to keep your blood circulating and your neurons firing. So fragile-seeming, but the human organism is amazingly resilient—”

“Till you run it through with a sword,” said Jocco, who was lying

on the ground, staring up at the ceiling. He looked around when no one answered him to see Jack and Scrape glaring and Doc nervously chewing his lip. “Uh, sorry. Wasn’t paying attention.”

“Clearly,” said Jack. “And Doc. Thanks for trying to get all our chemical reactions right. We, uh appreciate it. Do you wanna show Scrape and Michael the new stuff you made us?”

“Yes. Yes, yes, of course.” Doc shuffled over to his medical kit and withdrew with five small, corked bottles. The glass bottles varied in shape and color but they were all around the same size: small enough to fit in a pocket, big enough to hold a formidable amount of rubbing alcohol. He then pulled strips of cloth and matches from the kit and lay everything out on the floor. “I have, unfortunately, used all my rubbing alcohol, so do try not to get too injured during the suicide—”

“Rescue,” said Jocco.

“—mission,” finished Doc. “I like to call it an ‘Impact Vaporization Igniter.’ The recipe for this little weapon came out of a book entitled ‘A Practical Guide to Pyrotechnics for the Amateur Arsonist,’ which I highly recommend. Now, keep in mind,” Doc glared around at the others, “This is only to be used as a last resort. We don’t want to kill anyone we don’t have to and especially not the other children. However, if things start looking bad it might be necessary to create a distraction and this is the perfect way. How it works: to ready the weapon you uncork the bottle, soak the rag strip in alcohol and leave it so one end is in the alcohol and the other sticking out the top. Then to set it off you light the end—I won’t do it here: it would make a mess and we don’t have a surplus of supplies—and throw it. The alcohol will vaporize when it hits the target—say the Children Factory—and the flame will ignite the vapor into a noticeable and hopefully distracting fireball.”

“It doesn’t blow stuff up, though,” Jocco told the others, disappointed.

“It will make an excellent distraction,” Doc repeated. “In an emergency situation.”

“And it won’t burst into flames in our pocket?” asked Scrape, eyeing a bottle dubiously.

“Not unless, while in your pocket, the alcohol heats to about twice your body temperature and then you light a match and drop it in. It is really quite safe if you know what you’re doing.”

“But I don’t.”

“But I do, so stop worrying and let Jack tell you about the plan.”

“Right.” Jack pulled Doc’s blueprints towards himself. “So, we’re going a few hours before dawn, like we said before. The torches will be lit so they’ll be plenty of light around the base of the Children Factory, and they’ll be one guard on every side of the house. Doc, Jocco, and I will swing onto the roof and then climb through the window.”

“What? Where am I gonna be?” asked Scrape, indignant.

“You’re gonna be trying to wedge the doors of the other buildings shut in case someone sounds an alarm. You’re also going to help us escape if we need to fight our way out. But anyway, start with the catchers’ house; they’re most dangerous. We can’t hammer boards over their windows because that would wake everyone up, but try to block their windows some other way if you can. Michael, you’ll be helping Scrape.

“Once we—”

“The raiding party,” said Jocco.

“Sure. Once the raiding party’s inside we’ll search the bedrooms for anyone we know and free them.” Jack pointed to the prints of four bedrooms drawn on the fourth-floor blueprint.

“Why don’t we just free everyone? They’re prisoners, whether we know them or not,” objected Scrape.

“Oh. Um.” Jack had been so focused on his gang he hadn’t even thought of the dozens of other city kids who were being held prisoner. “Yeah,” he said hesitantly. “I guess we should free them, but that would be crazy. A whole mess of kids running around all of a sudden? Someone might get hurt.”

"They would create a good distraction," argued Scrape. "Guards would be too busy rounding up kids to focus on us."

"Maybe we could get them all to be quiet and stay where they are," suggested Jocco.

"We can't even get you to be quiet and stay where you are," said Jack. Jocco shrugged guiltily.

"We'll come back to that," decided Jack. "The two old people—what are we calling them?"

"Slave drivers?" suggested Scrape.

"Geriatrics?" suggested Doc.

"Geri-drivers?" suggested Jocco.

"Live-ins?" suggested Michael.

"Yeah, okay. The two live-ins will be asleep in their room, on the ground floor," he pointed to another sheet, "so they shouldn't be a problem, but there will be two awake guards inside the building. We're not sure where but I imagine they'll at least be doing rounds of the bedrooms, so we'll have to be really careful," said Jack.

"Then there's the lummoX. Since he's the one who does the interrogating and brainwashing he could be there at any hour, so we'll have to assume he'll be there. Our gang might be in the bedrooms, but they might also be in the interrogation rooms. We'll see when we get in there. Sally's—Michael's gang, too. So, whatever happens, we free and arm anyone we know and then we'll go searching for anyone being held in the belowground. Since we're assuming that the LummoX, Mustache, and the other man—Joseph—are there." Jack paused. How was this plan ever going to work?

"You guys will figure it out once you get there," said Scrape. "It shouldn't be a problem if you take them one at a time. The LummoX can't be *that* big. So once you find them, how will you get out?" asked Scrape.

"Yeah, that's actually kind of a problem," said Jack. "I was thinking we could try to overtake the rear watcher. As long as we do it quietly

everyone can just climb out a window. We'll have to wait and see. Actually, when we escape would be the perfect time to have a big mob of kids trying to escape, too. Maybe we could go up and free them once we find everyone and then blend in when they all start running."

"It would take ages to free all those children. We could leave someone in the bedrooms to free them all while we search. We could make a signal for each other and we could ask the other kids not to leave until the signal," said Doc.

"You think that would work?" asked Jack, dubiously.

"It might not. But it might."

"Wait—" Jack's breath caught. "How are we going to free them?"

"Isn't that what this whole plan is about?" asked Scrape.

"No, I mean, how are we going to *free* them? From the shackles. Who knows how to pick locks?"

"Zee and Wash," said Jocco, immediately.

"I meant *here*," said Jack. He looked at Scrape, who shook her head.

Everyone was silent. Then, "I do," said a small voice. Everyone turned to look at Michael, who was kneeling over the stew with a stick in hand.

"Really?" asked Scrape.

"Sure. I'm not like Jimmy but I'm pretty good."

"Oh. Great! I guess you'll be coming inside with us. So, assuming we can't find everyone in the bedrooms, we'll leave you, Michael, up there to unlock everyone while the three of us," Jack motioned to Doc, Jocco, and himself, "Go searching in the interrogation rooms. Try and get the freed kids to wait for the signal. When we find whoever's left we'll do just a regular whistle. When that comes, tell everyone to run and run fast. Maybe everyone can get out before the guards even realize what's happening. We'll go out the second-floor windows to avoid the live-ins."

"All I'm doing is just blocking off windows?" asked Scrape.

"And doors," said Jocco.

"And guarding the catcher's house. Try to stop them if they get out."

“Okay,” said Scrape, mollified by her slightly more active role. Jack seriously hoped Scrape wouldn’t have to deal with the catchers. Despite her insistence, Jack was worried about her. He still wasn’t feeling well and Scrape’s injuries were far worse.

“I think the stew’s ready,” said Michael.

“So that’s the plan,” said Jack as Michael and Scrape poured stew into cans.

“I need to go grab my lock picks,” said Little Michael. “I didn’t think I’d need them.”

“We’ll do that now,” said Jack.

“Jack. Incidentally,” said Doc. “I am still, of course, working on the plague problem. If we happen to see more of these pills while we’re in there...”

“We’ll try to grab them for you. But *only* if it’s easy. I’d rather get everyone out safely.”

“Of course.”

“Good.”

“All we need are the lockpicks and to fix the clothes so they’ll fit us,” said Scrape.

And that’s just what they did. Jack and Michael returned to Sally’s camp where Michael grabbed every kit he could find, and for the remainder of the day, the small gang sat around the fire trying to fit the adult clothing to them using a wide variety of techniques. Doc, peering over top of the glasses perched on his nose, ripped out all the seams of his and began resewing it smaller using suture-like stitches. Jack and Michael worked together so one would hold a dart in the cloth and the other would sew it in. Jocco and Scrape also paired up and developed an entirely different method of sewing in which one would put on the too-big shirt and hold out his or her arms and the other would sew seams around the first’s body and then cut off the extra fabric. This last method involved a lot of needle-pricks and curses.

Hours later everyone sat around the fire in their hillfolk threads,

tugging at the high shirt collars and testing the carrying capacity of the pockets.

“Hey, check it out! I can fit two whole cans in this one pocket,” said Jocco, standing up to demonstrate.

“Not without a belt, you can’t,” Jack laughed as Jocco quickly grabbed at the waist band of his pants.

“Jocco, you sewed this thing too close in the shoulders,” complained Scrape, who was rotating her arms.

Jocco, who was looking around for his weapons belt, ignored her.

Doc was ruefully picking at one leg of his pants, on which he had been forced to use white thread instead of black, which had run out.

“Here.” Jack tossed him a charred stick, which Doc ran up and down the seam until it blended in.

“Look, I can fit three potatoes in this pocket. Three!” Jack looked up to see Jocco waddling around the fire, his pockets full to bursting with food.

Little Michael, too, was feeling around in his pockets in curiosity. “I think there’s something in here. Yeah, look.” He opened his fingers to reveal a small round disk of metal. Jack peered closer and saw that a picture of someone’s head had been pressed into it. Michael flipped it over and on the other side Jack saw the number two.

“What’s that about?” Jack asked the room at large.

Predictably, Doc answered. “Currency.” He pushed his glasses further up his nose, and, peering over them with greater difficulty, inspected the disk. “This is called a coin, I believe.”

“This is money?” asked Jack, still staring at the disk.

“Yes,” said Doc.

“How much money?”

“Two, evidently.”

“Two moneys,” said Jack. “What could you trade that for?”

“I have no idea,” said Doc. “From what I’ve read the value changes at the drop of a hat. But it is fascinating, and it explains some of the

louder noises in the Factory. From somewhere below my interrogation room came a constant, loud pounding during the day. It's possible they were stamping these coins."

"Wash said people in the city traded in rocks. He didn't mention coins. I thought that was just in books."

"There are all sorts of different currency," Doc shrugged.

"Who's that guy?" asked Jocco, turning the coin back over and indicating the face.

"I couldn't say," said Doc.

"I could," said Scrape, who had joined them. She pointed to a few tiny letters above the head. "J.P. Allen."

"Allen?" Jack peered closer in surprise. "Huh."

"You know the name?" asked Doc.

"Yeah, it's the name of that catcher. The one who hit me with the rock, remember? And J.P. sort of sounds familiar but I don't—"

"Maybe they put his head on a coin to commemorate hitting you with a rock," said Scrape, grinning.

"Perhaps it was a member of his family. Allen can be a surname," said Doc.

Jack shrugged, he was losing interest. He pickpocketed Jocco for the sweet potatoes and placed them beside the fire to bake.

## 34

JACK STOOD LAST WATCH before the mission huddled in one of the few shadows near the entrance to the camp. A full moon filled the streets with unearthly white light nearly as bright as daylight. If the gang had been attacking earlier in the night the bright moon might be a problem for them, but Jack knew it would set well before they needed darkness. The first half hour of lookout was uneventful. Jack spent the time rehearsing the plan in his mind, trying to predict problems. The moon was much lower in the sky when a soft pattering of several sets of feet made Jack retreat into the entrance of the tunnel. The bare feet passed without pausing, heading for the jungle, no doubt setting off for an early hunt. As Jack climbed quietly back out of the entrance a voice made him jump and nearly trip over his own feet. He looked down the point of his knife to see Rat, still in the clean, white dress and bare feet, looking up at him with unfazed gray eyes.

"Hiya, Jackio. Watched been doin' down there, eh?"

"Hiding from whoever passed," said Jack, unabashedly. "I'm not looking for a fight tonight."

"Wot are ya lookin' for, then?"

"Nothing. Just some peace and quiet."

Rat peered at him suspiciously. "Do you 'ave some news you're not tellin' me?"

Jack shrugged. "No."

"Yes, you do. You owe me. I'm 'ere to collect."

"Oh, right," Jack had forgotten his debt.

"Oh, right" 'e says, conveniently forgettin' all the news kind ol' Rat delivered, free o' charge."

"It's not free of charge if I still owe you."

"It was then. Now no longer. I'd like payment in full, if you please."

It was only fair. Jack thought for a moment and decided to start small. "Well, Meg took a bunch of the O'Rileys to join the hill once O'Riley died."

She smiled at him in a not-so-friendly way.

"But you knew that. Sally's gang got caughted."

"An' your gang got themselves caughted, too. Robbie turned turncoat 'n made away with the little girl. The medium girl and the smart one got caughted by catchers. Not new news."

"R-right." He debated for a moment, wondering if he should keep Doc's escape secret. He didn't see how it would help, though. And she could probably live off of that for a week.

"Well, once they were caughted we went up there to see if maybe we could rescue them." Rat didn't react. "And while we were watching, the three of them came out the second story window. There was a fight. Doc got away but Wash got caughted."

Rat's eyes widened infinitesimally and he knew it was good.

"How about that," she said, quietly.

Jack said nothing.

"That's some news. An' me not knowin' it till now. That's two jailbreaks from the Children Factory—"

That caught on fast, thought Jack.

"The two biggest newses of our alive-times an' they both includes you, Jackey-o. How 'bout that." She eyed him strangely.

"We've got to be at least even."

"At least," said Rat, rubbing her chin and squinting up. "But North, it's bright out here tonight, innit?"

Jack glanced up at the moon. "Yeah, I suppose so." Jack had a sudden idea. "I've got more news, if you'd like. It's good. Big."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. But in exchange I want any information you have on the hillfolk."

"Showwr. Got plenty o' that."

"Do you?"

"Probably."

"Uh. Okay. The news is that me and my gang—"

"My gang and I."

"What? Whatever. We're going up to the hill later tonight and we're going to break the rest of our gang out. And maybe Sally's if we can manage it."

For the first time since Jack had met her, Rat actually looked surprised.

"That's what I'm doing out here. We didn't want to oversleep so we're keeping watch."

"Ow you gonna break 'em out, then?"

"What do you know about the hillfolk?" Jack countered.

She sighed, not discontentedly, and then began, "You know the Westerners?"

"Westerners? No."

"The hillpeople what live way up the hill aways. Sorta apart from the others. You know the ones."

"Oh, yeah." Jack was familiar with the small group. They lived in a

mostly overgrown clearing up near the top of the mountain. They wore tanned hides and earth colors, and, as far as Jack could ever tell, didn't interact much with the normal hillfolk. He had always called them the Outsiders in his mind.

"Well, anyways. They are *not* pleased with recent developments."

"What recent developments?"

"Guarding. They guard the night, but they used to hunt the night. They have to buy clothing with metal they don't like to use, except for arrowheads. The boss man's been keepin' a nearby eye on em and it's makin' em too far from comfortable. Resentful, you might call it."

"Oh." Jack thought about that for a moment. The information coincided with what Allen and Jacobsen had been saying, but he hadn't really thought what it meant. The guards at night didn't like being guards. Did that mean they would be less likely to put up a fight? He would have to think about that. "Yeah, that's good news. Thanks. How did you know all that?"

"You know better than that, Jackio," she said, grinning slyly.

Jack shrugged.

"Well, if that's all the news you got for me?" she looked at him questioningly.

"That's it."

"I'll find you when you have more, then."

And she slipped away into the shadows.

Jack spent the remainder of his watch thinking about what she had said. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't think of a way to really use the information. He could try talking to the guards, but somehow he didn't think they would be resentful enough to side with a bunch of city kids. The best he could hope was that they wouldn't care enough to fight hard. But they were adults, each so much bigger than the kids in his gang... He would just have to see what happened.

## 35

AT LAST, WITH A SIGH, he ducked back in the tunnel to wake the others.

Though the moon was low on the horizon, its light still had seared away his night vision. The fire had burned down to embers, so Jack made his way clumsily to the fire, feeling his way with his numb feet, and kicked one of the half-burnt logs. It rolled over in a shower of sparks and relighted. With a sudden movement Scrape sat up and looked at Jack. He nodded and she threw her blankets off and stood.

"Time to go," she said, nudging Michael while Jack poked the other two awake. Everyone had slept in their hillfolk threads and it took only seconds for everyone to be ready. They started for the door.

"Grout, it's bright out here," whispered Scrape, holding up a hand to block her eyes. "You woke us late," she added, noting the position of the moon.

"The moon's so bright it would have been useless to try and attack with it up," said Jack. He patted down his weapons belt to double check he had everything, hefted a disguise full of extra weapons onto his shoulder, and led the way to the jungle.

As group took off, running silently up the hill, Jack breathed a sigh of relief. No more anticipation, it was finally time for action. No one spoke the entire journey up. In addition, no one tripped or knocked into anything or cried out in alarm. They were being extra careful; if there was ever a night to stay unseen and unheard, this was it. When Jack sighted clear space through the trees he slowed to a walk and everyone else followed suit. They slunk up to the edge of the clearing and peered in. The moon had set during the run and the clearing was as dark as they could have hoped. Inside the ring of flaming torches Jack could see two watchers standing stiffly on either side of the front door. Everything was as they had planned. Scrape touched Jack gently on the arm. He turned to look at her and she jerked her head toward the catchers' house. Jack nodded and helped her heave the heavy coil of rope off her shoulders. As she snuck away, Doc handed the sack of extra weapons he carried to Jocco and then heaved the coil onto his own shoulders. When Doc was ready he nodded to Jack and the small group crept around the perimeter to the back of the Children Factory.

Jack chose a likely-looking tree with sturdy branches near the top and, one after another, they climbed up, the three older ones going especially carefully so as not to drop their heavy packs. Jack was first in line, and when he was well above the roof of the Factory he chose a branch and scooted out as far as he dared to make room for the others on it.

Doc came second. Jack could see his hands shaking as he crawled out towards Jack, gripping the branch so hard he was pulling off bark. And then came Jocco and Little Michael. All four boys looked at each other and then, in one motion, peered down at the ground. The guard hadn't moved. Without speaking Jocco handed his weapons sack to Michael and helped relieve Doc of the coils. Doc and Jack secured one

end of each line to the branch while Jocco held the other ends to keep them from falling. It took a few minutes to make sure everything was secure, but finally the job was done. Jack grabbed a nearby branch from the next tree over and climbed onto it. He checked to make sure his sack and his weapons belt were secure, grabbed a line, and tilted forward off the branch. His breath caught in his throat as he fell, but in less than a second the line had stopped his freefall and he was swinging out over the gap and on to the roof of the Factory. He landed on his hands and feet as softly as he could and froze, listening. No sound came from either the rooms under his feet or from the guards on the ground. He stood up, nodded to the others, and then busied himself with tying his rope off to the chimney. A soft thump and the barest hint of a squeal told him Doc had landed, and a minute later all four boys were standing on the roof, untangling themselves from ropes and checking their pockets to make sure they still had everything.

Once all the ropes were secured, Jack took off his weapons sack, crawled over to the edge of the roof, and hung over by his waist. Keeping one eye on the guard, still standing several stories below, Jack slowly peeled away a corner of window paper and peered inside. It was very dark in the bedroom, and the outside light from the torches didn't help, but Jack was certain at least that there was no movement inside. He peeled away a little and tried to stick his head inside. He scootched further off the roof and felt two pairs of hands grab his ankles. He blinked several times to clear the torchlight from his vision and now he could clearly see the two rows of inhabited beds and the door at the far end. There were no guards in the room. He peeled back as much of the paper as he could reach and then, with the help of the others, pulled himself back up onto the roof.

Jack nodded the all clear, pointed to his sack and looked meaningfully at Doc, grabbed the gutter and swung himself carefully over the edge until his feet touched windowsill. With one hand still on the gutter he pulled the rest of the window paper off and handed it up to the others.



In exchange, Doc handed him down his weapons sack. Jack was pleased to hear not a single clink coming from the sack; he had wrapped each piece of metal in cloth before packing it, and the cloth was muffling the noises well. He put the sack on the floor just inside the window and turned in time to see Jocco's bare feet coming at his chest. The small boy's feet couldn't reach the windowsill so Jack grabbed him around the middle and lowered him down. He did the same with Little Michael, and finally Doc's feet swung down onto the windowsill and Doc entered the room shaking from head to foot. Jack nodded at him and smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring way. Doc returned the smile weakly.

Jack peeked over the sill one more time to see the watcher standing in the same place as always, the brim of her cap pointed fixedly into the jungle. He turned back to the others and nodded that they should get to work. Without delay Little Michael found the first sleeping figure in chains and began picking the lock, while Jocco and Doc started down the isle of sleeping bodies, trying to find a familiar face. Jack walked straight for the door and pressed his ear to the wood. Silence. He tried the door handle and was surprised to find it was unlocked. He shouldn't have been surprised, he thought, looking back at the sleeping children. Anyone who would want to leave would have to break their bonds first. A sound made Jack's head whip back towards the door. Footsteps. He turned around and waved to the others who immediately ducked under nearby beds, then he followed suit. The door swung open and a guard entered. He was a tall, lean man with a thick stick hanging, Jack was pleased to see, on his belt instead of from his hand. He cast his eyes around routinely and was halfway through turning to leave when he saw the empty window frame. The man hadn't even had time to reach for his stick before Jack leapt on his back. The man cried out in surprise but the sound was muffled by Jack's hand, which had conveniently landed on the man's mouth. Before the man could do anything else, Jack had hit him in the temple with the butt of his knife, and the man's knees buckled. Jack leapt off before the man collapsed. Jack expected the unconscious man to crash to the floor,

but, to his surprise, the man landed quite softly. Jack looked around in surprise to find Jocco, Doc, and Little Michael climbing out from under the man's body. Apparently, they had unsuccessfully tried to catch the man as he fell, thereby quieting the landing.

Jack raised his eyebrows, impressed at their speed. Jocco grinned back at him and then looked around in surprise as bedclothes shifted and figures sat up. Awake children weren't Jack's primary concern, however. He looked at Doc and pointed out the window, eyebrows raised in question this time. Doc crept to the window, peered over the edge, and then shook his head. The outside guard was still unaware of their presence. Jack nodded and turned to the others. Michael was moving between the beds, whispering in ear after ear, and Jocco had cut one arm of the guard's shirt off and was using the scraps to bind his hands and feet. When Jocco finished, he and Doc, who still carried one weapon sack, joined Jack at the door.

Jack turned to Doc and Jocco, pointed to the unconscious guard, and held up one finger. The other two nodded. They still had one more guard to take out. Jack carefully turned the door handle a second time and swung it open. The hall that connected the bedrooms was still and silent, but the paper over the windows was glowing slightly. That side of the building faced the eastern sky, which had started to lighten. Jack groaned inwardly. He pointed at the window and then widened his eyes at the other two to indicate they needed to hurry. Jocco nodded, but Doc was wearing wide eyes himself and staring at the end of the corridor. Jack whipped his head around to see another large figure clothed in the threads of the watch. Jack felt a split second of fear but it gave way to relief almost instantly. The guard was slumped in a chair, head on his chest and breathing slowly. This was definitely an unexpected development. You could tie up a knocked-out guard without him or her coming to, but this asleep guard would probably wake up if they tried to restrain him. Jocco seemed to be thinking the same thing, because he tiptoed over to the man, raised the black stick he had taken off of the

first guard, and blew in the sleeping man's face. The man didn't move. He did it again. Not even a twitch. Jack came over and nudged the guard's shin with his toe. Nothing. Doc put two fingers up to the man's throat and closed his eyes for a minute. When he opened them again, he mimed sleeping and then pointed to the guard's heart and made 'slow' gestures with his hand. Jack crinkled his brow in confusion but then he shook his head. It didn't matter. What did matter was finding their gang, and now that the two guards stationed inside the Children Factory had been so quickly dispensed of, their job was starting to look easier. Jack pointed to Jocco and then to the guards' feet and hands. Jocco nodded and began hacking off one leg of the guard's pants. Jack pushed open the door of the next room.

This room was identical to the first: completely bare except for two rows of beds and a window. The sounds of their short fight with the guard must have penetrated this room, too, because about half the children were sitting up in bed and the other half were being poked awake by their neighbors. No one said anything as Jack and Doc futilely searched the faces for anyone familiar.

"We're getting you out of here. Stay silent. Michael will come free you in a second." Jack's whisper, as low as he could make it, still carried in the silent room.

They entered the third room, this one again identical, and again, the children here were awake. It was as if a silent charge had run through the children telling them something was happening. And again, Jack and Doc searched the faces in vain, told the children that Michael would be in soon and then left. They entered the fourth room to see two more lines of beds with dark figures sitting up straight, facing him. Jack and Doc automatically chose sides of the room and padded closer, then, at the same time, they both inhaled sharply. Jack was staring into the familiar face of Jim from Sally's gang. He looked behind him and saw that Doc had found Jimmy. When he recognized Doc, Jimmy began pulling at his bonds, eyes wide, as if to say 'get these things off me.' Jack turned

back to Jim who was holding his own shackled hands out. Jack fetched Michael, who freed Jim while Jimmy picked his own locks with a spare set Michael had brought. Jack moved on between the beds. Suddenly, his heart leapt in excitement. The shackles Jimmy had moved onto belonged to Breaker. He looked over to the left and grinned. The bonds Michael had almost finished breaking were Tish's. After the first room Jack had lost hope that anyone he knew would be up here. He practically ran to the next set of beds, on which lay more unfamiliar children. He moved on and it wasn't until the last set by the window that he saw another familiar face. Sally.

"Michael'll be here soon. He's almost done with Tish," Jack whispered.

At his words Sally smiled proudly, her white teeth showing clearly through the dark. Jack felt around in his sack, drew out a long thin knife with the wrappings still on it, and placed it in her lap. She smiled again and this time Jack thought he saw vengeance take the place of pride.

He returned to the front of the room motioning Breaker, Tish, and Doc to follow. Jack pulled out a short, thick sword, handed it to Breaker, and a dagger for Tish. Tish held up two fingers and Jack, grinning, handed her another. Breaker clapped her silently on the back, also grinning. Jack only had one blade left in the sack, so he took it out and stuck it in his belt with his other weapons. He folded the disguise, stuffed it in his pocket, and turned to face the room.

"We're breaking everyone out, but we have to find the rest of our gang first. Michael will pick everyone's locks. He'll explain more," He whispered. Jack turned to the Jims. "Free the other bedrooms, too," he whispered, "and keep them quiet until Michael can explain," and then he, Doc, Tish, and Breaker left the room.

Jack looked around the hall as they exited to see Jocco tying the last knot around the sleeping guard's hands. He stood up and joined them.

Jack turned to Tish, "Where are the others?" he whispered.

"On one of the belowground levels. I dunno which; we were separated," she whispered back.

“Are there a lot of belowground levels?”

Tish nodded.

“They use some of it for storage, I think,” said Breaker in a low voice. “I saw kids coming up the stairs with clay and stuff.”

“Right, let’s go. Oh, and remember the big LummoX might be here somewhere.”

Everyone nodded and Jack led the way down the hall.

Throughout the entire event, not a single child had given a cry of surprise, held them up with questions, or done anything except remain as silent as possible. Jack smiled. He was proud to be a city kid.

The third floor was dark and silent. Jack peered around carefully before walking out from behind the wall: the room seemed empty of people, but looms and big stacks of cloth made it difficult to be sure. They descended to the second floor. This one smelled strongly of leather and Jack saw shoes stacked against two walls. Against the third wall were barrels of what looked like white powder. Jack could feel Doc bristle in excitement, but that wasn’t why they were here. He put patted the boy’s shoulder in what he hoped was a sympathetic way.

When they reached the ground floor all they saw was a small room with a few chairs and a table. The front door opened in on it and so did another door set in a wall to their left, which hid the rest of the ground floor. Jack looked back at the others and put a finger to his lips. As if they needed the warning. He turned and was about to head for the lower levels when the door creaked open and an old man in a nightcap peered grumpily around the door.

“Did I hear somethi—” he began, and then his eyes went wide and he snapped the door shut.

“Jack, what—” hissed Tish.

“He’s going to sound the alarm,” said Jack, leaping for the door. He threw the door open and dove into the dark. This room was even darker than the other ones, for it didn’t have torchlight illuminating it.

Jack tripped over something and caught himself before he could fall. He stood listening. There was a noise behind him but before he could turn there he felt a sickening crack on the back of his head and white lights burst in front of his eyes. He hit the ground and rolled, just in time as another crack sounded from right where he had been. Then came two grunts and a gentle thud, and a light flickered on. Breaker had pinned the old man against the far wall and was attempting to wrestle a thick, wooden cane from his hands. Jack turned towards the light in time to see an old woman open her mouth wide and let out a piercing screech. Tish dove for her, covering the woman’s mouth with her hand. Jocco followed with a rag, which he stuffed in her mouth, but he also knocked the candle out of her hand and they were plunged into darkness again.

“Help! Help!” cried the old man again. Jack felt around for his disguise and shoved it in the man’s mouth and then felt towards the wall where he had seen blankets hanging. He touched cloth and ripped it down, uncovering the window and they could see again. Jack turned. Jocco had stripped the bed and was cutting the sheets up into strips. In a minute both the man and the women were bound and gagged and lying, Jack hoped, not too uncomfortably on the bed. They were old, after all. Though the lump on the back of his head didn’t care so much at the moment.

“You okay?” whispered Breaker.

“Yeah, thanks for that,” Jack panted back.

“Any time,” Breaker grinned.

“We gotta get out of here. I’m sure someone’s on their way. I’m surprised they’re not here already.”

The group burst out into the hall, which was somehow still vacant.

“Where are the other guards?” he whispered to the others. “They should be here by now.”

“Who cares, let’s go,” hissed Tish, and she grabbed his sleeve and began tugging him towards the stairs. They raced down the stairs and into the next room. It was dark and silent. An enormous fireplace sat in the middle of the room, surrounded by metal tools of all shapes and sizes.

“Excellent,” whispered Breaker as he swiped a sharp, lethal looking hammer from a small metal table.

“Hammer and anvil. We should get one of these,” said Doc, looking at Jack.

“That’d only be useful if we get out of here alive,” said Jack. “Next floor. And keep quiet. I dunno where the guards are, but they’ll be soon.”

The slam of a door sounded from somewhere below them and Jack’s heart skipped a beat.

“Let’s move.”

“Wait. Jack, look at this,” whispered Tish. She had knelt down and lowered her face to a couple inches above the floor.

Jack clenched his teeth. There was no time for messing around. But Tish didn’t generally bother with the inconsequential.

“Jocco, go guard the stairs. No noise, come back to report.”

Jocco nodded and turned back up the stairs, and Jack walked over to Tish, noticing as he did that the wood floor was covered in dirt.

“Wha—oh,” Jack breathed as he saw. A light, thin enough to be overlooked, was shining up from between the floorboards. Jack knelt down and delicately brushed more dirt away to widen the crack.

“Careful,” Tish whispered, “The dirt will fall through.”

Jack withdrew his hand and instead leaned down, closed one eye, and peered through the crack with the other and down into the room below.

The room was brightly lit, that was the first thing Jack noticed. He blinked rapidly with his open eye, but when he opened it again it seemed as though there was nothing to see.

He retracted his head and looked at Tish. “It’s an empty room,” he whispered.

Tish shook her head and pointed back to the crack. Jack noticed that for the first time that night she looked afraid. “Wash,” she whispered.

“We should go then,” said Jack, confused as to why she was holding them up.

“We don’t know what’s in there with him,” said Tish.

As if to punctuate her sentence, a door slammed shut and a low voice growled up through the crack. “What did I say? No sleeping!”

“Ah, I must’ve misunderstood you. Could ‘appen to anyone,” came a weak voice. ‘Ow about compromise then, eh?” “Howsabout I juss pass out for a coupla seconds, eh? An’ I won’ tell a soul about it. There’s a good fella.”

“You pass out, I’ll knock you out,” growled the man who Jack now strongly suspected was the LummoX.

“Centrifugal, centripetal. We ‘ave a deal then?”

There was a heavy splash, like a bucket of thrown water.

“Listen, cretin. This is your last chance to cooperate.”

“Well I’m not likely to cooperate if you keep callin’ my regal self a cretin, am I? I could get used t’ the whole man-servant deliverin’ baths right to my suite, though.”

Jack heard soft smack, as if someone was fondly patting a puddle of water.

Jack looked up quickly around at the others. Breaker, Tish and Doc were working together a few yards away, pulling up boards slowly but so silently Jack hadn’t noticed. Excellent, thought Jack. If they came in from above they would catch the LummoX unaware.

“I’ll jump in. You guys go find the door,” he whispered so quietly he wasn’t sure they had heard, but they nodded, pulled up a last floorboard, and the boys tiptoed out of the room. Jack put his eye back to the hole.

“Where’s Jack?”

“My jack?” asked Wash.

“Yes, your Jack,” growled the LummoX.

“I lent it to Jim, or maybe Jimmy—I don’t remember—an’ ‘ee never gave it back.”

The LummoX growled, low and threatening.

“Yeah, that’s ‘ow I felt.”

He growled again. “Where. Is. Jack.” He said, punctuating each

word. “I’m telling you, this is your last night. Tomorrow the questioning will get worse. A lot worse.”

“Shame. I was really gettin’ used to this warm fuzzy treatment. An’ incidentally, nice use of the classic Intimidating Repetition and Escalation of the Final Adjective.”

“What?”

“Really? ‘Ow do you even *communicate* with people?” asked Wash incredulously.

“Information. Now,” said the LummoX.

“All right, all right,” said Wash, with a suddenly defeated tone. His voice actually cracked on the last syllable. Jack pressed his face hard into the floor, as if he could press himself through the boards.

“I don’ know where Jack is righ’ now. Honest. I promise on th’ law of relativity.” He paused for a moment and then added, “Really? Nothin? It’s a wonder this buildin’ is standin’.” In almost his normal voice. Suddenly Wash came into view. His hands were up and he was backing away. The LummoX followed until they were both within Jack’s line of vision, the big man stared down into the small boy’s face. Jack could have sworn that Wash’s eyes flicked to the new hole in the ceiling, but Wash’s next words were so desolate that Jack must have imagined it. “Righ’. Anyway. I don’ know nothin’ about where ‘ee is an’ all, but I can tell you—” He coughed. “I can tell you,” he croaked, and fell to his knees, a hand on his chest. Jack’s muscles tensed in fear for whatever was wrong with him. “I can tell you that centrifugal and centripetal forces are actually very different.” And then all of a sudden Wash burst out laughing.

“An’ another thing,” Wash continued, grinning.

Jack felt a hand on his shoulder and turned. Tish was standing next to him, dagger in hand, looking positively fearsome.

“It’ll be okay. Go,” whispered Jack.

“When you’re tryina talk in code,” Wash continued.

The LummoX had passed under the hole, so that now Jack could jump down behind him.

“Don’ use big words to try’n baffle someone who prolly has a higher I.Q. than the whole raving hill.” And with that, Wash began laughing again and Jack jumped down the hole.

# 36

HE LANDED CATLIKE on the floor, so silently that the LummoX didn't even turn around. He straightened and winked at Wash, who grinned back, while looking at the huge man so as not to give Jack away. Unfortunately, Jack's timing was off and now he too was stuck in a locked room with an enormous hillman, who would no doubt notice the new inhabitant before long. Luckily, Wash took the matter of distraction into his own hands.

"Well, it's been lovely my good man," he said, taking on an accent reminiscent of Doc's. He grabbed one of the LummoX huge, meaty hands and tried to shake it, but the startled man drew it back reflexively. "Truly, truly lovely my dear. May I call you honeycakes?"

"What? No!"

Jack heard the slightest scraping of metal on metal at the door.

"Sugarbeet it is then," continued Wash. "Simply fabulous, my

sugarbeet, this whole vacation has been like out of a dream."

The doorhandle turned.

"Unfortunately, it is that woeful hour. I must depart. Parting is such sweet sorrow, is it not, sugarbeet?" Wash continued.

"What are—?" began the man.

"Your carriage awaits, Your Cretinship," said Jack, stepping out of arms reach of the large man and grinning at Wash.

"What? What? Uh..." the man seemed lost for words.

"What?" supplied Wash.

The hillman turned to face Jack. His eyes lit up in recognition and Wash slipped towards the door. The hillman lunged at Jack, but Jack ducked under his arms and circled around behind him.

"You don't mind if I *don't* call you sugarbeet?" Jack asked. "We haven't known each other for long, and I think—"

The hillman came at him again, leaning towards the right, the side to which Jack had escaped before. Jack ducked to the left.

"It's just a little too familiar, don't you think, *Mr.* Sugarbeet?" Jack emphasized the Mister to prove his formality.

The hulking hillman was coming at him again, this time squatting low so Jack couldn't go around. Jack backed up and felt his back hit the rough, wooden wall. Uh oh, he thought. The hillman drew closer, careful not to leave any gaps. There was only one thing for it. Jack ran at the hillman, placed his hands on the huge shoulders, and vaulted himself over the man's head. He landed in a roll, tumbling out of the LummoX's reach. The LummoX's massiveness made him a powerful man but not a quick one. Jack sprang to his feet and started running for the door. Unfortunately, the LummoX wasn't *that* slow. Jack's shirt suddenly tightened around his chest and neck, holding him back. He tried to continue running in vain, the hillman's grip on Jack's shirt unyielding. Instead, Jack spun around and ran towards the man, right into his arms. This completely unexpected move made the hillman release Jack and step back, as though an incredibly ugly spider was crawling towards him.

Jack turned and bolted for the door again, but once again the hillman caught him.

“Little help in here,” Jack called out as he tried to pry the man’s fingers off of the back of his shirt. Breaker skipped into the room.

“What’s goin’ on?” he asked casually.

“Can’t you get this—” but Jack’s sentence was cut short as the Lummo’s second hand closed over his mouth. He tried to cry out as the fingerer’s tightened, but a second later they loosened again. Jack looked up and saw that Breaker had grabbed the man’s forearm and was swinging off of it in an attempt to free Jack. Another ‘Oof’ came from the man’s other side and Jack looked to see Jocco attempting to climb up the man’s arm muscles like he would a stone wall. It was too much. The hillman released Jack, who skipped out of reach and assessed the situation. With one person on each arm the hillman would have trouble reaching either, which meant the boys would have to leave at the same time. Hoping desperately that the others manning the door were ready with the lock, Jack shouted, “Out! Now!” Simultaneously both boys dropped off the large man and bolted for the door. Jack followed suit, sprinting full on though he was only feet away. The three boys burst into the hallway all together and as Jack slammed into the far wall he heard the door slam shut and a small metallic click. Jack turned and saw Tish tugging on the lock to check that it was secure. Then she turned, her head cocked to one side, and smiled at Jack. “One down, one to go,” she said.

Jack smiled back before turning to Wash. “How are you?”

“Oh, don’ worry about me. He’s a pleasant chat. Any conversation in which I can use the word centripetal is a good conversation in my book. I could do with a bite, though—” he was cut off by a loud thud echoing down the stairs. They all looked up to see Jocco practically toppling down the stairs in haste, his eyes wide.

Jocco reached the landing and drew out his knife. “They’re here,” he whispered.

And then a crash sounded from behind the group, from the room in which they had just locked the Lummo. Jack turned in time to see the door shake violently with a second crash. The hinges had bent and the door was hanging at a funny angle. Zee must be somewhere below them, but if they continued down they would certainly get trapped. Footsteps thundered down the stairwell. Jack desperately hoped they were going up.

“Go back, all of you. Hide in the metal room. I’ll give the signal and they’ll come after me. Get everyone else and get out. I’ll find Zee.”

“No way in the North,” said Wash.

“Uh-uh,” Jocco shook his head.

“Come back when everyone’s out if you like, but go now.” The door crashed again, and Jack heard the screech of nail being pulled out. “Now!”

His order was emphasized by another crash, so violent that cracks opened up in the wood. The others sprinted up the stairs. Jack waited a moment, stuck his fingers in his mouth and gave the loudest whistle he possibly could, then whirled around and sprinted down the next flight of stairs. The next landing was identical to the one above, albeit darker. The darkness was an aid, however, because Jack could immediately see lights shining through the gaps between door and wall. He pressed on eye to the crack and smiled in victory. Zee stood in the middle of the room, arms crossed, somehow managing to look both defiant and bored as she gazed up at a rotund, mustached man with a receding hairline. The man was shaking his finger at Zee and talking. Jack strained to hear.

“Now listen here young lady,” the man was saying, “I understand why you don’t want to give us any information. You’re young, you don’t know the ways of the world yet. Jack might have even been like a father to you.”

At those words Zee gave him a look of such scorn that he stumbled over his next few words.

“Ah, yes, well, um, perhaps not. But even so, here on the hill you might find a father and a mother who would take care of you. You could

be part of a lovely little family. Wouldn't you like that?"

Zee's look of patronization was comical only because it came from one so small and was directed at one so large.

Jack smiled in his mind and smoothed down his hair and untucked his shirt so the tails covered his weapons. Jack figured he should finally make use of his uniform. It would be a shame, after all, to have made them for nothing, and this particular hillman didn't seem particularly clever. He knocked.

The door opened and the hillman stood in the doorway. Jack wasn't sure how children acted once they were in the factory. He figured subservient was a good way to go. Jack looked down at his feet and tugged a tuft of hair over his forehead, wishing for the first time that he knew what a cowlick was.

"Yes?" the asked the man, clearly surprised.

"Sir, there's been a disturbance, sir."

"There *has* been a disturbance, sir," the man corrected.

"Yes sir, has been, sir." He was still looking down at his feet, but the man didn't sound suspicious. "I was told to come get this girl. They want everyone in their beds, sir."

"What kind of disturbance?"

"I can't say, sir. I just do what I'm told."

"Good boy. Well then, take the girl. She is being quite uncooperative at present anyway."

"Yes sir," said Jack.

Zee walked forward and glared at Jack in a very convincing imitation of hatred and walked forward. As they left Jack saw out of the corner of his eye the man leisurely extinguishing torches. As soon as they were out of the man's sight Jack handed Zee his own belt knife and they began running up the stairs. She didn't ask questions as they ran, but her eyes darted around taking in Jack's hillfolk clothing and the splintered door on the next landing. They had just started up the next flight of stairs when footsteps thundered towards them from above. Both children froze. A

long, lanky shape was silhouetted against the dim light from above. It pounded down the stairs towards them, and as it neared the light spilling out from Wash's room Jack saw that it was Allen. Together he and Zee backed down to the landing for better footing. A puffing noise from below told Jack that the Mustache was coming up the stairs behind them. They were surrounded.

Allen leapt the last few stairs, arms out, and crashed into Zee and Jack, knocking them to the ground. Jack struggled but the catcher was fully grown and heavy with muscle. Allen sat up, still pinning the two children to the ground and frowning with the effort. Jack grabbed Allen's arm and used it for leverage as he kicked the catcher in the stomach. Allen jerked back with an oof, and the pressure on Jack's chest was gone, he tried to scoot back but Allen had grabbed the front of Jack's shirt in a fist and was holding on tight. Jack glanced over at Zee to see that she was being held the same way, and was thrashing around to free herself. A heavy footstep behind Jack signaled that the Mustache had caught up.

"But what—what are you doing?" he asked, still clearly under the impression that Jack was trying to take Zee up to the bedrooms. Jack slashed his knife down his front, cutting the fistful of cloth clean away. He leaped to his feet and jumped past Allen and turned. Zee swung a knife at her own front, but Allen grabbed her hand with his now free one. Jack started forward to help, but before he could take one step Mustache grabbed both of Zee's arms from behind. Allen let go of her, and moved to get his feet under him. Jack looked at Zee, not sure of what to do. A deep bell began to toll from somewhere above ground.

"Get gone," Zee said, and kicked the mustached man in the shins. He didn't let go.

Jack took a step forward, unwilling to leave, but Allen was up and he lunged for Jack. Jack leapt back up several steps and slashed at Allens reaching hands.

"Jack," said Zee, still staring at him. She raised her eyebrows, twisted out of the older man's grip, and dove at Allens legs. Allen fell hard, and



she scrambled up his back, but the Allen grabbed her legs before she could get far. The larger man stepped around them and began running as fast as he could, already panting, after Jack.

“Get everyone safe. Do it, Jack!” she yelled. It was the first time he had ever heard Zee raise her voice. Jack turned and bolted up the stairs, guilt already twisting in his stomach like a knife.

“Lil! He’s coming up!” Allen shouted over his shoulder as he tried to get a grip on Zee’s legs, which were attempting to kick him off.

Jack sprinted faster, feet pounding the stairs like a hillfolk, throwing caution to the winds and hoping desperately that he could reach the ground floor before he ran into Jacobsen. He did, but only just. Just as he stepped off the stairs and onto the ground floor Jacobsen hurtled toward him. Jack dove past her feet, scraping his chin on the floor, and rolled back to his feet. He didn’t even bother turning to fight her; he charged for the door of the old people’s room. It hung open and as Jack flew past the bed he saw the remnants of bonds scattered across it. Jack continued sprinting, not slowing down as he neared the wall, and then with a leap he dove through the paper, out the window, and into the day.

## 37

JACK FELL TO THE GROUND and rolled automatically, but he was disoriented. He sat up in a crouch and looked around, trying to regain his bearings. The sky had lightened while he had been inside; it was almost sunrise. The sound of the bell was louder out here. Jack turned his head and saw a slumped body lying up against the Factory. Jack approached it warily, but once he was a few feet away he could hear snores. He ignored his confusion and peered around the corner of the building to find the guard there and saw a hillman getting unsteadily to his feet, as if still groggy from a night’s sleep. The guard raised his head and looked around and Jack could see his mouth fall open. Then Jack looked around, too. It was mayhem. There were children everywhere, zigzagging the lawn, calling out for friends and siblings, or sprinting into the jungle. Hillfolk were there, too, dozens of them, and more were sprinting out of the jungle in response to the giant bell. They were shouting to each other and

forming a large, loose circle, attempting to corral the unwilling children back into the Factory. Already re-caught kids, lay on the ground, bound at their wrists and ankles.

“Sarah!” cried the open-mouthed guard, and he turned away from the scene and sprinted around to the back, not even noticing Jack lying in the grass, and began pulling the woman to her feet. Jack saw two more guards stumble around the front of the house and disappear off into the jungle without looking back.

“Get back here, you traitors! You deserters!” shouted a voice Jack recognized. He turned to see the mayor shaking a threatening fist at the fleeing guards, but they ignored him. Jack slunk around to the front of the house in time to see Jacobsen fly out the door and join the fray. The Mustache galumphed after her, looking quite a bit more dangerous with the live-in’s cane.

Jack looked back at the mess. Over a hundred furious children and enough angry adults. It was worse than he had feared. If it went on, people might get killed. He needed a new plan. If he could get all of the children to the city, away from the hill, the kids could disperse and hide. But judging by the enthusiasm with which both the hillfolk and the city kids were fighting, that wasn’t going to be easy. And in any case, thought Jack, that wouldn’t actually end the problem; catchings would still continue. Probably they would get worse. It was time to end this for good.

Allen ran uncertainly out the door, looking back over his shoulder as he went as if he had lost something. Jack grinned. Zee must have given him the slip. Allen turned and faced the yard. His mouth, too, fell open and he charged into the midst.

Jack stood up. He couldn’t think his way through this alone. He needed his gang. He took off running into the mayhem, dancing out of grabbing reach of adults and ducking under wildly thrown punches. He moved between weaving bodies and flailing limbs, trying to find a flash of a familiar face or the whip of braided hair. Out of the corner of his eye Jack saw Sally and Jim separated by a tall woman with a long black

skirt. Sally tried to dodge her way around the woman but the woman grabbed Sally’s arm, and then lightning fast another hand shot behind her and she grabbed Jim. Jack veered off to help, but a burly man with a fearsome expression leapt into Jack’s path, knelt down and wrapped his arms around Jack before he could stop jump away. Jack kicked as the man lifted him off the ground, but the man was holding him too tight.

“I got you, you little devil. This’ll mean big paymen—” The man grunted and his grip loosened. Jack slid between his arms and landed on his feet. He took a few hasty steps backwards but the burly man was turning to someone behind him. The man bellowed and then lunged and Jack saw Doc daintily side-step the man, leaving one foot in the path. The man had too much head of steam and he tripped and fell headlong over Doc’s foot. Doc bowed deeply to Jack as if he had just finished a stage performance, and then jerked his head as if to say, “Shall we retreat to safer territories so we may speak without further interruption.” Jack looked past Doc to see Sally helping Jim to his feet. The hilllady was nowhere in sight.

“Where did you learn that?” asked Jack as they continued running.

“One picks things up here and there,” said Doc mildly. “Fighting is both a science and an art, and since I have an interest in both—” They dodged to either side of an older man with a large belly, who took no notice of them.

“I need Scrape. Have you seen her? And Wash if he’s around.”

“I haven’t seen Scrape and I’m currently looking for Wash.”

“Okay. Meet us by the eastern end when you find him,” said Jack, and they both ran off again. Jack continued weaving through the crowd. In front of him he saw a boy who was being chased by a small but dangerous looking woman slip and fall. He cried out, holding his arm, and stayed on the ground. The woman stood over him, clearly unsure what to do in the face of tears. Jack’s chest tightened. People *were* getting hurt. Then, to Jack’s surprise, Scrape came charging out of the crowd and stood over the boy, knife in hand. She snarled something to the lady,

who turned and fled and Scrape bent down to check on the boy. Jack ran forward to join her.

“Hey,” said Jack.

“Hey,” Scrape responded distractedly. She was delicately feeling the boy’s arm, which had already begun to swell. He was clenching his teeth and looking away, tears trickling down his face. “Okay, I don’t know much about medical stuff,” she told the boy, “but I think it must be broken. I can’t feel any weird bone things going on so hopefully it’s just a little break. Doc will put you right, in the mean time we’ll get you out of here.”

Jack and Scrape gingerly helped the boy to his feet and guarded him as they snuck past the leaky circle of hillfolk, and stopped in the shade of some trees on the northeastern edge of the clearing. Almost immediately they heard running footsteps. Jack and Scrape whirled around to find Wash and Doc skidding to a halt in front of them.

“Wot’s the plan?” asked Wash, immediately. “An’ whose ‘ee?”

“Crisp,” said the boy, as he tried to surreptitiously wipe away tears. Doc immediately bent down to examine the swollen arm.

“The plan,” said Jack. “Well, we need to break this up. It’s getting dangerous. Do you think we can get all these kids to leave—run back to the city or hide in the jungle?”

“Maybe. But we’re outnumbered and that circle is closing fast.”

“We need a diversion,” said Wash. “Something big and noisy that will make the hillfolk break rank.”

“Well that shouldn’t be a problem,” said Scrape. “We’ll just set the Children Factory on fire.”

“Exactly,” said Jack.

“Okay,” said Wash, “‘cept ‘ow are we gonna light it? I mean, without some sor’ of—”

Everyone pulled their bottles of alcohol from their pockets and held them up.

“Ah.”

“Okay, that will scatter everyone and give the kids a chance to run. Then what?” asked Scrape.

“Talk to the Mayor and whoever else is in charge here. We need to convince them to leave us alone. All of us.”

“How do you plan on convincing him of that?” asked Doc from where he knelt on the ground.

“Oh. Uh, I was just thinking of threatening him.”

“Good plan,” said Scrape.

“No’ sustainable,” said Wash. “Wot’s to say ‘ee doesn’t agree with you now cuz you’ve got a sword to his throat, and then jus’ goes on catching.”

“Make him spit-promise?” said Jack.

Wash shook his head.

“Man, do adults just have *no* morals?!” he grumbled. “Anyway, there are about three times more city kids than adults, right?”

“Total, yeah,” said Wash. “But if you’re thinkin’ o’ threatenin’ with numbers, I don’t know if that’s gonna work.”

“Why not? The hillfolk are the perfect—what is it, Doc?”

“Common enemy against which to unite?”

“Exactly.”

“Think about it, Jacky. ‘Ow are you gonna contact each an’ every gang, plus the nomads? There’s no one in this city who knows where everyone lives. You’ll never be able to get the word out.”

“Grout, he’s right,” said Scrape.

“Yeah, but the hillfolk don’t know that, do they?”

“They might” said Scrape.

“Unless you can think of some other plan, that’s all we have to go with. We threaten them with all the kids in the city if they don’t leave us alone.”

“And if they call your bluff?” asked Wash.

“I dunno. I guess we’ll just wing it.”

“*Overwhelmed* with confidence,” said Scrape, smirking. “Let’s do it.”

"Wait—we forgot about finding the mayor in the first place. How are we gonna do that?" said Jack.

"Easy, said Wash. "The mayor's a grownup, right?" said Wash.

"Yeah," said Scrape.

"Well ipso facto, 'ee cares more about 'is 'ouse, an' gutters an' all th' rocks and metal bits inside than is 'ealthy."

"Does he?" asked Jack, not comprehending.

"Yep. The secon' mos' common symptom of gettin' old after complainin' abou' medical problems: gettin' so stuck to your possessions an' routines tha' you can' stand nothin' changin'."

"Really?" asked Jack.

"It's the stranges' phenomenon I ever read about—including complainin' about medical problems—an' I bet you all my future toffee the mayor's got it."

"So if we set *his* house on fire, he'll come?" asked Scrape.

"Runnin'," said Wash.

"And everyone else will leave running, hopefully," said Jack.

"It's broken but it's merely a greenstick fracture. Be glad you're young. It should heal before too long. Come see me in a few weeks and I'll take another look to make sure it's healing properly. In the meantime, try not to bump it against anything and submerge it in the river regularly to bring the swelling down." Doc had wrapped a strip of Crisp's shirt around his arm and tied it up behind his neck. "So, setting the mayor's house on fire, are we? Excellent plan." He straightened up.

"Shall we, then?" he and Wash said together, and the four children went off running, leaving Chip safely in the shadows of the jungle.

They skirted around the edge of the clearing, keeping well away from the fight. Jack saw many more bodies lying on the ground. He began to pick up speed but then glanced over and noticed Scrape's teeth were gritted. He looked down and saw her left sleeve was dotted with blood again, and right hand was pressed against her side over a red stain which was growing larger. They reached the back of the house safely.

"You doing okay?" asked Jack.

"Yeah, just give me a minute," said Scrape. She limped away from him towards the woods. Jack turned away as Wash and Doc came to a halt, panting, in front of Jack.

"Good," said Jack, "Scrape will be here in a second." Jack slunk to the side of the building nearest the presumably now empty Children Factory and peered between the buildings. No one was running towards them.

"Gotta light, Jackey?" asked Wash's voice behind them.

"Course," said Jack, pulling matches out of his pockets. "How else were we gonna do this?"

"Never know," Wash shrugged. "That mighta been the flaw fatale."

A shout of "Drop it!" interrupted them. As one, the three boys turned to see Scrape backing out of the forest, hands in the air, followed by two hillfolk with short spears and savage grins. Both spearheads were pointing directly at Scrape's chest. Scrape's weapon belt was empty, her right side now covered in red. Even from this distance Jack could see that Scrape's face was white with blood loss. Jack saw all this in less than a second. He started running.

"Stop or we kill her!" shouted the man. Jack skidded to a stop.

"Don't think we won't," shouted the woman. "We know who you are, Jack. Now get over here nice and slow and we might let your friend live."

"Like grout, stay where you are, Jack," shouted Scrape.

Jack stood indecisively. Scrape wouldn't be able to outrun those two, both of whom were tall and not bleeding. She might have been able to overpower them—it was usually a guarantee that Scrape was the better fighter, no matter who she was up against—but they had her at spear point. There was no way he, Jack, could reach the hillfolk faster than they could stab, and he hadn't even had a chance to draw out a blade.

"Get over here," repeated the woman.

Jack took a step forward.

"Stay where you are, you zygote!" shouted Scrape. The tip of a spear poked her in the chest, but Scrape didn't step back. Instead she glared at the couple. "Kill me or whatever, just get it over with. Stand-offs irritate me."

"I said get over here," said the woman, ignoring Scrape.

Jack started walking forward.

"I swear, Jack, if you give yourself over I'm gonna murder you." Scrape growled. The growl echoed strangely in the woods. Jack stopped short in surprise, looking over the shoulders of the hillfolk who had apparently not heard anything.

"Nice try, but we don't fall for baby tricks like that," sneered the man.

Before Jack could respond, two panthers leapt out of the forest and landed, one each, on the hillfolk's backs. The hillfolk pitched forwards, barely missing Scrape with their spears, and fell under the weight of the cats. They might still have been young, but the panther kittens were *big*, and Jack knew their claws are sharp at any age. Scrape jogged over to the three boys.

"Fine," she said, before Jack could ask how she was. "Are we doing this or what?"

"Do you think they might hurt them?" Jack asked, listening to the snarls of the cats.

"They're panthers. They'll be fine," said Scrape.

"No, I mean—" but the panthers appeared around Scrape's legs and sat down on either side of her like guard dogs.

"Do we have a plan or what?" she demanded.

"Right." Jack turned away and led the boys over to the soon-to-be-on-fire side of the house. From Scrape's side, the panthers snarled at the hillfolk, who were tripping over each other to get away. Scrape proffered her bottle. Jack looked down and was surprised to find that the matches were still in his hand and unbroken. He lit one but the light breeze blowing across the clearing snuffed it out immediately, leaving a weak trail of smoke. Jack hunched his shoulders, faced away from the

wind, and lit it again. It went out again. Wash and Doc came up on either side of him, shoulder to shoulder, to block the wind. Jack struck the match and again it went out.

"Lemme try," said Wash, reaching out to take the matches. He lit one and it exploded into flames and then disappeared into smoke. "Grout," he muttered.

"Give them here," said Doc. Jack looked around nervously as Doc took the matches. He spotted a small, blond figure running out of the crowd towards them.

"Well now," Doc said angrily as he, too, was unsuccessful.

The small figure was almost on top of them now.

"What—?" began Jack.

"Get gone," Zee said as she passed them. They looked at each other for a moment, and then as one sprinted after her. They had barely made it past the edge of the mayor's house when a loud creak and muffled thuds and clangs followed by a few screams sounded behind them. The three boys, two girls, and two panthers all stopped short and whirled around. At first Jack didn't understand what he was seeing. Then his mouth fell open. The foundation of the north side of the Children Factory seemed to have collapsed, and all four flours were leaning precariously to the side. Everything fell silent. The entire clearing was facing the Children Factory, staring in shock as it swayed in the breeze. As they watched, a few bricks from the chimney bounced off of the roof and fell to the ground. And then there were two muted poofs from somewhere in the still extant foundation and with one slow, powerful motion the building fell forward, collapsing in on itself as it went. Its new momentum broke the silence. Children and adults alike screamed, fleeing the clearing and heading for the jungle. Jack and the others stood and watched as people flowed around them and the building fell towards them. It hit the ground with a thunderous crash that made the ground beneath Jack's feet tremble, and though it fell dozens of yards away, all five of them were forced to take a step back as the gust of air pummeled them. Jack

narrowed his eyes against the dust and looked around at Zee. She was standing straight, arms crossed, and peering through the dust towards the wreckage as if analyzing the collapse.

“Was that you?” Jack asked, in stunned disbelief.

“Yep,” she replied.

“Ow in The Great North an’ All its Surroundin’ Provinces did you manage tha?”

“Physics is physics no matter wotcher dealin’ wit’,” she said, and started forward into the dust, against the fleeing children, towards the former factory.

Wash shook his head, and, cursing fluently, followed after her.

“That,” said Doc, “might have been just the kind of distraction for which you were looking.”

“What—oh, right! Doc and Scrape, let’s go find the Mayor.” Jack, Scrape and Doc ran into the dust toward an unnaturally loud voice sounded from near the mayor’s house. As they approached, Jack could see the mayor standing on the steps of his house, speaking through the small end of a long cone. They began jogging towards him, listening.

“—prevent any more of the children from leaving,” he was saying, “gather them into the center and we will prepare secondary Domestication Facility. Anyone who flees or shirks their duties in any way will be punished most severely, however, the man, woman, or child who brings me Jack will be heavily rewarded. Now, if—”

“Hello,” Jack interrupted. He had managed to walk up the porch and stand right beside the mayor without the mayor noticing. The mayor’s face, red with effort and anger, turned to Jack.

“Go away, I’m bus—” he began, and then his eyes went wide.

Jack saw the man shift his weight. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” he warned.

The mayor ignored his words and lunged, or tried to. Scrape had appeared on the other side of the mayor, her long thin sword hovering

just over the man’s enormous belly. The mayor gasped and he took a step back quickly.

“I’ll have that,” said Jack, jumping up and snatching the cone out of the mayor’s hands. The mayor spluttered in protest, but Jack raised an eyebrow in what he hoped was an annoyingly patronizing manner and turned away. He put the cone to his mouth like he had seen the mayor doing and addressed the field.

“STOP,” he thundered in his deepest voice. “The next person who tries to detain, corral or hinder a child will suffer grievous punishment.” Jack saw a few skirmishes end and some tiny figures sprint off into the trees. Everyone turned to see who was speaking. Many children and a few adults looked up at Jack, confused, and a few adults started forward angrily. “STOP,” he thundered again. “Unless you want a dead mayor.” He looked around again and saw over fifty adults and children still scattered around the clearing. Most were standing and staring at him, but a handful of small huddled figures, sometimes in groups and sometimes on their own, sat or lay curled up on the ground. Jack couldn’t see if they were hurt, bound, or just scared. “Michael?” he called.

“Here,” a high voice shouted back. Jack looked over to see little Michael waving. “Free anyone who’s still bound. Get Jimmy to help you if he’s still around. Tish,” Jack didn’t bother looking for her. He knew his gang would be here. “Go around and make sure all the kids are okay. Doc will be with you in a second. Wash, Zee and Jocco, check the wreckage. Make sure everyone got out safe. Sally? Breaker?” He saw two waves in response, “Good, and anyone else who wants to help, make sure the adults don’t do anything stupid.” Out of the corner of his eye Jack saw the woman who had held Scrape at spear point creeping up to him, weapon in hand. He drew his sword and pointed both it and the cone at her. “This is what I mean when I say stupid!” he shouted. She jumped back. “Everyone who’s an adult, give your weapon to Sally and sit down in a group. Allen and Jacobsen, drop your weapons and get up here. Scrape, get the spear off this lady,” he pointed to the hillwoman who was

trying to subtly retreat now, “and come inside.” Jack turned to the mayor. “Who else makes decisions in this place?” he asked.

“Mr. J. Williamson, Mrs. P.V. Williamson, and Ms. L. Dean,” the mayor said loftily, as if these people were Jack’s superiors in every way.

“Dean, and Williamsons one and two, where are you?” he called through the cone.

The door to the catchers’ house cracked open, revealing three people.

“Right. All of you come inside.” Everyone in the clearing remained still. Except for Wash and Zee, of course, who were making a racket. “Everyone move!” said Jack, hoping that would do it. It did.

Jack stepped back and Doc walked up to join them.

“Well done,” said Scrape.

“Yeah, I can’t believe that worked. Well, specifically, I can’t believe they all gave in just to save this zygote’s life,” Jack jerked his head at the mayor.

Scrape shrugged.

“Would you guys take him into the room with the big table? I’ll wait out here for the rest.”

The three who had hidden tiptoed up the stairs nervously.

“Inside then,” said Jack, and they shuffled through the door.

Allen ascended the stairs, hands raised. He wore no jacket and his clothing wasn’t baggy. Jack nodded. Jacobsen was behind him. She did the same and Jack nodded again.

“How did you know our names?” asked Allen.

“Recon. How did you know mine?” asked Jack.

“Robbie,” said Allen. Jack froze for a moment. Somewhere in all the worrying and the fighting, Jack had forgotten about Robbie.

“Where is he?” Jack asked.

“In our house,” said Jacobsen. “I thought you did Recon.”

In his mind Jack’s mouth fell open. Robbie had been so close all that time. Outwardly Jack nodded and said, “Inside.” He raised the cone. “Wash. Come here a second.” Wash jogged over to Jack.

“Alrigh’?”

“Robbie’s in the catchers’ house. That one,” Jack pointed.

“Whadaya want?” asked Wash, looking deadly serious.

“Just make sure he doesn’t get out for now. Don’t spread it around, though. Maybe just Breaker.”

“Right,” Wash said, and sprinted off towards Breaker, who was following Tish around, checking on the adults as he went.

“Right,” Jack echoed to himself. He took one last look around and went inside.

# 38

THE ATMOSPHERE WAS FROSTY at best in the conference room. The mayor was seated at the head of the table, with Doc behind him, weapon still out. The three strangers were huddled in the middle on one side, looking absolutely terrified. You'd think they'd never seen a real kid before, Jack thought to himself, and then remembered that it was perfectly possible they hadn't, at least not a city kid. Jacobsen and Allen were sitting next to each other across from the strangers. They looked tense, but not frightened. Finally Scrape stood by the door, leaning casually against the wall as she eyed the group, sword out.

"Doc, will you go help anyone who's injured?"

Doc nodded and left while Scrape slid into the seat next to the mayor. She had sheathed her sword but was playing absently with a dagger.

Everyone was looking at Jack. His pulse quickened, and he felt hot all of a sudden. His mind went blank, which was distinctly unhelpful

considering these might be the most important words he would ever speak. He decided to start talking and see where it went.

"Right," he began. "So, I assume you've noticed that we broke into your Children Factory." The mayor snorted derisively but Scrape grinned. "And that we freed all your slaves."

The three strangers made small noises of protest. "They weren't—" the mayor began.

"Shut up," Scrape advised. They did.

"You can call them whatever you like, it's all semantics," Jack silently thanked Doc for that word. "Either way, you have been kidnapping kids from the city and keeping them against their will." He paused for a second but no one objected, although Scrape's bare knife might have had something to do with it. "Does anyone disagree?" he asked.

"We were doing it for their—your—own good," one of the two women said primly.

"What's your name, again?"

She glared at him. "Ms. Dean."

"Right. Ms. Dean. Unfortunately, we don't want you to anything for our own good. In fact, we'd love it if you could just ignore us, like we've been doing to you."

"Out of the question," she said. "You are children and therefore must be looked after."

Jack quickly glanced at Scrape and shook his head. She shut her mouth with a snap but continued glaring around.

"Firstly Ms. Dean, I think you're lying, and that you want cheap labor."

Ms. Dean gasped in horror.

"Oh!" cried Mrs. Williamson.

"How dare you!" said the mayor

"That is no way to speak to an elder!" chastised Mr. Williamson.

"Shut up," said Scrape again.

"Secondly," Jack continued, "I don't care what your excuses are; you may not kidnap us."



"You have to realize," said Mr. Williamson politely, though his jaw was clenched, "That you may think you're living well, but that is because you are children and you don't understand how a home and a life should be. You need work and structure, not running around in complete chaos."

"What we need is not for you to decide. And if you look a little closer I think you'll find a few of your own people think the same." Out of the corner of his eye Jack saw Allen flinch.

"That is—" began Ms. Dean.

"Stop," said Scrape.

"But really—" began Mrs. Williamson.

"Nope," said Scrape.

"I say—" began Mr. Williamson.

"Shut up," said Scrape.

"Now you—" thundered the mayor.

Scrape casually tossed the dagger with her right hand and caught it in her left, the point two inches from the man's throat.

"Discussion is over," said Jack, who was getting irritated and really didn't want to lose his temper. "Will you leave us alone?"

"That would be irresponsible," cried Ms. Dean. Jack decided then that she was his least favorite.

"We can't in good conscience," said Mrs. Williamson. Jack changed his mind.

"Absolutely not," said the mayor. Jack had always know it was him.

"Good," said Jack. He looked at Scrape. "What do you think?"

"Problem solved," she said.

"Prob—what do you—" the mayor stuttered.

"You have, what shall we say, Scrape? Six?"

"Six? I'm hungry. Three at most," she replied.

"You, and everyone with you, have three hours to get gone. You'll go over the mountains in any direction you want—"

"He's generous like that," Scrape interjected.

"If any of you stay behind we'll have to kill you. If any of you come

over these ridges again we'll have to kill you. In fact, if any of you are ever seen again past those three hours we'll have to kill you."

Jack could hear new and distant noise from outside the house. Scrape stood up and went to the window. The mayor snorted. "You have no way of enforcing this. You will eventually either kill us or let us go. Once that happens there will be nothing stopping us from recapturing you children."

The noise was growing louder.

Jack braced himself and then, "Maybe you can win against these children, but there are hundreds more in the city. We would—"

"Ha!" snorted the mayor. "You are a disorganized bunch of heathens who can't even control yourselves, let alone each other."

"You make a pretty good common enemy," said Jack.

The waved his hand dismissively. "I know how the city works—I've heard all about it. Countless gangs who do everything they can to avoid each other—you don't even know each other, let alone have some system of communication!" the noise was now a roar, but the Mayor seemed not to have noticed. "Ha! As if you could organize. And this is exactly why you need someone responsible—someone *adult*—keeping you under control. To save you from the chaotic lives—" he broke off.

With one motion Scrape tore the paper off of the window behind the mayor in time for them to see what looked like every single kid in the city yelling, shouting and armed flood into the clearing and engulf the fifty or so stragglers in a wave of noise and movement.

"No. Maybe we're not the most organized," said Jack, smiling as he saw a white-blond head run past. "But it turns out we can get the word around."

All three adults were staring out the window, open mouthed.

"I can't believe this," said Mr. Williamson.

"Believe it or don't, it's still real. Three hours. We'll tell the city kids not to hurt you. You'd better go tell your adults to pack. And if you want to refuse, just remember the exploding building. Our physics is better than yours."

"And so are our numbers," said Scrape.

"You're going to kill us!" cried Ms. Dean.

"What? Weren't you listening?" said Jack.

"We'll need to get supplies from the Domestication Facility," the Mayor said hurriedly.

"Yeah, that's fine. As long as you're out in three hours," said Jack.

"Good," said the Mayor. All the adults seemed to relax minutely.

Jack turned and walked out the door and into the kitchen. He grabbed two loaves of bread and a huge wheel of cheese, which he cut in half.

"Here." He tossed one loaf and one cheese to Scrape. "Enjoy it while you can. Who knows if any of the city kids will take up farming?"

She grinned as she caught them and tore a huge chunk of bread off with her teeth. "Ouh know," she said, mouth full to bursting. "Ah don't ge' wha' the 'ig," she swallowed, "deal is with being civilized."

"I can tell," Jack smirked, and she punched his arm.

They stepped out the front door into blinding sunlight. When he could see, Jack looked up to see a perfect blue sky, with a few puffy white clouds drifting over the ocean.

A flash of white-blond hair flew past again.

"Rat!"

The girl stopped.

"I've got news!" Jack called.

Rat skipped over.

"Hiya Jacki-o. Fancy seein' you here."

"Did you bring all these kids up here?" asked Jack.

She shrugged. "I just spread the news."

"Well I've got some more for you to spread." Jack told her what had been decided, and then off she skipped into the crowd shouting, "I owe ya for this one, Jackey!"

The door opened behind them and they both turned around, ready for a confrontation. Allen and Jacobsen were walking out, hand in hand.

As they passed, Allen paused for a moment.

"We're, uh... sorry for all the trouble."

Jack and Scrape looked at each other. Jack opened his mouth to speak but the couple had already turned away, heading off across the lawn towards their house.

"What do you think?" asked Jack.

"I think city kids weren't the only ones forced to do things."

The four adults followed the catchers, acknowledging neither Jack nor Scrape as they passed. They walked up to the first group of people and spoke to them briefly and then moved on to the next group.

Jack and Scrape stood silently for a few minutes, watching the children hug and talk excitedly, while the adults shouted, questioned, and cried before finally organizing themselves to leave. As he watched, Jack felt the anger bleed out of him. He was exhausted. He couldn't believe that only a few hours ago he was keeping a quiet moonlit watch with Rat. Only a few hours ago he just planned to free a few kids. Why did this have to get so complicated?

"You think we're as bad as them?" Scrape asked, suddenly. Jack looked at her and then followed her gaze to a circle of sad and bewildered adults.

He was quiet for a long time. Finally, he said, "North, I hope not." His voice sounded unfamiliar to him. Jack turned his back on the clearing and bowed his head. His chest hurt. Those were people he was forcing from their homes. People who cared about each other—made each other tea and food when they needed it. Real people, not just hillfolk. Guilt and fear had never felt like this. He didn't know how to get rid of it. Tish's voice drifted back to him: *is it so awful to cry about the terrible and unfair things in the world?* Hot tears dripped onto his cold, bare feet. He shut his eyes and wished he was back in camp, or a 'scapehole, or out in the jungle. Anywhere but here, making decisions, forcing people to do things. They had made him do it. He still had no right. He felt Scrape put her hand gently on his shoulder. His shell cracked. Jack put his hands in his face and cried hard. They stood there for a few minutes, Jack's

face in his hands, Scrape's hand on his shoulder. Finally, the tears slowed and stopped on their own. He felt calmer. He took a few breaths and wiped his face off on his sleeves. A loud rip sounded behind him and then Scrape handed him a large piece of black cloth. He wiped his face thoroughly and then looked down. Scrape was missing much of the right leg of her pants.

"What's next?" asked Scrape, and like that they were back, as if nothing had happened.

"We need Sally's gang and whoever else they can find to keep tabs on all the hillfolk and make sure they really leave. In fact, it might be good if we did watches around the city and the hill for the next month or so."

"And us?" prompted Scrape.

"Our gang has a private matter to deal with," said Jack, and he led the way down the stairs.

## 39

THE WHOLE GANG GATHERED in front of the catchers' house.

"What's up, Jack?" asked Jocco, cheerfully, as Scrape passed around bread and cheese.

"Check-in?" asked Tish, tossing her long, dark hair over her shoulder.

"Quick. Then we have something to take care of. Tish, how is everyone?"

"Physically?" she said. "Ask Doc. Mentally, well, the ones who have been in there for less than a year or so are pretty much thrilled. Those who have been in there longer are definitely confused. They don't know which group they belong to or what they should do. They all know they don't want to be in a factory anymore, but they've been hearing about how savage we all are and they're kinda scared of us."

"Huh," said Jack. That was one eventuality he hadn't seen coming. "Are they going off with the hillfolk?"

"A couple. The ones who were caught when they were really young.

The rest don't know yet. For now, most of the long-term slaves are still in the clearing. I think they're waiting for someone to tell them to move. They're not used to making their own decisions."

"Okay. That's something to deal with. Wash, anyone pulled from the wreckage?"

"No' even a mouse," he said, grinning. "She's a right demo expert."

Jack grinned too. "That was seriously cool," he said to Zee. "Right, Doc, injuries?"

"On the children's side: two broken arms, one possible concussion, eight cuts that needed stitches, and the rest are minor bumps and bruises. I will check up on them in an hour or so. The adults wouldn't let me inspect them." He looked a little hurt.

"You wanted to?" asked Scrape.

"Medicine doesn't take sides," said Doc loftily.

"And what have the hillfolk been doing?" Jack asked the group at large.

Jocco answered. "The mayor told everyone to pack what they could carry and that they were leaving in two hours. Sally and a bunch of other kids went with them to make sure they didn't do anything stupid. They went in groups so they couldn't be overwhelmed. The kids, I mean."

"Excellent."

"Are we finished? I should collect a few herbs—" began Doc.

"Not yet," said Jack. "First we have to talk about Robbie."

As Jack expected, there was an outbreak of angry cries. He held up his hand and everything was quiet again.

"He's in there, but we need to decide what to do before we get him," said Jack. "And we're not killing him," Jack added quickly. No one in the gang would actually do it, so those angry suggestions would just waste time.

"Send him with the hillfolk," said Jocco.

"We could banish him from the city," suggested Scrape.

"Make him *our* slave?" said Jocco.

"We're not doing that," said Jack quickly. Jocco shrugged.

"We could just kick him out of our camp," said Tish. That sounded reasonable to Jack.

"And send him off with the hillfolk," added Jocco.

"What do you guys think?" he asked the twins

"Ain't nothin' t' me s'long as I don' gotta live wit' th' guy."

"I concur," said Doc.

"Shocked," grumbled Jocco, who seemed to really like the sending him with the hillfolk idea.

"Leave off. 'Ee's a zygote wot botched up like a filcher nickin' wooden coins. I don' feel like knockin' around wit' a lout wot's got nothin' in th' brain pan. An' we all knew 'ee was a zygote, un'all."

"That's true," said Tish. "We probably should have seen it coming."

"He did sell us out," grumbled Jocco.

"Yeah, well, you're a zygote, too, sometimes," said Tish. Jocco blushed, no doubt thinking of his botched attempt to save half the gang.

"Let's just kick him out and be done with it," said Scrape wearily.

"I second that motion," said Doc.

"Samesies," said Wash.

"Yeah," said Tish.

"Fine," sighed Jocco.

Zee nodded.

"Oh, good," sighed Jack in relief. "Now we just need to tell him."

Jack and Scrape went in to get him. He didn't even struggle, just hung his head and walked out between them. When they stepped into the sun, Robbie squinted. Jack stood there watching the large boy who had once been so powerful now looking weak and deflated.

"What do you want?" he asked resentfully. "Just kill me already."

"We're not gonna kill you," said Jack. "You're free to go."

Robbie met Jack's eyes for the first time. "What?"

"But, if you ever give anyone trouble—not just us—we'll kick you out of this valley. And if you come anywhere near our camp, same

thing. Or try to steal from us or any of our stashes. Basically, just leave everyone alone. Got it?"

Robbie nodded, still looking unsure.

"Why'd you do it, Robbie?" asked Scrape. She was glaring at him, but Jack thought she looked she sounded a little hurt.

Robbie looked surprised. "The plague was back."

"And you had no faith in our capabilities?" asked Doc, sounding offended.

Robbie didn't respond.

Jack asked the question that had been bothering him since Robbie kidnapped Zee. "Why did you take Zee up to the hill? You could have just told them where our camp was and given all of us up."

Robbie shrugged. "I didn't know I was going to do it. We were just walkin' and Scrape was talkin' about the plague and, I dunno. Does it matter?"

"Not really," said Jack. "I guess we'll see you around," and led his gang away.

"Why'd you protect everyone else from him too?" asked Jocco.

"It's not just our gang that should be kept safe, right?"

"S'pose so," said Wash.

"Man, I'm glad that was quick," sighed Jack. "I'm pretty through with anger and violence for a—"

His sentence was cut off by loud bang and an almighty roar. The whole clearing turned to stare at the mayor's house, whose door had burst open. As they watched, Allen fell backwards over the threshold. He caught himself gracefully and hurried to his feet again as a red faced and furious mayor stomped out after him. Allen held his hands in the air. His father moved towards him and Allen moved back. Jacobsen appeared in the doorway. She leaned against the doorway, looking sad but unconcerned.

"I said no!" thundered the angry man. "She's a Westerner, she's got no important lineage. I let her be a defender because she's got some skill,

but she is not good enough for an Allen!"

Allen said something quietly that they couldn't hear across the clearing.

"What?!" shouted the mayor, his rage redoubled.

Allen said spoke again.

"Absolutely not! I forbid it! You are coming with me! They're all coming with me!"

Allen said a few words and the mayor lunged at him. Allen sidestepped easily and caught his father before he could fall down the steps. Allen then hopped down the steps himself and called something to Jacobsen, who left the doorway and joined Allen. Allen picked up a bag that had been left by the stairs, put it over his shoulder and said one last parting word to his father. Then he and Jacobsen turned around, clasped hands, and walked away, leaving the mayor sputtering in apoplectic rage.

Jack watched them walk over to an older couple who also carried bags and were standing about fifty yards away. They were dressed in hides and earth colors. Jacobsen hugged each of them tightly and gestured to Allen. Allen shook the older man's hand. He held out his hand to the woman, too, but she ignored it and hugged him. Jack could see Jacobsen's grin. Then the two pairs turned their backs and walked off towards the west.

Jack smiled.

# 40

FOUR HOURS LATER HUNDREDS OF CHILDREN crowded the clearing, all sitting in small groups, eating and talking and laughing. Not long after the hillfolk had finally left, children had disappeared and then reappeared on the hill lugging soup pots, dragging bags full of cans, and staggering under the weight of dead boars. All food was placed in the center of the clearing near a large bonfire, around which Cookie strode, giving orders and snapping his fingers impatiently. By the time all the food was ready, most of the followers had returned, reporting that the hillfolk hadn't given them any trouble and that a handful of kids were following still, just to be sure.

Jack found himself sitting on the outskirts of the field with his and Sally's gang. Everyone was catching each other up on the night's events.

"—and then we walked down the passage and the other guard was asleep!" Jocco was saying.

"Asleep?" asked Tish. "I thought you'd knocked him out."

"Well I would have," Jocco said sulkily.

"Ahem," said Wash. "I reckon' I kin shed some ligh' on this mysterious matter." Everyone looked at him. He continued. "As some o' you will remember, Jack an' Scrape ingested some herbs a few nigh's ago. Two leaves each. Most notable symptom: uncontrollable drowsiness."

"You conniving little purloiner!" cried Doc.

"Huh?" said Jim.

"You'll get used to it," said Scrape.

"By Doc's protests, I kin tell 'ees taken a shufty an' seen tha' I took the res' o' these herbs. 'Course I didn' 'ave access to anythin' useful, bein' mostly detained at 'Is Mayorly's Pleasure, but I did manage t' 'and 'em off t' a girl wot makes tea for the watches. S'posed to be a wakeful tea. Don' reckon it worked for 'em."

"No way," said Jack, a grin spreading across his face.

"Yep," said Wash, smugly.

"But how could you know which day we'd be?"

"Couldn't. Knew you'd come soon. An' knew you'd come at nigh' as tha' 'as the mos' tactical advantage. 'Ad enough for 'bout five days' worth."

"So you've been drugging the guards every night?" asked Scrape in delight.

"By proxy," said Wash, shrugging.

"That explains quite a bit," said Doc, only a little resentfully.

"Yeah, that's why the guard in the back didn't see or hear us. I was sure she would eventually," said Jack. "By the way, Tish, why were you up in the bedroom instead of belowground?"

"Don't know. Guess they cycle through us," said Tish. She was leaning back on her arms, her legs stretched out in front of her, ankles crossed and eyes closed, face tilted towards the sun. Jack looked at her, brow wrinkled. There was something different about her.

"They only have three brainwashers," said Trip. "That's why we were put to work instead of going straight to the brainwashing."

Apparently, they were trained for brainwashing.”

Wash snorted.

“And they questioned you guys at night?” asked Jack.

“It’s hard to tell when you’re down there,” said Tish. She turned to Wash and Zee. “They weren’t very good, were they? I don’t know what brainwashing’s usually like, but I wasn’t convinced.”

“Yeah, well, they didn’t really know how to deal with you guys,” said Trip. “I was in the sewing room and I heard the old couple talking.”

“The live ins?” asked Jocco.

“Sure. Anyway, they don’t seem to really care about what the kids in there overhear. I guess most of them had been brainwashed enough they thought it wouldn’t matter. So they were complaining about how most children aren’t so defiant: missing a few meals will usually turn a kid, but they got the impression you guys would starve to death before you even took them seriously—I heard them going on about Wash in particular. And then Zee never said a word, just looked at them like she was disappointed in them. It was disconcerting, they said. Whatever that means.”

“Baffling, bewildering, demoralizing, disturbing,” rattled off Doc, automatically.

Trip continued, “They said,” she laughed, “that one hillman—the giant one—refused to work with Zee after only one session. He said there was something off about her and he didn’t want to be around it.”

“I heard that Tish was the real problem,” said Jimmy. “She kept asking the questioners how they were doing and stuff. They had to move one brainwasher to guard duty cuz he started to sympathize with her. Imagine asking after them even though she hadn’t eaten in over a day. They were turning to her side.”

“Impressive!” said Scrape, grinning.

Tish just shrugged and smiled up at the sun pleasantly. It was confidence, Jack realized. Somehow, she had found her confidence in that Factory.

“So their whole plan in kidnapping us—and in sending catchers down into the city to talk, not catch—their whole plan woz jus’ t’ find Jack. Seems like an ‘ell of a lot of effort for one puny kid,” said Wash.

Jack punched him. “Reputation, maybe. Like you said?”

“Pride?” said suggested Tish.

“What, it hurt his pride that Jack escaped with Little Michael?” asked Sally.

Tish shrugged. “Maybe.”

Doc sighed deeply, “Pride goeth before the—”

“Inev’table child rebellion,” finished Wash, also sighing deeply before wedging a fist-sized piece of cheese into his mouth.

Everyone cracked up.

“And to recruit, though. Don’t forget Meg went to join them,” said Scrape.

“Yeah. I suppose they figured that now we noticed the plague was back they could use it to get us into the Children Factory without much fuss,” said Jack. “Where is Meg, anyway?”

“She and a couple O’Rileys went to go follow the hillfolk. The rest are probably around here somewhere,” said Scrape.

Jack looked around at the peaceful picnic and sighed contentedly. At least for a moment, he didn’t have a thing to worry about. There was a pleasant pause in the conversation. Jack rolled up a hunk of bread into a ball and tossed it in the air to catch in his mouth. Scrape caught it before it landed and popped it in her own mouth, grinning.

Another long silence followed. Jocco and Scrape tossed each other bread balls and Jack lay back, enjoying the play of the warm light hitting his skin and the soft breeze whipping the warmth away.

“I’m gonna see if there’s any more bread left,” said Jocco as he got to his feet. “Anyone want anything?”

“I’ll take some more bread. And some butter if it’s there. That stuff is good, I can’t believe we’ve never had it,” said Jack.

The others placed their orders and Jocco went off to get seconds

with Wash to help him carry it all.

"I believe I will peruse the bookshelf in the mayor's house," said Doc, getting to his feet. "Perhaps we will have a lesson later today."

"Kay," said Jack lazily, not opening his eyes.

Wash and Jocco returned before Doc did.

"I reckon' we go' the last o'th' bread. 'Ope tha's okay," he said, tearing a loaf of bread in half and tossing one piece to Jack and another to Trip."

"These. Things. Are. Heavy," panted Jocco. "That's for you." He dropped a roasted boar leg onto Cookie's lap and returned to his seat, where he and Wash happily tucked into a second leg, Wash still staring at the collapsed factory.

"Mazin'," he mumbled. "An it, wit' a stone foundation an' all. You're gettin' too knowledgeable for my own good, you are," he said to Zee. "I'll be redundant soon."

She shrugged and smirked.

After a few minutes of silence in which everyone ate heartily, Doc returned at a run, his eyes wide, holding a bound stack of papers.

"Jack, Jack, you must see this," said Doc.

"Okay, it's okay, what is it?" said Jack, his old fear that Doc might have a heart attack over a typo in a biology book returning in full force. "Sit down first, then tell us what it is."

"I may have found it," Doc said in a rush as he dropped to his knees between Jack and Wash.

"What?" said Jack.

"Look here," Doc opened the papers to somewhere in the middle. There was a very large drawing of something's chemical structure, so large that it spread across both facing pages. Jack only recognized the lines as a chemical structure drawing because Doc had unsuccessfully tried to explain them to Jack a few times.

"What're we looking at?" asked Scrape, who was leaning forward, one hand kept protectively over the new bandages on her side.

"I thought it might be the chemical composition of the antidote, but look at this." He pointed to something that was indistinguishable from the rest of the drawing. "This would result in central nervous system depression which results in—"

"The symptoms of the plague," Jack remembered.

"What?" cried Scrape.

"Ya found it," breathed Wash.

"*That's* what it looks like?" said Jocco, critically, tilting his head sideways as if it might look a little more ominous from a different angle.

"Why did the mayor have a drawing of the plague in his office?" asked Jack.

"I'm not certain, but on this page," Doc flipped many pages before finding the right one, "must be the antidote. It is very close to what I, myself, was coming up with," he added with just a hint of smugness.

"So can you make it?" asked Scrape.

"We shall see. There is a formula in here, but I need the right ingredients and equipment."

"You kin proly find some'a th' stuff in tha' chemical lab on th' bottom floor of the factory."

"The what?!" cried Doc, jumping to his feet. "And you only bring this up now?"

"And the antidote! I forgot about all the antidote in there! It's probably buried but I'm sure we could find it!" cried Jack.

"Easy. You can't ge' in there yet. We need ta excavate."

"Well, what are we all still doing here?" said Doc, clearly at a loss for why everyone else wasn't on their feet too.

"Sit down," said Scrape. "We're relaxing just now."

Doc looked around another moment but when no one jumped up, ready to dig through a collapsed building, he sat back down with a huff.

"We'll get to it, brother mine," said Wash as he leaned in closer to the diagram. "Lookit this." Wash pulled a stubby pencil from his pocket and sketched something on a new page.



"What? No, that cannot be possible." Doc pulled the book onto his lap and stared at it, then pushed the book back to Wash, shaking his head.

Wash darkened in his lines, filled in a few labels, and wrote a number at the top. He pushed the book back to Doc and lay back in the grass.

"Every time it's exposed to temperatures over fifty degrees the bonds break," he said.

"How can that be?"

"Don' be coy. You know the boilin' points a pretty much everythin'."

"Yes, but above its boiling point the plague would just dissipate. It would be harmless," said Doc. "That means it would have to be introduced to us through—"

"Sumthin' cold," finished Wash.

"How did you see that?" asked Doc, impressed. "I already had many experiments in mind to work out the intricacies—"

"You think in biology. I find it limitin'. Physics, however, is physics no matter—"

"Wotcher dealin' wit'," the entire gang finished. Wash grinned up at the sky.

Doc was silent for a moment, reading the notes scrawled out on the surrounding pages. "It's only introduced through something cold," he mumbled to himself, "that must be—"

"The water. Yeah," said Wash lazily.

"What? The plague is in the water? But that's great!" said Jack.

"Is it?" said Jocco, dubiously.

"If we know where it's coming from—" began Scrape.

"Maybe we can get rid of it?" Jack finished hopefully.

"It's possible," said Doc.

"It's probable," said Wash at the same time.

"We still don't know how the compound is introduced to the water," said Doc.

"Well," said Jack, hoping he understood what Doc had said, "Unless

someone was pouring the plague in the river every day, there must be something else there."

"Like a time-release capsule," said Doc.

"Unlikely. Check this out at thir'y-two degrees," he pushed the book back to Doc.

"Oh, my. Given the right materials—"

"Which'd occur in nature, easy," said Wash.

"These bonds would naturally form at thirty-two degrees," finished Doc.

"But that's freezing. It would be ice," said Jack, who could at least understand that much.

"No' if'n the wa'er's movin'," said Wash.

"And the river is at its coldest—" said Doc.

"At th' source," said Wash.

"So, what's making the plague?" asked Jocco, who was growing visibly irritated at the science-y conversation.

The twins ignored him.

"What does this part look like to you?" Doc asked Wash.

"Er, a messtup phytochemical?"

"My thoughts exactly. In this form it could certainly inhibit immune response. These ones seem to be alkaloids. I can't identify which specifically, but there are quite a range of them."

"This over 'ere is a dead ringer for sparteine.

"It's Lupin," said Tish, matter-of-factly.

Both twins looked up, surprised.

"Ow'd'you know?" asked Wash.

"Phytochemicals are found in plants, right?" she said.

Doc and Wash nodded together.

"Lupin tastes really bitter so it must have a lot of alkaloids, right?"

Both twins nodded again.

"And it has tons of sparteine in it, which is why you can use it to fix heart arrhythmias. I haven't looked up what those are yet, so don't ask."

“Ow by th’ King in th’ North do you know all tha?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I’ve been reading Doc’s herbal remedy books for over a year now.”

“Oh, right,” said Wash.

“This would explain why I couldn’t find it in the water samples. It is naturally occurring. I must have just dismissed it. But if it is Lupin, this must be a new strain. I’ve never heard of Lupin poisoning occurring only in adults.”

“So it’s a plant that’s been poisoning us. What, is it just planted at the source of the spring, then?” asked Jack.

“There is no way that it’s that simple,” said Doc, shaking his head.

It was that simple. The gang decided they needed to check the spring immediately.

Small bushes tipped with purple cones of flowers in full bloom clustered in and around the spring.

“These must be them,” said Tish.

“Well, what do we do?” asked Jack, looking towards Doc, Wash, and now Tish.

“Get rid o’ ‘em, I reckon,” said Wash.

“Do we just pull them out or what?” asked Scrape.

“That would work,” said Tish. “Just make sure you get all the roots. And we can come next spring to double check they’re all gone.”

And so everyone set about carefully extracting the poisonous lupins.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen this variety before,” said Doc, holding an uprooted plant up to the light for inspection. “And they’re certainly not in any of the books I have.” He turned to Tish, who nodded confirmation. Doc placed the notes in the grass and began comparing them to the live specimen he held.

“Well they only came here about six or seven years ago, right?” said Scrape. “When the plague hit.”

“But how?” muttered Doc.

They all paused for a moment.

“I haven’t seen them anywhere else in the jungle,” said Jack.

“I think—oh dear,” squeaked Doc.

Wash splashed over to him and over his shoulder.

“Oh,” he said, simply.

“What?” cried Jocco, annoyed.

“These plants, it seems, *aren’t* naturally occurring,” said Doc.

“Not naturally occurring where?” asked Jack.

“Anywhere,” said Wash.

“What does that *mean*?” said Jocco.

“They were bred. Bred specifically to be poisonous,” said Doc.

“These are notes for how to increase potency of the poison.”

“So they were planted here on purpose,” said Scrape.

“I don’t see any other—yes. So it would seem.”

“Oh,” said Jocco.

“That must be why everyone didn’t die at once. The hillfolk hadn’t perfected the plant yet, so in the beginning it was only strong enough to kill those who were already sick,” said Doc.

“Wait,” a weight had just dropped into Jack’s stomach, “are all the hillfolk we just sent off going to die now? This is the only water in the valley, and if they haven’t taken the antidote since they last drank—”

“No,” said Scrape. “Remember the mayor? He insisted he needed to get some things from the Children Factory. It would have been the antidote.”

“Oh, right,” said Jack. “I hope they got enough.”

“Who cares?” said Jocco.

“They will die out, though, won’t they?” said Scrape.

“If they can no longer have children? Yes,” said Doc.

Jack paused. But what could they do about it? Nothing—there was never anything that could be done about that. If there was, the hillfolk wouldn’t have had to catch city kids. Still, Jack didn’t know how he should feel about it. He sighed. He was sick of worrying about things he could control, he wasn’t going to do it about things he couldn’t.

Everyone continued working in silence until the last of the lupin had been uprooted. They grabbed armfuls of the plants and, after some discussion, all made the long trip down the hill, through the deserted city, and dumped the plants into the ocean.

"It's salty," explained Doc. "It will kill the plants quickly—before they are able to create more poison. Now all we have to do is give everyone one last antidote, and, if we've removed all the lupin—"

"No one will ever die o' the plague again!" finished Wash.

"Of *that* plague," said Doc.

"You always was the cheerful one," said Wash, happily.

"They were poisoning themselves this whole time," said Jack.

"It was the only place they could be sure the compound would form," said Doc.

"And it would be a good way to have control over the hill," said Tish.

Jack looked at her. She shrugged.

"It would. If the Mayor had control of the antidote, everyone would have to do what he said or he wouldn't give it to them."

That made Jack tired. He watched the half-submerged mess of leaves and branches as they drifter further and further from the shore until he couldn't find them amongst the turbid waters. He turned back to his gang and was surprised to find them lined up in check-in formation. Jack didn't say anything for a moment; check-ins were for sharing new information and organizing. He had too much information already and he didn't care what everyone did at the moment. He rubbed his temples with one hand and discovered that he had a headache again. Finally, reluctantly, he turned to Tish who was first in line and said, "Anything?"

"There are still a bunch of half-brainwashed kids up there. I'd like to help them if I can."

"Yeah, of course," said Jack, who had forgotten all about the kids up the hill, who might be scared and confused. He felt a twinge of guilt but pushed it aside. He couldn't think of everything himself.

"I'll go, too," said Scrape.

"Good. You guys do that."

"I'll go excavate the lab," said Wash.

Zee nodded.

"I'll go up as well," said Doc. "I would like to continue reading the notes on the antidote, just to be sure."

"Well," Jack turned to Jocco. "Let's move back home, then."

Jocco looked delighted.

# 41

THREE EVENINGS LATER found Jack industriously trying to light a fire. The clouds had returned. Heavy rain had soaked the wood-gathering trip, and the log in front of him was stubbornly refusing to light.

“Ere,” said a voice behind him. Jack turned around and saw Wash, soaked through but carrying an armful of almost dried wood. A full sack swung over his shoulder. “Got it from ‘scape’ole seven. There was still some left.”

“Thanks,” said Jack, gratefully, and he cleared away the wet wood and began shaving off strips of dry wood for tinder. Wash disappeared into his room to change, and by the time she returned the fire had caught and Jack was stacking the wet wood beside the hearth to dry. Wash threw himself down next to Jack with his usual nonchalance, dragged his sack over to him, and began pulling out squirrels.

“Kebobs or stew?” Jack asked.

“It’s miserable out there. We’re goin’ wit’ stew,” said Wash.

Wash and Jack cleaned the squirrels, chatting about nothing, and started throwing chopped meat into the tinner cans Jack and Jocco had retrieved from the ‘scapehole.

A dripping Doc entered the camp, grunted moodily to the others, and made a beeline for his room. A few minutes later he returned, smiling pleasantly, grabbed a few cans, and sat beside Wash and Jack to start opening them.

“How’s it going?” Jack asked him.

“Not bad, not bad,” Doc replied cheerfully. “It’s an easy enough procedure and the ingredients are all there. I should have more than enough by tomorrow. I dare say the hardest part about the whole endeavor will be administering it to everyone.”

“We’ll manage,” said Jack. He wasn’t worried. Ever since The Revolution, as the city kids were now calling it, all the different gangs had been positively amicable. Run, the leader of what was previously the O’Riley gang, was far less bloodthirsty than O’Riley had been, and now that her greatest fear had a cure, she wasn’t at all inclined to return her gang to their old violent lifestyle. The Southerners were causing problems, but that was to be expected. With the O’Riley gang out of the way they had been hoping to be the new dominant gang, and Jack suspected those hopes were still not completely dashed. Jack wasn’t concerned. If they stepped out of line there were a few hundred kids who would be more than willing to push them back into it. Jack didn’t know if this good will would last, but it didn’t much matter. He was enjoying it, and if it ended, well, he knew how to survive.

Doc, who had finished the cans, pulled out an enormous book. He flipped to a page near the front and began writing again.

“What part are you at?” asked Jack.

“Allen has just hit you on the head with a rock,” said Doc.

Jack rolled his eyes. “How is that important? And are you only writing about our gang? That’s not very thorough, is it?”

"I have been collecting information from others, as well," Doc sniffed. "It will be as complete as possible."

"Includin' th' 'illfolk?" asked Wash.

"History is written by the victors," Doc sniffed again.

"Tha's a criticism o' recorded 'istory, no' a guidline fer writin' it," laughed Wash.

"Well, at least there will *be* an historical record, however incomplete," said Doc.

"Thank heavens for tha'," said Wash, nodding seriously while Jack grinned. "Where've you been all day?" asked Wash.

"I was with Odd and Strange. They never learned to trap—can you believe it? So I was showing them how to build some simple snares. And tomorrow I'm taking a few of the wandering gangs into the jungle. You know, I never realized but a lot of kids have been totally avoiding it for six years. I'm going to show them around, maybe where the best hunting and gathering is, teach them how to find their way out if they're lost, stuff like that."

"Hey, guys," called a voice from the door. Jocco bounded through, shook his head, spraying the walls with water, and plopped himself down by the fire. "Stew? Great! It's miserable out there. Doc, you're still writing your novel or whatever?"

Doc humphed and set the book carefully away from the sodden boy. Jack stuck the tenner cans on either side of the now blazing fire.

"—and I think those new snares Wash and Zee came up with are going to work out well. I've been getting really into snaring things lately. My next project is going to be to come up with a snare strong enough to catch a boar," said Scrape's voice from the hall.

"That sounds good. Let me know if you need help finding the right kind of plants to use. Doc has a few books on the uses of different trees."

"Ah, warmth!" said Scrape as they entered. Both girls moved to their rooms to change clothes.

"You should change," Tish said to Jocco as she passed, "you're making

a mess." Sure enough, a puddle of mud and water was seeping from the boy.

"I'll dry. There's a fire," he said.

"Suit yourself, but I'm not cleaning it up," she threw over her shoulder as she entered her room.

The girls reentered the living room quickly and joined the others by the fire. Scrape pulled out a few knives and began cleaning and oiling them. "This weather is terrible," she complained. "Whatever happened to that anti-rust coating, Doc? My blades are getting all rusty."

"Imagine the state of my books!" said Doc. "I will have to dry them all out—every single one."

Everyone ignored him. Doc complained about the humidity affecting his books regularly, but the camp had never been wet enough that he actually had to dry them.

"Where's Zee?" Jack asked, stirring the stew. "Dinner's almost ready."

"Here," a voice came from behind Zee, Tish, and Jocco's curtain. Zee pulled the sheet aside and joined them. She was carrying a very thick book and still had her index finger stuck between the pages.

"Wotcher readin'?" asked Wash, scootching over to sit by her.

"Theoretical Mathematics and Its Contemporary Uses," she said.

"Wotcher reading tha' for?" he asked, eying the book suspiciously.

"Physics is all well and good," she said, "But I've found that mathematics is really at the heart of all sciences."

"But—tha's not- you jus' don' understand—" spluttered Wash.

Zee just shrugged, opened the book in her lap, and continued reading. Doc started laughing.

"Ey, she means your sciences, too, ya know!" said Wash.

"I am well aware," said Doc, still laughing.

"Food's ready," said Jack, pulling the cans carefully out of the fire.

"Who's up for dice while we eat?" asked Scrape.

Everyone made noises of agreement. Scrape retrieved the dice, and they all sat in a circle by the warm, crackling fire, eating and laughing and teasing each other as they played.

## *Acknowledgments*

Thanks to everyone who went over my manuscript. Mom, Dad, Jenny, Baby Kate, Christine, Noah, Brad and Alex who went above and beyond, and a special thanks to Colin for his enthusiasm. Additional thanks to Nick for the great illustration.



## *When the last of the adults died*

Jack didn't really take notice.  
But as they faded away kids  
started to disappear, too.

The kids formed gangs  
to protect themselves  
and tried to be careful.

As to the fate of the  
kidnapped children,  
no one knew.