**United States of China**

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General notes

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# Chapter 1 – Homecoming

*Wednesday, April 4, 2040*

Home. Am I really going home? It sounds crazy. That means that the Cleanse in New Hampshire has truly ended. The word itself makes me shudder. Who came up with it? I wonder how many died. I’ve been away for seven weeks now. I don’t consider Concord my true home, but still, it’ll be nice to be surrounded by my own things. It also means returning to high school. That’s something I didn’t miss.

The helicopter hits an air pocket and we suddenly drop in altitude, making my stomach lurch. I hate helicopters. Really do.

The copilot turns around and hands me back my cell phone. They took it away during my stay at the military camp. They said they couldn’t have a teen texting military secrets or something. You’d think they’d make an exception for the daughter of the general. But no … I felt so cut off from the rest of the world. But that wasn’t the worst thing. I remember the constant wheezing and rattling of the compressor, the stink of the nearby latrines, the lumpy chow they served, and let’s not forget, getting woken up by the shouts of the drill instructor at 6 a.m. Fun times.

Finally, I have a signal on my phone. It fills up with text messages and news feed:

* …
* Concord Police Station Torched
* Bomb Explodes in Middle Grade School
* Franklin Pierce Highway Bridge destroyed. Use Rte 202 instead
* Peace Talks Aborted after Dallas Attack
* Are u going to Naomi’s party?
* General Pershing Orders Attack on all Rebel Bases However Small

Dammit, my father is in the news again. I have a growing sense of dread after reading these texts. How will people respond? My school is for New England’s social elites. The students consist of a mix of posh Americans and kids like myself who are the sons and daughters of Chinese military officers. We mostly get along. Mostly. There’s an unspoken truce; you stay in your corner and we stay in ours. It’s complicated being biracial. My mom was a white American and my father is Chinese. Americans mistrust me because I was born in China and the Chinese, well, they think I’m as American as a hotdog. I don’t know where I belong.

I heard that the Cleanse’s final death toll was six thousand. I can’t think that it’s my own father who masterminded the whole thing; it’s too hard. But then again, he rationalizes everything he does. He said that the attacks from the U.S. Resistance were not only increasing in frequency but also getting bolder.

I slide through my holovid collection and pick the one with my mom. We’re holding each other’s arms and spinning silly in a garden near my old home in Shanghai. Her beautiful hair is brown like that of a teddy bear, unlike mine, which is raven black. She’s smiling as if she didn’t have a care in the world. I can see the dimple in her cheek. Holograms are so real—I want to make my mom grow life-size and hug her. I rest my head on the Plexiglas window. She passed away three years ago, but I still miss her like it was yesterday.

Our journey isn’t long—an hour, tops. The helicopter starts its descent. I gaze down and see smoke plumes rising like black pillars from where the mortar fire fell. There’s a whole section south of Concord that’s been destroyed. Buildings have been reduced to rubble, the road is pockmarked with craters, and one of the bridges above the Merrimack River is twisted like a corkscrew. The worst for me is the homes that have been burnt to the ground. I feel my eyes water as I think of the families who lived there. No wonder Father wanted me to leave so suddenly.

We land in Concord. As I disembark from the aircraft, the air is thick with dust, forcing me to shield my eyes. A gray-haired military officer escorts me to the armored limousine waiting to take me home. He’s holding his helmet with one hand and nudging me along with the other.

Jayden, my chauffeur, is standing next to the passenger door. He’s wearing an elegant woolen trench coat today. With his cropped hair and steel-framed glasses, he could be mistaken for a businessman, but he’s a soldier who graduated with top honors from military school. My father handpicked him to be my driver. Someone once told me that he believed Jayden could take down an entire squad with just a sharp pencil. Surely an exaggeration, but still, this guy has quite the rep. I often think that he must be annoyed at having to chauffeur me around when he could be doing so many other things for his country. If he is, he never lets it show. He might be stiff as a broomstick, but I missed him. We exchange smiles.

“It’s still early, Teegan. I’ll drop you off for your afternoon classes.”

“Really, Jayden?” I plead. “I just want to go home.”

“Your father’s order. He thinks you’ve missed enough school as it is.”

“But I don’t have my schoolbag or anything,” I argue.

From the trunk of the car, he retrieves it and tosses it to me. I catch it instinctively. Damn, this guy is too organized.

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It should be a short drive from the military airport to my school, but with the recent bombings, we need to take detours because a bridge or a road has been closed for repairs, or shut for good. We drive past convenience stores, barbershops, Laundromats, bars limned with neon piping, past the state capitol building, the Veterans of the Civil War hall, past my favorite coffee shop. Oh, crap! It got the dreaded “T”**.** The holographic letter hovers above the door in bright yellow. Being branded a traitor means the shop will be tagged with a special frame on social media and it’ll be subject to vandalism by vigilantes. In short, it will mean the slow, agonizing death of the business. I’m going to miss this place; the owner was such a nice guy and he served the best blueberry muffins. The worst is that he might not even be a traitor; maybe a pissed off customer or an ex-girl-friend called the government’s hotline and fabricated a story about him. Feeling unsettled, I fumble in my purse looking for jellybeans and then I remember—I finished them already.

We finally pass the school’s guard tower and security checkpoint, and Jayden drops me off at the main entrance. I tighten my coat; icy gusts are blowing hard. We’re in April, but it’s still freaking cold; it looks like spring didn’t get the memo. I chew on a fingernail, apprehensive about how my first day back in school is going to be.

I hear shouting and grunts up ahead. As I near the source of the commotion, I notice that a circle has formed around two of my classmates: Roth, a white dude from The Hamptons, and Jié, the son of a Chinese officer. Jié has blood dripping from his nose. Roth has a welt on his face. He notices me as I join the onlookers. To my surprise, he spits in my direction, cold contempt in his eyes.

“Why the fuck did you that for?” I say.

“Don’t like invaders.”

“We didn’t invade you, Roth. Why can’t you get that through your thick head?” I tap on my forehead with my finger. “Your Federal Government asked the Chinese military for help.”

“No, we didn’t. You sent your troops in. They’re fucking everywhere.”

“Chinese soldiers died to help your country, asshole. Without China’s intervention, the Second Civil War would’ve gone on for years.”

“Well, it’s high time you fucking chinks go back home.”

As soon as he says chinks, Jié smacks Roth in the face, and they’re at it again.

Gee, you would think Americans would be more grateful. I stomp away.

I make my way around the fight and as I do, I notice my friend Adrian on the other side. I wave at him.

Adrian hasn’t developed his fashion sense while I was away—his jacket is too narrow in the shoulders. His pants might, just might, have been in fashion ten years ago. But Adrian doesn’t care, and it’s part of his charm. He strolls in my direction and he looks … well, he looks rather ripped, more so than usual. Perhaps it’s the snug t-shirt under his jacket or maybe he hit the gym during my absence.

“Hey, when did you get back?” he asks as he catches up with me.

“Just flew in.”

“Well, thanks to your father, order has been restored.”

“Yes, but for how long this time?”

“Not sure. The Resistance only backed down because of the intense fighting, but they promised to come back in full force soon. But enough of that. How was life in your military camp? Learn any good drinking songs?”

“Not even. It was dull as shit.”

Adrian and I walk to the entrance. I open the main door. In my absence, I had almost forgotten the grandeur of my school. It’s epic—it has marble floors, soaring columns, gilded ceilings, and masterpiece replicas dotting the halls.

There’s a massive sculpture from a French artist whose name escapes me, sitting firmly in the middle of the hallway. I skirt it. Adrian laughs. “You do this every time, Teegan. It’s a hologram. You can walk right through it.” He waves his hand inside the statue as he passes by. “See?”

“I know, but it looks so real.”

As we amble down the corridor, I see my friend Emma. She changed her hair while I was gone. It’s now shoulder length. It suits her oval face. She’s wearing a blouse that gives her a flattering figure. It’s finished with cute little dome buttons and gorgeous puff sleeves. I catch a faint shimmer washing across the silken fabric, brightening it briefly. That’s so cool. It must be one of those power shirts. They are crazy expensive. I heard that they harvest energy from physical movement. That sounds almost magical to me. I should get a self-heating one—I’m always cold. But even with her fancy clothing, Emma can’t shake off her next-door-girl look—she looks like the chirpy cousin that always arrives with a cooler full of beer at your barbecue.

“Hey! I saw your video-blog on the Student Council Scandal, Teegan. It was brilliant.” She gives me a high-five. “You should totally do a video on the Spartans next. They’re on their longest winning streak of the season and as a bonus, you would get to interview the team’s captain, Ryan. Think about it, Teegan, *Ryan.*’’

“Sports isn’t my thing, but I agree, Ryan *is* hot.” I cast a quick glance to see if Adrian reacts to my comment. Nope, he doesn’t. Is he really not interested in me? Or maybe he’s not the jealous type. Hopefully, that’s it.

“Just think about it.” She flutters her fingers and leaves.

Mark, a student from my year, stomps toward me, a wicked grin on his face. He gets closer until he’s towering over me. He’s sweaty from his basketball game. Eew.

“What do you want with me?” I give him a shove, but he is so much taller than me that he doesn’t even budge.

“So,” he asks, his voice loud enough to carry across the hall, “how does it feel to be the daughter of the most *hated* man in New England?”

“Lay off, Mark,” says Adrian, taking a step forward.

“I’ll handle this, Adrian. How do you think I feel, dumbass?” I reply, poking him in the chest. “Maybe if there were fewer bullies like you, we wouldn’t be in this mess! Ever think of that?”

I pivot on my heels. “Let’s go, Adrian. What’s with these people? My father is just doing his job, for God’s sake.”

“A boatload of people did die …” says Adrian.

“Stop! Don’t you think I know that? I saw with my own eyes the trail of destruction from the helicopter. The Second Civil War should have ended five years ago. Why can’t the Resistance just fucking let it go?”

We enter the classroom. I throw my schoolbag on my desk and slump on the uncomfortable wooden chair. This is going to be one hell of a school year.

# Chapter 2 – Together, We Are Stronger

The next day, just before class, I meet up with Adrian by our lockers. Roth glowers when he sees me in the corridor, but at least this time he doesn’t spit at my feet. Although his face is swollen from yesterday’s fight, he’s standing tall. Clearly, he has no regrets.

As I’m talking to Adrian, the image displayed on the hall monitor changes from a list of school rules to an aerial view of Boston flanked by Chinese and American flags. The caption reads: “5 Years of Cooperation, 5 Years of Safety.”

“Quite the gala they’re organizing,” says Adrian glancing at the display.

“Tell me about it. Remember, I’ll be singing in front of the nation.”

“Your father is still making you go through with it? I thought you were off the hook.”

“I was, but he was so disappointed that after a few days I caved in and told him I would do it after all. It’s all right. In a way, I’m doing it as homage to my mom. She used to love hearing me sing.”

“I heard a rumor that Glam will be playing. Is it true?”

“Absolutely! Oh, I hope I get to meet them. Their latest album is unbelievably good. Kido is *so* talented.”

“You still have a crush on him. Admit it,” says Adrian grinning.

“No. Maybe. What’s it to you, anyway?” I say, folding my arms.

“Just asking.” Adrian tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

“Are you still going ahead with your tattoo tomorrow?” he asks.

“Definitely.”

“Little - miss - badass,” says Adrian, poking me in the arm at the end of each word.

“It’s not that. I want to live. Being stuck in a control zone, getting chauffeured around, going to a school with guard towers … it’s just not my idea of how I’d spend my sixteenth year.”

“And what did you have in mind?”

“I don’t know, getting drunk for the first time, going to parties, discovering new music, and falling in love.”

When I say love, Adrian smirks. I blush and turn away. I’m not sure about our relationship and it’s driving me mad. Are we a thing? His dark hair and broad shoulders make him the center of attention of a good portion of the school’s female population, but I’m the person he hangs around with the most. He’s so hard to read. We even held hands a few times, but he never makes a move, and I’m independent as hell, which is probably not helping.

“I’ll have a gift for you on the night of the show,” says Adrian with a playful smile.

“You will?” My curiosity is piqued. “What is it?”

“It’s a secret. You’ll find out on the day of the celebrations.”

“You can’t keep me hanging, Adrian,” I protest. “That’s not fair!”

“Yes, I can. We’ve got to get to class.”

“You’re so cruel.” I jab him in the shoulder.

“I know.”

Adrian enters the classroom. I follow him absentmindedly, racking my brain for what it could be. Flowers? No, that would be too mundane. A handbag? A ring? A vintage vinyl for my record collection? Argh. I hate him.

I go to my assigned place at the back of the class. Emma is sitting not too far from me. She keeps readjusting her hair and gazes at a guy she has a crush on hoping that they’ll make eye contact. No success so far. The guy is too busy looking discreetly at his phone. Ever since Emma’s topless hologram was leaked on the internet by her ex-boyfriend, she’s had trouble getting taken seriously. Poor Emma. She was humiliated and teased without mercy. Every day I would find her crying in the girl’s bathroom, hidden in a stall, her knees pressed against her chest. She cried so often that she stopped wearing mascara. Adrian and I stood up for her on every occasion, but the students wouldn’t let it up. The principal had intervened but to no avail. One day after spotting Emma huddled in a tight ball on the hallway floor, sobbing in a whimpering way that tore at your heartstrings, Adrian had had enough. He had lifted one of the bullies—a guy named Brodericc—and rammed him into the lockers.

“Enough!” he said. "Stop harassing her.”

“What the hell, Adrian? Why are you defending her?” the student had barked. “She’s just a slut.”

“I thought slut shaming was a thing our parents did, Brod. If there’s anyone you should be harassing, it’s the jerk who posted publicly a hologram that was meant for his eyes only.”

The bully had tried to wriggle himself free from Adrian’s grasp, but he was pinned solidly. Brodericc had turned his head left and right looking for an ally, but no one came to his aid.

“Listen!” Adrian had grunted, “If I hear a word, a peep even that you or anyone else has given Emma trouble, I promise you that your mamma won’t recognize you when you get home. Got it?”

Brodericc swung a punch but missed wildly. Adrian leaned forward and pressed his forearm hard against his throat, making him gasp for air.

“Got it?”

The student whimpered a “yes,” but Adrian was not content with that. He wanted the nearby students to hear.

“What did you say?”

“I’ll stop,” he said louder.

And with that, Emma’s life gradually became normal again.

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I turn my attention back to Mr. Bradley who’s blabbing on and on about the discovery of the Cas9 protein and how it revolutionized genome engineering. Zoe, usually a quiet student, raises her hand.

Mr. Bradley looks at her. “Yes, Ms. Watson?”

“Well, I think we shouldn’t tamper with God’s creation.” She sweeps the room looking at the handful of designer babies in our class. “No offense to the mods.”

Mia twirls her wheat-blond hair in her fingers before replying, “That’s so hypocritical, Zoe. You’re a designer baby.”

“I didn’t choose to be a mod. My parents did.”

“Stop it you two,” says Mr. Bradley. “You both know that we don’t discuss religion in school. Now about today’s experiment. We’re going to edit the genomes of bacteria so it can survive on Strep media which would normally prevent its growth. Now, go and grab a petri dish from the shelves in the back.”

In a flurry of chairs and desks scraping on the floor, everybody gets up.

“My friend Marjorie has a fluorescent viper,” I overhear John say.

“Oh, that’s so creepy. Creepy but cool,” replies Emma, grabbing a dish.

“Why can’t we do fluorescent beer instead?” asks a girl behind me.

Once we’re done, Mr. Bradley says, “Now, if you would return to your seats, I’ll walk you through the steps.”

He hasn’t crossed the dozen feet separating him from the electronic chalkboard when we hear a deafening detonation outside. The class is startled and everyone starts talking with worried looks. I peer outside. In the distance, I spot a military helicopter heading northeast toward the industrial sector where the weapon manufacturing plant is. I point it out to Adrian.

“Quiet!” Mr. Bradley barks. “I’m sure there's nothing to be concerned about. The Cleanse has ended and the New England Resistance have been expunged.” To support his point Mr. Bradley nods to the DEFense readiness CONdition indicator, which is yellow, it’s normal value. We have these installed all over the school now.

He turns to the smart speaker hanging from the ceiling and says, “Aria, turn on the electronic blinds.” The windows become instantly frosted. And then he starts again, “The E. coli strain will be using is harmless. Now grab a …”

His sentence is interrupted by the blaring of the attack-warning siren—an incredibly loud and annoying two-tone sound—going up and then down. The DEFCON alert state jumps to red.

“Duck and cover! Duck and cover!” yells the professor. “Jiàn, what are you doing? Get away from that window.”

I drop to my knees and clasp my hands behind my neck, face to the floor like we practiced so many times in the bomb drills. Adrian runs toward me. Another detonation. Closer this time. I can feel the tremor. Mr. Bradley’s tablet bounces off his desk before crashing to the floor. I exchange a glance with Adrian. Jiàn is in tears, his fear contagious as any virus. A few are mumbling prayers like mantras: “Please God, please God …” I can hear bombs exploding in the distance like the roll of distant thunder. Stupid, stupid, stupid is all I can think. The war, the deaths, everything. I try to imagine where the bombs are falling but it’s hard to pinpoint. My house is northeast. I hope granddad is safe. I bite my lip. I feel a hand squeeze my shoulder. I turn around. It’s Adrian. He offers a reassuring smile. I smile meekly back.

After what seems an eternity, silence.

The DEFCON indicator changes back to yellow. A school guard knocks on the class door window and waves for everyone to get up. I have pins and needles in my legs from kneeling so long.

The professor talks on his phone briefly and then turns to the class. “Remaining classes have been canceled. It’s safe to go back home.”

As we’re herded out, a classmate shoots me a death stare and says, “How many people did your father kill this time?” I ignore him. Just as I enter the corridor, someone trips me. I fall to the floor and smash my face. Adrian rushes to my side and pulls me up. I’m about to run after the guy who tripped me when Adrian grabs me by the shoulder.

“Not worth it,” he says.

I’m angry and sad, but I don’t want to draw further attention to myself, so I let it go. If anything, I want to disappear to a moron-free alternate universe. Before the Cleanse, considering my father’s military rank, no one would have dared to intimidate me. But now, everyone is so fearful and mad that they don’t care anymore.

Adrian escorts me to my father’s military car. Jayden is waiting next to the open passenger door.

“Need a lift home?” I ask him.

“Thanks for offering, but I’ll take this time to go buy my mom’s medication.”

“Okay. Tell her I said hi.”

“Will do.”

I’m about to step into the limo, when I see Brigadier Grayson walk up to Adrian.

Adrian smiles and they shake hands. Grayson is an ambitious, ruthless military who works for my father. I didn’t know he knew Adrian. Weird.

As soon as I settle in the limousine, Jayden drives off.

“Is Ye Ye okay?” I ask.

“Yes, Teegan, your grandfather is fine. I spoke to him not ten minutes ago.”

“Was anyone hurt in the bombing? Was it the Resistance?”

“There was no bombing. A gas line exploded. That’s all.”

“But we saw a military helicopter. We heard dozens of bombs.”

Jayden doesn’t respond. I wonder why I bother asking. He won’t tell me anything.

The Cleanse didn’t even work. Six thousand people died and it changed nothing. I thought my school was in a safe zone, but not even. More attacks are coming; I know it. I decide to ignore Jayden for the rest of the ride. As we reach the security checkpoint of the zone where I live, Jayden slows down, opens his window, and waves at the guard on duty. He raises the gate for us.

As we pass by, new content flashes on the holographic billboard; A white woman is cuddling a baby gorgeous enough to be featured on an infant formula box. Underneath, the text reads: “Report suspicious activities and earn up to a 100 social credit points.” Sparkling stars rotate slowly in a circle above the woman’s head as if she were a saint. Ugh. Compensating people to denounce their neighbor makes me want to hurl.

As Jayden pulls over in front of my house, he breaks the silence.

“Your father told me he would be working late tonight and that he ordered pizza for you.” That’s my father, never home.

After a moment, ill at ease, Jayden adds, “He expects you to be studying for your math exam when he gets home.” I think Jayden is tired of playing surrogate-father and would love it if the General gave his directives directly to me. I don’t tell Jayden this, but so would I.

“And where’s granddad?” I ask, suddenly cranky.

“He had some errands to run.”

This sucks. I’m alone again for supper. I grab a few now-cold slices of pizza from the kitchen, go to my room, and slam the door.

# Chapter 3 – Inked

The next morning, I’m only ten minutes late when I open the front door. The limo is idling with the lights out, waiting for me on the snow-packed road, the plume of the car's exhaust rising in the cold air. Jayden comes out and opens the car door when I arrive.

“You’re late again, Teegan. You’ll get into trouble.”

“Just drive fast, Jayden. Government cars don’t get speeding tickets, so there’s nothing to worry about. Oh, I almost forgot. I have a group project after class. Can you pick me up at six instead?”

He looks at me, trying to decipher if I’m lying or not. I open my eyes wide, smile and dare him to say no.

“Sure. I’ll inform your father, of course, so he doesn’t worry. And what should I tell him the project is about if he inquires?”

I didn’t expect that question. Think fast, Teegan. “It's about James Cook,” I stammer. “The explorer who went to Tahiti in 1771.”

I see in Jayden's facial expression that he buys it. Adding numbers and dates is a surefire way to make your lies more believable.

“Good. It's settled then,” I say.

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I make it to my class in the nick of time. As I sit on my chair out of breath, I think that there should be a law preventing school days from starting with math. I pay even less attention than usual during class. Right now, I can only think of the tattoo I’m going to get later today and what’s it going to look like.

At lunchtime, I grab a food tray and look for Emma. I don’t find her but Madison waves at me to join her group. I sit on the bench next to them. As soon as I do, her two companions roll their eyes, grab their trays and flounce away.

“Ah, c’mon girls, stay,” says Madison, turning to them.

“Screw them,” I say, as I stab my link sausages with my fork.

“So tonight’s the night,” says Madison. “Emma told me about your tattoo plans. Is the shop in Concord?”

“Ahun,” I reply as I take a bite of potatoes.

“Have you decided where you want it?” she asks.

“Under my right breast.” Seeing the surprised look on her face, I add, “Well, it was either that or my bum. It needs to be in a location that my father will never see.”

“Oh, right. Is Adrian coming?”

“Yup. He insisted. He says he wants to be my bodyguard.”

“Oh, that’s so cute.”

I dip my sausage into ketchup. “We’re going outside the controlled zone, you know.”

“I can’t wait to see it!” Madison clasps her hands.

“I can’t believe you beat me again at Orc Wars last night,” says Joe as he walks by us with his tray.

“What can I say? I’m better than you in every single way,” Madison replies with a confident smile.

“Are you going to Naomi’s party?” I ask.

“No. I’m going out of town for a few days.”

“Again? You seem to miss school quite a lot.”

“I do, but I’m still an ‘A’ student. Perks of being a mod, I guess. Honestly, I just need to read the material once or twice and I get it. I don’t need to attend classes. The professor doesn’t speak fast enough and I get bored.”

“God, I’d like to be a mod too,” I say as I shove a forkful of mash potatoes in my mouth. “I hate math. I’d rather get a root canal than do calculus.”

“Being a mod comes at a cost. Everything around me is so boring … I process things so fast that life, for me, is like watching a movie in slow motion.”

Madison nibbles at her salad. “How about you. Are you going to Naomi’s party?”

“Not sure.”

“You should go. Her house is insane. You should invite Adrian too. He likes you.” She smirks.

I look up from my plate. “You really think so?”

“Oh, yes. I see how he looks at you. He’s playing all cool, but I’m sure that if you would sneak in his room you would find a framed picture of you on his night table.”

I laugh. “Regarding Naomi’s party, I’m not sure going is a good idea …”

“Life is like a video game except you only have one life. So don’t stress it. Nothing matters really. We’re all going to die so enjoy the ride, get the high score, and make out with the hunk.

“Fair point.”

“By the way, I’m going to a counter-protest in favor of designer babies on Saturday. The church is protesting mods. Want to come?”

“I can’t. I have my singing lesson.”

“Oh that’s right. You’re singing at the grand celebration, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“My father will be there. His company is sponsoring the fireworks.

“That’s nice of him.”

“Yeah. My father likes to support the Feds.” Madison grins devilishly as if what she had just said was an inside joke.

The school bell rings. We hastily finish eating and head to class.

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At long last, the school day ends. I grab my schoolbag and meet up with Adrian.

“Thanks for coming with me. I really appreciate it.”

“Sure thing. I know it's something that matters to you.”

I nod. When mom died, I promised myself that I would get a tattoo just like hers, and I’m finally doing it. Apparently, the tattooist I’m seeing tonight is the best in Concord. I hope he lives up to his reputation.

The drive takes us out of the controlled zone. My nose is pressed against the car window as I observe the city with interest. As we head toward the older part of town, the propaganda posters become less frequent. I notice graffiti, broken and boarded up windows, and lots of trash lolling about. I shudder. I’m now doubly glad Adrian is accompanying me.

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The car beeps. Adrian glances at the instrument panel. “We’ll have to stop to charge the car. The fuel cell is low.”

“Okay.”

We stop at the next service station we see. An air taxi with a broken propeller sits in the courtyard like a bird shot down from the sky. I wonder why they don’t bother repairing it. Oh, wait. I remember. Self-flying taxis were banned last fall after one of them was loaded with explosives and remotely detonated as it neared a delegation from the People’s Republic of China. It triggered public uproar.

As Adrian hooks up the car to the charging station, I spot a torn U.S. flag, its colors faded, wrapped around a concrete block in the burnt down remains of a police station. We have a few minutes before the battery is sufficiently charged, so Adrian and I walk over there.

With each step, my boots lift ashes and turn the immaculate snow into an oozy, gray slush. Something major happened here, I can feel it. Granddad would surely say that ghosts haunt this place. He sees ghosts everywhere; he even claims there’s one in the convenience store by our house. He say’s he has a chill each time he goes in to buy something. I think its just cold air from the beer fridge, but hey, who am I to argue with grandpa.

A wildflower wreath, wilted by the cold, rests on top of the block. Who might have left it there? On a charred wall, a collage of portraits has been assembled haphazardly: small pictures, big pictures, some in plain paper, others holographic, celebrating birthdays, weddings, graduations, life.

“Victims of the Cleanse?” ventures Adrian.

“Looks like it,” I say.

There’s a voice recorder taped to the wall. I press the play button. A voice full of crisp determination speaks. “I’m not sure how long my recording will survive the URF, but even if it stays just a while, it’s better than not at all. I don’t want anyone to forget the Cleanse and what they did to us. I hope this memorial will be an antidote to denial or oblivion. No one should forget what happened here. Ever.

“When the elite URF troops arrived in Concord, they came equipped with the latest and greatest military gear. They gradually overtook every position the Resistance had won. The guys were outgunned and outnumbered, but a small band refused to surrender. They eventually converged on this police station on the afternoon of March 11. The police commander, a partisan, let them in. It didn’t take long for the URF to surround the building. Using a megaphone, they ordered the rebels to come out with their hands over their heads. The leader refused, hollering, 'We'll come out standing proudly or not at all.' The rebels started to barricade the windows.

“The URF placed flammable material next to the building walls and lit it up, certain that the insurgents would come out, smoked out of their hole.”

Holy shit! I can’t believe they did that. They could have waited them out or sent a SWAT team, I don't know. I'm no military expert, but burning it down?

“God sure has a twisted sense of humor,” the voice continued, “because the wind blew in my direction that day. The smoke was so dense; it made my eyes sting. Even as the building blazed, I kept my red eyes riveted on the entrance, hoping—no, praying—that someone would come out. But no one did. Not a single soul surrendered.”

The tremor in the speaker’s voice speaks volumes about his emotions. His voice is so soft now that I have to edge closer to hear.

“Seventy-two members of the New Hampshire Resistance died that night, including a family of five, and my nephew, Ethan. That’s what I had to say, lest we forget why we’re fighting. One day the URF will get what's coming to them and I plan to live just long enough to see it.”

I look at the collage again and, in my mind, all of the pictures spring to life. The dad blows the candles on his birthday cake, the bride kisses the groom, and the graduate throws his cap in the air.

All dead now.

How many family members have they left behind? I think of my own mom who died of cancer and how that affected me. Outraged, I hit the wall with the palm of my hand. Tears well up in my eyes and begin to spill down my cheeks. Adrian skims across the pictures with his finger, lost in his thoughts. Instinctively, I reach for my phone and take a picture of the memorial.

My world is spinning away from me. I’m guilty by association. I’m guilty of murder. It doesn't make sense, I know. I wasn’t there after all, but a swirling storm of shame fills me and makes my stomach lurch.

As we walk back to the car, the story makes my head swim—seventy-two people died, engulfed in flames. The rebels were given the option to surrender. Were they heroic or plain stupid to stay? What was my father's involvement in their death? Did he issue the order, or was it one of his subordinates? I slip on an ice patch. Adrian grabs my arm just in time and prevents me from falling flat on my bum.

“Easy there,” he says. “I've got you.”

Adrian stares at me, a look of concern on his face. I stare back, at a loss. He knows what I'm thinking—Adrian and I have this ability to understand each other with very few words and he demonstrates it once more.

“Don't jump to conclusions, Teegan,” he says. “Maybe your father wasn’t even involved in this incident. He has a lot of responsibilities. Maybe he was only informed after the fact.”

“What about the family of five, why did they stay?”

“I don't know, Teegan. I really don't.”

I have no answer either. I open the car door and let myself drop on the passenger seat. Before the Cleanse and father’s involvement, I was like an onlooker gawking at the scene of a car accident, concerned but uninvolved. But with every passing day, the insurrections, the riots, and the strikes are becoming more personal, and I hate it.

Slouched in my seat, I bite my nails. I'm not sure what to do. Should I talk to Father? Ask him what happened? What would he tell me? Probably nothing. He never does. He didn’t even tell me about mom. He lives in his own little world separate from mine. I want to post the picture I took on social media, but that would get me in a shitload of trouble—not only would it be considered subversive, but it would prove that I went outside the controlled zone. I gaze out the window in silence. After a while, there's nothing left to chew off my index fingernail, so I start on another one. Adrian interrupts my thoughts.

“We're almost there.”

“What?”

“We're almost at the tattoo shop.”

“Oh.”

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We park the car. As we walk down the curb, I notice a homeless man wrapped in a scratchy blanket sitting cross-legged on ripped cardboard pieces. A dog, the color of butterscotch, is resting his head on his lap. The man is scrawny, but his dog scrawnier still. A tall man with a unibrow is giving him money.

I stop to watch.

“Teegan, we don’t have much time.”

“Give me a sec.”

The homeless man reluctantly hands over the leash. Confused, the dog stirs and looks at his master. I spot a handwritten sign lying on the ground: “Purebred Labrador for sale.”

“Come,” the tall man says. The dog keeps staring at his owner and doesn’t want to budge.

“Come on, you stupid dog.” The guy tugs on the leash.

The dog just yelps. The homeless man says, “Bye, Pepita.”

Hearing his name, the dog barks joyfully. The new owner yanks the leash, harder this time. The homeless man gets up and wipes his tears roughly with the back of his sleeve. He leaves, shoulders hunched forward, hands in pocket, shivering and miserable.

We exchange a glance.

“I know. I would *never* part with my dog.”

We continue walking down the street, checking civic numbers, when I notice a man ripping a poster from a telephone pole while guarded by soldiers eyeballing passerby.

I read the content aloud, “The War Ends on April 24th. Join the Resistance Today!”

“Shh!” says Adrian, lowering his head. “Don’t say things like that around soldiers. You’ll attract trouble.” Adrian glances around to see if one of the soldiers overheard me, but they haven’t or if they did, they didn’t care.

“A pretty bold statement coming from the Resistance given that they just got trounced by my father,” I say as we pass by.

“Do you make bomb jokes when you cross airport security?” asks Adrian once we’ve put some distance between the soldiers and us.

“No, That would be dumb.”

Adrian sighs. “Just be more careful next time. Okay?”

“Yes, dad.”

We continue walking for another block.

“401. Must be here,” I say to Adrian. I almost step on a broken syringe. I push it aside with the tip of my boot.

There’s an old-school gas motorcycle in the shop window. We step inside the tattoo parlor. A girl is sprawled on a torn leather seat in the small waiting room, playing a game on a small device. She ignores us.

I take a peek at the back room. A topless girl is leaning against the back of a vinyl chair. A young man is drawing a dragon on the small of her back. His forearm is covered with a motley crew of skeletons, devils, and demons intertwined with thorny roses. The wooden counter is covered with inkpots, razor blades, bottled chemicals, a bottle of hard liquor, and an ashtray overflowing with crushed cigarette butts.

The guy must have heard me, because he says, “Almost done. Be right with you.”

Adrian and I go and have a seat. I thumb through a book of tattoos, elbowing Adrian when I find a nice design.

A car honks outside.

The girl next to us looks up, startled and frightened.

“It’s okay, Nina,” says the tattoo artist. “It’s just a car.”

“A car?” she says.

“A car.”

She resumes playing on her device.

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His previous customer leaves the shop, grinning. A happy customer, now that’s reassuring.

The artist comes to the waiting room and looks at us. “So, who’s this for?”

“Me!”

“Welcome to my shop. My name is Liam. Come.”

I follow him into the backroom.

“Have a seat.”

Liam sits on the stool next to me.

“So, do you want a nanotat?”

“No. I want a good old-fashioned one.”

“For real? With a nanotat you can turn it on or off as you wish and even change the tattoos colors with an app. It’s all the rage right now.”

“Call me old-fashioned.”

“Hey, you’re the customer. So, where do you want it?”

“Under my right breast.”

“And you've chosen your design?”

“Yes. I want an artistic rendering of the words, *Courage is grace under pressure[[1]](#footnote-2)*.”

Liam chuckles. He looks me over. He probably sees a pampered Chinese girl who has no clue what she's talking about. He's not that wrong, but my mom had those words tattooed on her. She never explained to me why she picked that quote and skirted the question each time I asked, but somehow, by getting the same tattoo, I feel it will restore a lost connection to her.

“Do you even know what these words mean?” he asks, a smile on his face.

“Courage is being yourself even when the whole world wants you to be someone different.”

“I can relate to that,” says Liam. “All right. Let’s get cracking.” He takes a pad of paper and starts sketching. After ten minutes, he drops his notepad on my lap.

“Anything to your liking?”

One immediately jumps out. The quotation starts and ends with a little skull and the letters are stylized beautifully.

“This one,” I say, pointing.

“Good choice. It's my favorite as well.”

Liam rips the page out of his notebook, applies it on a stencil paper, and proceeds to trace all the lines. Once done, he says, “Take off your blouse and bra.”

I remove my clothes as instructed with a mix of excitement and fear. Liam takes a swig from the hard liquor bottle lying on the counter.

He wipes my breast and surrounding area with antiseptic. He then applies the stencil paper. Once he peels it off, I can see the outline of my future tattoo. My heart is racing with delight. After a few additional preparations, Liam takes a tattoo gun, inserts what I hope is a sterile needle and presses it firmly underneath my breast. As he turns it on, I feel the needles penetrating my flesh, and I gasp in pain. As Liam works the machine on me, the pain worsens. He often pauses to wipe down the ink and blood.

“I'll take a swig of your drink if you don’t mind,” I say.

Liam raises his eyebrows. “It's hard stuff. Sure you can handle it?”

“I can handle anything.”

“Grace under pressure.” Liam grins and hands me the bottle. I take a sip. The liquid burns as it runs down my throat. I close my eyes tight as I swallow. I take another sip and another. A burning fire invades my body. With a shaky hand, I hand him back the bottle. He gets back to work. After a while, I'm not sure if it's the adrenalin or the alcohol kicking in, but I get used to the pain and the unrelenting needles puncturing my flesh.

A phone rings. “Shit. What does *he* want?” says Liam. He takes the call. “Dad, I’m at work. What’s going on?” He turns to me and adds, “It won’t be long.”

Liam lets out an exasperated sigh. “Yes, I’m still doing my tattoo thing. As a matter of fact, I’m with a customer right now. I’m earning a living. You should try that for a change.”

He starts drumming the counter with his fingers. “What do you mean? Yes, I do serve Chinese customers and no, that *doesn’t* make me a collaborator.”

Liam scoffs. “Or what? You’re going to kick me out of the house I don’t live in anymore?”

He hangs up. He waves his phone as he’s about to throw it against the wall, but regains his composure and sets it down slowly on the counter. “Sorry about that,” he says to me. “My dad lives in a black and white world. He hasn’t realized yet the real one is gray-scale.”

Liam resumes his work on the tattoo for another forty-five minutes before saying, “Done.”

He places his torture instrument on the counter, lights up a smoke, and looks at his work, namely my breast, with a satisfied look. He points at a broken mirror on the wall. I stagger up to it. I forget the itching sensation that has now replaced the pain and look at my brand new tattoo. Liam did an amazing job! The letters are finely sculpted and the colors are bright and bold. I love it. “Hey Adrian, check it out.” I turn around all excited and then I realize that I have just asked my best male friend to come and stare at my breasts.

At first, Adrian looks at my feet, embarrassed, but eventually, his gaze travels up to my bare chest. As he sees my breasts, I'm not sure if he realizes it, but he lets out a slow breath, which gives me an immense sense of satisfaction. “Looks nice,” he says, trying hard to remain casual.

“Glad you like it.” I smile inwardly.

Liam signals me to come back to my seat so he can bandage my tattoo. Once he’s done, I quickly get dressed. As I finish buttoning up my blouse, Adrian taps on his watch. “We need to get going. It's almost 6 p.m. Your chauffeur will be wondering where you are.”

We head back to the car. He turns the radio on. An old Frank Sinatra song is playing. I gaze at Adrian. He’s focused on the road ahead. He really is handsome. What’s he doing hanging out with a girl like me? This guy is out of my league. It’s not that I’m not pretty. I guess I am. But I’m no model. I’m just an ordinary girl.

“What are you looking at?” he asks.

I’m suddenly embarrassed. I was staring at him and didn’t even realize. I decide to change the subject. “I didn’t know you cared so much about your dog.”

“No offense, Teegan, but Duke’s my BFF. We’ve had him since he was a puppy. It was my mom who found him at the onset of the war. The neighborhood she was driving through had recently been bombed. She found him trembling in the middle of the road, too scared to move. My mom took pity on him and brought him back home. To this day, Duke pees the floor every time he hears thunder.”

“At least, he found a loving home.”

“Hey, when are you going to get your driver’s license?”

“Me? Behind the wheel of a car? You’re funny. Believe me, you don’t want me on the road. I’d be a public danger. I’d be worse than a grandma craning her neck to see the road.”

“Driving isn’t that hard.”

“For you, it isn’t.”

Fortunately, Adrian drops the subject. But seriously, it terrifies me. What if I’m distracted and I drive into somebody? I could never live with that.

We make it back just in time. Just before I get out of the car, I don’t know if it’s alcohol-fueled courage or the fact that Adrian did seem to find me attractive, but I make a bold move—I lean forward and kiss him on the lips real quick. My heart is speeding faster than Shanghai’s bullet train. His eyes are full of surprise and confusion. After the initial shock has passed, he smiles briefly and says, “You should get going, Teegan. Your chauffeur’s waiting for you.”

I wait one second—okay, maybe five—to see if Adrian will take me in his arms and kiss me back. But he doesn’t. He seems conflicted. My gut tells me he wants to, but something is holding him back, and I’ll be damned if I don’t find out what.

“Okay,” I say.

I dart to the school gates where my father's car awaits me. As Jayden opens the door, he pauses and sniffs the air and then I realize that my breath reeks of alcohol. He gives me a disappointed look but doesn’t say a word. I sit and stay quiet during the ride back, wondering whether he's going to tell on me. If Father ever finds out that I’ve lied, gone outside of the controlled zone, and got a tattoo, he’ll lob my head off. When we reach home, as I'm about to step out of the car, Jayden says, “I hope you made good progress on your project.”

“I ...”

Jayden cuts me off. “Enough, Teegan. Just know that we’re not welcome in this country. The vast majority of the population hates us. It's not for nothing that your father has assigned you a chauffeur. Think of this the next time you plan a personal project.”

I now know that Jayden will not tell Father, but there was a cost—I have broken his trust. Yet, as I step into my house, I have no regrets about the tattoo or the kiss.

# Chapter 4 – Enemy Within

I call out, “Hello”, when I enter the lobby. No answer. Not even granddad. I'm happy Father is not there, though. I still don't know what to ask or say to him about the police station tragedy, and my breath probably still stinks of alcohol.

I drop my schoolbag in my bedroom and I head to the bathroom where I lift the bandage. I grin—my tattoo looks awesome. For some reason I can’t properly explain, I feel more confident now that I have it. I wonder if I can tell granddad about it. I think he would be “officially” upset, but secretly proud of me. He's always so supportive of my projects.

I sit down to do homework, but I can’t concentrate. I keep thinking of Adrian. He has a thing for me. I mean, I can’t be imagining things ... At school, I never catch him looking at other girls but me. He was the first friend I made when I arrived in the U.S. On my first day of school, as I stared blankly at my tablet wondering how to decipher the campus map, he kindly offered to escort me to my classroom. Later that day, he invited me to have lunch with him in the cafeteria, and we just hit it off. Over the course of the next few weeks, we texted non-stop, stayed after school to finish homework, and even became lab partners. Come on Adrian, I’m sure there’s something there.

Maybe he has a thing for Mia? They play tennis together. She’s a lot more curvaceous than I am and she aces all of her math tests, oh and she’s the goalie of the soccer team! Who is this girl? Give me a break! She’s also super nice. I roll my eyes. Ugh.

I make an effort to slow down my careening thoughts. Anyways, Mia’s a designer baby, it’s not fair to compare myself to her. But maybe all of this doesn’t matter.

I have another go at my homework, but after an hour of getting sidetracked by meaningless social media posts, I wave the white flag and give up.

It's almost nine. My butt is numb from sitting so I get up and look out the window. The whole neighborhood is covered with a fresh dusting of snow. The temperature is probably in the mid-sixties in Shanghai right now. I feel homesick. I sit back at my desk and grab an old pistol that my father's aide gave me. I take it apart, careful not to lose pieces before rebuilding it as fast as I can. Each time I play with it, it brings back memories. The year my mom died, my father didn’t want to leave me home alone, and so he would bring me to the army base where he worked. He had a large office with a humongous upholstered leather seat. When I sat in it I felt tiny, like Alice in Wonderland after she drank the shrinking potion. Father would leave me in the care of his aide, an elderly man named Wei, who was at a loss about what to do with a thirteen-year-old girl. The days were long and boring. One day I saw him take apart a pistol, oil it, and put it back together, and I asked if I could try. He allowed me to and it became my daily puzzle. After a while, I asked to go to the shooting range. Wei was surprised at my request but humored me. He’d bring me early in the morning when there was no one around and tutored me. I had set my mind to be able to draw the Chinese character UNFAIR in bullet holes. The repetitive drill of aiming, firing, and reloading was mind-numbing—I would fire several hundred shots a day—but somehow it gave me a small purpose and prevented my mind from wandering to sad places. At first, I failed miserably, but after weeks of practice, I eventually managed to draw the five-stroke character on the target fifty meters away. Wei was genuinely impressed.

I hear animated voices coming from the living room. We rarely have guests, so I'm intrigued. I open my door quietly to eavesdrop. From the top of the staircase, I see four military officers, including my father.

“What the hell happened Grayson? We outnumbered them. Our equipment is state of the art. We spare no expenses on our weaponry.”

“See for yourself.”

A video plays. For the first few minutes, the Resistance fighters in the skirmish are being beaten back. The tank accompanying the URF troops is blasting shells. Ripping though their makeshift obstacles, but then the tank stops in its track. The URF soldier bangs on the tank metals. A man comes out of the tank top. He yells something. The Resistance, no longer fearing for the tank, double back and stop fleeing. Instead, they aggressively push forward. Now it’s The URF ‘s turn to be overtaken. The fleeing soldiers are shot in the back. Their exoskeleton suits are no match for the Green Beret weapons used by the Resistance. The URF are massacred. The Resistance members wave their assault weapons in the air in victory.

“What do you mean some of the assault rifles couldn’t fire?”

“They were jammed. Some fault in the electrical circuitry.”

“Damn, that’s the second time this week.”

“You spoke to BlackIce about this?”

“Yeah. They’re investigating. They said it was a faulty batch. Something to do with a new manufacturing process they implemented. They generously offered three MK-1045 tanks as compensation.”

“Damn it, each time we’re about to get the upper hand, something happens.”

“Maybe we should switch to Green Beret weapons instead of BlackIce.”

“We’ve talk about this, Grayson. Their weapons aren’t are reliable either.”

“Back in my day, weapons didn’t have any electronics and just worked.”

Fuck this war will never end.

They’re watching a video of demonstrators marching towards the headquarters of a fast food chain under the watchful eyes of URF soldiers standing next to a riot-control truck.

The protestors look like pitchfork-wielding villagers on a monster hunt. Some of them are carrying robot heads impaled on stakes; others are dragging a robot dressed up in the chain’s uniform. They’re brandishing placards that say “Robots = Job killers” and chanting “Humans before robots! Humans before robots!”

The small group of protesters halts in front of the grand entrance. They unfurl a spray-painted banner saying “We Are Fucking Angry.” An activist throws a brick at the building’s glass door—it shatters in a thousand pieces. An officer shouts an order and points at the perpetrator. The young woman is shot in the chest. A shocked teen rushes to her side and takes her in his arms. The URF open the water cannons to disperse the crowd. The stream of water is so powerful that the protesters tumble to the ground and skid a dozen feet on the asphalt before coming to a stop. They attempt to flee but the URF charge with pepper spray and electroshock batons. A huge snail-shaped paddy wagon arrives. Shouting and kicking protesters are violently dragged inside by their arms or legs. A protester’s face is stomped by the boot of a soldier. My dinner resurfaces at the back of my throat as I watch the painfully brutal scene.

I hear a man in the living room chuckle. His name is Grayson Smith. Father has his arms folded against his chest. He gives Grayson a stern look.

“This is not the right approach, Grayson. These brutal interventions will only encourage civilians to assist the Resistance even more.”

“You forget your history, Zheng. In 1989, when the military crushed the protestors in Tiananmen Square, it effectively stopped the seven-week protest movement for good.”

“But at the cost of thousands of civilian lives.”

“You organized the Cleanse.”

“The Cleanse was about armed rebels, not civilians.”

“And the school?”

“Oh … you don’t want to go there.”

“Just saying. Not so different.”

Grayson straightens his back. “Our job, my job, is to maintain order at all costs. Last year, the Anderson robot manufacturing plant was trashed by Luddites. I’m just making sure this doesn’t happen again.”

Feeling the tension mounting, one of the younger officers, a corporal, shuts down the TV.

“But to the matter at hand,” Grayson says. I tiptoe to the edge of the living room to hear better.

“The Resistance has been aggressively recruiting to swell their ranks. However, the number of attacks perpetrated by the Resistance hasn’t increased. Our intelligence agency speculates that these new recruits are being trained in a new, secret facility and that they’re waiting for their numbers to be sufficient for an attack of unprecedented scale. They hope to topple the government.”

The corporal laughs, obviously judging the whole idea preposterous. My father nods to Grayson as if to say go on.

Grayson continues. “We don’t know yet where their new base of operations is. However, we have recently recruited a mole. When we find out where their lair is, we’ll bomb it to the ground.” Grayson hits his fist in his palm to punctuate his statement.

I shift my weight from one leg to another. The old hardwood floor squeaks. Grayson swings around and sees me. His brown eyes catch hold of mine.

“Who’s this?” he asks glowering at me.

There’s a tone of surprise in my father's voice as he replies, “This is my daughter, Teegan.”

I stare back at Grayson, unabashed. I want to show him that I'm not afraid of him. I'm disgusted by his reaction to the video. How can he believe that shooting unarmed protesters is all right? If he thinks violence can tame people into submission, he's dead wrong. Grayson's eyes are riveted on me. They’re cold and calculating. I've seen enough soldiers as a kid to know that his eyes have seen death. Our little staring contest turns into an awkward moment for everyone. The two junior ranking officers are wondering on whose side to be on. Father is a major general and so higher ranked than Grayson, who is a brigadier, but the latter is rising in influence. He's been trying to take Father's place for years. From the corner of my eyes, I see them inch toward Grayson.

I feel a hand on my shoulder. I immediately recognize my grandfather's wrinkled hand. There’s a tremor in his voice as he says, “Teegan, I fixed something for you in the kitchen. Come, it will get cold.”

I allow myself to be pulled away. I bow slightly and leave. Grayson gives me one last glare as I go.

I head to the kitchen with granddad's hand still firmly on my shoulder. As we leave, I can hear Grayson and Father’s final exchange.

“She heard our conversation.”

“She’s my daughter.”

“It was imprudent to meet in your home instead of our headquarters. She cannot speak of this to anyone. It could compromise the whole operation.”

“She won’t.” My father’s tone is now commanding and doesn’t allow for rebuttal. But Luo is not fazed by father’s booming voice. After a pause, he adds, “Your wife, wasn’t she Asian?”

“She was.”

“I can see the resemblance.”

This last comment is clearly not a compliment. For Grayson, I’m not a true American—my Chinese blood taints me. I cannot see my father, but I know that he's fuming with anger. Ye Ye is not happy either. As soon as we enter the kitchen, he whispers, “You've made a powerful enemy today. Grayson will never forget your impertinence. Never let your pride get the better of you.”

“I'm not afraid of him.”

“Well, you should be. You have no idea who that man is and what he can do to you. Now stay here until the officers leave, you hear me?”

“Yes, granddad.”

He disappears into the adjoining laundry room. I wait alone for about an hour. When I finally hear the front door shut, I hurry up to my room before Father can see me.

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I can’t escape him for long. He storms into my room an hour later without knocking. I hate it when he does that.

“Teegan, it’s very bad manners to listen in to other people’s conversation … to adult conversations. I thought I brought you up better than that. And you, staring back at Grayson. What insolence!”

“Sorry, Father.” I lower my head all the while thinking that I didn’t do anything wrong. After all, this is my house just as much as his.

“The school director tells me you haven’t been diligent in your studies. Did you do your homework?”

All I answer is “Yes, I did.” This comment is so unfair. I’m either studying or pretending to, several hours a day.

“I heard the same from your singing teacher. You need to be organized and serious, Teegan. You’re sixteen and soon will be an adult. Act like one.”

Father spots my shoes on the floor. One is pointing out from under my bed and the other is by my cupboard. He picks up both and sets them down neatly together underneath my dresser.

“Organized, I said!” Just before Father closes the door behind him, he adds, “Practice your recital piece more. You need to be *perfect* for the concert next week.”

The door shuts with a bang. I feel dizzy and sit on the wooden chair by my desk. Now that he's gone, I regret not fighting back. I had so many things to say. They come to me now, in a jumbled flurry: *I haven’t seen you in two years, dad. Two years! How dare you tell me anything? I'm like a tenant in my own house. When was the last time you and I did something together? How can you pretend to be my father if you're never there? How can you let a tragedy like the Cleanse happen? How can you tolerate men like Grayson in your troops?*

I'm mad at myself. I should have stood up to Father. I punch my pillow repeatedly until my fist is sore and my mind is numb. Tears flow down my face. I try to control my crying. I don’t want Father to hear me. My sobs turn into hiccups. As I lie in bed, I'm not sure what hurts me the most: my disintegrating relationship with my father or humankind’s brutality. After a while, I throw myself on my bed and fall into a dark and restless sleep.

# Chapter 5 – Tomb Sweeping

The next morning, rubbing my sleep-laden eyes, I head to the kitchen attracted by the scent of freshly brewed oolong tea.

“Morning, Ye Ye,” I call out.

Granddad smiles when he sees me. He taps the unruly strands of hair on top of his otherwise bald head to flatten them but without success. He’s wearing a white undershirt, loose trousers with a tartan pattern and black tai chi slippers. In the two years we’ve been living in America, I have never seen him dressed differently in the morning.

“Morning, TeeTee. Breakfast is served.”

“It smells good. What did you prepare?”

“Your favorite. Congee with pickled lettuce and fish balls.”

I sit on a stool next to the small kitchen table, grab a porcelain spoon, and eat.

“It’s delicious, Ye Ye. As usual.”

“I’m a good househusband.” He laughs and winks at me.

This comment would make my father cringe. In his mind, it's not manly to do chores around the house. It's a woman’s responsibility. But Ye Ye is not afraid of what other people may think of him.

“Remember the look on your father’s face when I threatened to come out wearing an apron in front of his guests from military school if he didn’t let you go out to see the movie premiere of *Rise of the Phoenix*?”

I smile. “I do. He never agreed so fast to me going out on a school day.”

He drags a stool over and sits next to me. He says something to me in Shanghainese, but I only understand a few words.

“What did you just say?”

Ye Ye sighs. “I said, TeeTee, you have big circles under your eyes.” After a moment, he adds, “It saddens me that I cannot speak to my own granddaughter in my mother tongue.”

“But Ye Ye, it's too early in the morning to speak Shanghainese. Later okay? Let my brain clear up a little.”

I slurp another spoonful thinking that hardly anyone speaks it anymore other than old people. So, what’s the point? But, I know it matters to granddad, and I tell myself that I’ll make an effort.

“So, you couldn’t sleep?”

“No. I was tossing and turning, thinking about stuff.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really. It’s just … I’m not sure what to do.”

“Hmm, you could use yarrow stalks as I taught you.”

“Divination, Ye Ye. Really?”

“TeeTee, the I Ching hexagrams used in divination are based on cosmic principles. They’ve been around for thousands of years. They aren’t a new fad, you know.”

“Maybe, but I want to figure things on my own.”

“I see. Do you want some tea?”

“Yes, please. It’ll help me wake up.”

He turns to grab the kettle, but it’s too heavy for him to lift. He needs to use both hands to pour me a cup. Even then, he shakes and splashes the table.

“Your arthritis is causing you pain, Ye Ye? Let me give you a hand massage.”

“That would be kind of you, but only once you've finished your breakfast.”

He smiles wanly. I know that he feels so useless here. He's far from his native Shanghai that he adores. He used to be a chief engineer. He was part of the team that built the manned Chinese module that landed on Mars six years ago. Now he prepares congee for his granddaughter and waits patiently for anyone to give him attention.

I check the time. I have another twenty minutes before my father’s military car drives me to school. I grab his left hand and methodically massage every finger, paying special attention to the distended joints. We chat idly about school, boys (not much to report there after the Adrian fiasco), the weather, and what Ye Ye is going to prepare for dinner tonight. After fifteen minutes, I give him a peck on the cheek and say I need to get ready for school.

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The ride is uneventful. I leave my coat in my locker and head to my class. As I retrieve my material from my schoolbag, I notice Adrian’s chair is empty. He’s normally so punctual. I start to freak out. He did leave rather abruptly last night. Is he upset because I kissed him? The class ends, and I scuttle to my Mandarin class biting my lower lip. I’m relieved when Adrian knocks on the door fifteen minutes into the class. The professor waves him in. Adrian presents a note. She removes her black spectacles, reads it with a disapproving frown before motioning him to take his seat.

At recess, I learn from Adrian that the road he usually takes to go to school was closed because of a military operation. There was a Jeep mounted with a machine gun as well as several armored vehicles. Adrian had to make a long detour. I ask him if he thinks this event has anything to do with the explosion we heard two days before. He's not sure. The only thing he knows for sure is that the military presence in Concord has been slowly building up. This might explain why Father has been even busier than usual. As for the kiss, we both pretend that it never happened and it makes me sad.

The remainder of the day goes by without incident and my driver brings me home after school. As I reach the front door, I notice willow branches hanging on it like a Christmas decoration. I had totally forgotten that today is the Qingming festival. I’m sure that it was Ye Ye that installed them on the door. He believes that the willow branches help ward off the evil spirits that wander on Qingming. He's so old school, but I love him for it. When I was little, Ye Ye would bring the whole family to the graveyard to clean our ancestor’s tombs and make offerings in their honor. The cemetery terrified me. I was always afraid that as we prayed with our heads bowed, a skeletal hand would somehow pop up from the grave, grab mine with bony fingers and drag me underground.

I open the front door and my nostrils are greeted by the delicious scent of garlic. As soon as I drop my schoolbag in the staircase, I hear, “Is that you, Teegan?”

“It’s me, Ye Ye. Let me just change clothes. I’ll be right with you!”

A few minutes later, I join Ye Ye in the kitchen. We have a fancy dining room, but Ye Ye and I never use it. Only Father uses it.

He often eats there alone after his long day at work before looking after his collection of miniature landscapes. My favorite penjing is a weeping willow, sitting aloof on a tall rock like a sage who can’t be bothered. He spend hours lovingly clipping a leaf here, clipping a branch there. I wouldn’t have the patience—these plants would be so dead under my care.

“It's Qingming today, Teegan.”

“I know.”

“You remembered?” He looks at me, surprised.

“Well, not really. The willow branches did the trick though.”

“I thought so. It’s sad that the young forget our traditions. Remember when we would go and fly kites in the park on Qingming?”

A memory makes me smile. Father had bought me the most amazing kite shaped like a dragonfly. My friend Zhou who always tagged along with us during the festival had one shaped like a butterfly. I remember my colored paper kite well. It was a full six feet wide. It vibrated and buzzed as it rose into the sky, counterbalanced by its long tail.

With his two hands, Ye Ye tosses, not without difficulty, an eggplant stir-fry with garlic and soy sauce in a large cast iron wok. The wok’s bottom is burnt and dented, but it’s one of the only objects that Ye Ye insisted on bringing with us to America.

“Is Father joining us?”

“No. There’s trouble in the city.”

I sigh. “Well, this smells awesome. It’s his loss.”

I set the table. Two bowls, some chopsticks and a teapot and cups. Ye Ye and I sit on wooden stools and eat wolfishly.

Once I’ve done the dishes, Ye Ye and I go to the small room in the back of our living room. This is where we keep our ancestor’s altar. A plaque with the name of our ancestors sits on top of it. The last name on the list is that of my mom, who died three years ago: Julia Peterson.

I help Ye Ye place in small ornate bowls offerings of fruits, tea, and wine. Finally, he hands me a lit incense stick. I place it in the incense burner. Ye Ye does the same. He bows his head and mumbles a prayer in Shanghainese. I do one for my mom.

When Ye Ye finally looks up, I notice his moist eyes.

“You still miss Nai Nai after all these years?”

He nods. Ye Ye quickly brushes a tear from the corner of his eye. He forces a smile. “We should burn some joss paper. I bought the traditional coarse bamboo ones.” He takes a rectangular piece of paper with a golden metallic rectangle in the center. “Let me show you how to fold it.” He teaches me how to shape it in the form of a gold ingot with a few simple folds and presses of the thumbs. He then throws it in an earthenware pot. Once I get the hang of it, we chat.

“You know, your grandma used to love ballroom dancing. She would always ask when we could go, and I would answer later, Nai Nai, we will go later. I worked hard at the Space Agency, especially in the last two years. The government was adamant that we set foot on Mars in 2034. They wanted to prove to the world what a great nation China had become. When we finally landed the Martian capsule and I was able to retire, Nai Nai and I took ballroom classes together.

I remember the first time I took her to the Shanghai Ballroom School. She looked at all the dancers waltzing, and her eyes lit up with joy. She was a quick learner, your grandmother, not like me. Even though the man is supposed to lead, your grandmother was more often than not guiding me as I was desperately trying not to step on her toes.” Ye Ye throws the last of the folded joss paper into the pot. “I never saw her as happy as during those dance classes. She passed away only one year later.” Granddad sighs deeply. “I always regretted working so much and not starting the dance classes sooner.”

“You did what you could, grandpa.”

He smiles affably, clearly not convinced.

“Well, when I was little, mom use to let me put my feet on her feet and she would hold my hands. We would turn and spin, singing silly songs until one of us felt too dizzy and fell to the floor. It’s been three years already.”

“I miss your mom too, Teegan.”

“Remember when I built a birdhouse for her birthday? I spent days sawing wood pieces, gluing them together, sanding the corners and painting them in her favorite colors.”

“Of course, I do. You asked me to play the sentry because you didn't want your mom to come in your room unannounced and see her present ahead of time. We had a code word to say, 'Danger, danger! Mom is coming!' so that you could hide your work. What was the word again?”

“It was shosho.”

Ye Ye chuckles, “Yes, that's right. Who came up with such a silly word?”

“You did, grandpa.”

“I did? Hmm. I can be creative sometimes.”

These memories stir up pent-up emotions. Now it’s my turn to feel my eyes tear up and my face redden. Ye Ye sees this. He takes me in his arms and hugs me. Even though he's frail in many ways, he's strong inside, and it comforts me.

He lets me go. “Help me bring the pot to the rear balcony.” I pick it up and follow him to the back of our house. As I walk, I say bitterly, “We should burn a joss paper for Father. He’s never present. He might as well be an ancestor.” Ye Ye doesn’t reply. He knows I’m right.

I set the earthenware on the balcony. I strike a long match and put the flame under the joss papers. As they burn, curly smoke rises into the night sky lifting our petitions to the deities. I murmur a last prayer to my mom, wishing with all my heart that she is well, wherever she is.

Ye Ye turns to me, content. “Time to do your homework. I’ll clean up.”

“Okay. Goodnight. I'm glad we celebrated.”

As I walk by the mantelpiece in the living room, a small picture falls from its frame. I pick it up and examine it. It’s a photo of a blonde toddler whizzing down a purple plastic slide with her arms up in the air. The little girl has a contagious smile that invites you to join in the fun. I remember asking my mom about this picture when I was five or six. I secretly hoped that she would tell me that she was my sister and so before asking, I had crossed my fingers in my back for luck. Mom was surprised by my question but said, no. She was just the daughter of a friend of hers living in Shanghai. I was so disappointed—I would have loved to have a playmate. I place the picture back and sigh. I find my family too small—it’s just Ye Ye, Father, and me now.

As I head to my room, the protest video I saw yesterday comes back and hits me. I think of my mom and how she would have reacted. She was feisty as Father always reminded me. If my mom had lost her job to robots, I’m convinced that she would have been among the demonstrators. The world around me feels so wrong, but at the same time, I feel helpless to change it. What should I do? What can I do? No answer comes. On top of everything, I have the Boston Celebrations tomorrow. I'm to sing in front of heads of state, high-ranking military officers, and conservative families of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. In short, rich, influential, or powerful people, and sometimes all of these combined. I'm supposed to be all charm and smiles, nodding politely, laughing at jokes, and making small talk with perfect strangers. I do a minimum of homework, and feeling inexplicably tired, I decide to go to bed early.

# Chapter 6 – Hit and Run

A knocking sound disturbs my sleep, insisting and pesky like a mosquito. In my sleepy haze, I recognize granddad's voice muffled by the door. “TeeTee, you're going to be late. You have recital practice today.”

I don't want to open my eyes and drift back to sleep. I vaguely hear a doorknob turn and my door open. I yank the covers over my head, pretending that I'm not here.

Granddad says, “I made you some tea.”

I moan something unintelligible.

“Your practice is in an hour. Josephine had to move earlier.”

I prop myself on my forearms and grunt, “Fine. I'll be right down.”

Reluctantly, I get up and go take a quick shower. As I comb my hair, I think of the Boston Celebrations. I'm to sing in front of heads of state, high-ranking military officers, and conservative old WASP families of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. In short, rich, influential, or powerful people, and sometimes all of these combined. I'm supposed to be all charm and smiles, nodding politely, laughing at jokes, and making small talk with perfect strangers. It just can’t wait … My comb gets stuck on a knot. I yank it through, ripping a few strands of hair in the process.

I remind myself that I have one last practice to attend, then it's the concert, and then I'm free. Josephine has made me practice relentlessly—I can sing the song in my sleep.

I head to the kitchen only to be surprised by the sheer amount of food on the table—Ye Ye went all out and prepared a traditional Shanghai-style breakfast—The 'Four Heavenly Kings': thin pancakes spread with sesame seeds, deep-fried dough sticks, sticky rice balls stuffed with spicy pickles and crushed dried pork, and soybean milk. Yum!

I sit to down to eat. I wrap one pancake around a dough stick and take a big bite. I love the way the deep-fried crispiness of the dough stick mixes with the fluffiness of the pancake. In between bites, I sip my cup of hot soymilk. This calms me down and reduces my irritability somewhat.

Thirty minutes later, Jayden drives me to Josephine’s house. I think of my performance tomorrow. I’ve never sung on a real stage before. I wonder what kind of dress they will have me wear. Will it be vintage American, *haute couture*, or simply modern? A loud thud followed by the sound of screeching car brakes. My head bangs against the front passenger head cushion. I'm dazed but I don’t think I’m hurt. Through the window, I see a car race by at breakneck speed. The limo spins and stops only inches from a telephone pole next to the driver’s door. Jayden turns around to check if I'm okay. I nod that I am.

I look out. Oh my God, someone was hurt. I spot a middle-aged man lying on the pavement, bleeding in the slushy snow. Jayden notices him also.

“You can’t go out, Teegan.”

“What do you mean? The man is badly hurt. He needs our help!”

“I’m following your father’s orders, you see.” His voice is now ice-cold. “He’s the one who explicitly instructed me to never stop to help someone because it could be a trap set up by the Resistance. Your safety comes first, I’m afraid.”

Jayden observes the scene with great attention, like a hunter.

“Screw my safety!” I open my door an instant before Jayden attempts to lock it remotely.

I race outside and kneel next to the victim. From the corner of my eyes, I can see Jayden open his door, but the gap between it and the telephone pole is too narrow for him to squeeze through.

I return my attention to the man. He’s badly hurt. The pool of blood next to his waist is already twice as big as it was a moment ago. He looks me in the eyes, and seizes my hand. In it, he places a solid, black object, the size of a small egg.

“Department 55 is real. They’re in league with the arms manufacturer, BlackIce. The content stored on this device will prove their existence.” He gasps. “It could … end the war for good. Many people sacrificed themselves to get this data, friends …”

He gasps. “I’m sorry it has to be you.” He grabs my shoulder weakly and stares me in the eye.

A nanotat flickers on and off a few times on his scraped forearm before fading out. It displayed nine red stripes.

“I hope I won’t die in vain.” He blinks a few times . His arm falls, and his head rolls to the side.

I grab my phone to call an ambulance. Jayden grabs me by my arm. “What are you doing, Teegan? You’re going to get me fired.”

“Let me go!” I say, but Jayden only tightens his grip.

“Look!” He points at two shady characters racing in our direction.

He pulls me back into limo and slams the door when I am seated. Jayden drives off, skirting around the body slowly, before accelerating.

Teegan cries. This is the first time she sees a man die up close.

I take a deep breath. I need to tell Father about this. There's a phone in the limo nestled in the back of the driver’s seat. I remember Jayden saying that if I had an important call to make, to always use this line because it used state-of-the-art military encryption. I need to make sure Jayden can't hear me though. Without using the intercom, I say in a loud voice, “Jayden don’t leave yet. I dropped something. I need to go back.” Jayden drives off. To be even more certain, I shout, “I'm having a heart attack. Stop the car!” He doesn’t slow down. Good. It's soundproof. With a trembling finger, I dial Father’s number.

The phone keeps on ringing at the other end of the line. “Come on. Answer me!”

Voice mail kicks in. Damn. I leave a long message. I tell Father everything: the existence of a secret Department 55, its link to BlackIce, the device he snuck into my hand and more importantly how the person believed it could end the war. Before I can finish, the voice mail cuts out saying I’ve exceeded the recording time.

I text Adrian: “Something weird just happened. Call me.”

Whoa. What just happened? I discreetly look at the device making sure Jayden can’t see from his rearview mirror. It matte black. There’s no opening. Not even the outline of a crack. I try to unscrew the top. No success. I tap on it. It doesn’t sound hollow. How could this thing be the key to ending the Civil War?

I playback the scene in my head. Every time I do, a new detail emerges. He was wearing a watch, his coat was torn …

Twenty minutes later, Jayden stops the car with a jerk in front of the house of my singing teacher. I do my best during the lesson but I can’t concentrate. Jayden still looks upset with me when I step out of her house. He drives—a little too fast—back to my home.

Twenty minutes later, Jayden stops the car in front of my house. As soon as he unlocks my door, I stomp out of the car. I feel betrayed. How could he be that heartless? He didn’t even let me call an ambulance. As soon as I enter my home, I drop my schoolbag on the floor, race up to my room, and fling myself on my bed, thinking, “I don’t want to live on this planet anymore.”Chapter 7 – Running Jump

From my bed, I stare outside. The weather has turned sour; rain is pouring down like an open faucet. The storm looks like it will go on forever. I watch it so long and steady that my eyes close by themselves.

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I’m a ghostly figure in the middle of a U.S. city street lined with tall, rundown buildings. Loose sheets of newspaper and plastic bags flutter in the wind, blowing in circles down the open street. Then they appear—first the demonstrators to my left and then the riot squad to my right. A protester hurls a brick through a car windshield. I run for cover. The ground shakes underneath my feet, making me stumble. The street opens like a giant zipper. The sidewalks on either side form giant concrete lips that crack and crumble as they form words I don’t understand. For a moment, I float like a cartoon character above the gaping maw and then gravity kicks in—I drop like a stone into the utter darkness below.

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A noise stirs me awake. I get up and sit at my desk. I examine the egg-shaped device. I twist the bottom and top of the device in different directions but nothing happens. I search on online for storage devices. I find none that have the shape that this one as.

My own tattoo is itching. I haven’t put moisturizing cream on it like Ami said I should. As I head to the bathroom across the hall, I hear banging on the front door. I check my watch. It’s just past 11 a.m. I wonder who it could be. I hear Ye Ye’s hurried footsteps, the door opening, and boots stomping into our house.

“We’re here for your granddaughter,” says a man whose voice I don’t recognize.

I stop in my tracks to listen. What does this man want with me?

“How dare you make demands like that? Do you know who she is?” Ye Ye asks.

“I know very well who she is. She’s General Pershing’s daughter.” I hear more footsteps.

In his most scolding tone, Ye Ye says, “Grayson, what’s the meaning of this?”

Shit! Grayson’s here. This can’t be good.

“General Pershing is accused of selling military material to the Resistance for profit,” Grayson says in his detestable voice. “He is being detained in Fort Warren. We have reason to believe his daughter was also involved.”

What a lying, conniving scumbag! I can’t believe he’s framing us.

“Impossible!” Ye Ye protests. “They would never do such a thing. Unlike you, they have honor.”

I hear a slap. I’m sure Grayson just struck granddad across the face. I’m raging inside. That coward is attacking a frail, old man. This could only be because of the device. Somehow they must know. How could they? Only Father and Adrian know about it … Oh my God, Adrian. It’s him. It can only be him. The double-crossing bastard! He was all smiles when he met Grayson at our school. I’m so mad at Adrian, I could choke him right now. I clench my hand so hard, my fingernails dig into my palm.

“Out of my way, old man.”

“Wait! She … she went out to see her boyfriend,” Ye Ye stammers. “She didn’t want me to tell anyone, especially her father. I think I can find his address. I’ll go and get it this minute.”

“Liar. The GPS on her phone says she’s right here. Teens are tethered to their phones like dogs to a leash. Men, search the house. Remember, we need her alive.”

I race back to my room. I can’t call my father, but I can call Jayden. He can help. He will help. I know he will. I dial. The phone rings and rings, but no one answers. I hang up.

Oh, Jesus. I need to escape. I put the device in a small plastic box and slip it in my back pocket. I take my schoolbag and dump its content on my bed. From my dresser, I grab whatever clothes I can lay my hands on and stuff them in the bag along with my purse and a bag of jellybeans. I yank a coat from a hanger and put it on. From my night table drawer, I grab my 9mm gun. Just as I’m about to leave, I snatch the lucky charm that’s hanging on my wardrobe door and pocket it thinking, I can use all the luck I can get right now.

I hear a doors opening and a flurry of footsteps coming from downstairs. They’re searching the house. I dart to the bathroom, turn the knob to lock the door, and then close it from the outside. If they find the door locked, they might think I’m hiding inside and lose precious time.

I hear a man shout, “She’s not on the ground floor. Heading upstairs.”

My heart is pounding. I cannot let them catch me. Grayson is ruthless. We won’t have a fair trial. We’ll be executed on trumped-up charges. Through the French sash window in my room, I spot two military cars parked in front of the house. I put on my schoolbag, clamber on my desk, and crawl out of the window onto the cold roof. I close it behind me so as to not leave a clue of how I exited. If they don’t find me, this will make granddad’s story more believable and hopefully help him avoid trouble with Grayson. I’m standing on all fours on the slanted roof. The wind blusters across the shingled roof whipping my long black hair into my face.

At least the rain has stopped. I start moving toward the top when a gunshot coming from the house makes me jump. I lose my grip and slide down the pitched roof gathering speed as I go. At the last second, I catch hold of the gutter. I hang in midair, swaying like a flag. Panting, I look down between my stretched arms—the ground is twenty feet below. I take a deep breath to steady myself. Oh my God! Did they shoot Ye Ye? I couldn’t live with that. He’s my anchor. A second gunshot startles me. I muffle a scream and force myself not to cry. My left hand slips. I’m hanging by a single arm and my fingers are slowly losing their hold. I can’t fall I tell myself grinding my teeth. Ye Ye sacrificed himself so I could escape. With a contortion, I manage to grab hold of the gutter again with my left hand. I swing a leg up to hook the gutter, but miss. My leg falls back down. The gutter is icy. I’m losing my grip. Sweet Jesus! I swing my leg up again and manage to hook it this time. My gymnastics training back in Shanghai is finally useful for something. I hear the telltale sound of a drone hovering nearby. They’re designed to be quiet. If I can hear it, it means it must be awfully near. An instant later, I see the drone’s powerful searchlight sweep the roof.

Oh, Christ! I heave myself back up on the roof. My breath is short. The drone will be above me in a few seconds. There’s no place for me to hide. Desperate, I grab my lucky charm from my pocket and throw it with all my might on top of our neighbor’s doghouse. I hit it squarely. The little charm bells ring as they hit the roof. Killer and Shredder come racing out, barking like crazy. The drone flips direction and heads their way to investigate. I breathe a sigh of relief. Using this opportunity, I run toward the other end of the roof, careful not to slip. As I get closer, I gasp—the old elm tree I was counting on to climb down, is further, much further than I remembered. I’ll have to do a running jump. I sprint the remaining distance to the roof’s edge and leap forward, arms flailing. I catch the nearest branch and enjoy a moment of triumph, but the wet bark is slippery. I lose my grip and fall, breaking branches in my descent. I land in the wet snow below. The fall knocks the wind out of me. I’m bruised in more places than I care to think about. Broken twigs are tangled in my hair. From the corner of my eye, I can see the drone heading in my direction. I still can’t move or breathe properly. Even though it’s cold out, heavy beads of sweat are dripping from my brow. My ribs are killing me. The drone is almost on me. I force myself up. Just then, the kitchen door opens. The drone moves toward the soldier coming out. I race down the side of the house before either of them can see me. Grayson shouts angry orders to his team to search everywhere. I jump the fence leading to the neighbor’s backyard and head back to the street. Only then do I stop running; I don’t want to attract undue attention. I think of Adrian. I could just wring his neck right now. I’ll make him pay someday, but not now. I turn off my phone so that they can’t track me. I need to figure out a plan, and fast.

# Chapter 7 – Leaving Sector NH-26

I have precious little time before they bring in reinforcements, but I’m not sure where I should go. I’m in the middle of suburbia. The only place I can think of is the bus station east from here. There’s only one problem—the control zone checkpoint is between the bus station and me. I decide not to worry about that right now.

Dogs barking in the distance renew my sense of urgency, and I increase my pace. My breath condenses into small, white clouds as it hits the air. I pull up my collar to shield myself against the sharp bite of the wind. It takes me ten minutes to reach Checkpoint Alpha. Chauffeured by Jayden, I passed through it a gazillion times but never paid it any attention. It’s a smallish building lit by floodlights. The access road has zigzag barriers to prevent cars from driving through at high speed. The perimeter wall is made of concrete block walls and steel-mesh fence with barbed wire on top. There are security cameras perched like owls along the top.

I take a deep breath. I have two options: either I try to find a discreet location and scramble over the fence or I casually walk up to the checkpoint and attempt to leave. I need to think this through. Maybe Grayson has already declared me a fugitive, and I will be arrested as soon as I announce myself. But Grayson is a member of the URF. Regular soldiers man the checkpoint. In addition, knowing how full of himself Grayson is, I’m sure he was convinced he could simply arrest me at my house. He didn’t expect me to escape so there’s a fair chance he hasn’t informed the normal military of the situation.

I decide to follow my instincts and be daring—I head for the checkpoint.

The guard at the booth watches me approach with suspicion; he moves the assault rifle strung across his back to the front and grips it. I walk resolutely forward as if a teenager crossing the checkpoint alone was the most natural thing in the world. As I near the booth, the guard slides up the window.

“Identification, please.” I tap on my ID bracelet and a small holoscreen materializes on top with my name, nationality, and address.

He stares at my ID with a look of surprise. “Ms. Pershing? What are you doing here this late? Why aren’t you with your chauffeur?”

“I’m meeting a friend in Sector NH-28 and Jayden is sick.” I’m following rule #5 of the perfect liar—keep your lies simple.

“Does the general know of your whereabouts?”

“Of course he does, what do you think?” I look at the man like he’s a complete moron.

“It’s quite dangerous being outside the controlled zone, you know. There were uprisings recently. You never know when or where the Resistance may strike next.”

“I know all that,” I say, straightening my back. “You’re going to make me late.”

“Ms. Pershing, I’m afraid I can’t let you pass.”

Shit! I’m so screwed—time is ticking—Grayson will raise the alarm any moment now. I fetch my phone from my bag hoping he won’t notice that it’s turned off. I open my eyes wide open and form a scowl on my face. I shove my phone into his face. “Do you want to call the general and ask him yourself? I have him on speed dial. I’m sure the general would love to have his work interrupted by a guard who says he doesn’t trust his daughter.” I slide the phone on the counter toward his hand.

Will my bluff work? Panic is mounting inside me. I can’t show it though. I clench my left fist so hard my knuckles turn white.

He looks at my phone and ponders the situation before saying. “Okay, okay. I’m just doing my job.”

“I understand,” I say, as I allow myself to breathe again. “You guys are keeping us safe, and I’m grateful for that.”

I walk toward the exit, resisting the urge to run. Oh, man, that was close. The electronic panel suspended above the road reads ‘You are exiting Sector NH-26’. I’ve only traveled ten yards when the man shouts, “Ms. Pershing, come back here!” I can hear urgency in his voice. Oh, shit! He knows. He checked on me and he knows. A wave of panic engulfs me. Should I just run for it or go back? The guard has an assault rifle. There’s no way I can just run away. I take a deep breath and turn back, forcing a smile on my face. The man has stepped out of his booth and is waiting for me.

“Yes?” I ask, trying desperately to keep my voice steady.

“You forgot your phone.” He hands it over to me.

“Oh, thanks. That would’ve been a real bummer.” I wrap my hand around the phone to take it back, but he doesn’t let it go. He just stares me in the eyes, trying to figure out my true intentions. But years of lying to my entourage pay dividends on this day, and I keep my cool. I patiently wait for him to release the phone. He does after a moment. “You should turn it back on,” he says in a harsh voice, “you might miss some important calls.”

I pocket my phone and reply, “Oh, I hadn’t noticed,” before walking away.

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Another ten blocks and I’ll be at the bus station. There’s automated teller machine there. I’m going to need cash.

I hurry down the street, frequently looking over my shoulder. I arrive at an intersection. A car is coming. Black, with black tinted windows. I’m not sure if it’s military. I back away, turn on my heel, and take off again down a side street.

Clatter overhead. I look up. A helicopter pierces the clouds. It switches on a powerful searchlight to scour the area. I dash under an overpass just as it flies overhead. I don’t think it saw me. I yank my hood over my head and take a few quick breaths to quell the panic rising up inside me.

I need to throw them off the scent. The URF knew that I was at my house because of my phone’s GPS. Maybe I can use that to my advantage. If I can hide my phone in a vehicle, the URF will chase it instead of me. I pull it out from my pocket and turn it back on, but I keep the GPS switched off. I notice I had three missed calls in the last hour. I rack my brain, but I don’t recognize the number. Whoever called isn’t in my contacts because the caller’s ID card would’ve been displayed. I stop wondering about the mysterious caller and focus on the task at hand. I don’t want anyone seeing my personal information, so I go to the settings menu. My finger hovers above the Erase All button, but I hesitate. My favorite pictures, videos, and holograms are saved in my phone: selfies with my best friend Zhou, mom singing at the House of Blues, Ye Ye and Nai Nai ballroom dancing, Father receiving the Order of Hero, and so many more. It pains me to delete them, but I have no choice. I press the button. A thin progress bar appears with the header Deleting. It feels like I’m erasing a little of my own existence, and I hate it.

Half walking, half running I make my way toward the station, avoiding major streets. I cross path with a few self-driving cars, but their rounded shape makes it impossible to hide my phone in. I need a truck.

I’m just about to give up on my idea when I spot a driverless delivery truck heading in my direction. The traffic light just turned green and it’s accelerating. I run into the street just like my mother taught me never to do. The truck’s automated system kicks in faster than any human driver could. The brakes screech. I close my eyes, bracing for impact. When I open them again, I see the truck’s bumper a mere ten inches from my kneecaps. Whoa! That was a stupid thing to do, but it worked. Nonetheless, I tell myself that from now on, I’ll be less reckless. I circle around the truck, turn the GPS back on, and chuck my phone into the cargo hold. Mission accomplished.

A blaring siren makes me jump out of my skin. I can’t pinpoint its exact location, but it sounds military. I race toward the bus depot. I arrive out of breath and sweaty ten minutes later. I bend over and grab my knees to catch my breath. I’m not used to running, even less with a schoolbag. My running experience consists of the mandatory laps during gym class.

As I straighten up, something attracts my eye. A cellophane-like substance has been sprayed next to the entrance. I’ve heard of these before. They’re called kloaks. It’s playing a poor-quality video. I’m shocked by who is on it. It’s a cartoony mug shot of Father! The word “Bang!” appears. A bullet hole forms on his forehead and blood oozes out horror-movie style. And then a caption appears: “We’re coming for Pershing!” The video loops back to the beginning and starts again. Next to the thumbprint button, I can see that this kloak got a whopping 2056 likes. Wow! Father really is hated by everyone. I rip it off like an adhesive bandage, crumple it in my hand, and toss it.

The station is almost deserted. There’s a homeless man sleeping on a row of hard plastic seats in the corner. His hair is disheveled and dirty. He’s hugging to his chest a small plastic bag that probably contains all of his worldly possessions. A couple of businessmen are drinking coffee at the counter. I spot the automatic teller machine. With everyone paying electronically, those are rare nowadays. The government even had a campaign where they told the population that paper money was bad as it transmitted germs, but it was a flop. With the civil unrest going on, people prefer cold hard cash. I pull a twig from my hair and place my face in front of the camera to access my account. I breathe a sigh of relief when a jingle plays and the words Welcome, Teegan Pershing appears on the screen. My account isn’t frozen—not yet, at least. I withdraw the largest amount allowed—five thousand dollars. I take the wad of cash and store it in my money belt. I glance at the homeless man again. I feel for the guy. It really sucks to not have a place you can call home. I walk over to him and discreetly tuck two twenty-dollar bills in his shirt pocket.

A waft of cold air. The sounds of heavy boots. Oh, no! I spin around. Half a dozen URF soldiers waltz into the station. The businessmen scatter as soon as they see them. I have just enough time to scuttle behind the row of seats before they see me.

Someone shouts, “Stop lollygagging and search for the girl. Daniels, let them out.”

Shit! What’s going on now? I peek from my hiding place. A soldier unzips a nylon bag. Out of it flutters dozens of mechanical creatures that look like dragonflies, but they’re not—they’re nasty buggers. Equipped with cameras, they’re used to search large areas for suspects. As each one activates, a square-shaped video feed appears on the soldier’s visor. They spread out to every nook and cranny of the room. I duck my head. Who am I kidding? I’ll never escape these professionals. I’m doomed.

A dragonfly heads toward me. It’s about to turn in my direction when I snatch it. My fingers fold over it and crush its wings, but the darn thing gives me a jolt that hurts like a bee sting. I let out a cry.

“Hey, did you hear that?”

Shit, shit, shit. I dare another glance. The soldier called Daniels lifts his assault rifle and marches in my direction. He stops next to the row of seats behind which I’m hiding. He pokes the homeless man lying on them with the barrel of his gun. The man moans and grunts, but doesn’t wake up. From my crouched position, I can see his boots. He’s coming my way. Any seconds now, he’s going to spot me. I don’t dare to breathe.

“Everyone,” shouts the commanding officer, “headquarters picked up the GPS signal from her phone. It’s moving fast. She must’ve boarded a vehicle. We’re heading back.”

The soldier shuffles his feet, hesitating.

“Daniels, what are you waiting for?” barks the officer. “Get your ass back here.”

The soldier leaves.

Phew! That was close. Too close. I count to a hundred before exiting through a side entrance. On the other side of the street, I notice a busy train yard. Maybe I can hide there. I cross the street. There’s a fence lining the tracks, but I find a hole and wriggle through the narrow opening. As I run toward a cluster of buildings, a growing roar attracts my attention. Another helicopter. I look left and right, unsure of what to do. The merchandise train to my left picks up speed. Without thinking, I leap into a boxcar that has its sliding door open. I kneel on the metal floor and recover my breath. After a while, I peek outside. No one seems to be pursuing me.

I sit down and press my back against the cold, corrugated wall. What nightmare have I gotten myself into? My thoughts turn to Ye Ye. I heard two gunshots back at the house. He’s dead. I know he is. The one person I could turn to. Gone. He wasn’t only my granddad, he was my friend, and I’m responsible for his death. I begin to cry, gently at first, but soon my tears turn into a swelling river that soaks my collar. Sobs crash on my body like breaking waves on the shore. He was my friend, I moan to no one, clutching my knees. He was my friend.

Eventually, my tears slow down. I force myself to breathe slowly and try to regain some composure.

Father has been arrested because of me. If they have him on charges of selling military material to the Resistance, this will be considered treason—he will be court-martialed and executed. I force myself to think clearly. I wipe the tears from my eyes. This won’t happen overnight. Father is powerful as well, maybe not as much as Zhang, but he’s been around long enough to have friends in high places. Lieutenant General Johnson will help him. He seemed to genuinely like Father.

And what happened to Jayden? I never called without him answering. He’s the most professional person I know. Was he imprisoned in Fort Warren like Father? I hope he's okay.

What was I thinking when I bolted out of the car to help the hit and run victim? I should’ve have stayed in the limo like Jayden ordered. I’m so stupid. I hold my head in my hands.

Somehow, I need to make all of this matter.

Slowly, a plan forms in my head. The device could be a game-changer. I need to find out what its content it. I could use it as leverage to get my father out of prison. I need to survive and get to a black market. Maybe an offgriders could crack it. I’ve heard rumors of a black market in Manchester. Maybe I could go there.

I have no idea how I’m going to get there in one piece, but I’m sure as hell going to try.

From my bag, I take out my stash of jellybeans. I eat a cherry, a lemon, and an orange one. I need the sugar. I have fifty-seven left. I’ll try to make them last until Manchester at least.

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I get up; my butt is cold from sitting on the metal floor. I stick my head out. The merchandise train is heading south. It’s going at the speed of a slow car. Forest surrounds the tracks on either side. I don’t hear any aircraft. That’s good.

I lie down and rest my head on my schoolbag. Hours go by. The train slows down eventually. I get up and peer outside. I see an ad for Springfield Motor Parts in the distance. The URF might be waiting for me in the train yard so I decide to jump off before it comes to a complete stop. I throw my schoolbag first thinking that I’ll be less heavy like that. Now it’s my turn. I take a deep breath and jump. My calves explode in pain as I hit the ground. I tumble forward and fall face first in the snow. As I sit up to brush off the snow sticking to my face and hair, I notice that my cheek is sore and my left knee is hurting. Shit. I must have pulled a muscle or something.

I see an old toolshed next to the tracks. The door has a broken window. That could be a good hiding spot. I limp over there. I pass my hand through the opening and unlock the door from the inside. By the crumpled bags, e-liquid bottles, and empty cans littered on the ground, I can tell that I’m not the only person to have taken refuge here.

Fortunately, no one comes and disturbs my stay. My cheek is puffy and sore. I pick up a plastic bag from the floor, clean it as best I can and fill it with snow. I apply it to my cheek to reduce the swelling. After ten minutes, I do the same to my knee. It should help.

After a few hours of staying put, I can’t feel my earlobes or my toes anymore. My fancy coat is designed to make me look awesome—not to keep me warm. If I stay here any longer, I’ll freeze to death. My stomach is growling. I’m so hungry. I decide to head into town. The sun is setting as I step out of the shed. I keep my hood on and hunch my back. My mug might already be displayed on the Most Wanted government channel.

After twenty minutes of hobbling, I reach Main Street. I spot an old-fashioned restaurant. It’s a two-story building made of red bricks. Smoke is pouring out of the chimney. Cut out snowflakes decorate the windows. It looks warm and cozy. I decide to go there. Remembering the tattoo incident, I rip the designer logo from my schoolbag—I don’t want anyone taking me for a rich girl. As I toss it in the slushy snow, I realize that no matter what happens next, life for me will never be the same.

# Chapter 8 – Extreme Makeover

I put my head down against the cold wind and hurry to the restaurant. As soon as I open the door, fragrant smells of freshly baked bread, sizzling steaks, and coffee greet my nostrils and make me realize how starved I am. A sign reads Please Wait to Be Seated.

Right next to it, I see the SCS reader. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Starving as I was, I had forgotten about it. Even if I am a few feet from it, the camera on it as done facial recognition and my social credit score has been pulled up. I have an SCS of zero. That makes me an undesirable citizen—a parasite of society as the propaganda poster would say. A man bustles over with a large smile. The place is quiet.

“Welcome.”

He turns to check my SCS score, and his jaw drops.

“You’re not welcome here. Get out of my establishment. You’re going to bring trouble.”

“But I’m cold and hungry. I just want … ”

“Don’t care. Get out before I call the police.”

“But …”

He opens the door and literally pushes me out before slamming the door behind me. I’m stuck outside. Is it just me of is the wind picking up? I need to warm up or else I’ll die of cold. I look around me. The town is quiet. A number of building and houses have been boarded up. Frozen trash piles dot the street.

I spot an old-fashioned restaurant. It’s a two-story building made of red bricks. Smoke is pouring out of the chimney. Cut out snowflakes decorate the windows. It looks warm and cozy. Maybe they’ll let me in. I put my head down against the cold wind and hurry there. I brace myself for another rejection.

As soon as I open the door, a waitress bustles over to me. She sees my SCS score and her face becomes concerned. I shrug my shoulder and I am about to turn back and head back into the cold, when she says with a wink, “Our system is glitchy. It often gets confused. Have a seat.”

I am so relieved I want to hug her. She accompanies me to a vinyl-upholstered booth tucked beneath a neon poster of James Dean. A miniature jukebox is perched on the table along with a basket holding condiments and a maple syrup dispenser. As I wait, I check out the song selection. I notice that they have “Moon River.” I press the button. The sound quality is crappy, but the song does bring back fond memories—it was a favorite of my mom’s. She used to sing it as an encore. I remember tagging along to the bar where she performed. It was tucked away in a back alley behind the old Anar hotel. It was a low-lit, graffiti-scrawled bar that used to be an opium den. I felt excited and scared at the same time. Everyone would stare at me, wondering what an underage kid was doing there. But my mom, she loved the place.

I tap the menu button on the table and holographic breakfast options materialize above the table. I stare at them blankly.

From the corner of my eye, I can tell she’s staring at my sore, red cheek. I hope she’s not a snitch. The government pays informants good money. There’s even a 24-hour hotline you can call.

“Awfully cold outside, isn’t it? Can I get you a mug of hot chocolate while you look over the menu?”

“That would be great.”

As the waitress scuttles away, I think about my options. How am I going to get to Manchester? I don’t drive. Airports will be under high surveillance. Big cities are heavily patrolled. The more I think about it, the more I realize that my only choice is to sneak aboard another merchandise train. Yesterday, I was attending one of the most posh schools in the U.S., and today, I’m a hobo. What a difference twenty-four hours can make. I sigh. I’m only sixteen years old. I’ll never make it. I plant my face in my hands.

The waitress walks to my table with a tray holding a steaming cup of hot chocolate topped off with whip cream. “Here you go, hon. Are you ready to order, or do you need a few more minutes?”

“I’m good. I’ll have the special.”

She taps a few buttons on her tablet and leaves.

I reach for my hot chocolate mug and wrap my frozen hands around it, savoring its warmth. As I take a few slurps, I notice that someone carved a heart in the wooden table with the caption, “Sarah loves John”. It makes me think of Adrian. Why did he say he loved me just before betraying me? That makes no sense. Was he feeling guilty? Argh! I hate him and I still want to wring his neck, but I miss him at the same time. It was so easy being with him. I could be myself. I didn’t have to pretend to be sexy or sassy or fashionable. Maybe it was because he came from a poor family, and he wasn’t a snob like a lot of the other kids. He attended school thanks to a bursary. I remember one time he brought me to a staircase that was reserved for the school personnel. The staff rarely used it, and it became a great hangout for kids to go and make out. As I headed there, I had butterflies in my stomach, and I could barely contain my excitement. Boy, what a disappointment that was. He just talked about his mom when I was expecting a passionate kiss. When it finally dawned on me that nothing was going to happen, I had stomped away pretexting that I was going to be late for class. I was upset with him for a full week after that. But now that I know what a wretched traitor he is, I’m glad we never ended up kissing.

There’s a group of construction workers sitting at the counter. One of them keeps staring at me. Have they broadcast my face on the news? After a while, the guy to his right turns around too and peeks at me. He then nods to his friend.

Shit. I need to change my appearance. Time for a trim. I head to the washroom at the back of the restaurant. On my way, I discreetly take a steak knife from a cutlery tray. Not ideal, but it’s the sharpest thing I can lay my hands on.

Once inside, I bolt it shut. The washroom stinks, and I crinkle my nose. I head to the sink. After washing my hands, I dab my puffy cheek with my fingers. It hurts. I’ll ice it again when I have the chance. At least my knee is a bit better.

The mirror is sitting askew on the wall. Compulsively, I straighten it. I look at my face. I’ve had long hair ever since I was little. Other than the occasional ponytail, I’ve always had the same hairstyle. But it’s got to go. I take comfort in thinking that at least with shorter hair, I’ll be less recognizable. I decide to cut it at chin level. I grab a bunch of hair and use the steak knife as a saw. As I cut, my beautiful black hair falls in strands into the sink. It takes me ten minutes, and I’m done. By then, someone is pounding on the door. “Stop hogging the bathroom,” says the muffled voice.

“I’ll be right out.”

I clean up my mess and look at myself in the mirror one last time. I smile. I look better than I expected—I have a badass look going on with my hair short like that.

As I get out of the washroom, the woman who was waiting for her turn gives me a death stare. I head back to my table. A few minutes later, the waitress arrives with my order. She places a hot plate with a slice of Shepherd pie, a baked potato, and peas on the table, along with a glass of water and a breadbasket. She immediately notices my new haircut and then her stare lingers on my red cheek again.

“Oh dear, you’re in big trouble, aren’t you?”

I nod.

“I’ll be right back, dearie.” I wonder what she went to do. She’s back in a flash with a plastic bag filled with ice cubes.

“You should ice it. It’ll reduce the inflammation.”

Smiling, I take the bag and press it to my cheek.

As soon as she leaves, I devour my plate. I discreetly stash the leftover bread in a napkin and stuff it in my coat pocket. It could come in handy later. I’m not sure when I’ll be able to eat next.

When it’s time to pay, I ask my waitress if she minds if I pay cash. She says it’s fine. I leave a hefty tip on the table. Just as I’m about to exit the restaurant, my waitress comes running toward me, a brown bag in her hand. She hands it to me with a big grin. Intrigued, I open it. I find a Danish pastry and what looks like a sandwich wrapped in aluminum foil. Her kindness brings a lump to my throat.

“It’s for the road, hon. It’s on the house.”

“That’s so kind. Thank you.” I spontaneously wrap my arms around her and give her a hug.

# Chapter 9 – The Saboteurs

At nightfall, I leave my hiding place. I’m stiff from the cold and from sitting. I decide to head to the train yard and hop on the next train heading south. As I exit the toolshed, I notice that my knee still hurts, but at least I’m no longer limping. That’s a relief. My path forward is simple—I just need to follow the train track. The tracks are lined on either side with industrial buildings and freight warehouses. Most of them look disused and abandoned. The path slopes gently downward. After a short walk, I reach a railway bridge spanning a wide river glistening under the moonlight. I pause to appreciate the view. The wind is blowing softly. The fir trees are covered with a thick layer of snow. Just above the tree line, I recognize a constellation: the Big Dipper. It’s the only one I know. I locate the two stars that form the outer edge and draw an imaginary line straight through them. Using my fingers, I measure the distance between the two stars and go up five times along the line. Bingo! I just located the North Star. Adrian taught me how to do that.

We had gone ice-skating on the pond behind the school. I had never skated before. Adrian was doing his best to teach me, but I was a poor learner—I fell constantly. Seeing this, he proposed to pull me instead. I wrapped my hands around his waist, and he started skating. With his powerful strokes, Adrian pulled forward while I held on for dear life and giggled. After a few laps, we had sat down exhausted on a bench by the rink. Adrian and I had gazed at the stars and that’s when he had taught me how to locate the North Star. Like that, he had told me, I would never be lost, no matter where I was. I hate to admit it, but I’m lost without him.

Adrian is quiet about his private life. He only speaks of his mother who has Alzheimer’s. But I know he comes from a poor family. I can tell from his limited vocabulary and lack of etiquette. And boy, does he ever suck at geography. I’m sure he couldn’t locate France on a map if his life depended on it. But Adrian has a level of street smarts that no one else in school has. He knows practical things, like how to do an oil change or how to start a fire with sticks. He’s also a good judge of people. He can tell when someone is genuine. This journey would be so different with him by my side. I kick a pebble hard and send it flying into the river.

As there is no sidewalk on the bridge, I’ll have to walk on the tracks themselves. I stop and listen. I don’t hear any trains coming and so I venture forth.

I’m almost halfway across when I see a man clamber over the railing. He must have been hidden underneath the bridge all along. He's dressed in black. A hoody hides his face. Mumbling something incoherent, he races toward me like a madman.

“The bridge, it’s going to …” he shouts.

“Leave me alone!” I yell back, panicked.

He lunges forward and tackles me. I hit the track bed hard and split open my lip. I’m about to turn around and fight back when with a heave he lifts me up, schoolbag and all, and topples me over the railing.

As I fall, I see the hooded man dive headfirst into the water just as I hear a deafening blast. I hit the water hard forty feet below. It knocks the wind right out of me. The water is freezing. I sink under water. I can’t see a thing. Blurry darkness surrounds me. I’m disoriented. I’m no longer sure which way is up and which way is down. I know that if I make the wrong choice, I will drown for sure. A numbing cold is spreading through my body. I look left and right frantically, trying to find a point of reference to orient myself. Seconds later, I’m shaken by a second explosion—it saves my life. I can see hazy flames through the water. I now know which way is up. I swim with every ounce of energy I can muster. My head emerges from the water. I gasp for air. The bridge I was on only seconds before has been ripped apart. There is a gaping hole in the middle. The metal train tracks are twisted and warped. And then a third explosion lights up the sky like fireworks on the Fourth of July. Debris rains down, peppering the water around me with pieces of wreckage. I tread water but barely manage to keep my head afloat. A colossal cement block falls near me triggering a huge wave. My head goes underwater again. I swim up as fast as I can and take a big gulp of air.

I look around for the guy with the hoodie. I can’t see him, only the glimmering waters reflecting the fire and chaos from the explosion. The scene is surreal. Fluffy snowflakes are falling amid orange flames, blue sparks, and black smoke. I spot something floating in the water. It looks like his backpack. I’m afraid he just sunk down to the bottom of the river like a rock. As I swim toward his backpack, I see his head pop out of the water. He’s gasping and panicking. A flood of relief sweeps over me. I swim in his direction to help.

As I arrive, I see him coughing water. He’s terrified. His teeth are chattering from the cold. His lips are blue. As his head starts going underwater again, he panics. He puts his hand on my head and pushes me down to keep his own head above the surface. Desperation is giving him strength. My head is pushed under. I swallow ice-cold water. I frantically push and shove until I can free myself from him and swim away. I cough out liquid as I come up for air. My muscles are becoming numb with cold. It’s becoming harder and harder to move.

I’m starting to think that I don’t have the strength to help the stranger. I might drown trying to save him. As I swim away, a knot of guilt forms in my stomach. I haven't traveled five yards when I decide to turn back. I just can’t leave him—not when there’s a chance we can both survive. As I’m swimming, I spot a railroad tie floating. I grab hold of it.

When I near the man, I shout, “Look at me! Look at me!” The man’s head is going under water more and more frequently. He’s exhausted. “Grab hold of my wood plank. It will help you float.” He manages to wade toward it and clutches it. I hold on to the other extremity—I don’t want to be too close in case he panics again.

“Slow your breathing down. You’re wasting energy. You’re going to be okay.”

He looks at me and forces himself to take a deep breath. That causes him to have a fit of coughing.

“It’s going to be okay. Take another deep breath.”

He does, and this time he doesn’t cough. I’m shivering. My hands are so cold that I can barely hold on to the slippery piece of wood.

“We’re going to swim to shore together, holding the floater. Okay?”

“The army,” he blurts. “It’s coming. We just blew up the bridge.” Just as he speaks, a helicopter appears in the distance with its searchlights on.

Holy crap. This guy must be a member of the Resistance. I can’t worry about that right now.

“Come on! We can do this.”

We start swimming toward the shore. The man is exhausted. His hand slips from our makeshift floater and he goes under. I grab his hoodie with my hand and yank him back up. I look at him in the eyes. “I can’t do this alone. I’m not strong enough. You need to hold on. You can do it. I know you can.”

With teeth chattering uncontrollably, he nods. He pulls himself a bit higher so that his chest is pressed against the wood plank, and he uses his legs to kick the water.

We swim agonizingly slowly toward the shore that feels like a million miles away. Every stroke is a struggle. Every breath is a battle. My extremities are so numb from the cold that it takes all my willpower to move them.

We finally reach the riverbank. I drag the hooded man onto the embankment. Exhausted, I remove my soaking schoolbag and let it drop to the ground; it bursts like a water balloon. Still panting, I sit on the snowy ground. In order to conserve as much heat as I can, I pull my hood over my head. I glance at the man I just pulled in. His lips are blue with cold, but his chest moving. He’s breathing. Wasn’t easy, but I did it.

A man about my age arrives in a flurry, flashlight in hand. He ignores me and darts to the man I just saved.

“Jim, are you okay?” He helps him sit upright.

Jim coughs water and croaks, “Yeah.”

“Troops have started arriving. They’re on the other side. They have searchlights and dogs. This place will soon be crawling with soldiers. We need to head out.”

He helps Jim up. The young man then turns to me. “You, you have to leave.”

I can’t believe what I just heard. I'm furious. I get up to face the guy. “I’m soaking wet, freezing cold, and I almost drowned because you guys freaking decided to blow up a bridge. And you want me to leave?”

“In case you didn’t know, little girl, there’s a war going on.”

I put both hands on my hips. “Call me little girl again and I'll punch you in the mouth. And yes, I know about the war. Who doesn’t?”

“Harry,” says Jim in a weak voice. “She saved my life. We can’t just leave her here. That wouldn’t be right.”

Harry turns to me. “Fine. The truck is parked up there.”

Harry and I assist Jim as we go up the small hill to the road above. As we walk up, Jim tells Harry, “My backpack is somewhere in the river.”

“Shit.”

“I know.”

“Why?” I ask. “I mean it didn’t have your name stitched on it.”

“No, but it’s almost the same. If they find as much as a single strand of hair on it, they’ll have a sample of my DNA and be able to identify me.”

Crap. I'm too cold to think of all the ramifications, but they could be huge.

“Let’s just hope they never find the backpack,” says Harry.

We soon reach the curb at the top of the hill.

“Get in the pickup. We need to hurry,” says Harry.

The blue truck has seen better days. It must be twenty years old by the signs of rust and tear. The front fender is holding on for dear life with duct tape. The passenger window is covered in a spider web of cracks as if someone had whacked it with a hammer. Harry is already in the car when I get in. I take the middle seat. Jim clambers in after me. I’m not even buckled in when Harry accelerates, making the tires screech.

“So, who are you guys?” I ask Harry.

“We’re saboteurs,” he answers matter-of-factly.

“You’re members of the Resistance?”

“Not exactly. Just think of us as volunteers giving a helping hand.”

“Your idea of a helping hand is to blow up railway bridges? You almost got me killed, dumbass.”

“How the hell could we anticipate that someone would be taking a leisurely stroll on a railway bridge after dark?”

We continue to ride in silence. I’m too tired to argue. Without asking for permission, I turn the truck heater to the maximum.

I turn to Jim. “How are you holding up?”

“My toes are starting to thaw out,” says Jim, his teeth still chattering. “Thanks for coming back for me after I almost blew you up.”

“You would’ve done the same.”

We drive west for about an hour. West is good. This car ride is bringing me closer to D.C. The road is bordered by forest on either side. It’s now pitch dark. After a while, we unexpectedly turn onto an inconspicuous dirt road. A few minutes later, we drive up to a small house. A dimly lit porch extends across the full width of the house.

“We’ve arrived,” says Harry.

Jim gets out of the truck and gallantly gives me his hand. As I step out of the truck, I hear a small, feminine voice, “Harry, is that you?”

On the porch, I see a girl, no older than nine, holding a revolver with both hands. She’s pointing it in our direction.

“It’s me, Lolo,” says Harry.

She lowers the heavy gun. Harry darts up the stairs and holds her by the shoulder. “The adventure was a success.”

“You were gone two full days.” Her tone has a mix of reproach and pride.

He gently takes the gun from Laura’s hand. “Lolo, how many times do I have to tell you? Never put your fingers out in front of the cylinder. The escaping gas can blow your fingers off.”

“I forgot.”

He jams the gun between his belt and the waist of his pants. He then picks up Laura effortlessly and steps inside.

Jim turns to me. “Well, what are you waiting for? Come in.”

A dog barks as we approach and then wags his tail when he sees Jim. It’s the cutest dog ever. I think it’s a beagle. It’s got short legs and long, soft ears. It has a shorthaired coat with gorgeous chocolate colored splotches. It looks likes it has quite a number of dog years under its belt, but it still has the eyes of a puppy.

Jim enters the house. I follow hesitantly. The house is a mess. Dishes are stacked on the counter, there are socks on the floor, and dust covers every flat surface that I can see.

As I take off my wet hoodie, Harry looks at me startled. “I recognize her. She’s on the most wanted list. Jim, you brought back General Pershing’s daughter to my house!”

Harry points a menacing finger at me. “You, get out of my house now!” Laura takes a step back. The dog barks, feeling the tension mounting.

“Calm yourself, Harry, she’s just a teen like us.”

“She’s the daughter of the man who brought us the Cleanse, Jim!”

I take a step forward. I want to show Harry that I’m not afraid of him. “I’m Sino-American. My father is Caucasian and my mother was Chinese.”

I look at Harry straight in the eyes before adding, “Don’t worry. I’m going. I wouldn’t want to stay with a bunch of assholes anyway.” A flurry of thoughts rushes through my head. Suddenly I’m wondering why am I risking my life to help end the Civil War. Maybe I should just focus on a way of saving Father. As I’m about to leave, Laura steps forward. “Do you have a car? We’re in the middle of nowhere you know, and it’s dark now, and you’re all wet.”

I crouch so that my head is level with hers. “No, I don’t have a car, Laura, but I’ll figure something out.”

“What were you doing on the railway bridge anyway?” asks Harry.

“Nice to see you can talk without barking,” I reply. “But since you asked nicely, I’ll tell you. I’m fleeing the United Republic Forces. So you can relax, I won’t be telling on you.”

Harry looks at me for the very first time. That is, truly looks at me. He cocks his head a little to the side as he observes me with his brooding eyes. I observe him back. He’s tall. Six feet, maybe more. He has a light beard scruff. He's wearing a pair of form-fitting jeans and a skintight t-shirt, which outlines his broad chest and hulking shoulders.

“You can stay ‘til morning,” he says after a while. “And by the way, I’m not an asshole. I just want my the fucking Feds to back down and let us leaves our lives without controlling us.”

Laura’s face lights up. She pulls my sleeve. “Can I show you my room?”

“Hey, Lolo! Catch.” From his backpack, Harry takes out a brown paper bag and throws it to her.

She catches it clumsily. “For me?”

Without waiting for the answer, she pulls out a teddy bear from the bag. He has clearly seen better days; there’s a stain on his tummy and he's missing an eye. He's adorable, though.

She looks up at Harry, “But he’s missing an eye.”

“It’s ‘cause he's a pirate. Arr.”

“A pirate?”

“Yup. He’s just missing his eyepatch.”

“I have a pirate teddy! Cool.”

I shiver. Laura’s right. In my condition, it would be crazy for me to go back out in the cold, alone and soaking wet. Whether I want to or not, I need to spend the night here. After that, well, we’ll see. I turn to the guys. “Do you have any clothes you can lend me until morning?”

Harry opens the fridge and ignores my question. Jim smiles, “Sure. I need to change myself. I'll be back in a sec.”

He comes back down a few minutes later.

“What’s your name by the way?” asks Jim.

“Teegan.”

Jim is shorter than Harry. He’s slim, almost skinny. He has black curly hair.

“All right, Teegan, catch. He throws me an oversized man’s jersey and a pair of boxer shorts.

I look at who I’m guessing is Harry's sister. “Where’s the bathroom, Laura?”

“Upstairs. Let me show you.”

I follow her up the raggedy stairs. She points at the half-open door at the end of the corridor. I get in, close the door, and happily strip out of my wet clothes. I hang them on the shower curtain rod to dry. I smell the football jersey Jim gave me and crinkle my nose. Clearly, the definition of the word clean is not the same for boys as for girls. I put it on anyway. It’s long enough to cover my butt, so I decide not to wear the boxers. When I open the bathroom door, I see Laura standing right on the other side. She clearly stood there all along waiting patiently for me to come out. She smiles when she sees me and grabs my hand like I'm her new best friend.

“This is my room,” she says proudly as she opens the door to our left. It's painted pink. It’s filled with plush toys—there’s some on the bed, on the shelves, and even pouring out of the wardrobe. All the animals of the savanna must be represented here, from monkeys to giraffes to cuddly lions.

“Wow. You have a lot of plush toys.”

“My brother brings one back each time he goes on an adventure.”

I look at the sheer number of them. “Your brother must go on many adventures then.”

“Yes. He does.” For a moment, a shadow of loneliness falls on her face, but it doesn’t stay long.

I sit on her bed. “Hey, your sweater is inside-out.”

Laura pulls her sweater at the collar and peers inside.

“You’re right. I hope I didn’t look too silly.”

“I’m sure no one else noticed.”

She starts pulling it off but the sweater is a little too small for her and gets stuck at her head.

“Here, let me help you.” I manage to pull the sweater off, but I dishevel her auburn hair in the process.

“I messed up your hair. Do you have a hairbrush?”

“Yes, I do.” She dashes to the bathroom and returns with a comb with teeth missing. She sits on the hardwood floor, her back pressed against my knees. I comb her hair. It's going to be a long job. Every couple of inches I hit a knot that requires disentangling.

“So your name is Teegan?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“That’s a nice name. Does it mean anything?”

“My mom chose it. It means ‘special thing’ in Celtic.”

“You are special.”

“I’m not sure about that, but thank you anyway. Hey Laura, do you like jellybeans?”

She turns toward me with a wide smile. “You have some?”

“I do. I’ll give you a couple.”

“Wow, this day is turning out to be great!” She presses her new one-eyed teddy bear against her chest. “Jellybeans, a new toy, and a friend.”

She looks at her teddy bear. “We need to find an eyepatch for you.”

“If you have a sewing kit and a bit of fabric, I bet I could do one.”

“I have my mom’s old sewing kit. She used to sew a lot.”

“Where are your parents?”

“Harry says my dad is a collaborator and that my mom is a doormat. They no longer live with us.”

“I see.” Just as she speaks these words, I notice Harry in the doorway. He looks simultaneously ashamed and furious that Laura told me about their parents.

He steps into the room. “Laura, time for bed.”

“But Harry …”

“No arguing, young lady. Get in your PJs.”

I get up, but before I leave, I whisper to Laura, “I’ll sneak back to your room to give you your jellybeans.” That seems to calm her. She turns to Harry with a knowing smile.

“Okay then. Goodnight, Teegan.”

“Bye, Laura. Sweet dreams.” I wink at her and she winks back at me oblivious that Harry is watching the whole scene.

He picks up Laura and gives her a peck on the cheek. “Sleep tight, Lolo.”

As we get out of the room, Harry turns to me, “She seems to like you.”

“It seems to surprise you that someone would like me.”

He looks at me with his dark eyes. “Laura doesn’t get along with that many people.” I think to myself, well, lost in the woods like this, I’m sure I wouldn’t either.

We head back to the kitchen. I sit on the chair next to Jim. Harry joins us, a glass of Coca-Cola in hand. Jim looks at him and then nods in my direction. Harry takes the hint. He gets back up, “Want something to drink?”

“Yes, that would be nice,” I respond.

As Harry pours another glass, Jim focuses on me. “If you don’t mind me asking, why are you fleeing the Republic Forces?”

“I found out information I wasn’t supposed to.”

“That's it?”

“Military information.”

“Ah.”

Harry sits down, suddenly attentive. “And what did you find out exactly?”

“I can’t tell you. If I did, I'd have to kill you.”

Jim and Harry stare at me, wondering whether this is just a joke in poor taste or whether I'm somehow serious.

I hastily add. “I'm kidding. It's just that I would rather not get you involved. The less you know, the better it is for everyone.” I decide to change the subject. “How about you guys? What were you up to on the bridge?”

Harry's eyes lock onto mine. “We’re trying to topple the Federal Government.”

Undaunted, I take a sip of Coke and reply, “Well, I'm trying to stop this nonsensical war.”

Harry laughs, “You? On your own? And how are you going to accomplish that feat, pray tell.”

“Not telling. It’s a secret.” Gee. Why did I say this. This must think I’m stupid of something. I decide to stir the conversation away from me.

“So, what was your intention in blowing up the bridge?”

“We want the URF bastards to declare martial law in Massachusetts.”

“But why? When a state is under martial law, the URF shut down grocery stores, you need to line up for hours at crappy warehouses with ration coupons to get food or fuel, they impose a curfew, and they arrest even more people. Why would you want *that* to happen?”

Harry's eyes light up. He's clearly happy that I asked that very question.

“Because if we remain in our current state, people will not rise up and revolt. But if the URF ratchets up the hardship on the people a notch or two, finally, even more people will take up arms.”

I swirl the remaining Coke in my glass. “You really think this is the right strategy?”

“I'm not interested in preserving the status quo; I want to overthrow it.”

“I have a hunch that you didn’t come up with that line.”

“You’re right. Nicolas Machiavelli did.”

I raise my eyebrows.

“He was an Italian politician, diplomat, and writer based in Florence during the Renaissance. He wrote *The Prince*.”

“You know how to read?”

“Ha, ha, very funny.”

“And what if people get hurt in the process?”

“They already are,” replies Harry in a harsh voice.

I become quiet. Yes, they’re already being hurt. Jim, feeling the tense mood, changes the subject. “So where are you from? I mean, were you born in the U.S.?”

“I was born in Shanghai. I came with my father and grandfather two years ago.”

“Do you miss your home?”

“Every day.”

Harry stares at me and replies, “I do too.” I get it; he misses America the way it was before the war. I finish my drink. Jim yawns. It's contagious and I start to yawn myself. I realize just how exhausted I am. Harry sees me cover my mouth with the back of my hand. “You can sleep on the floor in Laura's room.”

“Thanks for letting me stay,” I say.

Harry mutters, “Sure.”

I head upstairs. Laura is already asleep under a handmade quilt with a primrose pattern. Remembering that my schoolbag is soaking wet, I empty it to give my stuff a chance to dry. I check the device. It’s intact. My jellybeans didn’t get wet either. I take four and put them on Laura's nightstand. I steal one of her pillows and settle on the hardwood floor. I close my eyes and quickly fall asleep, reassured for some reason by Laura's gentle snoring.

# Chapter 10 – Drone

I wake up surprisingly rested. Dappled sunlight angling through the window blinds caresses Laura’s forehead, but the light doesn’t awaken her. Her arm is wrapped tightly around pirate teddy.

I go and check if my clothes are dry in the bathroom. They're still a little damp but wearable. I grab them and head back to Laura's room to put them on.

Just as I remove Jim's jersey, the door starts opening. I grab the biggest plush toy I can find—a giraffe—to cover my nakedness. I gasp and push madly on the door to keep it shut. Fortunately, whoever is on the other side doesn’t insist.

“I wanted to know if you were still sleeping.” I recognize Harry’s voice.

“Don’t you know how to knock?”

“I *did* knock.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I did. It’s not my fault if you’re deaf. We’re downstairs if you want breakfast.”

“I’ll be down in a minute. And for the record, I hear perfectly fine.”

I hastily get dressed, neatly fold Jim’s shirt, and head to the kitchen.

Even after a full night of sleep, I still feel emotionally drained from yesterday’s ordeal. My nose is drippy. The simple thought of heading back into the cold right now makes me shiver involuntarily. I turn to Harry, “Can I stay another day?”

“I didn’t ask you to go,” replies Harry.

“I can stay?”

“I just told you. Are you sure you’re not deaf?”

“It's just ...”

Harry cuts me off, “That you think I'm a patriotic jerk.”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

“Who's a jerk?”

I hear Laura’s sleepy voice. She's holding pirate teddy in her arms.

“No one. Just about to make oatmeal. Want some?”

“Oatmeal again? Don’t we have anything else? I eat oatmeal all the time. You promised me you’d find some peanut butter.”

“Hey, Laura, if you want, we can make Chinese-style congee together.”

“What's that?”

“Well, it does look like oatmeal, but it’s made with rice. I could use your help.”

“Okay.”

“Harry, do you have rice?” I ask.

He points to a cupboard.

Jim arrives. Laura smiles at him and says proudly, “I’m going to help Teegan make congee.”

“That’s great, Lolo.”

Laura sits her teddy bear straight on a chair and joins me in the kitchen. We get to work. In no time, we serve everyone homemade congee. Suspicious at first, Harry has a taste and declares that it's not bad. I take it as a compliment. We eat our fill and give the rest to the dog, Cadbury, who laps it up joyfully.

Jim takes out a harmonica from his coat pocket. “I'll be on the front porch if you need me.”

“I’ll be in the barn,” says Harry.

I sit on the loveseat by the bay window while Laura puts on some headphones and fidgets with the dials of an old radio.

I gaze outside. There are patches of snow on the ground where the trees provide shade. It’s quiet. I spot a rabbit darting away. After a while, dark thoughts start tugging me down. I’m not ready to deal with the recent events—I head outside to see what Harry’s up to.

Every few seconds, I hear a thump coming from the barn. Intrigued, I push the door hanging crooked on a single hinge and enter. I’m greeted by the smell of damp straw. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dim lighting. The roof is holey, and shafts of light, mottled with dust specks, peek through it here and there. Melting snow drips through the numerous cracks. Long chains hang from the rafters. Antique farm equipment has been pushed alongside the walls to make room for a training area. In its center, I find Harry hitting repeatedly a tractor tire with a sledgehammer. Using taped hands, he brings the heavy mallet directly over his head before crashing it down on the tire. His tank top is translucent with sweat.

“Want’s some tea?” I holler.

He glances in my direction. “I’m not done yet.”

He discards the sledgehammer and tightens the tape wrapped around his hands. He then flips a humongous tractor tire over and over across the space, groaning with each lift. Holy shit, that thing must be four times my weight.

Wow. So that’s his gym—a few tires and a sledgehammer. I think of the one we have at school. Every piece of equipment is specialized for a particular muscle group. Body-motion sensors warn you when you’re not executing the movement with perfect form. We have a dry sauna, a wet sauna, an endless supply of pristine towels, and let us not forget the juice bar serving performance-enhancing smoothies.

“I want to try,” I say.

“Be my guest.” Harry steps out of the way. He’s probably thinking that I can’t flip the tire even once. I’ll show him. I squat next to it. The thread is covered with small clumps of ice and mud. I slide my hands underneath. Eew. I strain and groan and lift and … nothing. The thing is so damn heavy, it barely moves.

“Come on,” says Harry.

I give it another go, but it hardly budges. “It’s - not - moving,” I grunt.

“Think about a guy you want to impress.”

“No one comes to mind,” I grumble as I look him straight in the eye.

“Then think of someone you hate.”

Oh … that’s easy. Grayson. A jolt of anger hits me like a bullet. That bastard beat my defenseless granddad before shooting him. I change the position of my hands to get a better grip and lift. I let out a cry. It moves up a few inches.

“Put some heart into it, you sissy,” Harry prods on. “Not – helping!” I snort. After a furious heave, I manage to get the tire to a fortify-five degree angle.

“Good! You’re halfway there.”

I wedge my shoulder against the sidewall and push some more. With a final thrust, I topple the tire. It lands with a thump.

“There,” says Harry.

I grab my knees and catch my breath. After a moment, I straighten up and brush my hands against my pants like this was no big deal. Harry resumes his training.

I wait to see if he’ll compliment me or say something nice, but he doesn’t.

“Don’t worry,” I answer to the question he hasn’t asked, “I’ll get out of your hair.”

Just as I’m leaving the barn, Harry shouts, “I knew you had it in you, you know.”

I smile. You bet I have it in me.

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Back at the house, Laura asks my help to patch up her teddy bear. I nod, happy for the distraction. Laura goes scavenging for a sewing kit and piece of fabric. After only a few minutes, she runs up to me, a big grin on her face. In one hand she has a small metal box and in the other, a piece of red felt.

We set up on the kitchen table with the necessary equipment. Laura draws the shape of the patch with a pen, biting her lip in concentration, and then cuts it with scissors. Harry enters the house and sees us. I can see in his eyes that he's happy that someone is spending time with his sister, and in turn, this makes me happy. I’m glad I can give Laura a little company; it must be so lonely for her living in this house located in the middle of nowhere.

I begin to sew the patch on, but when I’m halfway done, I give the needle to Laura. “Here, let me show you how to do the rest. It's handy to know how to sew.”

Teddy's patch is just about done when Jim storms into the house shouting, “Drone!”

Harry runs to the living room. “What?”

“A drone, Harry. It had the URF logo. It took pictures!”

“Damn it! We’re compromised. They must have found your backpack. I've been listening to the Voice of Freedom; everyone’s talking about the bridge explosion. They brought in reinforcements overnight. It's having an even bigger impact than we thought.”

Harry looks at Laura, and in a split second makes a decision.

“We have to run. Laura, do you still have your knapsack ready like I told you?”

“Yes, Harry.”

“Go fetch it, sweetie. And Teegan, get your stuff.”

“Guys, we have ten minutes to evacuate. Grab your gear, warm clothes, water bottles, and bare necessities.”

I race upstairs. I throw each item hodgepodge in my schoolbag without any consideration. Laura is with me. She grabs her knapsack from her cupboard and pirate teddy. We fly downstairs. Harry pulls out the fridge revealing a cubbyhole. It’s filled with containers with unpronounceable chemicals, wire rolls, batteries of all shapes and sizes, and tools. In short, everything a do-it-yourself bomb maker would need. From beneath a shelf, Harry pulls out a bolt-action rifle.

“Everyone ready?”

I can tell that he’s worried most about Laura. His eyes are constantly darting to her, his face riddled with guilt.

“Where are we heading, Harry?” I ask.

“The Appalachian Trail. It’s our safest bet.”

“We need to throw them off the scent first,” says Jim.

“What do you have in mind?” asks Harry.

“I’ll go hide the truck.” Seeing Harry’s surprised look, he adds, “If they see it parked by the house, they'll know immediately that we’re on foot.”

“Good idea.” Harry fumbles in his pocket and throws a set of keys to Jim.

“Where do we meet up?” asks Jim.

“At the abandoned house on the trail, the one with the stone chimney,” replies Harry.

“You mean the old Patterson’s house. I know the one. I'll meet you there as soon as I can.”

Jim gives Harry a quick hug. He then turns to Laura. “You listen to your brother, okay, Laura?”

“I will.”

I can tell by how hard Laura is clutching her teddy that she’s scared.

With sudden look of alarm, she asks, “What about Cadbury?”

Harry puts his hand gently on her shoulder. “We can’t bring him with us.”

“But why not?”

“Because he’s old, and he would slow us down.”

Laura fights back tears. She goes and sees Cadbury, who’s napping on the couch without a care in the world. She caresses him a few times before pulling back quietly. The dog doesn’t wake up.

Jim takes off. As we reach the front door, Harry scrutinizes the sky for drones. Seeing none, he motions us forward. A few minutes later we’re in a sparsely wooded area heading west.

“Why the Appalachian trail?” I ask.

Harry is quick to respond. “It's controlled by the Resistance. It's booby-trapped. Even the URF don’t venture there.”

*Booby-trapped.* I shudder at the thought. Laura takes my hand and squeezes it tightly. Keeping a brisk pace, we quickly leave the forested area and enter a barren field that seems to have no end. We walk over frozen lumps of earth, making our progress difficult. Stalks of wormwood stick up through the snow and sway in the wind. I almost step on the rusted remains of a hayfork. The field must have been abandoned for many years. Laura is a real trooper, but after two hours of this grueling march, I can see that she’s starting to feel faint.

“Harry, Laura needs a break,” I say. “And, truth be told, so do I.”

“Not before the forest. We're in the middle of a field here. We're too exposed.”

“Please, Harry,” says Laura.

Harry sighs. “Okay, but just five minutes.”

I slump on the ground to rest. Harry offers Laura and me water from his canteen. We both take a few big gulps. I look around. The evergreen forest is about one mile west from here. I spot a little animal staring at us.

“Hey Laura, check out the striped squirrel. It’s so cute.”

“That’s not a squirrel, silly. That’s a chipmunk. Don’t you have chipmunks in your country?”

“Maybe, but I’ve never seen one before.”

Laura squats and attempts to lure the chipmunk. I’m just starting to relax when Harry gets up and tells us it’s time to go.

“So soon?” says Laura.

“It’s not safe here,” replies Harry. “Come. I’ll give you a ride.”

Harry is already carrying a monstrous backpack, yet he scoops up Laura as if she weighs nothing. As soon as she’s cradled in his arms, she gives a peck on her brother’s cheek. We resume our journey. I’ve never traveled outside for this long in winter. My feet are cold and so are my earlobes. The wind is blowing steadily from the north and it’s not letting up. As we reach the edge of the forest, Harry lowers Laura to the ground. He then turns to me.

“How are you holding up? Need a ride?” He has a stupid grin.

His question surprises me. “You're not strong enough to carry me with my backpack.”

“Challenge accepted.”

I feel silly now. Harry comes toward me. Somehow I’m uncomfortable that he's going to wrap his arms around me and cradle me like a child. Laura giggles. He sweeps one arm under the bend of my knees and lifts me, schoolbag and all. His face is now next to mine. It feels awkwardly intimate.

“Harry's strong. Isn’t he?” says Laura, breaking the spell.

“He sure is, Laura, but he's not as strong as my ex-boyfriend.” I'm not sure why I felt obliged to lie like that. Maybe it was to wipe the smug look on Harry's face. After my comment, he drops me unceremoniously. I feel oddly relieved.

Harry looks at us, “Okay, enough strongman challenges for today. We're about one mile from the old house. We should be there in twenty minutes if we don’t dawdle.”

Harry turns to me. “Think you can keep up?” he asks while raising his eyebrows.

“Just lead the way, oh fearless leader,” I respond.

He takes Laura by the hand and starts walking. We’re now on the Appalachian Trail. It's not well marked and I realize it takes someone experienced like Harry to keep us from straying from the path; I would get lost in no time.

Every now and then Harry holds his arm up, and we all stop. He scrutinizes the ground for I don't know what. Occasionally he even prods the soil with the tip of his rifle. Once satisfied, he waves us forward.

If it weren’t for the unmistakable sensation that my toes are going to fall off from the cold, this walk in the woods would be pleasant. Bright birch trees lit up by the midday sun surround us. For a brief time, I forget the URF menace.

“Eek!” Laura stops in her tracks and points with a shaking finger at a wood sign hanging from a tree branch—it has the Resistance logo and the words “True patriots don’t give the URF a hand.” A severed hand covered in dried blood is nailed underneath. I shudder. Holy crap, I don’t want to mess with these guys.

“Let’s be extra-careful,” says Harry trying hard to keep his voice calm. “Everyone, walk behind me. The old house shouldn’t be far.”

We’ve been walking for ten minutes when I hear whizzing sounds, like that of tiny motors and the clickety-click of little paws on a hard surface. I look over my shoulder and shriek. A horde of robot-spiders the size of dinner plates is racing toward us. The most unnerving thing is their red blinking eyes that seem to observe us. They have a flexible tube curved like a scorpion’s tail jutting from their back. The spiders run dizzyingly fast, their articulated legs adjusting with no difficulty to the uneven terrain.

The leading spider is just a few feet away from me. The tube wiggles until it points in my direction. Just as it fires, I jump and catch a branch. A dart almost hits me. I let go of the branch just as the spider races below me. I fall on it with all my weight. I feel the metal legs twist under my feet, and hear a satisfying snap.

With his rifle, Harry shoots at the spider nearest him and hits it. The red eyes go out, and after a final whiz, the spider stops moving. But behind that one are a dozen more.

Harry fires again, but this time misses the nimble creature. It fires back and hits him squarely on his thigh. As he yanks the dart from his leg, Harry turns to Laura and me. “Run! Run as fast as you can!”

Laura is the fastest to react. She sprints forward. A dart hits me. I feel a burning sensation in my lower back followed by a feeling of numbness that invades my entire body. I collapse, unable to even move my arms to break my fall. I land on the uneven ground and roll a few times on the slope before settling on my back. My limbs are completely unreactive. Even my throat feels constricted. With a growing sense of panic, I realize that I’m completely paralyzed.

The robot-spider climbs on me. Its pointy legs prod my body as it moves. It positions itself on my chest and an articulated camera takes a picture of my left eye. The flash blinds me for a few seconds.

A bunch of soldiers approach me, intrigued, probably wondering what is a bunch of teens doing in their neck of the woods. They look like they just stepped out of an army surplus store; no two soldiers are dressed alike. However, they all have a belt with grenades and an automatic weapon slung over their shoulder. There’s no doubt as to who they are—the Resistance*.*

One of them, a stocky soldier, walks up to me. He places a foot on either side of my shoulders. If I could, I'd punch him in the nuts. He takes my hood off and examines me more closely. He smiles as if he recognizes me. He then pulls me by my feet. As I’m dragged, snow enters underneath my coat, creeps up my back before melting on contact with my skin. He props me up against a tree next to Harry and Laura's paralyzed bodies. In the distance, I can hear a helicopter approaching.

He walks back to his squad. The Resistance fighters look on the edge and sleep-deprived. He pulls out a pack of smokes, takes out a cigarette and lights up.

“Who are these kids? Didn’t they see our sign?” asks a woman, a look of concern on her face. She has a scar that runs diagonally from her left eye all the way to her chin.

“You won’t believe this, Sonia, but I believe we just captured Teegan Pershing, the daughter of the Major General.”

“You’re shitting me!” The woman stares at me in disbelief.

“It’s her all right!” chimes another soldier after consulting the tablet in his hands. “She matches the retinal scan we have on record. But wait, it gets better! She’s at the top of the URF’s Most Wanted list.” The soldier’s gaze lingers on his tablet. “Holy shit! She even has a bounty on her head. I’ve never seen the URF want someone this bad before.” He then walks up to Harry. “And this asshole,” he says as he kicks Harry in the shin, “is the jerk who blew up Memorial Bridge last night and compromised our four-month operation.”

What? I have a bounty on my head? I feel the blood drain from my face. My head spins. How much worse can this nightmare get?

“If she’s that important, we could trade her for Conrad,” says someone I can’t see from my position.

“We can’t just trade her!” says Sonia. “She’s just a teenager for God’s sake.

“Who do you want to see free?” says the soldier. “The daughter of the very man who organized the Cleanse or our leader who got captured fighting the feds. You tell me.”

“But she’s just a kid,” argues Sonia. “She’s not her father. You can’t blame *her* for his actions.”

“Enough! It’s not for us to decide.”

I stop listening to their conversation. I feel horrible. I imagine every possible outcome in my head and none of them are good.

“I found another one.” A young woman walks up to the group. Jim is lumbering in front of her. He has his ankles loosely tied together with a cord to prevent him from running off. She’s prodding him forward with the tip of her sniper rifle. She has piercings all over her face—eyebrows, lips, ears, and nose. Her hair is short and spiky. Her skin is pale. If badass had a spokesperson, she would be it.

“This guy was lurking next to the old Patterson’s house.”

She shoves Jim forward. With his feet bound, he trips and falls in the snow next to me.

A crackling voice comes on a radio. “We just spotted URF troops on the ground. Look alive!”

“Crap! Just what we needed.” The dude flings his cigarette butt in the snow.

“All right, folks, you know the drill.”

Just as the stocky man bends to pick me up I hear a hiss as if compressed air was released from a canister. In seconds, the entire area is covered with dense smoke that makes my eyes cry and the back of my throat burn. Snot is running from my nose. My eyes are burning, and no amount of blinking brings any kind of relief. I can only see a few feet around me. At least the effects of the tranquilizer are ebbing and I can move more freely.

Gunshots. Laura shrieks. Sonia’s body falls at my feet, her chest riddled with bullets. Through the smoke, I can barely make out the URF soldier who killed her. His face is covered by a gas mask. He glances at me before returning to the fight.

Harry crawls up to me. “We need to escape while we have smoke cover.”

I nod. Jim frantically unties the cord binding his feet. Something explodes only two dozen yards from us. Dirt, rocks, and branches rain down on us. I cringe and cover my head with my hands. Harry dives on top of Laura to protect her.

“Are you okay, Lolo?” he asks when the dust has settled. She nods, terrified.

As soon as Jim has freed himself, we grab our backpacks and trudge into the forest, coughing and blinking. My ears are still ringing from the detonation. When we’re out of the smoke, Harry sweeps Laura in his arms, and we run. Once in a while, I look over my shoulder—no one seems to be pursuing us. Not yet. There too busy killing each other.

Not forty-eight hours ago, I was getting ready to sing to America’s upper crust. Now, I’m running for my life in the company of ragtag teens who, like me, carry their own fears and agenda.

# Chapter 11 – Crazy Pete’s House

The wind is blowing hard. The adrenaline rush of our escape is long gone. Laura is walking next to me, holding my hand tight. We’re still shell-shocked and everyone is keeping quiet. To top it all off, the URF are sending bounty hunters after me. I sigh. How could this get any worse?

After a while, Harry breaks the silence. “The Resistance is not at all what I imagined them to be.” Harry’s voice is full of contempt. “To believe that they were my motivation all along. What a disappointment.” He spits out the last words.

Harry then looks at me, “So you’re the daughter of the General, hey?” I can see in his eyes that he’s fully aware he’s asking a loaded question. So why does he even bother?

I cross my arms over my chest. “Yes, and what of it?”

“He’s done some very bad things.”

“You’re looking at me like I were him. You’re no better than the Resistance.”

“Well, the apple never falls far from the tree.”

“Tell me, Harry, are you anything like your father?”

“Not one bit. He’s a snitch collaborating with the Feds and I’m a true patriot.”

“So why are you judging me like that?” My voice is quivering now. “Instead of treating me like the daughter of my father, how about treating me like me? You think you can do that?”

“Stop squabbling you two,” says Jim “We need to find a place to hide, and fast. Whoever wins the bloodbath contest is going to come after us.”

Harry casts a glance at Laura to make sure she’s not listening. “But where? We’re in the middle of buttfuck nowhere. The nearest town is miles away.”

Jim stops dead in his tracks. Harry stares at him, wondering what he’s up to.

“I know a place where they would never look for us.” Jim’s voice is hesitant.

“You do?” I say.

“Yes, but you’re not going to like it,” says Jim. “Crazy Pete’s house.”

“The one on Fernside Road?” asks Harry.

“That’s the one,” says Jim.

Harry’s face changes just like if someone had asked him to jump into a snake pit.

“Well, what’s so special about it?” I ask.

“The house,” says Harry, “is surrounded by a minefield.”

“You want to bring us to a minefield, Jim?” I poke him in the chest. “Are you mad?”

“No one will think that we’re crazy enough to go there,” defends Jim.

“That’s right, and you know why?” I say.

“No,” says Jim.

“Because we’re not crazy, that’s why!” For a moment I had my hopes up. This is not ordinary stupid. This is advanced stupid.

“We have the Resistance and the URF after us,” Jim continues.

“And don’t forget bounty hunters,” adds Harry.

“Yeah, and bounty hunters,” I say in a low voice, more to myself than to anyone else.

“But there’s a way in,” says Jim. “A hapless girl from the county wandered into the minefield and stepped on a mine, detonating it. In turn, that mine detonated some of the surrounding ones. We go in by the craters. Then, from what I can recall, we only have about forty yards to the house. I’ll go first. I’ll look for mines, tripwires, and stuff. If I don’t blow up, you follow in my footsteps. Once in the house, we’ll be safe.”

Harry pulls Laura against him. Jim notices.

“As I said, Harry, I’ll go first. I’ll be extra careful.”

I think about this. If the URF catches me, they’ll interrogate me, if not worse. I shudder at the thought. And if it’s the Resistance catching me, they’ll trade me to the URF. Back to square one. Either way, I get killed. Great. “I’m in,” I say resolutely.

Jim turns to Harry. “It’s up to you.”

“All right. I don’t have any better ideas, but Laura goes last.”

“How far is the house?” I ask.

“I reckon about two to three miles from here,” Jim replies. “It’s at the junction of Mad River.”

We get going. Laura clinches Harry’s hand hard. I admire her. I try to recall what I was doing when I was nine; it’s a bit fuzzy, but I’m sure it didn’t involve winter hiking and getting shot at.

The bright sun doesn’t offer any warmth. My feet are freezing and I no longer feel my fingertips. To get my mind off the cold, I decide to chat with Jim. “So who’s Crazy Pete?”

“Crazy Pete? He used to be in the army. When the second civil war started, he used his old army contacts to procure anti-personnel mines. He would say to anyone who listened that he would blow up anyone who set foot on his land. With the help of his son, he proceeded to surround his farmhouse with mines. He put an electrified fence all around it. Everything was fine until the young girl blew up. Either out of guilt or fear of going to prison, he and his son disappeared into the night and were never heard of again.”

“They sound like warm and cheerful guys,” I say.

“I saw something!” Laura shrieks. She points at a tree cluster to our right. I squint but notice nothing out of the ordinary. Harry peers attentively, “I see nothing, Laura. You’re tired, sweetie. You’re seeing things.” She turns to me for support. I shake my head. Laura mumbles, “No one takes me seriously,” but doesn’t press the matter further.

We near Crazy Pete’s house. The building is a white colonial house with a farmer’s porch. The white paint is peeling in many places revealing grayish wood panels underneath. If it weren’t for the sign reading *Minefield* with a skull and the gaping crater, it would look like any ordinary farmhouse. The biggest crater is over twenty feet wide. A bunch of smaller ones surrounds it.

Jim darts across the road and enters the main crater. After a moment, he waves at us to join him. We follow in single file: me, Harry and Laura. As we scuttle across, I hear the distant sound of a helicopter and exchange a worried look with Harry. A URF chopper is on its way—I’m sure of it.

Jim is on all fours. He meticulously checks the path ahead for a few yards, and when he deems it safe, he signals us to follow. It takes us excruciatingly long minutes to advance only a dozen feet. Every now and then, Jim gathers pebbles and creates a mound to indicate the safe path.

As Jim proceeds to the next section, his voice rings out “Holy Shit!” He points to a barely visible wire in front of his left foot. “Tripwire. Crazy Pete was one crafty man. Just walk over it carefully.”

We’re about halfway to the porch when Harry exclaims, “Look what I found!” Harry extends his hand toward a gun lying on the ground. He has just wrapped his fingers around the grip when Jim, his face white with terror, shouts a deafening, “No!”

Harry stares at everyone in surprise.

“Leave it there if you want to live.” Jim’s voice is shaking. “Remove your hand slowly from the grip.” Harry, suddenly frightened, lets go of the gun.

Jim is sweating profusely. “Oh man, that was a close one.” Jim approaches Harry and examines the ground. “That’s what I thought. There’s a mine right underneath. Some mines detonate on pressure—when you walk on them—but others, like this one, detonate when a weight is removed.”

“Oh my God, I could’ve blown up everybody,” says Harry.

“But you didn’t. Let’s keep moving,” says Jim.

The helicopter roar is getting louder and louder. “Guys, we’ve got to hurry,” I say.

“We can’t, Teegan,” says Jim shaking his head. “We’re in a friggin’ minefield for God’s sake.”

The helicopter is just on the other side of the forest. Rays of sun glint off the metal rotor blades. I don’t think they’ve seen us yet, but it’s heading in our direction. This is bad.

“Jim,” I say, my voice wavering, “I cannot allow myself to be caught. Too much is at stake.” Jim ignores me. He gets back on all four and scrutinizes the path leading to the house. Only Harry seems to understand—he looks at Laura and me in concern. The house is so near—only twenty yards now—yet so far. The helicopter will spot us any moment now.

Without warning, Harry bolts toward the house oblivious of tripwires and mines. I scream, “Harry, stop!” He doesn’t listen to me. He pounds the ground with his heavy legs as if to say, if I’m to blow up, do it now, and be done with. I hold my breath as I visualize the distance remaining before he reaches safety: fifteen yards, ten yards, five yards … Harry has reached the porch. I start breathing again. As he turns to face us, I can see he’s been sweating bricks.

“Come on. Move!” he cries. “Just follow in my footsteps.” The helicopter is so close now. Jim backtracks, scoops Lolo in his arms, and dashes toward the house. If they go, I think morbidly, they die together. I follow, right behind.

As soon as he arrives, Jim drops Laura on the porch. He rattles the doorknob, but the door is locked. He pulls out tools from the inside pocket of his coat.

“Jim, we don’t have time,” barks Harry. “Move out of the way.” Jim sidesteps and Harry rams into the door like a grizzly bear. It bursts open. Just as the helicopter nose peeks over the tree canopy, we scramble inside the house and slam the door shut. Jim rushes to the only open window and shutters it.

“I don’t think they saw us,” says Jim panting as he peers through the cracks. “The chopper is now heading north.” We let out a collective sigh of relief.

I approach Harry. “So, what was that all about?” I demand. I’m simultaneously mad and grateful that he risked his life for us.

“What?” he says, acting like nothing has happened.

“You could have blown yourself up. That’s what.”

“I could have, but I didn’t. Sometimes, Teegan, you need to take risks.”

*Sometimes, Teegan, you need to take risks.* This guy is so condescending. He’s starting to get on my nerves.

“Let’s go check if there’s food stashed in this house,” says Jim. “I’m starving.”

We scatter across the house and explore. The shelves in the kitchen are empty. I’m about to open the cupboard door when Jim hollers, “Guys, check this out!”

We assemble in the dining room. Jim points at an opened trapdoor. A rickety set of wooden stairs lead to a dark and musty basement.

“Anyone have a flashlight?” asks Jim.

Laura rummages in her backpack and takes one out. A timid light beam appears when she turns it on. She shakes the flashlight a little and the beam brightens a bit. She hands it to Jim.

He goes down the stairs and whistles. “This guy was a real prepper. Come on down, Laura. You’re going to like this, but mind the steps.”

“Really?” She looks at me all excited. I take Laura’s hand and we go down the stairs together.

When we reach the bottom, I see walls covered with shelves from floor to ceiling. Most of them are filled with neatly stacked cans and water jugs. A couple of crates are piled up in a corner. There’s also a diesel generator and a rusty old fridge.

Jim pulls out a jar from behind his back and presents it to Laura.

“Is this what I think it is?” Laura’s eyes light up. “Peanut butter. Oh yes!” Laura takes the jar from Jim’s hand and jumps up and down with joy.

“I’ll prepare a snack,” says Jim enthusiastically.

Harry takes a random can in his hand and reads the label, “Yummy, SPAM.”

“Quit complaining, you.” Laura gives her brother a jab in the ribs.

“What did I say?” Harry asks. I give a discreet thumbs-up to Laura.

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The afternoon sunlight squeezes through the cracks of the boarded windows and illuminates the kitchen. When we sit to eat, everyone is quiet because we’re so exhausted. Jim didn’t want to risk lighting the wood stove and so food is cold. SPAM tastes like dog food. Now, I’ve never had dog food before, but I’m pretty sure that’s what it tastes like. Laura hasn’t touched her plate and is eating peanut butter by the teaspoon instead. I think of Ye Ye’s cooking. I miss him. I miss him so much it hurts. I can’t control myself and I start crying. Everyone looks at me with a concerned look making me even more uncomfortable. I run upstairs and lock myself in the bathroom. It takes at least an hour for me to cry myself out. When I open the door, I find Laura sitting on the cold hardwood floor, patiently waiting for me.

“Are you okay?” she asks. Her voice is so sweet and full of caring that I have to control an urge to cry again. I pick her up and hug her. I manage a smile and say, “Better, thanks.”

Even though it’s midafternoon, we agree that we should take a nap. Laura scavenges for blankets and pillows from the room upstairs, and we all lie down together in the living room. No one wants to sleep alone. Besides, some of the windowpanes upstairs are broken, letting in drafts of cold air. Laura grabs the recliner. I walk up to Laura. “Do you want me to sing you a lullaby? I know a great one. It was my favorite when I was little. My grandma used to sing it to me all the time.”

Her face lights up. “Sure.”

“It’s called ‘Tzu Chu Tiao’.”

“Tsu choo teahow?” she asks.

She mangles the pronunciation, but I don’t correct her. “Yes. It means Tunes of Purple Bamboo.” I close my eyes, trying to remember the words. It’s been so long since I heard them. They awake distant memories of a simpler time when I had my whole family with me, a time when my mother was still alive. I remember my grandma’s smell when she walked into my room. She would usually come in minutes after my mom had tucked me in bed. She spent a good deal of her time in the kitchen cooking for us, and a waft of cooking aroma—garlic, thyme, ginger, and sage—always seemed to accompany her like faithful companions. The words come back to me now. I sing softly. Laura closes her eyes. The little furrows in her forehead disappear. In no time she falls asleep.

“Thanks,” says Harry.

I turn around to find Harry standing behind me. At least, he seems apologetic now.

“It’s nothing,” I reply. “It’s been a hell of a day, and Laura needed a bit of love.”

Before I lie down, I take my handgun out of my bag and tuck it in the front waistband of my pants, hoping I’ll never have to use it. I lie down and fall into a dreamless sleep.

# Chapter 12 – Suede Moccasins

“Harry! Harry!” There is fear in the wavering voice. Groggy with sleep, I prop myself on one elbow to see what’s going on. A strangled cry escapes my lips. A man is holding Laura hostage. His hair is black like glossy oil. He’s clad in leather. Instead of boots, he’s wearing soft suede moccasins—no wonder no one heard him enter. He has the edge of a serrated knife pressed against Laura’s throat.

Harry, who was sleeping as well, jumps up and growls, “Let her go if you know what’s good for you.” Veins stick out of his muscled arms. With his entire body taut, Harry is about to pounce on the man. The man makes a slight slicing movement with his knife. Laura shrieks. A pearl of ruby blood forms on her throat. Harry backs off.

The man then looks at me, “Are you Teegan Pershing?”

Seeing Laura’s terrified look, I decide not to be heroic or clever. “What do you want with me?”

“You’ve got a bounty on your head.”

Jumbled thoughts go through my head in quick succession. Is he going to hand me over to the URF? Or does he work for BlackIce? Will they torture me? Will Father and I be executed as traitors? My insides tie themselves into knots. I regret not hiding the device; that would’ve given me a bargaining chip. Now, I have nothing.

A sly grin forms on his pockmarked face. “If you come with me like a good little girl, I’ll let this one go free. A girl for a girl. Seems fair to me.”

Everyone is staring at me wondering what I’m going to do, but none more so than Harry. I can see the blood drain from his face. Laura’s eyes are wide open in terror.

I could never live with myself if anything happened to her.

“Okay.” I walk up to the bounty hunter without hesitation. As I do so, I clench my fists hard to prevent my hands from shaking. I don’t want to appear weak in front of this bastard.

As I near the bounty hunter, he pushes Laura violently forward, and she falls on her knees. Before I can react, he wraps one arm around me like a vice, and with the other puts his knife against my throat. He presses the blade so hard, I’m afraid to breathe, lest it cuts into my skin.

Harry runs up to Laura and helps her up.

“Are you all listening? Because I’m not going to repeat myself.” The bounty hunter stares at everyone in turn, making sure he has everyone’s full attention. “I’ve planted a bomb outside and the detonator is on my wrist. If anyone, anyone at all, tries to play hero, I press a button, and we all blow up. Get it?”

Silent nods.

“Good. Teegan, wave goodbye to your buddies because it’s the last time you’ll ever see them.”

With his knife still at my throat, we slowly back out of the room. Jim is staring at him, trying to figure him out. I think to myself that at least Laura’s safe and that’s what matters. When we reach the front door, the man spins us around so that he can see where he’s going. He follows the same path through the minefield we took earlier today. As we reach the safety of the road, my kidnapper breathes a sigh of relief. There’s a large SUV parked on the side of the road below a cluster of snow-covered pine trees. He pushes me in that direction.

“Who hired you?”

“In this particular case, BlackIce. They give me a lot of work because I’m the best.”

“You weren’t hired by the URF?”

“No. These fuckers don’t pay half as much as BlackIce.”

“BlackIce. You mean the weapon’s manufacturer?”

“Enough questions. Open the door and get inside.” I obey. What else can I do? I wonder about the others. Are they all watching from the window, unsure of what to do?

As I sit, I feel the pointy edge of my kidnapper’s blade against my back. “Now put on the handcuffs.” One of the cuffs is already fastened to the seatbelt. I attach the other one around my left wrist. It snaps with a click. The bounty hunter yanks the chain linking the two cuffs together to make sure they’re secure. He walks around to the other side of the vehicle, gets inside and starts the car. As we accelerate past the house, he says casually, “I never leave witnesses,” and presses the button on his wrist. I turn around. One after the other the mines surrounding the house detonate. Bang! Bang! Bang! With each explosion, I cringe and shrink into my seat, and my heart sinks a little more. Walls are ripped from the foundation and tossed into the air, the porch is torn to shreds, the chimney crumples into a mound of bricks, and finally, the roof collapses into a heap of shingles and blackened splinters. As we drive away, I can only think of Laura, Jim, and Harry dead. I want to scream, but I’m so mad, I can’t.

“Monster!” My face crimson with fury, I pummel him, handcuffs and all, but my blows are ineffective. He slaps me on the face so hard I reel from the impact.

“Shut up,” he barks.

Raging, I resolutely put my hand underneath my shirt to grab my pistol tucked into my pants.

“Whatever you’re doing, stop it,” he growls. “Keep your hands where I can see them.”

“My stomach hurts,” I say. “I’m on my period.” I put my hand back expecting another slap, but it doesn’t come. I carefully grip the pistol and place it flat against my stomach, pointing at his chest. I look at the speedometer; we’re already doing thirty miles per hour. This is going to hurt. I shut my eyes and fire.

The man screams in pain and loses control of the vehicle. It swerves toward the roadside ditch and a colossal elm tree. We crash. The airbag activates. The windshield cracks. The passenger door pops open; I almost get thrown out of the car, but the handcuffs linking me to the seatbelt hold me back. I blank out momentarily. When I come to, I find that a smell of gasoline permeates the air. There is no sign of the bounty hunter. The driver’s door is open, but the seat is empty. I begin to panic. I need to get out and fast. I yank frantically at the seatbelt, but the strap fabric is solid. My breathing is fast and shallow. I need to pull myself together if I want to survive this. I stop tugging on the seatbelt and have a second look around. The crash ripped part of the passenger door giving it a jagged edge—maybe I can rub the strap against it to tear it.

Just then, the bounty hunter appears teetering on his feet. His face is covered in blood. There is a large bruise on his forehead. He punches me. My vision becomes blurry. Adrenaline shoots through my body and I decide to fight back. Hate like I have never known rages inside of me like a storm. This man killed in cold blood what little of a surrogate family I had. Using my free hand I grab the seatbelt strap, which was loosened in the crash, and with a deft movement circle it around the bounty hunter’s neck. I pull hard. The noose tightens. He tries frantically to pull at the strap, but I’m not letting go. With each passing second, his attempts to free himself become feebler. His face is turning blue. His eyes catch mine, pleading for me to release him, but all I can think of is my dead friends. A few seconds later, he stops struggling altogether, and I know that he’s dead.

The realization that I have just killed someone hits me like a ton of bricks, but I push the thought away—the smell of gasoline is even more present now. With my free hand, I search the bounty hunter’s pockets for the handcuff key; I manage to retrieve it after a few attempts. With my hand trembling, it takes several tries before I manage to insert the key into the hole. I feel faint. The handcuff now removed, I scramble out of the car and fall into the ditch a few feet below. The blood coming out of my scalp runs down the side of my face and makes me blink. I stare at the brooding sky. Fat snowflakes fall lazily, swirling gently before pricking my face. I can hardly feel the cold on my back. And then I black out.

# Chapter 13 – Trust

I come to with a pounding headache. Each time I try to move stabs of pain shoot up the side of my neck. My stomach is queasy. Someone is gently stroking my hair. I manage to focus my vision—it’s Laura. My head is on her lap. Oh my God, she’s alive!

She beams a smile at me. “Guys, Teegan’s awake!”

I hear Harry mumble, “It’s about time.”

“That was a close one, hey Teegan?” says Jim.

I force myself to sit upright. I want to know what happened. It takes me a moment to get my bearings. I’m in a car. The hood is all banged up. I recognize it now—it’s the bounty hunter’s SUV. Somehow, they managed to pull it out of the ditch. Harry and Jim are in the front seat. I’m in the back seat with Laura.

“You guys are all alive, but how? I saw the explosion. The bounty hunter, he set off his bomb as soon as we reached the road.”

“Jim saved us,” Harry says. “He called it. He said, and I quote, ‘This son of a bitch is going to blow everything up as soon as he reaches a safe distance.’ Jim had us run down to the basement and lie on the floor. If it weren’t for him, we’d have been blown to bits.”

“But it was my brother who insisted we go out and see if there was any way we could save you,” adds Laura. “He’s the one who found you lying unconscious.” I hear pride in her voice.

“Because of you, my little sister almost got killed.” Harry’s comment takes me by complete surprise.

“Cut the girl some slack, Harry,” says Jim. “She almost died.”

“No! I won’t. It’s about time she leveled with us. What’s going on, Teegan?” His voice hardens as he continues. “What’s the real reason you’re on the most wanted list? The URF have their shit together. Why would they also hire bounty hunters to track you down?”

“It’s complicated,” I reply.

Harry swings the steering wheel, hits the brake, and pulls over to the side of the road.

“Well, I got time,” he says.

“I’m not sure if I can trust you.” The words pour out of my mouth without any filter. I regret them as soon as they come out.

“Okay. Get out of the car. Get out of the friggin’ car right now!”

“You can’t be serious,” says Jim.

“If she doesn’t trust us,” barks Harry, “then there’s no sense of us hanging together now, is there?”

“I’ve placed everyone in harm’s way and I’m very sorry for that.” I look at the dried blood on Laura’s neck where the bounty hunter’s blade nicked her and I’m wracked with guilt.

“Sorry is not good enough, princess.” Harry prods me on without shame. “So, what’s it going to be? Are you going to tell us what’s going on or leave?”

Everyone is waiting with bated breath for my answer—Laura most of all. She’s looking at me with doe eyes hoping that I’ll allow myself to trust her brother.

I feel my insides contracting with anxiety. I think of Adrian and how he betrayed me. But I also know that I’ll never reach Manchester on my own—I need to trust.

I tell them everything. The hit and run, the device, the words the person spoke to me, my plans to get the device to a black market or an offgriders and lastly, how I the evidence is stored in a device. I also mention how BlackIce is involved.

Harry stares at me the whole time. His body is so tense; I can’t read what he’s thinking. Jim is attentive but clearly shocked and outraged. I’m ashamed of my own countrymen.

I’ve finished talking. No one says a word. I guess that everyone is digesting the information, and then everyone bursts out talking.

“Was the device damaged in the car accident?” asks Harry.

I check that the box containing the storage device is still intact in my money belt. “No, it wasn’t,” I answer.

“What kind of data was stolen?” asks Jim.

“I’m not sure—It has to do with BlackIce and the never ending war.”

“So,” asks Laura in a hopeful voice, “can Teegan stay?”

“Well, that depends, Laura. It depends on her next answer.”

I glare at Harry. I hate it when he’s patronizing.

“And what’s the question?”

“What are you going to do with this device that could stop the war?”

“I’m going to Manchester to get it decrypted.”

“So,” says Harry, “you’re betraying your own father?” I can’t read his emotions. I’m not sure if he’s proud of me or despises me.

I straighten my back. “To make things right, yes. That’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make.”

“Show it to me,” says Harry.

“What?”

“The storage device. Show it to me.”

I hesitate a moment. Harry did seriously consider kicking me out of his house when he realized I was wanted. Will he just take it from me and leave me stranded on the side of the road? On the other hand, he ran all the way here to look for me. Without him, I would have died of cold in the ditch. I decide to trust him, for now. It doesn’t come easily to me. I hand him the little box. As I give it to him, everyone is looking at it like it was the Holy Grail.

Harry opens the box, and as delicately as he can with his big fingers, pulls out the egg shaped device. “It’s all in here,” he says to no one in particular. He gawks at it like it’s some mystical artifact that can magically set the world right.

He exchanges a knowing glance with Jim who then avoids my gaze. Crap! I should have known—they’re going to take it and leave me. Shit. It’s my leverage to get Father out of prison. Panic is swelling inside of me like a tidal wave. I feel like snatching the box from Harry’s hand, opening the car door and bolting. I feel dizzy. How far could I realistically run with my neck and head injuries before they catch me? I’m so angry I have tears pooling in my eyes. And then something unexpected happens.

“We’ll help you.” Harry hands me back my little box and closes my fingers over it, confirming that it’s mine.

My mouth drops open in disbelief. “You’ll what?”

Harry smiles at me for the first time. “We’ll help you, Teegan. We’ll help you get to Manchester.”

I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Okay.” I struggle to stay upright in my seat, but my head is swimming. Before I can ask what has made him change his mind, I blackout once again.

# Chapter 14 – Nor’ easter

When I come to, I find myself cradled against Laura. She’s sleeping with her head nestled in an old sweater, her hair a mess. Outside, a blizzard is raging. I can’t see a thing; it’s a total whiteout. The wipers are frantically trying to keep up, but the snow is coming down fast and furious. Gusts of wind threaten to sway our course and send us headlong into a ditch at any moment. Harry’s hands are cramped on the wheel; his eyes are riveted on the road ahead. Jim is the only one who notices me stir. “So, how are you feeling?”

I take a moment to assess my condition. I tap my neck lightly to find that it’s been bandaged with a torn piece of clothing. It’s soggy with blood, but not soaked. I also have a gash on my forehead. To top it off, I feel like there’s major roadwork going on in my skull, and it’s giving me a pounding headache.

“Bad headache,” I reply after a moment. “How long have I been out?”

“Three, maybe four hours.”

“Whoa, that long? What’s with the storm?”

“Well, it’s not an ordinary storm—it’s a nor’easter.”

“A what?”

“I forget you’re not from here. A nor’easter is the mother of all snowstorms. It can drop feet of snow in a matter of hours.”

“Great. A huge storm,” I reply, rubbing my temples with my fingertips.

“It’s not all bad you know. With the blizzard, no one will be on the road or in the sky looking for us. It’ll give us a couple of days to figure out our next steps.”

“You see a silver lining in everything, don’t you, Jim?” I say.

Before he can reply, a violent gust of wind shoves the car sideways. Harry turns into the slide until the tires find their grip again. He regains control an instant before we dip into the roadside ditch.

“Holy Moly, that was close,” grunts Harry.

“We need to stop,” says Jim.

“No shit,” says Harry. “Keep your eyes peeled for shelter. You too, Teegan.”

“Sure.” I press my nose against the window and peer out at the white madness outside. The road is just one white blanket. I can’t even tell where it starts and where it ends. After fifteen minutes, I notice the silhouette of a building. Drifting snow swirls about the lonely streetlamp illuminating the parking lot in front of it. “There on the right, I see something!”

Harry nods. He slows down, enters the parking lot and parks the car.

I wake up Laura and we plod to the entrance, calf-deep in snow. The neon sign is unlit, but from the shape of the tubes I can make out its name—The Black Friars Pub.

Harry examines the main door. “The door has a deadbolt. We need to find another entrance.” Even though I’m standing only a few feet away from Harry, I can hardly hear him over the roar of the wind.

“I’m cold, Harry,” shouts Laura, stomping her feet to keep warm.

The ground floor windows all have security bars so we decide to circle the building.

“Look!” I say pointing at a basement window.

“It’s too narrow,” says Harry. “Even you couldn’t squeeze through.”

“But I can!” says Laura.

“Are you sure?” asks Harry. “It’ll be dark in there.”

“I have my flashlight.”

“Okay, Lolo, but be careful.”

“Don’t worry. I will.”

I kneel and push hard on the casement window, but it won’t budge.

“Stand back. I know how to open it,” says Jim.

His method is quite direct. He smashes the window with his boot. He cleans up the jagged edges before turning to Laura, “I’m going to hold your arms and lower you inside. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Once she’s inside, we head to the front door and wait. Laura hasn’t been gone a minute and Harry is already biting his lower lip. After a few minutes, we hear a crashing sound coming from the inside of the pub. Harry jerks the doorknob violently knowing full well that it’s locked. He starts beating against the door, shouting, “Laura, Laura, are you okay?” No answer. I begin to worry as well. Letting her go in by herself wasn’t such a good idea after all. Maybe if I had removed my coat, I could have wriggled through. I should’ve insisted to be the one going. After what seems an eternity, the front door finally opens. Laura is there beaming with pride. I heave a sigh of relief. She invites us in with a flourish of her hands. We scramble inside. The moment the door shuts the sound of the howling wind dims, and I can hear myself think again.

Jim picks Laura up and gives her a peck on the cheek. “Well done, Laura!” Harry smiles at his sister, the relief on his face evident. I shake my head like a dog with a shaggy coat to get rid of all the snow that has accumulated in my hair.

“Let me see if I can find the breakers,” says Harry, taking Laura’s flashlight.

A few minutes later, we hear, “Found them!”

The neon lights buzz and hum and flick on one by one. I look around. There’s a long L-shaped bar, a pool table, and a dartboard. There’s even a small stage with a mike stand and some overhead lighting and spots. We drop our bags on the floor and go sit in a booth for a while. We’re so exhausted that no one is talking. Laura is leaning her head against Jim’s shoulder, half-asleep. She’s really fond of him. After a while, Jim gets up. “I don’t know about you guys, but I’m starving. I’m going to see what I can scavenge food-wise.”

Jim manages to whip up a half-decent supper consisting of instant soup, spicy chili and canned green beans he found in the kitchen’s pantry. I’m so hungry that I wolf everything down. Not very ladylike, I admit. If I would’ve eaten like that at school, everyone would have gossiped about my lack of manners for days, but here no one cares, really. After our hot meal, the mood is lighter. The beer that Jim found is probably helping. Even Harry laughs when Jim tells us how awkward his first kiss was because he didn’t want to take out his chewing gum from his mouth. But for me, the events of the day cannot be easily forgotten. As soon as my supper is finished, I move away from the group and go slouch in a seat. I fold and unfold nervously a piece of paper I found in the bounty hunter’s car. It has a handwritten note on it: “Hoekwai, we should totally get this tattoo.” Below the note is an image of a red-tailed hawk swooping down on a prey.

“So, how are you feeling?” Harry startles me with his question. I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn’t notice he had joined me.

“Head hurts.”

He looks at my bandaged wound. “Before you go to sleep, I'll put some water to boil and disinfect it.”

“Don't bother,” I snap. “I'm fine.”

Harry reaches out to touch my bandage, but I slap his hand away and then shove him back. “Leave it the HELL alone.”

“It needs cleaning, Teegan. The wound will get infected.”

“I can take care of myself. Why don’t you go take care of Laura instead? I think she’d like that.”

Harry takes a step forward. “What are you insinuating?”

“Nothing. I’m just saying that maybe you should take better care of her. How old is she anyway, nine?”

“I take good care of my sis.”

“Of course you do. You go out with your best pal to blow things up and bring her back a plush toy a few days later. You’re doing it by the book.”

“Enough,” says Harry, barely keeping his voice under control.

“You do homework with her, right?”

“Stop pressing my buttons, Teegan.” Harry’s face is turning crimson with anger, but somehow this doesn’t stop me from continuing.

“How about her meals? Do they have the recommended servings of fruits and vegetables? A girl needs her fiber, you know.”

“Why are you picking a fight with me?”

“I’m NOT picking a fight.” I bang my fist on the table. “I’ve had enough fights to last me a lifetime.”

Harry stomps away, but as he reaches the bar, he spins around.

“It’s about him, isn’t it?”

I frown, confused and upset. “Who are you talking about?”

“The bounty hunter,” says Harry, his voice now soft and even. “You did the right thing. It was either him or you.”

“Of course I did.”

“You had to kill him. There was no other choice.”

“I know. I just told you.” I get up from my seat, more and more upset at Harry’s insistence.

“You did what you had to do.”

“I know. I know! Stop repeating yourself.” A tsunami of emotions washes over me, threatening the core of my being. I fall back in my seat feeling like all the air has been sucked out of my lungs. My breath is shallow. My chest constricted. I nervously loosen my belt.

“I shot him and then I strangled him with a seatbelt,” I say after a while. “Killing him wasn't even hard.” My voice is suddenly small and shaky. “I know I should feel bad, but I don’t. Does that make me a bad person?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

Harry doesn’t answer. He wraps his arms around me and holds me tight. I want to cry, to let go, but I can’t. After a while, we sit and gaze at the table in silence. I feel a tiny bit better.

Harry puts his hand on my knee, but when I look at him surprised, he quickly removes it, embarrassed or something.

I chug my beer. It tastes awful, but I don’t care. I keep touching the wound running diagonally across my forehead. It’s no longer bleeding, but it feels jagged and swollen.

I turn to face Harry. “Do you think I’m going to have a permanent scar?” It’s silly, I know, to worry about such a vain thing when so much is at stake, but I can’t help it.

“Yes.”

That’s Harry for you. No sugar coating. No don’t-worry-it-will-hardly-be-noticeable comment to reassure me.

“Crap. That’s what I thought,” I mutter, touching my wound again.

“Scars are just like tattoos, but with better stories,” says Harry.

“That doesn’t make me feel better.”

It seems both of us are comfortable with silence because we stay quiet again.

“You changed your mind about me. Why?” I ask after a while, probably too harshly.

“Two things, really,” replies Harry, swirling his beer. “When the bounty hunter had Laura and asked you to step forward to take her place, you didn’t hesitate, not for one second. You were ready to sacrifice yourself to save my sister. That was a selfless act.”

“And the second?”

“You’re not even American, yet you’re ready to risk your life to help stop this never ending war. That takes bravery.”

Harry shifts his position on the chair and lowers his gaze. “My father, he was neither selfless nor brave. He was always looking for ways to make fast money as long as he didn’t risk anything or, God forbid, have to work hard for it. When the Second Civil War broke out came, he became a snitch. I started to suspect things were amiss when we moved to a nicer place that I knew we couldn’t afford. When I found out about it, I kicked him and my mother out of their own house. I threatened to kill him if he ever came back and, well, he never did.” Harry takes a big gulp of his beer.

“Wow, and I thought I had it bad with my father,” I say, half to myself, half to Harry.

“I’m not complaining. This is just how it is. It’s just … it’s nice to meet someone with conviction once in a while. Someone like you.”

“Whoa! Harry, was that a compliment? Did you just compliment me?”

“I did. Now get over it.” Harry has his I’m-in-charge face back on. “Let’s disinfect that wound of yours and change your bandage.” I get up and follow him to the kitchen.

Once my face is cleaned up, I decide to do the dishes while the rest of the crew explores the bar. I figure that even if we did break into private property the least we can do is leave the place clean. Besides, I don’t mind the chore; it keeps my mind from wandering off to dark places.

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“Hey guys, check this out!” shouts Jim. “This baby is a real antique.”

Jim is tapping on the cover of a jukebox. Not a modern one, but a vintage one with vinyl records. Intrigued, I approach it. It’s filled with songs from the fifties and sixties. My mom would have absolutely loved it. With her vocal range and skill, she could sing anything she wanted. Hell, she could get a standing ovation by singing the text from a do-it-yourself furniture instruction sheet. But what she enjoyed singing the most were the golden oldies as she called them. The jukebox lights are blinking, enticing me to make a selection. I resolutely press the button labeled, ‘The Twist’ by Chubby Checker.

The music starts playing. The sound is a bit scratchy, but the volume is loud. I go and take Laura’s hand and bring her with me to the stage.

“Laura, do you know how to do the twist?”

She shakes her head.

“Look! It’s real easy. Just move your feet like this.” I start twisting.

She starts imitating me. She’s a little awkward at first but quickly gets the hang of it.

“Wow! You catch on fast,” I say a bit out of breath. “Now, hold your arms at your side, but slightly bent at the elbows. Use your arms to help your body twist from side to side.”

“You’re doing good!” Laura turns to see if Harry is watching her. He beams back a proud smile and Laura’s eyes light up.

“Ready for the next part?”

Laura nods vigorously.

“Okay, squat all the way down while twisting and then slowly twist back up.”

Jim cheers us from afar.

“Okay, Laura, and now for the last bit. Once in a while, raise one leg in the air for style.”

Just as Laura starts doing the dance move, the song ends.

“Play it again, pretty please,” pleads Laura, clapping her hands.

My head is hurting, but I don’t want to disappoint her. I press the button again.

Jim heads to a console located on the side of the stage. He plays with a few sliders and high-powered spots flood the stage. I can see specks of dust gliding down the wide beams of colored light. Jim is having a blast—he just found the controls for the laser lighting display. He’s changing the laser beam colors, fanning them in and out, and just going wild.

I raise my eyebrows and with big open eyes look at Harry, who’s on his second beer. He hesitates at first but then joins our little group on stage. He takes off his boots and starts twisting on his hole-ridden socks.

He dances really well. I’m impressed. I lean toward him and whisper, “When you aren’t busy being a prick, you can be pretty cool.”

Harry whispers back, “Was that a compliment, Teegan? Did you just compliment me?”

“I did. Now get over it,” I say, grinning.

When the song ends, Harry takes Laura’s hand and brings her to the jukebox. “Your turn to choose, Lolo.”

“But Harry, I don’t know any of these songs.”

“Well close your eyes, and press any button you want.” With her little finger, she fumbles across a few buttons before choosing one.

‘Rock Around the Clock’ starts playing. Jim comes on stage and grabs Laura by the waist and lifts her high into the air. Laura is giggling. “You’re tickling me, Jimmy.” As soon as she’s high above his shoulders, Laura closes her eyes and extends her arms like wings. Jim takes her cue and moves her around the stage like she was an airplane. I’ve never seen Laura this happy.

Harry grabs my hand, lifts it above my head and makes me spin a few times; it’s too bad I’m not wearing a rockabilly skirt. The spinning finished, we swing and dance together.

The record starts skipping. Jim gently lowers Laura to the floor.

“Time for bed, Lolo,” announces Harry.

To everyone’s surprise, Laura doesn’t argue. She yawns and follows Harry who found her a nice cozy sofa at the back of the bar. Harry talks a bit with her. My head is hurting again. The dancing and spinning didn’t help. I walk up to Jim. He’s sitting on the floor staring at a worn photograph, looking lonely.

“What are you looking at?” I ask.

Jim looks up at me. He hesitates a moment before answering, “A picture of my sis.”

I sit next to him. “I didn’t know you had one. Where’s she now?”

“Not sure exactly.”

“You lost contact?”

“Yes.”

“Were you two close?”

“Yeah. She’s my twin sister.”

“A twin! That must be so cool. Is she like a clone of you?”

Jim laughs at the thought. “No, not at all. Growing up, I was the quiet one, but Hailey, she always ended up on the wrong side of the tracks with the worst sorts of people. She was a ‘wild’ as my dad used to say. Her style was all her own. Some days she would wear skimpy outfits just to upset my parents, and on others, she would wear vintage clothes that even my grandma would’ve found outmoded. She skipped class often. She started hacking when she was in high school. Didn’t like a grade she got so she decided to hack into the school’s computer and change it. The only thing we have in common is our birthday.”

Jim pulls his knees to his chest. “It’s funny. When I was little, I always thought my sis was a chatterbox. She would comment on everyone and everything non-stop. It would drive me mad. Now I miss her constant chitchat.”

“Where’s she now?”

“She went dark.”

“What do you mean?”

“My sister is a hacker. A real computer genius, she is. Her best friend’s SCS fell below hundred. Her life had become hell. So my sis had the brilliant idea of hacking the government’s database to increase its value. But somebody found her cyber trail and now the police is on her tail.”

“So you don’t know where she is?”

“Actually, I do. She’s hiding in some abandoned plant in Rialto.”

“And no news since?”

“No. But I’m not surprised. The Ministry of Public security monitors all internet traffic. It wouldn’t be safe for her to email me.”

Jim crushes his cigarillo butt and flicks it on the floor. He opens his pack looking for another one, and finding none, tosses the empty pack on the floor with a disappointed look on his face.

“You shouldn’t smoke, you know. It’s bad for you.”

Jim looks at me like I said something stupid. “Teegan, given how screwed up the world is, do you really think that I’ll live old enough to care? Come on. We’re all going to die young.” He winks at me as though what he said was funny.

I get up. Jim is clearly no longer in the mood to talk. Everyone is tired and soon we all prepare to sleep. I make a makeshift pillow out of a bundle of clothes I pull from my bag and settle down for the night.

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The next morning, my entire body is aching from sleeping on the cold wooden floor. I peer outside. The storm has abated. Jim is preparing breakfast. I grab a glass of water and sit at the bar. I take the remote and flip channels until I reach the national news. An Asian spokesperson for the New England Utility is on the air. “Downed trees caused widespread power outages, leaving over one million people without electricity. Our effort to restore power will focus on the cities displayed as green dots on the screen behind me. For these, power should be restored within a few days. Based on the new Homeland Security guidelines that came into effect last month, municipalities that have harbored acts of rebellions will have their power restored last; be prepared to wait several weeks.”

The man continues, “Remember that it is your civic duty to call the 24-hour Homeland Security hotline if you notice suspicious activity in your area.”

Jim is the first to react. “This is nuts. What about people with young families? People will die from the cold.”

Disgusted, Harry says, “Jim, turn off the TV will you.”

As I get up to fetch my bag, I hear Harry shout, “Hold on.” He points at the screen.

“Hey, Teegan, isn’t that your friend from school?”

I turn around. Oh my God, it is. There’s a picture of Emma on the screen. My heart starts racing. “Crank up the volume, Jim,” I say.

“The daughter of the CEO of Acme enterprises has committed suicide,” announces the conservatively dressed anchorwoman. “Emma Thompson’s body was found late last night by her mother as she returned from work. In her suicide note, Emma explained that the constant bullying she faced at school was a burden too heavy to bear. She was fifteen years old.”

We see a montage of a few pictures of Emma. She’s so fabulous. Grayson stomps out of the front door of her home flanked by two URF soldiers in full gear. He looks briefly at the camera as though he was looking at me directly. I shiver. I now know that Emma didn’t kill herself—she was murdered. It’s a personal message from Grayson: surrender or everyone you know will suffer the same fate. I turn pale.

“Are you okay, Teegan?” asks someone. The voice echoes in my head, but I pay it no heed.

They killed her. They showed it on television to get to me. They’ll stop at nothing.

A surge of anger rises in me. I’m angry at myself, at Grayson, at the world. I hurl my glass at the TV. The screen shatters. I throw against the wall every piece of dishware I can lay my hands on. A steady stream of tears pours down my cheeks. I gasp for air between sobs. *It’s my fault, it’s my fault*, I keep repeating. Just as I’m about to grab Laura’s plate, she looks at me with such fear and confusion in her eyes that I let it drop on the table. It smashes into pieces.

I feel hands on my shoulders pulling me away from the mess I created. I let myself be guided like a child to a booth at the back of the bar. I sit in a daze. I look up; it was Jim who brought me here. He smiles briefly at me and leaves, knowing that I need time by myself.

My splitting headache is back, but I force myself to consider the events of the last few days and what they mean. I prop my elbows on the table and plant my head in my hands. So much has gone on, no wonder my head’s a jumbled mess. I blow my nose with a napkin I snatch from a dispenser on the table. I need to pick myself up. Father needs my help. If I don’t act, he’ll be executed. And just as importantly, I need to make Ye Ye’s and Emma’s death count. This brings me back to the device—I need to get decrypted. With any luck, this will get Zhang and Grayson arrested and the charges against Father dropped. I’m up against the URF, BlackIce, and the U.S. Resistance. We have a battered SUV that’s sure to attract attention as soon as we’re in a major city. I wish Ye Ye were here. He always had good advice. What would he say? After a while, it comes to me. ‘When people work with one mind, they can even remove Mount Taishan.’ The saying reminds me that I’m not alone in this. I’ve made friends. I walk back toward the group in a better state of mind. They’re all sitting at a table near the bar, talking in low voices.

As I approach, everyone looks at me apprehensively, wondering if I’m going to lose it again. Even Laura edges herself closer to Harry when she sees me.

“I’m sorry about before,” I say in a quiet voice. I pull a chair and sit.

“No worries. We know it’s been rough for you lately,” says Harry. “Hell, it’s been rough for all of us.”

“Emma’s death was not a suicide,” I say. “She was murdered. The officer you saw on the screen, his name is Grayson. He’s Zhang’s henchman. He works for BlackIce. He’s the man responsible for her death. I’m sure of it.”

“Why am I not surprised,” says Harry.

“With her death, I’m even more convinced of what I have to do. In the car, yesterday, you guys offered to help. Are you still up for it? I mean, if you’re not, that’s totally cool. It’s just that, well, I need to know.”

Everyone nods, even Laura.

“Thanks. That means a lot. I think the next step would be to get the device decrypted and find out what kind of data it has.”

“Fuck, if only Hailey was there. She can decrypt military stuff.” asks Jim. “Our best bet is to go to a black market.”

“First things first,” says Harry. “We need to find a safe place for Laura to stay. I don’t want her to go through a day like yesterday ever again.”

“Are you still thinking of your aunt’s place in Hartford?” asks Jim.

“I am,” replies Harry.

“But I don’t know her,” protests Laura.

“You’ll see, Lolo. Margaret is the sweetest person in the whole world and she makes the best peanut butter cookies.”

“But Harry, I want to stay with you. I can help. I got us into the bar, didn’t I?”

“Laura, this is not up for discussion.” Laura folds her arms across her chest.

“Then what?” I ask.

Harry and I bicker about the best way to get to one. Jim’s the only one who stays quiet. After a while, Jim raises his hand as if he were in a classroom asking the teacher for permission to speak. He holds his arm up a long time. Finally, he says, “Quiet! I have something to say.”

He leans forward. “I’ve heard of a secret place from my uncle who’s into smuggling.”

Encouraged by our nods, Jim continues, “There’s an underground tunnel that was built during the Prohibition under Byram River. It was rediscovered during the Second Civil War or so my uncle told me. Apparently, some folks have expanded the tunnel and there’s a lot of wheeling and dealing going on there. Most of the contraband going into New York State flows through there. It’s next to Green City. Apparently, the URF avoid it like the plague.”

“That could work,” says Harry.

“Sounds like a plan,” I say, nodding.

“Can we stay here a bit longer, Harry?” asks Laura as she looks at the fresh snow outside.

“Yes, Lolo. We’ll stay here until nightfall.”

# Chapter 15 – Buzzkill

The rest of the morning goes by quietly. We’ve decided to stay in the bar until nightfall. Outside, the snowstorm has ended. The sky is clear blue. Who would’ve thought that a blizzard was raging only twenty-four hours ago? Jim and Laura go outside to build a snowman. Harry is shoveling the car. As for me, I decide to take a nap.

I wake up some time later to find Harry by my side. His hand, cold from coming from outside, brushes the loose strands of my hair off my forehead.

“We need to change your bandage.”

I sit up and massage my stiff neck. He pulls on the bandage delicately. It’s icky and sticky, and he needs to tug on it to slide it off. I suddenly feel self-conscious. I must look ugly with this big gash on my forehead. Wanting to feel how jagged it is, I put my hand up to touch it.

“Not without washing your hands first, young lady,” orders Harry as he intercepts my hand and places it back on my lap.

“Okay.”

Harry proceeds to wash my forehead with boiled water. He dips his cloth in the water and dabs my wound.

“You make a good nurse.”

Harry chuckles. “Maybe I like having you as a patient.”

After a while, he announces, “All done. You’re free to go.”

I give him a peck on the cheek. He smiles, but doesn’t say anything. I like Harry more and more and it’s scaring me—people I care about tend to have short lifespans.

I head to the window and open the blinds. Jim and Laura have built a humongous snowman. Laura is teetering precariously on Jim’s shoulder trying to insert a stick into the head to make a nose. It’s nice to see them having fun like that.

Further up there’s a dark cloud of what looks like a swarm of insects. It’s swirling and drawing together in the thinnest of waists before expanding forward. Mesmerized, I watch it for a while.

Harry comes and sits next to me and I forget about the swarm. He hands me a steaming cup of instant hot chocolate. We stare outside in silence. With the snowman finished, Laura is now busy throwing snowballs at Jim. She has a good aim—Jim’s black hair is full of snow.

Still groggy with sleep, I lean my head against Harry’s shoulder. “I’d be nice if we could stay here for a few days, wouldn’t it?”

“It would.”

I edge myself closer to Harry. His arm goes around me. No one has held me like this since my mom passed away. It feels reassuring and I can use a good dose of reassurance right now.

“Tell me something about you,” I ask Harry.

“Like what?”

“I dunno. Anything.”

Harry lets out a suppressed sigh. “Not sure what there’s to say, really.”

“You can do better than that,” I insist, poking him in the ribs.

“All right. I have a tattoo of an eagle on my back.”

“Cool! I have one too. I got it just a week ago.”

Harry raises one eyebrow.

“What? You look surprised,” I say.

“Well, it’s just that you don’t strike me as the kind of girl who has tattoos.”

“So what kind of girl do I strike you as?”

“I dunno. The prim and proper type.”

“Shows how much you know me.” I scowl at him, but he’s not impressed. I’m not prim and proper. Well, I might be proper, but I’m not prim. That’s for sure. Or am I? Oh, I don’t know. I’ve never really thought of this before. I just do what feels right.

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours,” says Harry.

I blush beet red. Harry smirks. “So, it’s in an embarrassing location then.”

“It’s on my breast,” I stammer out. “I didn’t want my father to know.”

Spontaneously, Harry turns around and removes his t-shirt. An American bald eagle is etched over his muscled back. The white wings are spread open; the yellow talons are ready to snatch a prey. The red stripes of the American flag along with several white stars hovering over a blue background are painted inside the wings. It’s majestic. Whoever did this was a true artist: the colors are vivid, the details exquisite. I trace the outline of the tattoo gently with my index fingernail making Harry shudder. I stop when I notice that a section of the right wing is stenciled in, but has no color.

“Your tattoo isn’t finished. Why?”

“The girl who was doing it left town before our last session.” After a brief hesitation, he blurts, “It’s a long story.”

Harry hurries up and puts his t-shirt back on. He has a pained expression on his face. Knowing him, he won’t tell me anything more. I decide not to press the matter further, but I’m guessing they were more than friends, and somehow that annoys me.

Harry waits to see if I will show him mine. My heart starts to pound. I can’t stop the redness that floods my cheeks. What should I do? What should I do? I don’t want to prove him right when he called me “prim and proper”. A loud noise to my right makes me shriek. A snowball just hit the window. I see Laura laughing just outside. Jim waves at us. The snowball breaks the spell. Harry gets up.

“More hot chocolate?” he asks, a smile on his face.

“Uh. No. I’m good.”

I resume looking outside, dangling my legs. I feel less alone. I daresay, I’m almost happy. I sip my hot chocolate. Laura and Jim are building a snow fort. They’re currently digging an ambitious tunnel. Where do they find the energy? I’m ready to go for a second nap. Harry is fixing himself a snack at the bar. I’ve never had a boyfriend before. Could he be the one? For the longest time, I thought it would be Adrian. We had such good chemistry. Once, when I couldn’t sleep, I even imagined all the details of our wedding: what my dress would be like, how he would look in a tuxedo, and what kind of cake we’d have. Suddenly I’m upset with myself. Why am I even thinking of him? Why can’t I enjoy the moment I just had with Harry? Why does Adrian keep popping up in my head? I wish I could erase him from my memories and forget he ever existed. I feel a sting on the back of my arm and I smack it. A droplet of blood splatters on my arm.

“Mosquitos this time of the year. Really?”

I’m about to wipe the blood off with a napkin when Harry shouts, “Stop!” His face is pale. What’s up with Harry? Is he afraid I’m going to catch malaria or something?

“Don’t touch anything, Teegan.”

“But why?”

He races to Laura’s backpack to fetch something.

“What’s going on, Harry? You’re scaring me.”

He doesn’t respond. He grabs my arm and, using the magnifying glass he found, examines the location where I was stung.

“Shit, shit and double shit.”

“Will you tell me what’s going on already?”

“Check for yourself.”

He hands me the magnifying glass. At first, I see nothing out of the ordinary, just the blood splat, the squashed remains of the mosquito, and my arm hair, but upon closer inspection, I can see a pattern. The wings—they’re not natural. They have a plastic sheen on them. This isn’t a normal mosquito.

I look at Harry. “It’s a nano-robot, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“This can’t be good.”

“No. The URF must have let out a swarm of these buggers.”

“Or BlackIce. What are they used for?”

“Manhunts.”

I swear under my breath.

“These mosquitos are programmed to sting humans,” says Harry, pacing the floor. “They take a sample of your DNA and send it back to the headquarters along with your location. A computer then checks if any of the DNA samples received match a wanted criminal and when it does …”

“That means …”

“They know exactly where we are. We have to go.”

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In no time, the SUV is racing out of the parking lot with everyone aboard. I’m sitting in the back with Laura. Jim is in front with Harry.

Laura casts a wistful glance at her unfinished snow fort. All of the happiness I had seen earlier on her face is now gone. She’s clutching pirate teddy hard in her arm trying not to cry. All of this is wrong. After playing in the snow, kids should be sipping hot beverages next to a warm fireplace, munching on freshly baked cookies, not escaping battle-hardened soldiers.

“How long before they find us do you think?” I ask to no one in particular.

“How should I know?” barks Jim.

“It was just a question. No need to get your panties in a bunch,” I grumble back.

“We reach the Green City tunnel before they reach us. Simple as that,” offers Harry, trying to break the tension.

We drive in silence. I lose track of time. The featureless road we’re on is bordered on either side by pine tree forest or the occasional farm blanketed in a thick layer of snow.

After a while, Harry startles me out of my thoughts.

“Teegan?”

“Yes.”

“Do you believe in God?”

“Maybe, why?”

“Because now would be a good time to pray.”

I look up to see a gunship helicopter rise over the horizon. It’s equipped with rocket launchers and machine guns. It’s coming straight for us.

“It has guns, Harry. Big guns.” Jim’s voice is shaking.

“Get a grip on yourself. They won’t kill us, okay? They want the device and to interrogate us, and for that they need to capture us alive.”

“Will we be arrested?” asks Laura, her voice strained with emotion.

“No, Lolo. I’ll make sure we won’t.”

Her nose is drippy. She clutches her Teddy to her chest. “Pirate teddy doesn’t want to be arrested. He told me so.”

“There’s just one helicopter,” says Harry. “We’ll lose it under the pine tree canopy over there.”

I don’t share Harry’s confidence. We’re going to be captured. I know it. Laura feels it too. She grabs my hand. I think of the device. They’ll search me for sure. I must hide it, but where? I rake my brain for ideas, coming up short.

The helicopter is closing in. A bright flash shoots out from the gunship’s nose. I hear an electrical zap and then the motor dies, and all the car lights go off. The SUV rolls to a halt.

“Shit! That was an electromagnetic pulse!” curses Jim.

The gunship stops moving and hovers menacingly above the road. The side door slides open. From inside the craft, two ropes drop down to the road. Soldiers move in and take position to rappel down. Harry desperately tries to start the engine again. After a few attempts, the engine roars back to life. Harry floors the pedal. The car whips forward and fishtails on the wet snow.

The first soldier has ten feet to go when Harry drives right under him making the rappel rope swing. He must have jumped just then, because we hear him land with a deafening clank on the car’s roof. Laura shrieks. Using a knife, the soldier pierces the rooftop with a single, powerful stab. He then starts carving the roof open like if he was opening a tin can. Laura screams hysterically and covers her head with her arms. My head is pounding. I’m seized with terror. I don’t want to be captured. Not now. Not after everything I’ve been through. Jim rolls down his window. He unbuckles his seatbelt and shimmies his upper body through the car window. I can’t see exactly what he’s doing, but it looks like he’s trying to catch the soldier. I can see him pulling and tugging and straining under the effort. Jim’s courage snaps me into action. I open my window. I slide my upper body through the opening. Laura has her little arms wrapped around my legs so I don’t fall out of the car. Freezing wind stings my face. The soldier is crouched on the roof of the car. With one hand he’s holding one of the steel roof bars, and with the other he’s trying to stab Jim. The soldier notices me and spins around. He tries to slice me with the edge of his blade, but I duck just in time. Jim takes this opportunity to grab his right boot. I get back into position and grab the same one. Jim and I look at each other briefly and then I shout “Now!” We heave the man at the same time. The soldier falls over the side of the car. He holds on to the metal bar for a few seconds, but then let’s go and tumbles into the road.

I slither back into the car and sit.

“Hang on! We’re almost there,” says Harry. He points to the forest ahead. “The tall trees will give us some cover.”

“Not sure about that. Look!” The gunship is back. Another electromagnetic blast shuts down the motor again. This time, Harry cannot get it to start again, no matter how hard he tries. We’re immobilized. Harry bangs his fist against the steering wheel in frustration.

“Teegan, you have to hide the device!”

“I know, but where? They’ll search us. They’ll search the car. There’s nowhere to hide it.”

“I don’t care. Find something!” says Harry.

“Hide it where they’ll never think to look,” says Jim.

“Where, Jim? Where?”

“On the enemy himself.”

“That’s brilliant,” says Harry. “Teegan, we tackle the first soldier heading for us and you hide the device in one of the soldier’s belt pouches.”

“Got it.”

Moments later, over a rising hill, I see an armada of helicopters in V-formation heading our way. I stop counting the aircraft after ten, there are so many. Grayson is throwing everything he has at us. He won’t let me escape a second time. My device can change the course of history, and he knows it.

The helicopters stop their progression and hover like bumblebees a hundred feet above the ground. Side doors slide open one by one. Ropes drop down like before. Masses of soldiers rappel down. The sky fills with these soldiers descending like spiders on silky threads. They slide down the rope with ease and, in three controlled brakes, are on the road. They race toward us.

“Teegan, let’s go!” says Harry.

We bolt out of the car. Jim and Laura do the same on the other side. A soldier, ahead of the rest of the troops, is running in our direction. Harry hurls himself forward and tackles him. The soldier, weighted down by his combat gear, falls in the dirty snow. I jump into the melee. I manage to detach a belt pouch Velcro. I shove the device deep inside. Harry is doing his best to keep the man down. The soldier hollers in pain. He punches Harry with his exoskeleton-enhanced arm and Harry tumbles into the snow. I take a long look at our pursuer in order to be able to recognize him later. His rank insignia says he’s a corporal. Soldiers swarm us. As I try getting back up, I feel a needle plunge into my thigh and a cold liquid being forcefully injected. My vision becomes blurry. I lose my balance and fall to the ground. Seconds later, I pass out.

# Chapter 16 – BlackIce Facilities

I wake up with a gasp on a bed. I sit up in panic. My head is groggy, my stomach queasy. It’s slowly coming back to me—the helicopters, the soldiers, and the injection. I glance around to find that I’m alone in my room. Where have they taken the others? Did they find the device? *Slow down, Teegan*, I tell myself. *Take a deep breath. Okay, where am I exactly?*

The entire ceiling glows with a soft bluish light. There’s a door but no windows. A surveillance camera motor whirls and stops constantly so that it’s always trained on me; it’s unnerving. The camera feeds into a flat screen bolted to the wall. As I see myself in the monitor, I come to the sudden realization that they’ve taken away all my clothes and of course, my schoolbag. They dressed me in a pair of blue worker pants and an itchy linen shirt that’s too big for me.

There are a couple of paint buckets in a corner. Long, loose electrical wires hang from the ceiling. The walls have only received their first coat of paint. Clearly this is a new construction. There’s a closet-size bathroom. I swing my legs off the bed and go splash cold water on my face. As my gaze catches my reflection in the mirror, I notice my sunken cheeks—I’ve lost weight these past few days. My hair is in a tangled mat. I resist the urge to touch the gash on my forehead. I don’t want to infect it. I hope Harry doesn’t find it too gross. It’s funny what you think under intense stress. At least it looks like it’s healing properly.

I’m thinking that they didn’t find the device because I’m still alive. What happened to my friends? If this is a prison of sorts, maybe they’re in nearby cells. I strain to hear sounds around me, but I hear nothing. No footfalls outside the door, no whispered conversations, nothing, except the annoying sound of the camera.

I examine every square inch of my room trying to hatch an escape plan and fail miserably. The walls are solid. The door is electronically locked. There are no conveniently located oversized vents like in a bad movie. The only thing I find is a coin-shaped piece of scrap metal on the floor, which I pocket just in case. I throw myself on the bed in frustration.

After a while, I turn on my back and look at the sparse objects in the room again: the electrical wires, the door, the paint buckets, and the camera. A daring plan starts to form in my head, and I feel a flicker of hope rising in me.

Just as I get up from the bed to test one of my assumptions, the door slides open with a grating sound. A muscular officer is standing on the other side. He’s a BlackIce mercenary. He has a regimental insignia with a dragon flanked with thunder and clouds just beneath it. I’ve never seen this insignia before on any of my father’s troops. It’s definitely non-standard. I’m guessing he’s one of Grayson’s men. The back of his neck is red from too much sun. Somehow, I’ve got the feeling that I’m no longer in New England, but somewhere warm. With his telescopic steel baton, he points to the door. I exit the room with small, hesitant steps, wondering where he’s taking me.

As I step out, my suspicion that I’m in a detention center is confirmed. There must be twenty or so cell doors over two floors, each labeled with a letter followed by a number. My cell is C-108. I’m sure my friends are locked up in there. We go down a metal staircase to the communal area one floor below. There are a number of metal picnic tables and benches fixed to the concrete floor. A large television screen is hanging from the ceiling displaying a test pattern of colored stripes. The whole place smells of paint and chemicals. As we exit this section, I notice the same dragon insignia that I saw on the officer’s arm painted on the wall next to the door.

I’m escorted to a room with a full body scanner in the middle. A woman in a white lab coat is sitting at a desk.

“Go stand on the yellow circle in front of the machine,” she orders as soon as I enter.

I do as I’m told.

“Now, take off all your clothes,” she adds.

I look at the woman and then the man in consternation. I don’t want to stand in front of either of them naked.

“Now!” orders the man.

I start stripping. She resumes typing on the keyboard, but the officer shamelessly takes in every inch of my body with his eyes. Each time I remove a piece of clothing the knot in the pit of my stomach tightens. My cheeks are burning red with embarrassment. My eyes dart to the various objects in the room, looking for a makeshift weapon or anything that could help me escape, but I find none. Naked, I step inside the machine. A draft of cold air from a nearby vent makes me shudder. The woman types a few commands. Indicator lights go on. I stay there a long time wondering if the X-rays are frying my brain cells.

“So?” asks the officer to the woman after a while.

She systematically examines the image on the holoscreen floating above her desk. “I see nothing. It’s not on her.” She sighs with exasperation. “I told him it was a waste of time doing this again, but he wouldn’t listen.”

So, I’m going through this for a second time. This confirms my suspicion that they haven’t found the device yet. I let out a discreet sigh of relief.

“You can step out,” she tells me. I walk out of the machine and get dressed as fast as I can.

“He’s going to be upset,” says the officer, pacing back and forth in front of her desk.

“I know,” she mutters, shuddering at the thought. “When is he not upset?”

“Careful with what you say,” replies the officer as he glimpses at the security camera on the ceiling.

“They haven’t been hooked up yet, remember?” says the woman.

“Right. Forgot about that.”

“So, what’s going to happen to her?” She casts a nervous look in my direction.

“He’ll make her talk.” A nasty smile forms on his cracked lips.

He yanks my arm and escorts me back to my cell. Other than occasional guards or construction workers, I see no one else. I suspect this is a clandestine place where BlackIce can conduct his own black ops without the scrutiny of the U.S. government. As we arrive back at the detention center, I listen closely each time we walk next to a cell door on the slim chance that I’ll hear one of my friends talking, but I have no such luck.

The officer places his wristband next to the card reader by my cell door and it slides open. He pushes me inside. I sit on the concrete floor and press my back against the wall. The last words of the officer replay in my head like a broken record: “He’ll make her talk.” What are they going to do to me? I’m chewing my dirt-caked nails like a manic squirrel.

A scraping sound startles me. There’s someone here with me. I spin around. My jaw drops in disbelief as I recognize who it is. I get up, race forward and pummel him with my fists. “Adrian, you bastard! How could you do this to me? You betrayed me! You sold me out!”

Adrian takes my blows without flinching. “Teegan, stop! I’m not sure what you think I did, but I did nothing wrong.”

“Sure. You ratted me out to Grayson.”

“You don’t understand.”

Before I can reply, the door opens again and a BlackIce mercenary stomps in.

“You! Come with me.” He grabs my arm and pulls me out of the room.

“Let go of me!” I shout. Adrian steps forward to intervene, but the officer points the tip of his baton to his face.

As I leave, I cast a furious glare at Adrian. He glances back at me but then immediately looks away. That’s what guilty people do. They look away.

The officer escorts me down the same corridor as before, but this time we hang a left before the room with the scanner. We go down a hallway leading outdoors. As soon as the doors open, it suddenly hits me—there’s no snow on the ground. It’s warm, hot even. There’s not a cloud in sight. It smells of freshly cut grass. I’m in a garden that extends in front of me for as far as my eyes can see. Distant hills have a purplish hue. I’m no longer in Massachusetts, that’s for sure.

“Where am I?” I ask the officer.

“You’re in Texas,” he replies.

My spirits sink even more. A short walk brings us to a courtyard. Two stone lions watch over the garden's entrance. I’ve seen the same ones in the Ming garden in Shanghai. The female has a protective paw on a cub while the male’s paw rests on a ball symbolizing prosperity. High walls set with latticework windows surround the courtyard.

A man is approaching. My heart skips a beat—it’s Grayson. He has dark circles under his eyes and gaunt cheeks. He probably hasn’t slept in days because of me. Well, that’ll teach him. He stomps up to me and, before I can react, slaps me in the face. I reel from the powerful blow.

“No one escapes me. No one.”

I step back and massage my bruised cheek. Grayson stares at me. He’s expecting a snappy comeback no doubt, but I don’t reply. For once, I shut my mouth. I notice that Grayson has a major general insignia. So, he finally got what he wanted—my father’s job.

He sticks his face right into mine. “Tell me where you hid the device?” His breath smells of cheap mouthwash.

“And if I don’t?”

Grayson’s face beams with a malicious smile as if he was expecting, no, hoping for this reaction from me.

He spins around and says, “Walk with me.” Grayson takes a footpath bordered by neatly trimmed bushes. The officer prods my back, pushing me forward. I’m forced to walk alongside Grayson. The officer follows close behind.

We walk in silence. To my left there’s a narrow path leading up to a pavilion perched atop a small hill. To my right there’s an artificial pond filled with water lilies.

“Have you ever heard of the Chinese bamboo torture?” Grayson startles me with his question. Why is he mentioning this? Is he going to torture me? Is he trying to scare me into talking?

I shake my head.

“Let me enlighten you then. This technique regularly makes it to the top ten of the most painful tortures in the world. I prefer it myself over the waterboarding technique.”

My hatred for Grayson is growing by the minute.

“Here’s how it works: bamboo tips are chiseled in the shape of a spear and placed in pots under the victim’s organs, like the liver or the kidney. Now bamboo is one of the fastest-growing plants in the world—certain species can grow an impressive thirty-five inches in a single day.”

He looks at me to gauge my reaction. Swallowing quickly, I try to contain my fear.

“As the bamboo grows, it will slowly, inextricably impale the vital organs. The victim will bleed like a gutted animal before dying in unbearable pain.” Grayson pauses before adding matter-of-factly, “We always gag the victim because of the screaming.”

I clench my teeth so hard my jaw aches. Grayson isn’t telling me this for nothing. We go over an arched wooden bridge toward a bamboo grove.

“Ah, we’ve arrived,” announces Grayson.

I shriek as I see Laura tied to a rack. When she sees me, she twists and turns, but her ties are too solid. Her mouth is gagged, and I only hear her moans. Her eyes are pleading me to save her. I rush to her side and take her hand in mine. She clutches it like a lifeline. I feel guilty and angry with myself—her life is at stake because of me. After a moment, the officer pulls me away. As he does, I notice four bamboo pots underneath the rack, their stalks sharpened, ready for use. Grayson plans to torture Laura to get me to talk.

*Nothing is lost. Not yet*, I tell myself. *I have a plan.*

A young woman arrives. She starts positioning the bamboo pots underneath Laura. She measures the distance between a bamboo tip and Laura’s skinny body before verifying the value on a chart. She has a vicious glint in her eyes that sends shivers down my spine. She’s enjoying this. She’s done this before. I kick one of the earthenware pots she just placed. It shatters, sending a shower of earth arcing into the air. The woman gives me a scolding look. The officer yanks me away from the rack. I wriggle free from the officer’s hand gripping my shoulder and turn to Grayson. “How can you be so cruel? She’s nine years old.”

“I’m not cruel. I’m efficient. You’re the one who’s cruel. Do you know what will happen if the content of your device becomes public?”

“Yes, they’ll finally know the truth about BlackIce.”

Grayson laughs. “You aren’t very bright, are you? Riots and pandemonium will ensue. That’s what. There won’t be a single Laura dying but thousands.”

Grayson drops on the ground a holo-projector the size of a grapefruit. He types a few commands on his wrist computer and a full-size hologram of Zhang appears. The translucent projection shimmers in the dazzling Texas light. Even though this is just a digital representation of him, I feel threatened and take a step back.

“Hello, Teegan. How lovely to see you. Did Grayson show you the koi carps in the lotus pool? We received them only yesterday. Some of them are thirty years old.”

“Let’s skip the small talk, Zhang. What about Harry and Jim?”

“They’re alive and well, for now.”

“What do you mean for now?”

“Don’t play stupid with me, Teegan. We strip-searched you thoroughly, but we didn’t find the device. Now where is it?”

“I hid it.”

“I got that. Where?”

“Somewhere between Massachusetts and Texas.”

“Don’t play with me.” The hologram is so lifelike that I can tell that Zhang is glowering at me.

“Why did you put Adrian in my cell?”

“I quite thought you two liked each other. Isn’t that the case?”

“Not really.”

“Ah. If you return to your cell, and I do mean if, I’ll see what I can do about that.”

“What about my father?”

“He’s in Fort Warren, our new ultra-modern prison facility. He looks a bit gaunt, I’m afraid. These are trying times for him. Knowing your daughter maintained a blog promoting the Resistance while having an underage affair with a tattoo artist is hard news to swallow.”

“So you’re feeding him lies too?”

“Lies, truth, it’s all but a matter of perspective.”

Zhang lets out an audible sigh. “Teegan, let me give it to you straight. You’re a smart girl. You know that you’re all going to die. But, if you tell me where the device is, no one will be tortured. You will all die quickly and painlessly, including the little girl. I will also free your father. He doesn’t know what’s going on, and he’s a good commander. It’ll be an easy matter for me to get the charges dropped. However, if you don’t collaborate, I’ll put Grayson in charge of how you all die. He can be quite creative when he puts his mind to it.” Zhang nods in the direction of Laura to support his point.

I need to stall for time now that I have a remote chance of escaping from my cell. I know Zhang is a master manipulator, but I’m a good liar. I close my eyes and think of the saddest moment of my life—the day I learned my mom had been diagnosed with cancer. I remember all the details. The look on my parents’ faces, what clothes they were wearing, how my mom tried to act brave, and how I locked myself in the bathroom to cry. Soon, tears pool in my eyes before spilling onto my cheeks. I don’t bother to wipe them. Zhang and Grayson need to believe what I’m going to say next.

“You win,” I blurt. “The device is in a small box near the place where the SUV crashed. Near Crazy Pete’s house. It’s buried under the roots of an oak tree. The tree has a branch broken by lightning. It’s hard to miss.”

“Very well.”

Zhang turns toward Grayson. “*You’re* in charge of recovering the package. Do you think you can manage that simple task, Major General?” Grayson nods reverentially. Zhang presses a button on his wrist computer, and his hologram vanishes with a twinkle.

Grayson turns his full attention back to me. “That was a quick answer,” he says suspiciously.

“What’s there to think about?” I bark back. “My two choices are sucks or sucks even more.”

Grayson looks me in the eye. He pulls out a long knife from a leather sheath attached to his belt. It looks like something a butcher would use. “If you lied, I’ll eviscerate the little girl in front of you and hang her organs on a clothesline. And then I’ll tie you to the bamboo rack myself.”

Grayson spins on his heels and leaves. Out of the shadows, the MP officer who escorted me earlier appears.

I just bought myself a few hours, tops. I hope to God my plan will work. When I get back to my cell, Adrian is no longer there. Zhang kept his word on that at least. I guess they no longer need him to extract information from me.

The screen is now displaying four different feeds: Harry, Jim, Laura and me. Harry and Jim are each in their own cell, which looks identical to mine. I can see their cell number painted on the concrete wall—they’re in section B. Harry and Jim are pacing frantically, but it’s Laura I’m worried about; I can see her tied to the rack, baking under the sun. Her eyes are squint shut because of the dazzling sunlight. My eyes are drawn to the bamboo pots positioned below her. In my head, if I draw a vertical line from the tips of the stalks to her body, I can tell that the stalks will puncture her liver, kidneys and stomach. I can’t bear to watch the screen anymore—it’s psychological torture. I focus on my plan.

I rip out some fabric from the bed sheet. I pull on the first of the three electrical wires hanging from the ceiling. Holding my metal coin with the fabric for isolation, I try to short-circuit the exposed copper leads. The first wire is dead. I quickly try the next one. Dead also. I have one last try. If this one doesn’t work, my whole plan will fall through. Apprehensive, I try the last wire. As soon as the coin connects the black and red leads, I see sparks fly. It’s live! I can hardly contain my excitement. This should be able to give a good jolt.

I kneel next to the paint bucket in the corner and using the coin, pry it open. I dab my fingers in the beige paint and smudge the camera lens with it. A security guard will be bound to notice and send someone to investigate.

I push my back against the wall. I’m clenching the live wire with my sweaty hands eager for the door to open and scared all at the same time. What if I screw this up? My chest tightens at the thought. This is my last chance to save my friends and me. My heart is pounding. The next minutes are the worst of my life, which if you think about it, is saying something. After what seems an eternity, the door slides open. An officer steps in. *Now!* I stab the nape of his neck with the electrical wire. The man convulses under the shock, but I don’t let go. I feel terrible doing this, but I don’t have a choice. He lets go of his baton, which falls to the ground with a clank. He finally collapses to his knees before toppling to the ground. I look at the officer crumpled on the floor. I had no choice, I repeat to myself. Just as I turn around to leave, a second officer barges in. Before I can react, he touches my chest with the tip of his baton and gives me an electric jolt. My left side goes numb. In just a few seconds, my body goes completely rigid. I’m aware of what’s going on, but I’ve lost all motor skills. I’m falling, but there’s nothing I can do about it. I crash to the ground and bang my head hard. The officer pulls his partner out of the room, and the door closes shut.

I lie on the floor. After a while, my body starts responding again, but I don’t want to get up. Grayson will send an aircraft to Crazy Pete’s house. They will search and search and find nothing. He will come back here even more furious. Even if I decided now to tell him where the device is, he would torture us anyway.

I have failed Father. I have failed my friends. And now I’m going to witness Laura die in front of my very eyes. I wish I were a thousand miles from this horrible place. I’m too numb to cry. Hopelessness curls my shoulders forward. I bury my head in my hands. Time goes by. When I snap out of my dark thoughts, I glance at the monitor. A first bamboo shoot has already pierced Laura’s shirt. Her blouse is stained with blood. Her whole body is writhing as she tries in vain to free herself from her bonds. Her face is contorted in agony.

*What if I killed myself?* The thought appears out of nowhere. The more I think of my hopeless situation, the more it takes hold. The terror of killing myself pales when compared with the certainty of the horrors to come. A sense of calm purpose washes through me. I won’t give Grayson the satisfaction of killing me himself. I don’t want to witness Laura’s death. What could I use to kill myself? I go back to the electrical wire I used earlier. The wire is no longer live—they must have switched off the breaker—so I use it instead to make a noose. I stack three paint buckets and clamber on top of them. Gently, I pass the noose around my neck.

# Chapter 17 – The Exit Toll

Tears are rolling down my cheeks. I think of Harry, Laura and Jim. I think of Ye Ye and Father. I think of Emma. I think of what my life could have been. I feel miserable that my efforts came to nothing.

*Oh, Mom, please be waiting for me on the other side. I need a hug so badly it hurts.*

Just outside my cell, I hear a trampling of boots. This is Grayson. I know it. The door opens. *Now, TeeTee, Do it now.* With my feet, I topple the paint buckets. I drop. The noose tightens around my neck cutting my breath. I feel like I’m going to pass out. *Mom, if you hear me, please be there for me.* I clench my jaw against the pain. Just as I’m blacking out, a voice startles me. “Teegan, no!” I open my eyes. It’s Adrian. He jumps on top of a paint bucket. With a knife, he cuts the wire. I fall into his arms. His face is drained of blood. He looks at me with such love, with such tenderness that I’m dumbfounded. He untangles the noose from around my neck and holds my face in his warm hands.

“Adrian, why did …” I can’t finish my sentence. My throat hurts. He is so close; my lips brush the line of his jaw with each word.

“I came to rescue you. We need to escape. We only have a few minutes before they figure out what’s going on. I started a fire on the other side of the compound. That should keep them busy for a while.”

I point to the CCTV monitor. Laura’s t-shirt is now drenched in blood. “My friends, we need to free them.”

“I can’t, Teegan. I’m working alone.”

“Please!” Adrian looks at Laura before looking back into my pleading eyes.

“Do you know where she is?” he sighs.

I nod weakly.

“Wrap your arm around my neck.” He helps me up. My feet are wobbly, but I can stand. I massage my neck and throat.

“Why did you come back if you betrayed me in the first place?” I ask.

“I never betrayed you.”

“Then how did Grayson find out? Only Father and you knew.”

“Your father’s phone line was tapped.”

“But I saw you speaking to Grayson at school.”

“Grayson was beginning to figure me out. I had to send him on a wild goose chase.”

“Figuring out what? Who are you?” I remove my arm from his neck and take a step back.

“I’m your bodyguard.”

“You? My bodyguard?”

“Yes. Your father hired me. I’m a Special Forces soldier. I work for the URF. And, by the way, I’m nineteen years old, not seventeen.”

The more I think about it, the more it makes perfect sense. Why he was always with me, why we hung around at every recess. How fit he is. It also shows that Father cared for me in more ways than I thought.

Bewildered, I sit on the bed. “That’s why you didn’t kiss me back after the tattoo parlor?”

“Yes, but then something that should have never happened, happened,” he stammers.

“What?”

“I fell in love with you.”

Adrian looks at me like I’m the most desirable person on the planet. He sits on the bed next to me and wraps his arm around my waist. I gently remove his hand. I don’t know what to think. How can I go back to liking or loving someone after I’ve hated them so hard? I’ve developed feelings for Harry now. What am I going to tell Adrian? The distant wail of a siren snaps us back to reality. We both get off the bed at the same time. “We have to go,” says Adrian. His voice sounds more distant or am I imagining this? Did he really think I was going to jump into his arms?

“I know in which cells my friends Harry and Jim are,” I say. “Let’s head there first.”

We sneak out. I’m thinking that the paint I plastered on the camera will prevent the security team from seeing us exit and that’ll buy us some time. We go up the metal staircase and hang a left. Each door is numbered. I spot Harry’s cell first. “There!” I point to the door in front of me. Adrian takes a wristband that he must’ve stolen from an MP officer and presses it against the card reader. The door slides open. Just as Adrian steps in, I see Harry launch a punch, but Adrian has lightning reflexes—he seizes Harry’s wrist in mid-flight and with his other hand, pushes against his elbow. The next movements are a blur and before I can react, Harry crashes on the floor.

“Adrian, stop!” I say.

“Well, he started it,” replies Adrian.

“I thought you were a guard,” says Harry, his pride more wounded than his body.

I give Harry my hand and pull him to his feet. He takes a long, hard look at my companion. “Adrian? Isn’t he the jerk who betrayed you?”

“Yes, no, it’s all a big misunderstanding,” I blurt out. “I don’t have time to explain, we need to hurry.”

Harry takes me by the shoulders. “Where’s Laura?”

“She’s in the garden.”

“The garden?” Harry sees in my eyes that something terrible has happened to her. I avoid his gaze and turn toward the door.

“Let’s free Jim. He’s in the next cell,” I say.

Adrian uses the wristband again to open the door. This time, to be safe, I walk in. Jim races up to me and hugs me. “Thank goodness you’re alive. What about the others?” Jim’s gaze darts around the room. He notices Harry and smiles. He then sees Adrian.

“Who’s he?”

“This is Adrian and before you ask, he’s the guy who helped me escape.”

“Ah.” Jim doesn’t look convinced.

“Anyone know where we are?” asks Harry.

“We’re in Texas,” I reply.

“Texas?” Jim looks surprised and excited. For a moment, he seems about to speak, but changes his mind.

“The Lone Star state where the Civil War began,” says Harry to no one in particular.

“Where’s Laura?” says Jim after scanning the room.

“She’s in danger,” I say.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” asks Jim.

“We need to get our stuff back,” I say. “We won’t escape for long, wearing prison outfits, with no money, and no nothing.”

“Need to find the device too,” says Harry.

“How the hell are we going to find the soldier you planted the device on?” asks Jim.

“That’s easy,” replies Harry

“You know where he is?” asks Jim, surprised.

“I do.”

“But how? There must’ve been a hundred soldiers pouring out of those helicopters.”

“He’s in the infirmary—I wounded his leg bad.”

“Smart,” says Jim.

“We should split up,” says Harry. “Teegan, you know where Laura is. I’ll go with you. Jim and Adrian, try to find the infirmary and get the device back. Bonus if you can find our backpacks. But don’t take any unnecessary risks.”

Adrian looks at me conflicted. He’s probably thinking, *I’m her bodyguard and I can’t leave her.*

“I’ll be prudent, Adrian. Don’t worry,” I offer.

Adrian nods grudgingly.

“We hid the device on a corporal,” says Harry. His rank insignia is a two-bar chevron, point …”

“I know what it looks like,” snaps Adrian.

“So, where do we meet after?” asks Jim. “This place will be teeming with guards soon.”

“There’s a Chinese pavilion in the garden, on top of a small hill. It’s rather secluded. Let’s meet there,” I answer.

“If we aren’t there within an hour,” says Adrian, “assume the worst, and just escape.” He looks at me as he says this.

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Harry and I race to the garden. I look up at the cameras on the ceiling, thanking the Lord that they aren’t wired up. We encounter the body of a guard, his head snapped at a near right angle in the prison observation deck and another body just outside the hallway. Adrian’s lethal and … scary.

As soon as we exit the building, I notice a huge column of black smoke soaring at the far end of the compound. Barracks are blazing in the distance. We cross the bridge leading to the bamboo grove. Harry sees Laura first. He races to the rack. She’s no longer struggling. Two bamboo spears have pierced her. Her once white skin is now blustery red from sun exposure and her lips blistered and cracked from dehydration. While Harry detaches her ties I check to see if she’s breathing. I feel a flood of relief when I see her chest rise and fall faintly. She’s alive. Harry removes his shirt. With a few quick rips, he manages to make a bandage long enough to wrap around Laura’s waist to staunch the bleeding. He scoops her up and presses her against his chest. Laura looks so small in his arms. Tears blur my vision, but I blink forcibly several times to get rid of them. Now is not the time.

“Let’s head for the pavilion,” I say.

We hide in the bushes to avoid a group of guards exiting a shed. As soon as they pass us, we climb up the hillock to the pavilion. I look for surveillance cameras and see none. Harry lowers Laura gently to the ground. The pavilion wall is hiding us from the garden. This is as safe a spot as we will find.

We wait.

Harry’s eyes are vacant. He’s absently stroking Laura’s matted hair.

“I’m so sorry, Harry.” I blurt out after a while. “It’s my fault. I’ve put you at risk. I’ve put Laura at risk.”

He turns to me. “No, it’s my fault. If I hadn’t blown up the bridge, I would never have had the URF on my back.”

“You’re brave, Harry. You know that?”

“Brave, maybe.” He gazes at Laura, before adding, “but I’m thinking I’m massively stupid also.”

Just as I give Harry a lingering smooch on the cheek to cheer him up, Adrian and Jim arrive. As soon as Adrian notices me, he lets my schoolbag drop to the ground.

“I got your stuff back,” says Adrian gruffly.

“And the device,” adds Jim, tapping his pocket. There’s fresh blood on Jim’s shirt. I guess they didn’t get it without a fight.

“How’s Laura doing?” asks Jim.

“She’ll survive. She’s a Price,” replies Harry.

“Can we go now?” I ask. “We still have to escape this hell hole.”

“Where did you learn to fight like that?” Jim asks Adrian. “We saw the bodies on the floor as we left the prison compound. Looks like their necks were snapped.”

“I’m with the URF.”

“You filthy piece of shit,” spits out Harry.

“You think the Feds are all bad, don’t you?” says Adrian. “Well, who do you think ended the Civil War? You know, the one where Americans were shooting Americans? The Feds did. That’s who. Like it or not, they brought a semblance of peace to this country.”

“Yes, but at the cost of our liberty.”

“*Liberty*. What an American thing to say. Like you know what it truly means.”

Harry glowers at me. I know what he’s thinking. *You should’ve told me.*

“Laura’s Teddy was all cut up,” says Jim. “I guess they searched for the device in the stuffing.”

I ignore Harry who’s still glaring at me, hoping for an explanation. I open my backpack. My stuff is all there. I find my cash in a neatly labeled Ziploc.

We change into our old clothes. Who would’ve thought a week ago that I’d be standing in my underwear in front of three guys and not be in the least embarrassed?

When we’re done, Adrian pushes a heavy bag in our direction. “Found these as well in the locker room.” The bag is full of weapons and ammo clips. There’s even a grenade belt.

“I’ve got dibs on the grenades!” says Jim. “I can’t wait to blow something up.”

Harry and I both take pistols. Adrian picks up a scoped rifle.

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I head out of the pavilion. From my vantage point, I spot an exit from the garden leading into a courtyard busy with dump trucks, cranes and bulldozer. There are mounds of earth meant no doubt for the garden. Adrian walks up next to me. He points to a helicopter half hidden behind a truck. “That’s what we want.”

“You can pilot this thing?” I ask.

“I’m with Special Forces—I can pilot anything.”

Harry and Jim see it too. Harry picks up Laura. She stirs in his arms and moans in pain but doesn’t open her eyes. We slowly go down the hill toward the exit, mindful of Laura’s condition.

Just as we cross the gate, I see them—a horde of soldiers racing toward us. There are so many. We run. The first shots are fired. “There!” yells Adrian, “take cover behind those crates.” I don’t have to be told twice. I dive behind the nearest ones as bullets zip by. Soon, everyone has joined me. Harry lowers Laura to the ground. I take my pistol from my back pocket. I aim at the first combatant I see. I don’t want to kill him, so I shoot at his legs. I hit him in the shin. He falls forward only to be trampled underfoot by his colleague running too close behind him. Harry is firing all over the place to keep them at bay. Adrian is taking his time and going for headshots. One by one they fall. Jim just launched a grenade. The deafening detonation hurts my ears. Two more soldiers hit the ground. The URF must have decided they’ve had enough losses because they take refuge behind crates as well. We’re at a standoff.

A voice bellows out of the megaphones perched on the compound walls. “You can’t escape me, Teegan!” It’s Grayson. I can recognize his snotty voice anywhere. “I’ll hunt you down. I’ll find you. And you’ll pay! Believe me, you will.”

I overhear Adrian mumble to himself, “That bastard won’t stop pursuing Teegan until she’s dead. There’s only one way to …” The sirens start blaring and I miss the end of his sentence. The gate leading out of the courtyard is closing—the whole place is going into lockdown.

A soldier appears from the side. He takes several big steps, and then, helped by his exoskeleton body suit, leaps into the air and lands right next to me. I shoot but miss. He grabs me by the arm. His grip is so tight I scream in pain and drop my pistol. I hear fighting next to me. He drags me away by brute force. Why is no one helping me? I wriggle and twist, but cannot free myself. This is when, from the corner of my eye, I see Laura get up. She picks up my pistol and aims at the soldier with trembling hands. My attacker lets go of my arm, whips out his pistol from his holster and takes aim. I close my eyes. A gunshot. The thud of a body hitting the ground. I picture Laura’s body sprawled on the loose gravel. I can’t bear it anymore—I need to know. I open my eyes. Laura is alive but in shock. She’s dropped the pistol. The soldier is on the ground. His visor is shattered. The bullet went right through an eye socket. His helmet is filling with blood. I pick up my firearm and crawl back to the safety of the crates. I take Laura into my arms and have her look away. Adrian shoots another soldier trying to flank us.

“We need to get to the helicopter, and fast, or we’ll be overrun!” shouts Adrian.

Harry turns to Jim. “Now’s the time to blow things up.” I turn to Laura. “Can you run?” She nods. I take her hand in mine.

Jim throws several grenades in the direction of the BlackIce soldiers. The ground shakes with each explosion and deafens my ears. Jim is yelling something, but I can’t hear a thing. I clutch Laura’s hand even harder. It feels like there’s an earthquake going on. A cloud of gray, acrid smoke fills the air and gives us some cover. We race toward the helicopter. We have but a moment before the mercenaries dare leave their position. I help Laura clamber aboard the aircraft. As soon as we’re all inside, Adrian turns to face us. “Quick, run out of the helicopter through the other side. They need to think that you’re still in the helicopter. Understood?”

“But why don’t we all leave in the helicopter?” I say, out of breath.

“Because they’ll hunt you down to the ends of the earth. That’s why. I’ll fly out alone. That way, they’ll be chasing me, not you. It’s important that the soldiers think everyone’s on board. Got it?”

Adrian yanks out the remaining grenades from Jim’s belt. Jim is surprised but lets him do it.

“I’ll throw another couple of grenades to give you some smoke cover,” continues Adrian. “You’ll need to run as fast as you can and hide in the bin of a dump truck.”

Adrian looks at me with a mix of fierce determination and tender love. What is he thinking? I don’t care. I take his face in my hands and kiss him. He kisses me back deeply on the lips, sending a shiver down my spine. Harry gives me a jealous look, but I close my eyes and ignore him. Adrian pulls back, stares me in the eyes for what seems an eternity, before saying, “Now go,” with the ghost of a smile.

“Thanks for everything, Adrian. And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry I doubted you.”

“Quick now. Get ready,” says Adrian as he approaches the left cargo door.

Adrian lobs a few grenades. As soon as we hear the first explosion, we jump down from the helicopter and race to the nearest truck. We sneak under the tarp covering the bin. When I hear the helicopter take off, I peek outside. I watch as it flies away with my bodyguard inside. I can’t believe the risks Adrian took to save me, to save us all. It’s nice to know that I have my very own guardian angel. Just as Harry yanks my arm to pull me back inside the cover of the tarp, the helicopter explodes in midair. The rotor starts spinning out of control. It then slews sideways into a hillside and explodes again. The wreckage rolls down the hillside and hits an embankment. A curtain of smoke rises followed by flames. My heart stops. Disbelief. Shock. Horror. Each emotion hits me like a bullet to the heart. My legs start shaking. Adrian just blew up the helicopter on purpose. His words run over and over in my head, *That bastard won’t stop pursuing Teegan until she’s dead …* By faking our deaths, he’s stopping the pursuit. By sacrificing himself, Adrian has given us a real chance to escape. I cry and sob and cry some more. Harry claps his hand over my mouth to muffle my sobbing. “Shh! You’re attracting attention.” Destiny is not even allowing me to cry. Even my crying will get us killed. We’ve escaped from Grayson, but Adrian’s dead.

# Chapter 18 – Population Zero

We huddle together under the tarp, waiting anxiously for the truck to leave. Harry believes the driver will depart eventually to get another truckload of earth for the garden. I’ve managed to stop crying by shutting out all thoughts of Adrian. But every now and then it’s just too hard, and a sob escapes me like a hiccup. I can’t wait to leave this hellish place. Laura’s wounds have started bleeding again; the mad dash to the helicopter mustn’t have helped. Harry uses one of his old t-shirts to staunch the bleeding. Hushed whispers are exchanged, but I keep to myself. I hear fire trucks in the distance, barked orders, and stomping feet. The bin smells of manure and fertilizer. I cover my head with my arms trying to shut out the world around me. I fear that at any time someone will walk up to the truck, lift the tarp and discover us. After a while, the turmoil dies down. When dusk falls, my hope lifts as I hear the engine start. I chance a peek outside to confirm that we’re indeed leaving the compound. I breathe a sigh of relief. When the truck makes a stop a few hours later, we seize the opportunity to sneak out. We hurriedly hide in the back of the service station and stay there until the truck has departed. Exhausted, I sit on the bench of a wobbly picnic table. A barn light surrounded by buzzing insects illuminates graffiti scrawled in dripping red letters on the building wall: *It’s dangerous to be right when the government is wrong.*

Laura comes and joins me. I wrap my arms around her and hold her tight. She leans her head against my shoulder. She’s shivering—probably because of her sunburn.

“You saved my life out there, Laura. What you did was very brave.”

Laura closes her eyes and doesn’t reply. Her face is haggard. Her lips cracked from dryness. I stroke her forehead gently. Jim and Harry are having an animated discussion. After a moment, Harry comes and sees me.

“Stay put. We’ll be back in an hour.”

“Where are you going?”

Harry doesn’t answer me. He just leaves hurriedly with Jim. I’m too tired to argue. I doze off. A gentle nudge on my shoulder wakes me sometime later. It’s fully dark now. “Wake up, sleepyhead.” It’s Harry. He gently picks up Laura who was dozing against me.

“What? Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

As I reach the front of the station, I see Jim at the wheel of a rundown Mustang with a black strip down the hood. I get inside. I’m sure they stole it, but at this point, I’m too tired to care. I take the front seat because Harry wants to sit next to Laura. The car reeks of strawberry air-freshener. The vinyl of my seat is torn in several places. At my feet, I find a grocery bag brimming with drinks, chip bags, and chocolate bars. I take a soft drink. Harry hands a bottle of water to Laura who gulps it down. Jim pulls out of the gas station and heads for the main road. I’m worried about Laura. She hasn’t spoken a word since we rescued her. The poor kid has been through so much. *Kid*, funny I should use that word as if I wasn’t a kid myself. Well, maybe I was a kid a week ago. Now, who knows? Definitely don’t want to be an adult—they’re too stupid. I spend the next hour thinking of Peter Pan and Neverland and how it would be to live there among the Lost Boys or how I could be one of the mermaids and drown Grayson in the lagoon. I let myself think of anything as long as it doesn’t involve Adrian.

We drive east. Jim’s told us it’s about a 12 hour drive to Hailey’s hideout. As we drive into the night, the temperature drops. We close the windows. After a while, Jim announces that he’s too tired to continue. He takes a side road and parks the car under a cluster of trees. We settle down as best we can on the uncomfortable car seats to sleep.

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I wake up at the break of dawn with a sore neck. Birdsong fills the air. I don’t usually pay attention to it, but this morning I do, maybe because of my short stint in a prison cell. The leaves in the trees surrounding me flutter in the light breeze, creating a soothing, rustling sound. I exit the car as quietly as possible so as not to wake the others. I decide to stretch my legs by exploring the meadow by the side of the road. After a brief walk, I come upon a shallow ravine with a clear, swift-running brook bordered by hemlocks. I splash my face and drink some water. The air is crisp. I lie down in the grass and look up at the soft pink and blue colors of the early morning sky, and a memory of Adrian springs up all on its own.

It happened just before the Christmas break. It seems like ages ago now. I had a big English test coming up and, unsurprisingly, I hadn’t studied for it. I was having trouble with that class. The teacher was so bad. His flat lessons bored me out of my skull. Adrian was in the same boat. I invited him over to study. Father was away that evening and only Ye Ye was around. Adrian and I chatted and laughed and ribbed each other. We even occasionally glanced at our manuals. Before long it was midnight. Ye Ye turned off the house lights and I asked Adrian if he wanted to sleep over. He hesitated at first but then accepted. I pretended I was cool with it, but inside I was nervous as hell. Adrian was possibly even more nervous than I was because he only removed his shoes and socks. Instead of sleeping in my usual tank top and boxer PJs, I put on the longest, thickest nightdress I had. I probably looked like his grandma, but he was classy and didn’t tease me about it. We both settled awkwardly on my bed. Adrian’s hair smelled so nice—something peppermint and wintergreen. His presence next to me was reassuring in a way that I still can’t find words for. Nothing happened that night and I was glad; I wasn’t ready. But it did turn out to be the best night’s sleep I had ever had.

I prop myself on my elbows and look at the stream. The sun’s already hot. I sniff myself—I smell like cow shit. I’m filthy head to toe. I check that no one is around before undressing. I wade into the stream buck naked. The water’s cool and pleasant on my calves. I take a few hesitant steps on slippery pebbles before plunging into the water. I feel the strong current wash away the stink and grime and blood. When I emerge, I make my way to a flat slab of rock in the middle of the brook. I lay in the sun for a bit and try my best to untangle my hair with my fingers.

After a while, I go back to the riverbank and put my clothes back on. I sit on a big rock and I try to dislodge the dirt buried under my nails with a twig. The water may have refreshed me, but the pain of Adrian’s death remains. Who will take care of his mother now? She’s such a lady. Always happy, never complains about anything. She was so proud of her son going to a private school and getting a proper education. She still lives at home but with her Alzheimer’s and no one to take care of her, she’ll be forced to go to a hospice. I tell myself I’ll visit her, but will she remember me? Will I be the one to break the tragic news to her?

“Hey!” says Harry, startling me.

“Hey,” I reply without looking up.

“Want to talk?”

“He’s gone. Even if I talk about him he won’t come back.” I drop my twig on the ground; it wasn’t working anyway.

“I’m sorry about your boyfriend.” Harry’s voice sounds sincere. “He was a hell of a good soldier. Never seen anyone as brave either.”

“He wasn’t my boyfriend, but he was my friend. He was the best friend I ever had. And I called him a traitor.”

“How could you have known? The evidence was against him. It all added up.”

“I should have trusted my heart.”

“Your heart? Yeah, maybe, but sometimes it can be just as confused.”

“You’re talking about my kiss with Adrian, aren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“I don’t want to fight, Harry. Not now. Not with you. I like you … a lot.”

“You seemed to like Adrian a lot too.”

“Now, stop it! Adrian was my best friend. He had just helped us escape. He was leaving. He deserved that kiss. And with what happened after, that’s the one thing in my messed-up life that I’ll never regret doing. So leave it alone.”

“I get it.”

“I’m not sure you do but whatever. Just give me time,” I say in a softer voice. “All right?”

“I … shouldn’t have pressed you like that. My bad. I’ll go check on the others. We should head out soon.”

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Shortly after, we’re on the road again. This time Laura is in front with Jim. She seems a bit better after the night’s sleep.

“Are you hungry?” Jim asks Laura. She nods.

“When are you going to start talking again?”

Laura shakes her head.

“Never?”

Laura nods. Her face is blank, her eyes distant and emotionless. Jim is about to add something, but I give him the stare. He understands and lets the matter drop. I think that after everything she’s been through, Laura needs time as well. It hurts to think that less than twenty-four hours ago they were having such a wonderful time playing together in the snow.

We’re going northeast toward Fort Worth if I read the road sign right. There’s a strange beauty to the sprawling landscape surrounding us: plains, green fields, and Americana. Maybe it’s the light. The air feels different too. If I had my camera, I would want to stop and film this area.

The scars of the civil war are still fresh here. As we drive, I notice that craters dot either side of the road—mortar craters. A few of the bigger ones contain filthy, torpid water. The road has been repaved extensively. The North, by and large, didn’t have any big bombings, other than in Chicago, but Texas was the first state to secede and was consequently hit the hardest by the URF. My father had commented that Texas had to be punished hard and made into an example. I think of BlackIce’s machinations to push the state to secede and wonder what would have happened if he had failed. Would the other states have seceded anyway? Would the U.S. have avoided the Second Civil War altogether?

“Anything good on the radio?” asks Harry.

Jim turns it on. Country music starts blaring.

“Anything but that,” pleads Harry.

Jim fumbles with the station scanner. The voice of an announcer comes on. “With the historic vote coming on April 16th, people from all parts of the country are converging for a peaceful rally on Capitol Hill to push Congress to resume peace talks. Cathy Ellendale is organizing the grassroots campaign. Praised for her peaceful, Gandhi-like approach, her actions have been labeled as misguided by influential Senator Donald Nelson, who was quoted as saying that …”

“Donald Nelson … turn off the radio before I barf,” says Harry. “This spineless guy is a flatterer, a liar, and a manipulator. He’ll say *anything* to prop up his failing government.”

Jim shuts the radio.

“Well, Cathy is an amazing woman,” I say. “My father often spoke of her. He once said that she’s the one person in America that could broker a long lasting peace in the country with her ideas for a New Republic.”

“Yeah,” says Jim, “she’s interviewed a lot on Voice of Freedom. Smart lady, but her methods are too peaceful for me. Sometimes you need to shake things up by blowing shit up.”

“Are you sure, Jim?” asks Harry.

“Of all people, why are *you* asking me this question? You’re the one always quoting Machiavelli and shit, saying we need to push the people to revolt.”

“I know.” Harry glances at Laura. “I’m just not sure that’s the right way anymore.”

Jim drums his fingers on the car window, visibly upset. “Wow. Didn’t see that one coming.”

“How long to the hideout, Jim?”

“Dunno. Maybe another nine-ten hours. But, we can’t take the major highways. There are drones and cameras. We’ll need to use the back roads.”

A road sign proudly announces, *Granbury, Where Texas History Lives*, but a giant skull has been spray-painted on it as well as the words, *Population Zero*.

I soon understand the reference. The town has been obliterated. There’s not a single standing building as far as the eye can see. We soon enter an artificial trench whose walls are composed of the bulldozed rubble of the destroyed city—it’s completely surreal. The entrance of the trench is marked by the broken fuselages of two combat aircraft standing upright on either side of the road.

Bricks, wood planks, garage doors, refrigerators, barbecues, and cement blocks are heaped on top of another. Crushed cars, stacked like pancakes, make up part of the wall. Remains of a playground: a broken merry-go-round, crumpled metal slides, and bits of a teeter-totter jut out here and there. The rubble is so high you feel like you’re driving through a tunnel. As we arrive at what would have constituted the town center, all that remains is the front wall and clock of the courthouse and a church steeple supported precariously by a corner wall.

A shadow on the road. Jim swerves to avoid it. Laura shrieks. A huge rat is darting across the road, something squirming in its mouth. As we drive through this apocalyptic scenery everyone is quiet in the car. After a while, I catch a glint reflecting from the top of the southern wall.

“A sniper! Harry, there’s a sniper on the right wall.”

“Yeah, I saw him. Pretty sure he’s not here for us. Probably U.S. Resistance.”

Cars and trucks are few and far between. We pass by a military convoy driving slowly on the right side of the road. The last vehicle has a poster with the slogan, *United, We Are Stronger* and the URF logo. I duck when we pass next to it, not wanting to be recognized. I’m so happy when we finally drive out of this artificial death valley and get back on the open road.

“They did this on purpose,” says Jim, breaking the silence.

“The URF is forcing the population to drive through the destroyed city as a reminder of what happens to those who oppose them,” says Harry. “It’s the Road of Shame.”

“This is wrong on so many levels,” I say.

“This war needs to end, Teegan,” says Harry as he bangs the palm of his hand against the seat. “We need to rebuild our country.”

I stay quiet after Harry’s last comment. If we are successful and my father is freed and the Civil War ends—and that’s a lot of ifs—would I stay with Father or move out? I look at my new friends, at Harry in particular. What would I do? I’m not sure. Not yet.

# Chapter 19 – The Cavalcade

“Hey, Harry, do you see what I see?” asks Jim, after a while on the road.

“Oh, yes!”

They’re staring—no, drooling—at a Mexican restaurant advertising the best tacos this side of the Rio Grande. It’s a white-washed one-story building. There are a few palm trees strung up with dingy Christmas lights. A torn Texas flag hangs limply on a pole. A yellowed sign reading WE ACCEPT FOOD STAMPS is placed in the window. The whole place oozes charm, but my stomach is growling like crazy. I haven’t eaten anything solid in the last twenty-four hours, so I don’t protest.

As Jim pulls into the parking lot, Harry delicately lifts the hem of Laura’s t-shirt and examines her.

“We should get those wounds cleaned up at the restaurant. Okay, Lolo?”

Laura nods. Harry hands her a cleaner t-shirt for the restaurant. It has *I am the future* written on it in bright rainbow colors. *What kind of future are we giving you, Laura?* I think with a twinge of guilt as she removes yesterday’s blood splattered t-shirt and puts on the new one.

“So, how is she?” I ask Harry discreetly as we walk up to the entrance.

“Still hasn’t spoken a word, and it would be better if she was seen by a doctor. Her wounds are superficial, but I’m afraid one of them might be infected.”

“We’ll figure something out.” I give Harry a reassuring pat on the back.

A middle-aged Mexican woman in a colorful apron greets us as soon as we enter the restaurant. With a smile full of broken teeth, she sits us at a table covered with a cheerful tablecloth. The place is deserted. She must be happy to have customers. The lady brings us menus. Jim proposes to order for all of us. I nod emphatically. At this point, I’ll eat anything. Harry and Laura head to the washroom.

Our waitress comes back with a pad and pencil. “So, what will it be?” Her English is impeccable. She must be second or third generation American. It’s so ironic. For the longest time, the Americans did all they could to keep Mexicans from illegally entering the country—they even built the longest, costliest wall in the world. And now it’s the opposite; ever since the Civil War, Americans are fleeing in droves to Mexico.

Jim gives the order: “Guacamole, ceviche, chili con carne, chicken tacos, quesadilla plate, enchiladas, and fajitas.” Our waitress scribbles the order down.

“You need to add one more, Jim,” I say, counting the dishes with my fingers.

“Why? That’s plenty.”

“Chinese superstition. For regular meals, you should always order an even number of dishes as odd numbers symbolize death. It’d be bad luck.”

“You believe in this stuff?”

“Better safe than sorry.”

Jim rolls his eyes but humors me. He turns to the waitress, “Plus jalapeño poppers.”

Harry and Laura come back. Mouthwatering aromas of garlic and chilies drift from the kitchen as we wait impatiently for the food. As soon as the dishes arrive, I load a heaping plate with a bit of everything. The food is surprisingly good, especially the soft chicken tacos—the meat is charred but still juicy inside. It seems I’m not the only one loving them. Soon there’s just a single taco remaining. I greedily look at it. “Anyone having that?” No response. I snatch it from the serving dish before anyone changes their mind.

Three plates later, my stomach is finally full—okay, maybe *too* full as I feel slightly nauseous, if not a little green. I lean back in the chair and hold my stomach. I let out a satisfied and surprisingly long belch. It makes me giggle in amusement. Harry is surprised but grins. It even elicits the faintest of smiles from Laura, but Jim has a shocked look on his face.

“What?” I say, acting all innocent.

“Wow, that wasn’t very ladylike,” says Jim.

“Well, in China it’s considered good manners to burp after a meal.”

“Well, this is America, and it’s considered rude.”

“Oh, come off your high horse,” says Harry, surprised by his friend’s reaction.

“And who says I want to be a lady?” I add, suddenly miffed. What’s up with Jim, I wonder.

When the waitress comes back, she stares at the empty plates on the table with an astounded look on her face. “Wow, you kids were hungry. To be honest, I never thought you’d finish it all and that would’ve been a crying shame seeing how many folks around here don’t have enough to eat.”

“Well, ma’am, it was delicious,” says Harry. “Compliments to the chef.”

“I’ll be sure to tell my husband.”

We get up and pay, and soon we’re on the road again.

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The rumbling of the car ride combined with my full stomach is making me drowsy. I fight to stay awake, but after a while, I give up. I undo my seatbelt and lie down on the back seat nestling my head on Harry’s lap. He smiles at me. I caress his cheek with the back of my fingers. What was just a little scruff a few days ago is now a bristly beard.

“Your beard has grown. It suits you.”

“Glad you like it.”

Harry runs his fingers through my hair. Even after my quick swim in the river, it’s still tousled and oily. I feel self-conscious. What I wouldn’t give to spend just an hour with my stylist right now. Harry doesn’t seem to mind though. Occasionally, he encounters a knot and tries to untangle it. It’s so relaxing that I close my eyes and let myself doze off.

It’s Jim’s upset voice that wakes me sometime later. I sit up straight, rubbing my eyes. “What’s going on?”

“The car broke down …” he answers.

“Shit. How far are we from Hailey’s hideout?” I ask.

“Two hours at least.”

“Let’s try to hitch a ride,” I say.

“The odds of a minivan or truck picking up four strangers are slim, but I agree,” says Harry. “That’s our only option right now.”

I find a flattened cardboard box in the trunk and rip a side off. “Hey, Laura, can you write ‘Going to Rialto’ on this?”

She nods and rummages for a marker at the bottom of her backpack.

Once she’s done, I stand by the side of the road and wave and smile at every passerby. Jim is playing lookout and warns us if an oncoming vehicle looks remotely official. When he whistles, we duck and hide.

Hours go by. It’s now late afternoon. We’re hot and tired and thirsty and annoyed. I sit on a rock and finish the last gulp of my warm soda.

I hear a racket coming our way. Jim shouts, “It’s the Cavalcade!”

I get up and join Jim. “Why is it that I think I should know who that is but don’t?”

Jim looks at me surprised. “For the daughter of a general, you don’t know much about what’s going on, do you?” He takes a cigarillo from a pack in his shirt pocket and lights it up. He takes a quick puff and then blows the smoke out slowly.

“The Cavalcade consists of a bunch of anarchists that ride in a convoy. They travel from one location to another like nomads. They usually set up camp near some small town for a couple of weeks before moving on. Their leader is called Kurt Wakefield. I think he leads some sort of cult.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Well, a bunch of folks came on the Voice of Freedom claiming that Kurt miraculously parted the waters of the Wichita River to let his convoy pass.”

Jim takes another puff before continuing. “They even claim that Kurt’s the new Moses.”

“Wow! And people believe that?”

He points at the motorcade coming our way. “Clearly, they do.”

A hundred vehicles: streamlined motorcycles, jacked-up cars, pimped-out vans, 18-wheelers, and repurposed school buses are heading our way. Wow, I didn’t realize they had so many members.

The car leading the motorcade is a vintage white Cadillac with a flag with Jesus’s face attached to the radio antenna. We grab our stuff and wave frantically as they drive by. As the end of the procession nears, what little hope I had of getting a ride is doused.

Harry kicks a rock into a fence. Jim mumbles something about blowing them up.

The last school bus halts with a jerk next to us. The driver opens the door.

“Need a ride?”

I race to the door fearing for some reason that the driver will change is mind. “Yeah! We’re going to Rialto.”

“Well, come on in, then.”

We get in and make our way to the few seats that aren’t taken towards the rear of the bus. A few people greet us or wave as we walk past. All of them have an identical wooden cross dangling from their necks. Some of them have letters and numbers tattooed on their faces, arms, or necks: E3:8, P16:4, J7:24 … I wonder what they represent.

Music is playing from a boom box sitting on a guy’s lap. I recognize the song: it’s Neil Diamond’s *Sweet Caroline*. It brings a smile to my face.

Harry finds a double seat and settles down with Laura. I sit next to a girl about my age, and Jim has a seat on his own.

“I’m glad you guys stopped for us,” I say to the curly-haired girl next to me. “With the war going on, no one wants to stop for strangers.”

“Well, we’re just doing what Jesus would’ve done.” The girl smiles warmly. “I’m Ellen by the way.”

“I’m Teegan. So, where are you guys going?”

“Nowhere in particular. We crisscross the country. We’ve decided to be nomads until the Lord brings us to the Land of Canaan.”

“The land of what?” I say.

“You know, the land of milk and honey, the Promised Land. We’re so lucky to have Kurt as our shepherd. He’s so dreamy. When he was little, he …” I stop paying attention to her, and she doesn’t even notice. I pick up a leaflet sitting in the seat pouch in front of me. Idly, I glance at the headlines: *How to Welcome Jesus into your Life, Reaching out in the Name of Christ,* and my favorite so far, *Why Climate Change is a Hoax.* Whoa, they’re pretty intense.

Ellen beams when she sees me go through the leaflet. “I designed the logo for it you know. I’m a graphic designer. Where are you guys heading to?”

“Rialto.”

“My cousin lives there. It’s held by the Resistance … I think. Or at least it was. It changes all the time. The Feds one day, the Resistance the other …”

I tell Ellen I want to nap. It doesn’t take long before I doze off.

I get jolted awake sometime later when the driver swerves wildly to avoid an obstacle on the road. I open my eyes, feeling grumpy.

“Are we near?”

“To Rialto? I reckon another ten minutes. We’re already in the burbs.”

Ellen suddenly shifts on her seat and points eagerly at a bunch of destroyed homes as if she was waiting for that exact opportunity to reveal a secret. “It was God Almighty who started the Civil War, you know, to punish us because we lost our way.”

“God started this war?”

“He sure did.”

“You’re kidding. Right?”

“No …” She gives me a perplexed frown. “Why would I kid about something like that?”

After reading their ridiculous leaflet, this is the final drop.

“I’ll tell you who started the war,” I say as I raise my voice. “Humankind did. That’s who. A man called Robert, and another called Simon, and a woman called Nikki. They all started this fucking war. Not God.”

“Don’t swear. It’s forbidden.”

“Oh, I’m not done here. If you thinking it’s in God’s hands, you’re not going to take responsibility and worse, you’re not going to make it stop.”

By now, just about everyone on the bus is staring at us.

Ellen crosses her arms over her chest. “Well, Kurt says it was God. So there.”

I’m not sure why I’m so triggered. My stint in a prison, Adrian’s death, waiting for a lift all day under the hot sun, the leaflet … I’m not sure and I don’t care. I’m having none of it.

“Kurt says it was ...” I repeat, imitating her annoying voice. “What kind of argument is that? Don’t you have your own brain?”

The music suddenly stops. A ruckus erupts. People stand up and speak over each other, chiding me with glowering eyes and wagging fingers.

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We’re back on the side of the highway.

“You got us expelled from the bus, Teegan,” says Harry.

“Yeah! We were almost there,” whines Jim. “Couldn’t you shut your mouth?”

“No. We have wars because people shut up. The silence of people shutting up is deafening.”

It starts to rain.

I glance at the road sign nearest me. It reads Rialto – 5 miles.

We start walking with slouched shoulders. Jim is carrying Laura in his arms. He placed a plastic bag over her head to protect her from the rain. Harry is carrying Laura’s backpack on top of his own.

After a while, Harry catches up to me, “You’re right, you know. People need to speak up more.”

“Thanks. Sorry I made us all walk. It’s just … ”

“No need to apologize.”

Why did I get so angry? It takes a while, but it comes to me. It’s people hiding under the anonymity of the war that pisses me off. People saying the Feds did this or the Resistance did that … Individuals are responsible, dammit. So when Ellen said God caused the war, I finally dawned on me, that no one, absolutely no one, felt accountable for the nation’s woes. Well, I for one am going to do something about it and whatever I do, good or bad, I’ll own up to it.

We arrive in Rialto, get our bearings, and head immediately towards the industrial sector. After another thirty minutes, we arrive exhausted and wet at our destination—a decommissioned coal plant sitting by a small lake with brownish water.

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Under oppressive clouds, we trudge towards the abandoned facility. A hundred feet high smokestack painted in red and white stripes dominates it. We follow the gravel road until we reach the perimeter fence. The gate leading inside is locked with a corroded padlock and chain.

Laura picks up a sign lying on the ground. With the hem of her sleeve, she wipes the mud off. She glances around our group as a worried frown crosses her face. She lifts it up for us to read. It says Warning Cyber Døgs.

“What do you think, Harry? Should we be concerned?”

“I don’t know,” he replies as he brushes raindrops from his brow. “The sign’s pretty rusted. I’d be surprised if any guard dogs were still around. This place looks like it’s been abandoned for some time.”

“I hope you’re right,” says Jim, “I hate dogs.” He takes out his tools and gets to work on the lock. In less than a minute, the timeworn gate opens with an outraged screech.

We step over scrap tires, broken crates, and train tracks as we make our way towards a cement staircase that leads to the nearest entrance. The metal door is ajar. Next to it, a sign reads Danger-Authorized Personnel Only. We ignore it and enter a vast, dimly lit room filled with derelict machinery, pipes, and gears. Green control panels with dials, knobs, and sliders line the far wall. Part of the ceiling has collapsed. Underneath it, a hollow is filled with dirty water.

“Are you sure this is the right place, Jim?” asks Harry.

“I was. Now, I’m not sure anymore.”

“Yeah, this looks like a crappy place to hide,” I say. “I mean there’s no pool, the bar is so 2020s, and the carpet is hideous.”

“Haha. Not funny,” says Jim.

“Did you hear that?”

“No,” says Harry. Nonetheless, he pulls out his high-intensity rescue flashlight.

I see a rat the size of a cat scuttle by with something squirming in its mouth. I let out a deafening shriek.

Harry and Jim turn to Laura, fearing for her. I raise my arm sheepishly. “It was me. Sorry. Don’t like rodents.”

We continue exploring. The coal plant is bigger than a football field.

I hear a faint clickety-click on the floor.

“Guys,” I whisper, “I heard something.”

“What now, Teegan?” says Jim.

“There’s something out there.”

“You’re hearing things.” Jim kicks a crate blocking his way.

At least Harry doesn’t find me crazy. He shines his flashlight all around us, and that’s when I see it—a mechanical mouth with sharp incisors floating midair not ten feet from me. I squeal and point at it with a trembling finger.

“Guys? What – is – that,” I ask in a wavering voice.

As I’m speaking, a box-shaped head is revealed and then whatever electronic camouflage was active turns off revealing a mean-looking cyber dog the size of a Great Dane. And it’s not alone—three other ones appear right behind it.

Jim’s face goes white with fear; he pulls out his gun tucked in his belt. His hand is shaking.

“Get away you stupid dogs,” hollers Jim. “Get away from me.”

“Jim, keep calm,” says Harry. “They’re not attacking.”

Jim steps backward, trips on a box, and falls. The dog growls. Jim fires. His bullet hits one of the dog’s hind legs. Mechanical bits and pieces fly in the air. The dog skids backward under the impact. But then he hobbles forward on his three remaining legs and leaps. He lands on Jim’s already prone body. His jaw locks on his leg like a bear trap. Jim hollers in pain. He kicks the dog with his other leg, but the mechanical brute is ignoring his blows. Laura scurries behind me. Harry grabs the dog attacking Jim and heaves him up with a groan before tossing him aside.

The three remaining dogs charge.

# Chapter 20 – The Abandoned Coal Plant

I raise my arms to protect my face and brace for impact.

“Heel!” The command echoes in the vast room.

The dog twists sharply in midair to change its course and lands next to me with a clunk. I take a step back and lower my arms to see better. The dogs have stopped attacking. I exhale deeply. They’re gathering behind a black woman in her forties and a teenager who looks like her son. Both of them are pointing rifles at us. The teenager has a finger curled on the trigger.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” says the woman.

“We’re looking … for someone,” groans Jim, as he staunches the blood flowing from his leg with his hand. “Her name is Hailey. She’s a darker.”

“Hailey, you said?”

“Yes.”

She puts a hand to her ear. “Operator, we’ve intercepted a group of four who claim to be looking for Hailey.” As she’s talking through her microphone, she looks around as if to ascertain there’s only us. “Okay. We’ll do. Out.”

Looking distressed, the teenager kneels next to the dog that Jim shot and checks its hind leg. “You damaged Sasha, dumbass. It was my dad who built her for me.”

“Sasha was trying to chew my leg off,” grumbles Jim.

“That’s not a reason.”

“When is that *not* a reason?”

“Head for that door over there,” says the woman, waving her rifle “and don’t try to be clever or Jasen will set the dogs on you.”

“Sasha, follow,” commands Jasen. “Charlie, Buddy, Cooper, patrol.” Their camouflage reactivates, and in no time, I lose track of their position.

We march forward as instructed. Assisted by Harry, Jim manages to hobble on one leg. He’s visibly in pain. I take Laura’s hand and give it a light squeeze. Her lips are trembling, almost like she's trying not to cry. I’m wracked with guilt. Laura has gone through so much already, and now this.

“What’s your name?” I ask our escort.

“Zari.”

I expect her to ask mine, but she doesn’t. Clearly not the talkative type.

We go down a winding passage lit by a string of flickering light bulbs. It eventually leads to a sprawling hall. I stop briefly to observe the place. A massive turbine occupies the center of the room. Part of the ceiling has caved in. A plastic tarp has been placed to block the opening, but it’s loose and flaps in the wind. The dampness of the place makes me sneeze. Some walls are covered in vines climbing all the way to the casements. The catwalk above me stretches all the way to the far end of the room. In front of me, people are going to and fro. I’m guessing this is the common area.

The woman nudges me forward with the tip of her rifle.

As we’re walking, two girls jump from the catwalk and land with feline grace next to us, startling me.

The girl on the left is just a bit older than I am. She has a coil of rope slung over one shoulder. I recognize her immediately—Hailey. She has the same eyes as her brother if you forget about her eyepatch. With sleeve tattoos, an edgy pixie haircut, and smoldering looks, she’s hard to ignore. She bears herself with an air of effortless self-possession that instantly makes me jealous—she’s everything I want to be. A heated blush rises to my cheeks. I have a brief thought that I could have a girl-crush on her.

“Hey, little brother!” she says with a broad smile.

Jim’s face lights with delight, “Hailey!”

“I’ll take it from here, Zari,” says Hailey.

Zari lifts her rifle in the air in acknowledgment and leaves with her son and the cyber dog in tow.

“Babe,” says Hailey. “This is my bro, his best friend, Harry, and Lolo. Hi Lolo!” She waves at Laura.

Her companion is gender-defying. It takes me a while to decide if she’s a man or a woman. She has no curves, but her delicate neckline gives it away. A beanie covers her short side-shaved hair. She has a star-shaped implant emulating bioluminescence on the top of her hand. She’s wearing a Led Zeppelin tee with jeans.

“And I don’t know who she is,” says Hailey, looking at me.

“I’m Teegan,” I offer.

“Nice to meet you, Teegan.”

Hailey turns to her companion, “Eiza, can you finish securing the plastic for me?” Without waiting for an answer, she throws her rope to her friend, who deftly catches it and heads out.

“What brings you to my neck of the woods?” asks Hailey.

“I need your help,” groans Jim.

Hailey notices Jim’s bloody ankle. “Oh my God, you’re hurt. What happened?”

“A cyber dog bit me. I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Your call,” she says with a worried frown. “The operator wants to meet you.”

The operator. Quite the title. I’m not sure who to expect.

Hailey stoops to Laura’s eye level. “How'd you like a ride?”

Laura nods. Hailey hoists her on her shoulders.

“They know each other?” I ask Harry.

“Yes. Hailey used to babysit Laura.”

As I’m walking alongside, I observe Hailey. She’s wearing a long, single-breasted jacket with a throat tab. The jacket is lined with an American flag. Her unlaced leather boots are handpainted with wildflowers. As she walks, Hailey seems to step on purpose in puddles of water, making big splashes. Laura giggles. Harry, on hearing Laura laugh for the first time since the prison, smiles.

We cross the room. A few buckets have been strategically placed to collect water dripping from the leaky roof. A few people turn their heads and watch as we pass by.

A grey husky races joyfully to greet Hailey. A pang of sadness hits me when I notice that the dog is missing his two rear legs. A makeshift wheelchair made up of old stroller parts is supporting his rear end. Hailey takes Laura and lowers her gently to the ground. She bends down to greet the dog and ruffles his fur.

“Hi there, Hobble.” Laura raises her hand to do the same but then looks at Hailey.

“Go ahead, Lolo, you can pet him. He’s bat-shit crazy, but he won’t bite. He’s as sweet as apple jelly.”

Laura pets him. The dog wags his tail and licks Laura’s face.

“Hey, Laura, why don’t you watch my dog while I take care of a few things?”

Laura nods. Hailey says nothing, but she turns to Harry with a quizzical look on her face. I think she just picked up on the fact that Laura hasn’t peeped a word since they’ve met.

“Okay, let’s go see the operator,” says Hailey in a more serious tone. We take a janky cage elevator to the mezzanine level. The place is filled with computers, cables, and machinery. A ceiling fan turns lazily, barely stirring the torpid air.

A guy sitting on a stool watches us enter. He’s eating cereals out of the box.

“Operator, your visitors are here,” he announces.

The operator isn’t as I had imagined. A thin man is lying on a tilting hospital bed. He has three triangular metal plates bolted to his bald head. With deft movements of his fingers, he moves, resizes, and scales holoscreens filled with data, images, and video streams.

I take a step forward, “Hi, I’m Teegan and this is …”

“Oh, I know who you are,” he says in a deep voice as he sits up straight. He has penetrating blue eyes. He waves his hand and the holoscreens instantly fill with our personal data: name, parents, birth date, blood type, last purchase location, my bra size, it’s … it’s creepy how much information he has on us.

“What I want to know is why you’re here. You’re all on the most wanted list. And Teegan, you even have a hefty bounty on your head.”

“Oh, believe me, I know about that.”

Hailey raises her eyebrows in surprise.

“By barging here unannounced,” says the operator, “you’re putting *everyone* at risk.”

“We’re very sorry about that. We just need Hailey to help us with something, and we’ll be on our way.”

“Hailey knows the rules. She’s not allowed to hack from within the facility. We don’t want to draw attention to ourselves. This is a safe house, not an internet café.”

“But sir, we don’t need her to hack into anything …”

“You need to leave.”

My heart skips a beat. “What? No!”

“I’d love to help …” he continues.

“Really?” I say, suddenly hopeful again.

“Let me finish. But having you here is just too risky.”

“Ah, come on,” I say.

From the corner of my eye, I see Jim grabs hold of Harry’s shoulder to steady himself. The bottom of his pant leg is soaked in blood.

“You’re breaking your own rules, you know,” says Hailey, with a determined voice. “You say that you’ll provide sanctuary to any fugitive who hasn’t committed a violent crime.” She points to our profiles, “They haven’t.”

“That’s right,” says Harry.

Hailey takes a step forward. “Plus, you owe me one.”

All eyes turn toward the operator. He looks at our profiles again. After a while, he sighs. “Fine. You can stay. But Hailey, just to be clear, now, we’re even.”

“Even, yes. Thank you.”

Hailey notices the blood pooling on the floor next to Jim’s wounded leg. “Shit! We need to get you to a doctor.”

“I’m fine. See.” Jim lets go of Harry and tries to stand on his own. He doesn’t last two seconds before he collapses on the floor.

“Okay. Maybe, not so fine,” he whimpers.

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We’re waiting in the hall beneath the operator’s mezzanine. This section has been repurposed into a communal kitchen. There’s a trestle table with benches and chairs. Jim’s been gone an hour now. They said they had an ex-army medic working for them, so I’m not too worried. Harry is quiet though. More so than usual.

By the pantry, Laura spots a fat-bellied furnace refurbished into a miniature library. It has a wonky metal chimney painted in rainbow colors. The words “Take One, Leave One” are written on an old-fashioned chalkboard. Laura races up to it. She opens the squeaking cast iron door like it leads to a magical kingdom. She glances at the secondhand books with a smile. Hesitant at first, she retrieves one. It’s a thick book. I crane my neck to spy the title: *A Tale Dark and Grimm*. Given everything we’re going through, I find her choice remarkably appropriate. Laura sits cross-legged on the floor to read.

I spot a blue-haired girl sitting in the corner blowing a bubble gum. Using an electric screwdriver, she’s making adjustments to her prosthetic hand. Now and then, she flexes her fingers.

I turn to her. “Hi, I’m Teegan,” I say over the racket of rattling pipes.

“I’m Jan.”

“So, how many are you in the safe house?”

“Sixty give or take. We have Zers, political activists, and hackers. All sorts. Mainly, people who dared to stick it to the man.”

“Did you yourself?”

“Oh, yeah,” she replies with a satisfied smirk. “I spent sixty-three days, nine hours, twenty-seven minutes in a crappy cell, but every second was worth it.”

“I was wondering, why do you call the man in charge, operator?”

“Well, his real name is Bob, but somehow he thought it lacked gravitas.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, Bob definitively doesn’t cut it.”

“He’s a nice guy, you know. He genuinely cares.” She pops her bubble gum.” Once fugitives have recovered here for a bit, he helps them find safe passage to Los Diablos.”

“Los Diablos? But that part of California got devastated by an earthquake. Why would anyone want to go there? I mean, it’s a no man’s land.”

“Maybe to you. But to Zers, it’s different. There’s no government there. They can have a fresh start. There’s no one on your tail. No fear of Feds showing at your home in the middle of the night.”

“Oh …”

I hear wheels squeaking. Hailey arrives pushing Jim in an office chair. Jim’s wearing an old-school cast made of plaster. A pair of crutches rests on his legs. Hobble trots behind them, joyfully chewing on someone’s shoe.

Harry jumps up from his chair when he sees them arrive, “So?”

“No major damage,” replies Jim.

“But he won’t be able to walk for a while,” adds Hailey.

“That’s a bummer,” says Harry.

Hailey wheels Jim next to the kitchen table.

“Would you mind?” Hailey says to January. “We need to talk.”

“Not a problem. I was leaving anyway.”

“You guys hungry?” asks Hailey.

“Are you kidding?” I say. “I could eat a horse right now.”

Harry nods emphatically. “It’s true. She could eat a horse. Literally. Her stomach is a bottomless pit. I’m not kidding,” Harry insists. “She’s like a black hole.”

I knuckle-punch him on the arm. He winces, but that’s not enough to shut him up.

“A ravenous black hole, too.” He turns to me. “You give black holes a bad name, you know that?”

“You done?” I ask.

“For now.”

“Got it,” says Hailey. “Let’s get you something to eat, and then we’ll talk. We need to ration food, so expect portions to be small.”

In no time, Hailey fixes us a rudimentary meal consisting mostly of canned pasta heated on a stovetop. Laura joins us at the kitchen table. She swallows the five mini raviolis on her plate before you can say Jack Robinson. She looks for some more, but the serving dish is empty.

“Hey Laura, I’m not very hungry,” I lie. “Want some of mine?”

She grins like it’s Christmas and I'm Santa Claus.

I give her half my plate. I may be down to a few raviolis, but it was worth it just to see her smile.

“I meant to ask you,” says Jim to his sister as he takes a bite, “What’s up with your eye?”

“Oh, this. It’s so cool! I got a Translucik eyeball implant. When I’m allowed to take the eyepatch off, it’ll allow me to see all the normal colors, plus infrared and ultraviolet. My senses will expand.”

“So you’re a transhumanist now?” says Jim, raising his fork.

“Yeah, so?”

“Did she put you up to it?”

“Who? Eiza? No!”

“And how are you paying for this tech?”

Hailey hastily folds her right arm over her chest. “I have the means. Don’t worry.”

Jim pulls her arm. The needle marks are plain to see. “Jesus! Don’t tell me you’re a vamperling too!”

Holy shit! I can’t believe Hailey is trading blood for tech. I’d never do something like that. Hailey yanks her arm free. “Stop judging me, Jim. I had enough of that from mom and dad.”

Eiza arrives just then. “What’s wrong, darl?” she asks Hailey. Her Aussie accent is so thick, I have to replay the words a few times in my head to understand her.

“Nothing,” replies Hailey with a huff.

“Of course something’s wrong,” Eiza insists.

“Jim doesn’t like me having a Translucik.”

“Not his body, now is it?”

“Damn right.”

Hailey scoots over to make room for Eiza on the bench. The rest of the meal is quiet. Laura discreetly gets up from the table and returns to read in a corner.

When we’re done eating, Eiza turns to Harry and I. “So, why have you guys come here again?”

“We discovered what BlackIce does,” says Harry.

“Makes the roads real slippery,” says Eiza. “Everybody knows that.”

“Har Har. I meant the arms manufacturer.”

“I knew that. What about them? They manufacture a bunch of weapons so assholes can kill other assholes. What else is there to know?”

“Oh, a lot,” replies Harry.

“And it’s all here.” I take out the device and place it on the table.

Hailey grabs it. “Holly Molly! It’s a T-2090. That’s military tech. Where did you get this?”

I look around to make sure that no one outside our small group is within hearing distance. I bring my chair closer to the kitchen table. “Huddle up.”

In hushed voices, I tell them about the hit and run, this thing happened and that other thing (though I leave that little part out because it’s embarrassing), right up until we got here. As I listen to myself, it starts to really sink in, what we’re doing. Holy Jesus!

“Holy Jesus,” blurts Eiza, echoing my thoughts.

Hailey examines the device. “And the incriminating evidence is stored in here?”

Even though I’m not certain, I answer a resolute, “Yes.”

“When did you decide to be a transhumanist, Hailey?” says Jim. “Peer pressure got to you?” He shifts restlessly in his chair. “You want to dismantle your body like a fucking food processor and exchange parts. Is that it?”

“Drop it!” says Harry. “Now is not the time.” Harry turns his attention back to Hailey. “Jim said you were a good hacker, a great one even.”

“She’s the best,” says Eiza. “Even the operator consults her, and he’s a mod …”

“Can you open it?” I ask. “We think it contains info that could end this stupid war—for good.”

“Pardon me if I’m skeptical about that claim,” says Hailey, “but sure, we’ll help. If Jim can stop being an ass, that is.” She glowers at her brother. “Eiza, what do you think?”

“You’ll need an F-13 reader for this thing. Do you know the password?”

“No,” I reply.

“Well, you’ll never get it open, then.”

# Chapter 21 – Ultimate Shutdown

Eiza’s comment shatters our hopes. Everyone talks at once.

“What do you mean, you can’t open it?” says Harry.

“Can’t you hack into this thing?” says Jim.

“Do we have the thingamajig Eiza mentioned?” I ask.

“All of you, stop!” says Hailey. “I can hack it. I think …”

Eiza’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“Let me get my stuff,” says Hailey.

She comes back a few minutes later. She places a portable computer and a mug of coffee with the caption *pro.gram.mer n. an organism that turns coffee into code* on the kitchen table. A holoscreen and virtual keyboard appear as soon as she boots up her computer. She places my device on a circular pad lit with a glowing blue rim. A worn asset tag reading Property of the U.S. Government is affixed to it. Her fingers move in a blur across the keys. She mumbles to herself as she works.

“Let’s get the OS version.

“Let’s check for known vulnerabilities.

“Nope. Nope. Haha! It does! Thank you black hat St. Jude for your insightful post. Now, let’s upload a teeny-weeny malware.”

The rim light turns red.

Hailey takes a sip of her hot beverage. “Hmm … Let’s fool the system into thinking it’s a normal update.”

Another flurry of commands. The rim light turns back blue.

“Good! Now let’s bypass the lockout threshold limit. Last, unleash Leviathan and perform a brute-force attack to crack the password.”

Hailey slurps her coffee, “Now, we wait …”

The screen fills with ever-changing combinations of characters.

“How long?” I ask.

Hailey tilts back in her chair and puts up her feet on the kitchen table. “Can’t say, really. Hours, days maybe.”

Jim sighs. “This is going to take forever.”

His negativity is grating on my nerves. With the tip of her finger, Hailey turns a virtual knob on her keyboard. “You can watch TV on my screen while we wait.”

The news turns on. A huge bell with a long crack is being hoisted onto a platform truck under the watchful eyes of Federal soldiers. “For the first time since 2003,” the anchorman says, “Liberty Bell is leaving the Independence National Historical Park. Its new home has been kept secret by the authorities. We spoke to Lt. Rebecca Lovett about this relocation.”

“This American artifact bears a timeless message,” she says. “Proclaim Liberty. The unpatriotic rebels don’t understand that true liberty can *only* come from a strong federal government. These anarchists have chosen Philadelphia has the next battlefield. We won’t let them damage or God forbid, steal the Liberty Bell.”

“Lt. Lovett,” says the anchorman, “people are claiming that the battle in Philly will be, and I quote, ‘the battle to end all battles.’ What are your thoughts on that?”

“We’re ready and waiting. We’re going to deliver a decisive blow to the Resistance. That’s for sure. Seasoned soldiers from all over the country are converging on the city as we speak.” She swats away a black fly buzzing around her face, but the pesky little bugger comes right back. “They’re equipped with best in class weaponry. The defeat of the rebel forces will be resounding.” Another swat. “This will be the last major battle of the Civil War.”

“Can I quote you on that, Lieutenant?”

“You sure can.”

“Now back to our coverage of the city’s evacuation. Citizens are fleeing the city in droves before the battle. Our news drone filmed the miles-long gridlock on Interstate 95 in the South Philadelphia area. Some citizens are simply abandoning their cars rather than risk being there when the bombing starts. With less than 48 hours to go, authorities believe only forty percent of the city has been evacuated so far.”

Jim changes channel.

“Hey, I was watching that!” I say.

“Don’t want to hear bullshit propaganda, is all,” says Jim.

What bug crawled up Jim’s butt? I wonder.

Hobble trots in the kitchen, a chew toy, well more like a chew sneaker, in his mouth. He drops it next to Laura and wags his tail. Laura looks up from her book. She smiles. She picks up the drool-covered running shoe and throws it to the other end of the room. The dog takes off like a rocket. The stroller fishtails behind him as he bolts forward, wheels squeaking. Even with his two hind legs missing, this dog has more energy than I’ll ever have. I grin. In no time, Hobble’s back with the sneaker, ready for another throw. Amused, Harry goes and joins them.

While they play fetch, I go and speak to Eiza. “So, how long have you and Hailey been together?”

“It will be our one year anniversary in five days.”

“It’s getting harder again being openly a lesbian, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. When Hailey posted a picture of us kissing on social media, she lost 200 points. It turned her into a Zer. That’s when we decided to come here.”

“It takes courage to display your love publicly.”

“It does. But then again, Hailey is full of courage.” Eiza’s eyes shimmer with admiration as she glances at her girlfriend.

“It must be hard for you too.”

“Er. Yes. What are you referring to?”

“Being the daughter of an infamous general.”

I push back my chair. “You know?”

“Of course we do. The operator knows everything. Don’t worry. It’s chill.”

“Yeah, it does suck. I would rather have been the daughter of a nobody.”

“Hailey and I were wondering, is Harry your boyfriend?”

I blush.

“Ha ha! You like him, but it’s not official. Am I right?”

I smile. “You’re exactly right.” I shift on my chair. “I just don’t know for sure. A good friend of mine died a few days ago, and it’s still pretty messed up in my head.”

“Don’t rush it. If he’s the right one for you, you’ll know.”

“When did you know for Hailey?”

“The sun was setting. We were riding on my motorcycle on some small backcountry road, when she stood up on the rear foot pegs, grabbed hold of my shoulders and started belting shamelessly a lewd song about a drunken sailor and a mermaid.” Eiza chuckles at the memory. “That’s when I knew that she was the one for me.”

“Good story.”

I glance at Harry who’s still playing with Laura and Hobble, and I wonder.

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An hour goes by, then another. Hailey frequently checks on the status. Eiza has gone to sit next to her. She’s leaning her head on Hailey’s shoulder, clearly content with that simple physical connection. After a while, Laura comes to see us, yawning. I’m just about to ask about sleeping accommodations when there’s a beep!

Hailey stands up, raises her fist high in the air and blurts, “Bam! I’m in.” Her face lights up into a huge grin.

The holoscreen is now displaying a progress bar with the words, “New device found. Connecting …”

Eiza high-fives Hailey.

I’m getting so excited I can barely contain myself. “So, what’s in there?”

“Give me a sec. I’ll open the directory.” A text appears, accompanied by numerous high-resolution 3D photos.

We all hunch over Hailey’s screen to read what it says.

“Dear Jacob,

“Andrew Scott, congressman for Pennsylvania, has been caught having an illicit affair with a local woman as documented by the evidence herein. I believe we could blackmail the congressman into promoting the Social Credit Rights Act, which, as you know, would …”

“Fuck. This is it? This is it?” Jim looks at me, furious. “We risked our lives for an adultery scandal?” Jim jabs my shoulder.

My face becomes red with anger. I snatch his wrist. “Don’t ever punch me like that again.” I let it go with a jerk.

“Back off, Jim! Teegan couldn’t have known,” says Harry. I can tell he’s disappointed—it’s the way his eyebrows furrow that gives it away. That feels like a punch in the gut; Jim’s jab was nothing in comparison.

Jim bangs his fist on the table. “Fuck, I can’t believe I fell for your baloney.”

I pace the room with restless footsteps. It doesn’t add up. The person who was escaping with the device said it contained a petabyte of data. BlackIce sent a bounty hunter, nano-mosquitoes, and choppers after us. This can’t just be about an illicit affair.

“Hailey, are you sure there’s nothing else in there?” I ask.

She examines the folder again. It contains exactly one text item, the one we just read, and eight pictures of the congressman in the company of a woman who I presume is his mistress. The pictures were taken at restaurants, concert halls, and romantic places.

“Nope. That’s it.”

“Are you dead certain?” asks Jim.

“Of course, I am, Jim. *I’m* the person experts go to for help.”

“I don’t know about you,” says Harry, “but it’s been a grueling day, and I’m exhausted. I suggest we hit the sack and figure out what to do in the morning.”

I try to blink away the tears of disappointment welling in my eyes. “Makes sense,” I offer.

“Fine,” says Jim.

“We’ve got hot showers near the dorm,” says Eiza. “They’re really nice.”

I grab my backpack and get up. Harry picks up Laura. We follow Eiza in single file to the dorm area. It’s a huge room, which has been cleared out of whatever equipment used to be there. Hammocks with spreader bars hang from the ceiling pipes. Each one has a green footlocker underneath. Of all the hammocks, only a quarter seem occupied. A few occupants are playing video games or reading or just snoring to their heart’s content.

Hailey assigns each of us a hammock. She then points at the far end of the room. “At the end of that passage, you’ll find gender-neutral showers. If you’re prudish or have some hang-ups about that, you’ll have to wait until everybody’s done.”

Hailey wraps her arm around Eiza’s waist. “We’re off. Night, night. See you in the morning.”

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I drop my backpack next to my hammock and head straight for the showers. Each stall has low wooden walls and a semi-transparent pink plastic curtain separating it from its neighbor. I can see the silhouette of a man showering two stalls down. Hmm. Not much privacy here. A sign on the back wall says: To Conserve Resources, Showers Must Be Under 5 Minutes. Well, the hell with that. After the day I just had, I deserve a long, hot one.

I enter the stall and strip off all my clothes. Seeing how torn and dirty and miserable they are, I just drop them in a heap on the floor. I have a brief thought for my silk bathrobe sitting all lonely in my closet back in Concord, wondering where its owner disappeared to. I try to unfasten my silver necklace, but then I remember how fiddly the latch is and give up—it won’t rust anyway.

I look at myself naked in the mirror. I lost weight as well. I have bags under my eyes. I turn my body slightly sideways and spot a nasty bruise on my outer thigh; I don’t even remember hurting myself there. Give me another three days of this regimen, and I’ll be indistinguishable from the homeless living in Sector NH-22.

I lick my chapped lips and attempt a smile at the scrawny girl reflected in the mirror. I take note of my tattoo for the first time in days: Courage is grace under pressure. Well, I’m running out of courage or grace or both.

I turn the knob and step into the shower. At least, the water is hot. I can’t believe how good it feels running along my shoulders and down my back. I scrub the mud, blood, and soot. If only it would scour the angst, pain, and anguish too. I grab the shampoo bottle and lather my hair.

The lights flicker before going off. The water flow stops. An emergency light comes on.

A male voice booms from another stall. “Hey! What’s going on?”

A voice crackles on the intercom a moment later. “Eiza, the generator is acting up again. Mind having a look?”

“Dammit!” I kick the stall. And I thought this day couldn’t become any shittier. With my hands, I wring out as much of the remaining lather as I can before stomping out of the stall. Grumpy, I get half-dressed and plod back to the dorm in near darkness. I’m halfway there when, of course, the lights turn back on. Everyone stares at me. I’ve got shampoo suds in my hair, a damp t-shirt which I’ve only just realized is inside out, and no pants, because I couldn’t be bothered to put them back on.

I hate my life.

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I fling myself on the hammock. After a while, the ceiling lights dim automatically. Laura is reading her book with her flashlight. Jim is buried under his blanket; I can only see a tuft of his black hair sticking out. As for Harry, he’s lying in his hammock, gazing at the ceiling. I think of my budding relationship with him. He’s brave, courageous, and determined. He’s also handsome. If Nai Nai saw us, she would say that we’re bound by the Red String of Fate tied around the ankles of those who are destined to be together. Who was the deity in charge of tying the cord again? Oh, I’m too tired to remember.

Now that we found that the device is a red herring, will we be parting ways? This scares me. I don’t want to end up alone. My thoughts drift to Father. I can visualize him pacing in his small cell, doing nothing all day. That must drive him mad. He’s been working twelve-hour days for as long as I remember. My stomach growls louder than ever. I could go for one of Ye Ye’s gargantuan breakfast right now—slightly sweet sesame pancakes, fried dough, pan-fried dumplings, là jiàng noodle soup …

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I toss and turn for hours. Fed up, I get up and go see Hailey. She’s snoring like she’s sawing a tree.

“Hailey! Psst! Hailey!”

She ignores me and rolls to the other side of the hammock.

“I have something to ask you.”

She finally opens one eye. When she recognizes me, she pulls her blanket over her head and mumbles, “There’s no service at the number you’ve dialed.”

“It’s important. I need to borrow your equipment until the morning.”

She props herself on an elbow.

“Uh? What for? What time is it anyway?”

“I’m thinking that maybe, just maybe, I’ll find something we missed earlier. As for your second question, it’s three in the morning.”

She waves her hand. “Fine, take it. It’s over there. Listen, Teegan, I like you, but should you ever wake me up again in the middle of the night, I’ll plaster the most embarrassing pictures of you ever taken on the internet. Got it?”

I swallow hard and back away. I recall Sophia’s pool party and shudder—my wardrobe malfunction was a topic of conversation for weeks.

I return to the kitchen and set up the computer. It’s quiet at this time of night. Only the humming of the fridge disturbs the silence.

I close my eyes and replay in my mind the hit and run accident just in case I missed something. I distinctively remember her saying, “I’m sorry it had to be you.” She *knew* she was putting my life in danger. Her last words were, “Many, many people sacrificed their lives to get this information. It has the power to stop the war.” She understood that she was holding on to something of great importance. Had she stolen the data herself?

Using the sticky-notes pad and red pen I found on the kitchen counter, I doodle the nine red and white strips that appeared briefly on her arm. After a while, I open the 3D images of the adulterous couple, and spin one idly, looking for some sort of clue.

A young girl startles me. It takes me a second to realize that it’s Laura in her PJs. She comes and sits next to me. Taking my pen she writes, “Can’t sleep?”

“No.”

She draws a sad emoji on the paper.

“You can’t sleep either?” I ask.

“No. Bad dreams,” she writes.

“Oh Laura, I’m so sorry I got you involved in this mess.”

“I’m not,” she scribbles.

I’m surprised. No, I’m stunned. She sees my perplexed look and writes some more.

“Better this than being stuck alone in Concord with no parents or friends …”

Wow! I didn’t expect that, but I get what she’s saying—I’d rather be part of a dangerous adventure than feel abandoned or worse, useless. I hug Laura. What’s great about hugs is that you can’t give one without getting one in return.

One by one, she opens the eight images. Luminous, they float above the table like they told a graphic novel story. Laura examines them attentively. After a while, she selects the shopping mall image. The couple is on an escalator holding hands. She draws my attention to a pawnshop in the background. An assortment of goods—trumpet, bicycle, vintage computer terminal, baseball mitt, and more—is lined up in the display window.

“That’s just a pawnshop.”

With a movement of her two hands, Laura scales the image much bigger before zooming in on the terminal.

I stare at it, confused. “What’s there to see?”

Laura rolls her eyes. With her pinky, she indicates the terminal.

A caret blinks next to the letters “PWD:” Oh my God, the terminal in the picture is interactive! I tap on it. The virtual keyboard activates.

I look at Laura. “But what’s the password?”

She shakes her head. BlackIce is the first word that comes to mind. I enter it and press return. A retro video game death jingle plays. The terminal updates with Password Incorrect. Two more tries.

Shit! I rack my brain, wondering what else it could be. As I’m thinking, Laura nudges me. With the pen, she points at my doodle with a questioning look.

“Oh, that. The girl who owned the device had this nanotat on her forearm. I think it was meant to be turned off, but it blinked on and off a few times, probably because of her accident.”

Laura looks at me excitedly. She writes, “It’s the Sons of Liberty flag.”

“The what?”

“American history,” scribbles Laura. “Secret society. Formed to protect the rights of colonists.”

“Wow! How do you know that?”

“Books ☺” she writes.

I have a hunch this is it. I type Sons of Liberty. The depressing jingle plays again.

Laura moves the virtual keyboard in front of her. She’s about to type something, when I say, “Wait! There’s just one try left. What if you have it wrong?”

Laura shrugs her shoulders as if saying, what do we have to lose? She types Sons and Daughters of Liberty.

The 3D images turn to pixelated dust. Damn it! That was the last try. It might even have wiped out the content of the storage device. I tilt my head back and groan out of frustration.

Laura pokes my shoulder a few times before I react. I glance at her—she’s grinning like a Cheshire cat. My eyes widen in surprise. A folder marked Secret and Confidential has appeared. I expand it with a tap. Holy Molly! Hundreds of semitransparent squares—each representing a document, image, blueprint, or video—appear over multiple layers.

“Oh my God, Laura, we hit the mother lode! You did it!” We exchange a fist bump.

There are so many of them, I don’t where to start. I pick one randomly and read. It’s a bank transfer notice from BlackIce to America for Americans. Holy shit! AFA is a right-wing extremist group. They’re financing them? I jot this down. I decide one file equals one sticky note. I write the document’s date on top. Once I’m done, I stick it on the table.

Another one. A letter of apology this time for the assault rifles malfunction in the Battle of Chicago. Blackice says it will open an investigation into the manufacturing process. They will replace all defective weapons for free under their no-questions-asked policy. They also mention a wire transfer to the general’s offshore bank account to thank him for his ongoing support.

Laura nudges me. She writes, “Zzz.”

“All right.” I kiss her on the forehead. “Good night, Lolo. Thanks again for your help.”

She trots off.

The next memo is dated October 2036. BlackIce has become the biggest arms manufacturer in America. “To thank our employees and their families for their continued commitment to excellence,” the memo reads, “each manufacturing facility will be organizing a family picnic …”

I need tea. This is going to be a long night. I get up and put the kettle on.

Another memo. This one wants to reassure a high ranking Blackice director that no one will notice that the NewDawn military technology sold to the Feds is almost identical to the SteadFast brand sold to the Resistance. Yeah, figures! There are selling arms to both sides. I note down that they both support NetField, a wireless communication technology invented by BlackIce that piggybacks on existing communication channels. When I finish reading the lengthy memo, I scribble down wireless backdoor access to weapons, exosuits, drones, and tanks.

The kettle is whistling. I slog to the kitchen and prepare a large teapot. I come back with a steaming cup of Oolong tea.

“Dear, Jim,” reads the next one. “I went through the employee files you sent last week. I agree with all of your recommendations except one—Madison Davis.” Holy Shit! Is that the same Madison who’s in my class? No, that can’t be. She’s sixteen-years-old, like me. Hmm. But she’s a mod. This deserves a sticky note. I jot down some thoughts. She does miss school often. She always has been vague about the reasons why only hinting that she needs to help her dad with his business. I take a sip and continue reading. “She is not ready to be promoted to Battle Master. She has the wits and the killer instinct, but not the discipline. The fact that her father is a high-ranking member of our organization should not impair our judgment.”

What on Earth is a Battle Master? I search for all documents containing these words. It returns thirty-four files. As I read them, I carefully note my findings.

Battle Masters are specialists trained by BlackIce. Given how complex their task is, only mods have been able to do the job so far. Their mandate is to influence battles fought on U.S. soil so that none of the parties ever get the upper hand. Using the NetField technology, Battle Masters can remotely alter a weapon’s firing rate, make it jam, or shut it off completely, as well as slow down an exosuit, or stop a tank in its tracks. I write down, ‘jamming only works if done from a command center.’

The more I learn, the more I’m horrified—BlackIce’s hidden agenda is to have a never-ending war. This organization sickens me. They are selling death to fuel their greed. I curl my hand into a fist. I have an urge to break something, anything. Not wanting to wake anyone up, I refrain from pounding the table with my fist, but it’s hard.

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It’s dawn. Through the casements, I see the sky lit in pinkish colors. The teapot is empty. I can barely keep my eyes open. I count my sticky notes. I have a 127 in total, all sorted by date. I know enough. My mind is made up. Now, it’s time to tell the others and let them make their own choices.

I go and wake everyone, even Hailey. Everyone is asking for an explanation, but I just tell them to get dressed and meet me in the kitchen.

Jim picks up one of my sticky note from the table. “What’s with all these?” he asks.

I tap his wrist. “Put that back. I put them there for a reason.”

“Harry,” I say. “I’ll have some of your coffee if you don’t mind.”

“But you never drink coffee.”

“I do today.”

I would have liked to have more energy for this momentous event, but I don’t. It’s with my elbows on the table, and my head resting in my hands that I start talking.

“Laura and I have managed to find the secret files hidden inside the device.”

“No way!” says Hailey.

“We did. There are hundreds of files in there.

“I haven’t had time to read everything, but I was able to get the broad picture. What I found is … dunno if there’s a right word for it … it makes everything feel cold … and calculated.”

I give them the highlights of my investigation. As I’m talking, I watch Harry’s emotions flash across his face: surprise, indignation, horror, and finally anger.

“BlackIce has been manipulating the war the whole time!” says Harry, pounding his fist in his palm. “Both sides. Puppets! My oldest friend, Jerome, died because his SteadFast assault rifle jammed.”

Jim exhales sharply, gets up on his crutches and starts pacing. “These greedy mother-…”

Harry nods towards Laura. “Your language, Jim.”

“So many people have died on both sides … for nothing,” says Hailey. “The war was rigged from the start.”

“If the country hadn’t been so divided in the first place,” says Eiza, “BlackIce would have never succeeded in spurring a Civil War. Even before they got involved, Texas was already on the brink of seceding; BlackIce’s interventions were just the straw that broke the camel’s back. The …”

“None of that,” interrupts Jim “excuses BlackIce’s underhanded actions.”

“That’s not where I was heading. I was just …”

“Blackice allowed our country to burn so they could profit from it,” continues Jim.

“There! You did it again.”

“Did what?”

“Are you daft? You keep interrupting me.”

“Guys, guys … Quiet! I’m not done.

“The more recent files mention the big battle in Philadelphia. It’s in BlackIce’s financial interest for the war not to end. They will be deploying a command center and a battle master to ensure nobody wins. One of their documents lists three suitable locations, which are sufficiently hidden, yet close enough to the battle’s epicenter: an abandoned botanical garden, a Middle-Grade school, and on the roof of a high rise.”

“Shit!” says Jim. “I forgot about tomorrow’s battle. With the city’s evacuation incomplete, it’s going to be a massacre.”

“We might be able to do something,” I say. “Using their NetField technology, we could jam the weapons on both sides. It won’t stop all of the fighting, but most of it.”

“Hailey,” asks Jim, “can we hack BlackIce weapons from your computer?”

“No. From what Teegan said earlier, you need to do it from a specialized BlackIce computer and be fairly close to the battlefield. It’s doable, but only from the command center.”

“Darn.”

Hobble trots into the room and glances around, probably feeling that he’s missing out on something.

“Let’s infiltrate the command center then,” says Harry. “Let’s teach these battle masters a lesson!”

“The offensive is tomorrow,” says Jim. “That doesn’t leave us much time to prepare.”

“You guys are mental!” says Eiza. “Totally nuts. You’re talking about entering a war zone—the biggest one in recent U.S. history—infiltrating a command center manned by BlackIce mercenaries and commandeering it.”

“Yeah, that pretty much sums it up,” replies Harry.

Eiza creases her brow. “This is a suicide mission. You know that?”

She turns to Hailey. “You’re not going to let them do this.”

Tears are welling in Laura’s eyes. She clenches her hands into fists. I shouldn’t have woken her for this. What was I thinking? She’s too young for these kinds of discussions. Heck, I’m too young. And now, she’s all stressed out again.

Hailey notices too. “Hey, Laura. Hobble hasn’t had his walk this morning. Would you mind going with him?” She taps her thigh. “Hobble, come here, boy.”

Laura ignores Hailey and stomps out of the room. Harry runs after her. “Laura, wait!”

“Listen, guys,” I say. “Eiza’s right. This plan is advanced stupid.”

Eiza nods.

“But I have to do it.”

“What?” blurts Eiza. “But you just said yourself that it was a stupid plan.”

“I did, but it’s the only plan we have. I cannot, in good conscience, not act. That’s not who I am or who I want to be. For me, this war happened because of millions of tiny decisions made by millions of people who decided not to bother, not to listen, and not make their voices heard. There’s a small chance we *will* succeed, and if we do, imagine how many lives we can save—civilians, but also military. That makes it worthwhile for me. The more I think about it, the more I think it’s the right thing to do.

“I hate to admit it,” says Eiza, “but I agree, this plan could reduce the number of casualties.”

Hailey wraps her arms around Eiza. “Babe, don’t hate me for this, but could you lend them your motorcycle?”

“You mean my vintage Harley that I lovingly restored over the last year after visiting countless parts recyclers?”

Hailey kisses the nape of her neck. “Yup. That one.”

Eiza sighs. “Don’t have much of a choice, now do I?”

Hailey kisses her again. “It’s for a good cause.”

Eiza sighs. “I know. Sure. But you owe me.”

Jim looks at his cast, chewing his lip. Hailey looks at him like a hawkish mom. “Jim Malicorne, don’t even think about going. You’re staying right here. You’re not fit to go, and we need someone to take care of Laura.”

“What if Teegan and Harry need something blown up or a lock picked?”

Harry walks up to his friend. “I’ll be more difficult without you, that’s for sure, but we’ll manage.”

Jim exhales sharply. He throws his crutches. They fall with a clank to the floor. ”If it wasn’t for that stupid cyber dog …”

Harry picks up the crutches and leans them against the kitchen table. “Easy, Jim. We’ll have more adventures together. I promise.”

“But we’ve been partners in crime since, well … forever. This sucks.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” says Hailey, “but if this audacious plan is to have any chance of success, I’ve got to get to work. I’ll see you guys bright and early tomorrow morning.”

# Chapter 22 – Goodbyes

The next morning, we’re assembled outside the coal plant. It’s nippy. I zip my jacket all the way up and pull my head down into the collar.

Hailey has bags under her eyes—she clearly didn’t sleep much. She smoothes down an unruly cowlick that rests atop her brunette hair.

To my surprise, Zari’s son, Jasen, arrives. Sasha is trotting alongside. Her leg has been repaired—it’s a different color from the others.

Jim waves a crutch at the cyber dog. “Whoa! What is *she* doing here?”

I wave at Jasen. He walks up to me as if I was the group leader.

In a soft voice, he says, “I think Sasha should come with you. She can help.”

I give Hailey a quizzical look. “You told Zari about our plans?”

“She can be trusted.”

I turn my attention back to Jasen. “Isn’t Sasha a gift from your father?”

“She is. But my father died two years ago. He was in the Army Corps of Engineers. My mom and I, we want this dumb war to stop. For good.” The boy pauses before adding, “Sasha is quite advanced you know. She can camouflage—that sucks up the battery, so don’t use it too often—she can follow, attack, guard, and self-destroy.” He looks at me with puppy eyes. “Please don’t have her self-destroy.”

“Thanks, but we’re going by motorcycle and she …”

“48 miles per hour,” interrupts Jasen. “That’s how fast she can go. Sure, she’ll slow you down a little, but she’s well worth it.”

“Harry, what do you think?”

“I think we need all the help we can get.”

The boy smiles. He hands me a list of verbal commands written on a torn piece of paper. He turns to Sasha, “Additional masters: Teegan and Harry.” The cyber dog barks twice. “Oh, before I forget: one bark is no, two barks is yes.”

“Now, it’s my turn,” says Hailey. “I have a few things for you too.”

“This modified watch has a built-in GPS. I have programmed the coordinates of the potential command center locations: the botanical garden, the Middle-Grade school, and the high-rise. It will help you locate them.

She hands me the watch.

“Okay. I did this next thing quickly.” She gives me a small object the size of a small flashlight. “Press the button, and it’ll jam any BlackIce weapon within ten yards. It will only work once, so use it wisely.”

“Last, I made a copy of the device’s content on a secure server. Just in case.”

Eiza asks us, “Do any of you know how to drive a motorcycle?”

I point sideways to Harry. I’m not driving. No way. Just the thought gives me hives.

Eiza throws the key to Harry, who catches it.

“Listen up. Each helmet is equipped with a headset. You can give commands to Sasha through the mouthpiece. If you hear a beep, it means it detected a police radar nearby. Lastly, I packed a little something for you guys in the saddlebag. It’s for the road.”

“Food. Yeah!” I say.

Eiza walks up to me. She feels the flimsy fabric of my jacket with her hand. “This won’t do at all.” She takes off her leather jacket and hands it to me. It’s a classic motorcycle jacket—double-breasted, with an asymmetric front zipper.

“This is an expensive coat. Are you sure you want to lend it to me? Considering my life-threatening lifestyle, it might come back damaged.”

“Better the coat than you.”

I put the coat on. Harry straightens my collar. “Looks like little miss badass is back in action.”

I force a laugh. With our imminent departure, I’m getting anxious. Truth be told, I’m not feeling badass at all. We’re leaving for a battle zone, and we might not come back. That’s the gist of it. I have a horrifying thought—what if I live and Harry dies? I swat the thought away. We’ll both come back. We have to. I cross my fingers behind my back. If I could cross my toes, I’d do that too.

Harry takes Laura by the shoulders. “Are you okay to stay with Jim and Hailey?”

She nods.

“Are you sure you won’t speak to me, Lolo? I would very much like it if you spoke to me.” Lolo’s eyes become moist. She throws her arms around Harry’s neck but doesn’t peep a word.

Harry doesn't insist. “As soon as we’re done, I’ll come back and get you. We’ll go somewhere quiet and spend time together. I promise.”

Lolo puts out her pinkie. Harry entwines his little finger with hers.

“Jim?”

“Yeah?”

“Take good care of Lolo, will you?”

“That’s the plan.”

It’s my turn to hug Laura. “You’re the brightest and bravest person I’ve ever met. I’ll come back with Harry. I want you to stay in my life. If I had a little sister, I’d want it to be you.” I take off my necklace and put it around her neck. I try to fasten the clasp, but I’m emotional as hell, and I fumble—I can’t bear to let Laura go. She’s been my source of joy and sanity these past few days, but on the other hand, she mustn’t go through any more traumatic events. It’s best if she stays in a safe place, and Jim loves her like a brother. My eyes tearing up, the necklace finally fastened, I put on my best fake smile and wave at Laura like a starlet in a soap opera commercial. Laura waves back. Jim takes her hand and they head back. Harry’s gaze follows his sister until she’s inside. He’s worried. I’ll need to reassure him.

Hailey puts her arm around her girlfriend’s shoulder and they depart as well. Eiza takes a last glance at her motorcycle; she looks like an anxious parent dropping off their kid for their first day of kindergarten.

I go behind Harry and wrap my arms around his waist. “Don’t worry about Laura. This kid has more grit than many adults I know.”

“She’s safer here than with us, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah, I’m a real shit magnet,” I say.

“It’s just us now. It feels strange.”

“It does, but it’ll allow us to get to know each other a bit better,” I say, tightening my arms around him.

“I’d like that,” says Harry.

He kicks the bike into gear, and we’re off, Sasha bounding beside us. I tighten my embrace, rest my head on his shoulder, and smile to myself.

He’s attracted to me.

# Chapter 23 – On the Road Again

It doesn’t take long before we’re on a county road heading west with New Jersey’s countryside rolling past us. I gaze at the gentle hills decked out in shades of light and dark green, farms surrounded by white picket fences, barns with gable roofs, and houses with the occasional tire swing hanging from a branch. The war seemed to have spared this part of the country, and I’m glad.

“How long to Philly?” I ask.

“Four hours, give or take.”

“That’s not so bad.”

For a moment, my worries disappear. I forget that we’re heading into a battle zone with a half-baked plan that I pulled out of my ass. But that respite doesn’t last long—thoughts of bombs and death and Armageddon skitter back into my mind like cockroaches.

I need to get my mind off things. “Tell me a joke.”

“Okay. Hmm. What do you call a funny mountain?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hill-arious.”

“I meant a funny joke.”

“That’s all I got.”

“How about you?” says Harry. “Know any good ones?”

“No. I forget jokes as soon as I hear them.”

After a while, I ask, “Harry, are you afraid?”

“Me? No. I’m not afraid …”

“Oh …”

“I’m petrified.”

I lean closer to him. “Oh good. I mean, it’s not good that you’re petrified, but I’m happy that I’m not alone feeling that way.”

We stay quiet. The road is uneventful, but the sky is darkening.

“I think it’s going to rain,” I say.

“Not much we can do about that.”

I was right. Rain starts to pitter-patter on my helmet. My visor becomes foggy. In no time, the road gets covered in big puddles of water. Harry slows down a little. The rain gets heavier. The wind picks up, bending the naked branches and swaying the evergreens. With the lashing rain, it’s hard to see more than twenty yards ahead of us.

I holler into the mouthpiece, “We need to find cover.”

“As soon as we find shelter.”

We finally reach an overpass. Harry slows down and parks on the shoulder. Sasha stops beside us. I let out a sigh of relief suddenly realizing how tense I’ve been since the rain started. We remove our helmets. I shake my hair loose and push several strands back in place.

“Hungry?” asks Harry.

I knock my helmet against his, “I’m a ravenous black hole, remember?”

Harry opens the saddlebag. From it, he pulls out a wicker basket and opens the lid. I peek inside—there’s a thermos, two sandwiches, and a small tub of strawberries. Harry yanks the goblet from the top of the thermos and pours me a cup.

At first smell, I know its Oolong tea. “Eiza’s so thoughtful. Want some?”

“I’m good.”

We lean against a bridge column and eat our sandwiches. I’m so grateful that someone took the time to prepare a lunch for me.

Sasha stares at Harry’s lunch.

“Is it just me,” I ask, “or does Sasha look like she wants a bite of your sandwich?”

“I noticed. Why would a programmer bother to code this behavior? I mean, a cyber dog is obviously never hungry.”

“To make them more likable, I guess.”

Curious about how far the creator went in mimicking a real dog, I stroke the dog’s metallic head. It lets out a happy yap.

“Hmm … who would’ve thought? They really thought of everything.”

The worst of the downpour has passed. A few self-driving cars pass us by. A kid waves at us with a big smile. Harry waves back with just as much enthusiasm. He’s so sweet.

I take a sip of tea, savoring the flavor. I close my eyes, remembering a tea vendor in Shanghai. He was planted on a sidewalk teeming with pedestrians, holding out a cup of his wares in each hand. As I walked by, he winked at me and told me it was the best tea in all of China. His face was wrinkled like a dried snakeskin, but he had a gentle smile. I declined politely. I should have tasted it. Maybe it *was* the best tea in all of China, and I missed out.

His sandwich finished, Harry picks a strawberry from the tub and dangles it in front of my mouth. I’m about to bite into it, when he pulls it away. A moment later, he suspends the strawberry again inches from my lips. As I tilt my head to bite it, I can tell by the twinkle in his eye that he plans to trick me again. I open my mouth wide letting him think that I will be fooled, but as he yanks it away, I grab his wrist and hold it in place while I take a big bite. I lock eyes with him as I chew the juicy berry. His grin widens. He wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me closer. His lips are getting dangerously close to mine. I feel a stirring inside my chest. I shut my eyes. Will this be our first kiss? Is he going to use his tongue? What do I do with my tongue?

A vehicle zips by. Splash.

I open my eyes. A semi truck is speeding away. If I was wet before, now I’m drenched! I spit and wipe the dirty rainwater from my mouth with the hem of my sleeve. The mood is killed. My clothes stick to my skin. My shoes are waterlogged. I glance at Harry. For a second, I think he might ignore what just happened and continue with his most excellent initiative, but no. Ah, come on! It was just water for Pete’s sake. He was off to such a great start with that strawberry. I would have liked for our first kiss to be under a bridge as it rained just before we were off to save the world.

I sigh. It would have been so memorable.

Harry starts packing. “No good standing here. Better get going.”

And we’re on the road again. Was that the name of a song? I don’t remember.

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As we reach the top of a hill, I see Philadelphia’s skyline.

By the side of the road, a temporary billboard has been put up by the Resistance that shouts in red letters Make Your Country Safe Again! Join the Resistance. Ironically, the sign is riddled with bullet holes.

More and more cars drive in our direction. Given how fast they’re going, the drivers must have disabled driving-assistance. Fighter jets soar above us leaving white trails behind. Moments later, we pass a Federal military convoy consisting of five armored vehicles.

A sign reads Tacony–Palmyra Bridge. It’s a steel arch bridge that looks three-quarter miles long. Gusty winds ruffle the murky water below. A concrete barrier divides the three vehicular lanes; there are two eastbound and one westbound.

“We’re almost there,” says Harry. “Philadelphia is on the other side of the Delaware River.”

As we near the entrance of the bridge, Harry slows down. A holographic sign the size of a garage door glimmers in front of us with the words CITYWIDE LOCKDOWN IN EFFECT. The red signals mounted on the overhead gantry indicate that the westbound lane is closed to traffic. Not only that, the Feds placed anti-tank obstacles made up of metal angle beams.

“There’s no way we can get through,” I say.

“Yeah. We’ll have to go in via the outbound lane.”

“That won’t be easy either. Did you see that massive car pileup?”

I point toward the 18-wheeler that has flipped over, spilling its content. Wrecked or abandoned cars dot the bridge behind it. Blocked by the truck, people have been forced to abandon their vehicle and cross the bridge on foot. A news drone flies above filming the accident. I don’t want our cyber dog caught on camera; that would make us look suspect.

“Sasha,” I order, “Activate camouflage.” In seconds, the dog disappears from view.

Harry does a U-turn and reenters the bridge via the eastbound lane.

“Slow down, Harry. They’re families with kids, here.”

Harry reduces his speed to that of a slow jog.

It’s drizzling more heavily now, and I turn up my coat collar. Curious, I examine the flow of civilians leaving the city. A few of them have self-flying umbrellas floating above them as they walk. My favorite one has a pink watermelon on it.

A picture album lies open in the middle of the road. Every time a wind gust blows, pages flip and photographs fly off twirling like autumn leaves. It must be so hard to leave everything behind and not know if any of it will be there when you come back.

A middle-aged man is pushing a safe on a dolly. He has a rifle resting on top. He glances left and right worried that someone will attempt to steal it.

A man and a woman in their thirties are each pushing a grocery cart filled to the brim with their worldly belongings. They share a similar physique. Brother and sister maybe?

Some have motorized luggage following them like obedient dogs; others are riding on top of them.

A family approaches. The young woman is holding her child in her arm. The daughter—a pink bow in her hair—is holding a travel cage with a meowing cat inside. The father, heaving and panting, is dragging a chest-sized rolling luggage. Harry pulls over next to the man. When I see him remove his helmet, I take mine off as well.

“As the fighting started?” asks Harry.

“There’s been sporadic fighting all over the city. Nothing big. Nothing like what’s coming. But that means a lot of road closures and areas to avoid.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, why are you guys still here?” I say.

“Are you kidding me? The city has been gridlocked for days. It only got a bit better this morning, and that’s when we decided to leave. And then, there was that multi-vehicle accident on the bridge.” He waves his hand in the direction of the truck.

“It’s been hell, really,” says the mom.

“Honey, can you hold him for me?”

The woman hands the toddler to her spouse. She opens her purse and pulls out a scarf. She wraps it snuggly around the tot’s neck before taking him back from him. Seeing the plight of the civilians is heartbreaking.

“What about you guys,” says the mom. “Why are you here?”

“My aunt has refused to leave her home,” I lie. “We decided to go and pick her up.”

“Whether she wants to or not,” adds Harry. I’m impressed. He’s a good liar too.

“Well, you need to hurry, then. On the news, the Feds announced that they will open the drawbridge to prevent Resistance troops from entering via Palmyra.”

“Anything else I should know before going in?” says Harry.

“Beware of the Fivers. If you think regular soldiers are assholes, they are worst.”

“What’s a Fiver?” asks Harry.

“A Fiver? The Feds cobbled together a new program to entice new recruits into the army. The newcomers agree to a five-year commitment in exchange for an end-of-term bonus, hence the name. The catch is, during your stint, there’s no way out other than in a body bag.”

“Yeah. There are many bad seeds in there,” I say. “Recruiters are desperate to fill up the ranks, so they ask no questions when you join. My father told me a lot of them have dodgy pasts and that they’re not to be trusted.”

“Sounds like lovely people,” says Harry.

“Who do you think is going to win the battle?” I ask.

“Oh, I know the answer to that one. No one. That’s who. The war makes losers of us all.”

“That’s so true,” I say.

“Whose side are you on?” asks Harry.

“I’m not dumb enough to answer *that* question. It’s not something you share with strangers. Half the country is siding with the Resistance and the other with the Feds. And both sides stubbornly believe they’re right. The country hasn’t been this torn since 2018.”

“If you really want to know,” interjects the woman, “like many here, we’re on nobody’s side, because nobody’s on our side.”

An alarm rings in the distance. Everyone looks around panicked. A sign on the gantry lights up: Attention—Drawbridge Opening. A piercing metallic screech cuts through the air followed by a clank.

“Shit! Harry, we must hurry!”

“I know. I know.”

“Godspeed,” says the father. “I hope you find your aunt okay.”

We put our helmets back on. Harry accelerates but soon has to slow down again to manoeuver around the flipped truck. The sea of abandoned cars behind it is like an obstacle course. We approach the lip of the bridge. The rotating span is already at a 30-degree angle. I can’t see how wide the gap is.

“What about Sasha?”

“Who cares? What matters is getting across the bridge!”

This is fucking insane. We’ve done crazy shit before, but this is next level. I’ve fallen in a river once before and barely survived. The span is sixty feet above the river. That’s high enough to kill us if we fall. Harry must have twisted the throttle fully open because we jump forward. I push my chest against his back.

Before I know it, we’re airborne.

I scream like a teen on a rollercoaster ride. I’m not sure whether to close or open my eyes so I end up squinting. The motorcycle lands with a thwack on the other side. We skid and lose control. We’re heading straight for guardrail. We’re going to splatter against it like bugs on a windshield! Harry hits the brakes. The rear wheel slides sideways along the wet asphalt. Easing off the throttle, Harry throws out his leg to keep his balance and leans the bike in the direction of the skid. He manages to straighten up the bike and regain control. The lane up ahead is clear.

“Holy Jesus, Harry! That was close. Too close!”

“Did Sasha make the jump?” he asks.

This guy has nerves of steel. How can he be asking about Sasha after pulling a stunt like that? That jump was like thirty feet long. I mean I almost peed my pants.

“So?”

I look over my shoulder. She’s there all right. She gives me a stare like she knew how dangerous out stunt was. Man, she’s way too creepy.

“She made it,” I yell, for no good reason.

“Good! I’ve got a feeling we’re going to need her.”

A military helicopter hovers above us—for too long.

“Harry, I think we’ve been spotted!”

Harry accelerates once more. We arrive in Tacony.

“We made it!”

I start laughing hysterically.

“What’s so funny?”

“We’re batshit crazy, is all.”

My adrenaline-fueled laughter is contagious, and Harry laughs as well.

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Welcome to Philadelphia. The huge billboard comes as a welcomed relief. I check the GPS watch. We’re less than 10 minutes from our first destination: the botanical garden. I order Sasha back into camouflage mode.

We’re driving down Levick St. when the engine sputters a few times before abruptly stalling.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

Harry checks the dials. “Out of gas.”

I hear the rattling of a helicopter. “The chopper we saw earlier is hounding us.”

“Let’s not stay here,” I say.

We bring the motorcycle beneath a highway overpass and hide it behind a shipping container.

“I’m pretty sure the tank was full when we left,” says Harry.

I squat and examine the bike. “There. The gas tank is leaking. Our rough landing on the bridge is probably to blame.”

“Crap. How far to the first location?”

I check the GPS. “By motorcycle, four minutes. Walking, more like forty-five.”

Harry kicks the container. “Grab your stuff. I don’t want to stay in this city a minute longer than I have to.”

I hear the rhythmic thud of boots marching in step. My pulse starts racing. A platoon of soldiers is coming our way. I peek around the container. There are three squads of Fivers. Shit! I knew it. They’re marching alongside combat vehicles as if the road belonged to them—hell as if the whole world belonged to them. I swallow hard.

“All right, listen up, maggots!” says the sergeant. “We’re rallying with the Osborne Platoon in sector PN-34.”

Moving through this city is going to be hell.

# Chapter 24 – Searching for the command center in Philadelphia

We skirt around the concrete roadblocks at the end of the street.

The streets are empty like in post-apocalyptic movie. Crows crow. Plastic bags flutter in the soft wind. The sky is magnificent. I spot a lonely drone hovering above the empty street.

We avoid it and walk quietly, keeping to the shadows. Art is a big deal here. Boasting over 2000 outdoor murals, it’s been called the “mural capital of the U.S.”

The URF troops are stationed downtown.

The resistance wants to capture this city for symbolic reasons.

Resistance arriving by freight train.

The quiet before the storm.

I spot a kloak on the wall. It displays a pixelated video of a white rabbit holding a pocket watch like in *Alice in Wonderland*. The hour and minute hands are spinning wildly. An old-style alarm clock is hooked up to dynamite sticks. The caption reads: “It’s getting late. Should you be here?”

Resistance places kloaks with a video of a nuclear bomb exploding to warn citizens when an attack in a populated area will happen. They bang on cars to set of the alarms they mention it on voice of freedom

They hack billboards in the city

**GPS 1 – Botanical Garden**

They have exited the central station

The streets are empty. Plastic bags are lolling about. We see almost no traffic only a few self-driving cars.

It feels like were in post-apocalyptic movie

I know it’s unnerving

Remember the movie Fuck this shit before the aliens attack

Yeah.

This city has the same vibe.

Occasionally a drone flies overhead.

We use the drone umbrellas

We walk to the botanical garden

We hop on the tramway. We disembark at the botanical garden.

A cross has been set with spray painted name Alicia, we will not forget

The wall behind has bullet holes

We see the greenhouse. The glass ceiling has long been destroyed.

I could see why this would be a good hiding spot for a command center. The garden is downtown; you can land a VTOL aircraft through the broken roof. I hope this is it. I am scared but I want to get it over with.

We enter cautiously. It was a paradise under glass, with soaring Gothic arches painted white and looking like the closest thing to heaven Teegan could imagine. The glass panes glinted in the sunlight, and the inside of the greenhouse was filled with palms and lime trees imported from Florida, orchids from South America, and newly hatched swallowtail butterflies. The greenhouse’s latest residents were four hummingbirds. Harry walked into the greenhouse, enjoying the look of wonder on his face as he stepped inside and felt the warm air and it made me love him more. They passed a cluster of hydrangeas in the far corner of the greenhouse.

Shit. There’s No one here.

Let’s head over to the next spot. It’s a high school downtown by the freight yard.

Harry grabs me from behind, “One sec.”

He kisses me on my naked shoulder. There is sensuality to him that quiet brewing. He then kissed my ear, and my body jumped. God, was he attractive. He put his arms around me and the tenderness with which he surrounded me exited and moved me. Our bodies joined together and I could not believe the joy I felt. The decision to kiss for the first time is the most crucial in any love story. It changes the relationship of two people much more strongly than even final surrender. A kiss can be a comma, a question mark, or an exclamation point. That’s basic spelling that every woman ought to know.

The bomb fell with a terrifying whistling sound.

We ducked. It fell downtown

Fuck the combat has started. We need to move.

I am still I can’t move. For the first time in my life I feel I have something that I want to protect at all costs.

We run across the garden and head for Sodoma Street. The sky is teeming with drones. Fighters are crossing in between skyscrapers. We arrive by the yard.

We walk by a depot. An explosion. The wall collapses. Resistance fighters come pouring out. The commanding officer is yelling go go go

He sees us. What the fuck are you doing here. This is not safe.

Get to the Civilian Shelter. That building over there. Well, don’t just stand there! Run!

Stations were fitted with bunks for 22,000 people, supplied with first aid facilities and equipped with chemical toilets. 124 canteens opened in all parts of the tube system. Shelter marshals were appointed, whose function it was to keep order, give first aid and assist in case of the flooding of the tunnels. An estimated 170,000 people sheltered in the tunnels and stations during World War II.

Jizzhum Avenue is blocked. A column of tanks. Shit.

We take side streets.

Fuck you gave me a scare. The man was in his late seventies.

Botanical garden kiss

Startled by bombing start

Teegan scared for real – she first time she does not want to lose something. She wants to abort

I stop to take in the scene in front of me.

The biodome was a marvel of architecture a spiralling, leaning tower made of glass and metal. With its orange and golf colors, each level, was like a ring recently forged and pulled out of a cauldron.

They stacked on top of each other precariously. Like a game of jinga I thought that a gust of wind would be enough to topple the construction.

The vault sitting on top of the tower is made off a glass dome. Or i should say was

I point at it. The glass dome is shattered and only a few panes remained reflecting the few sunrays that escaped the cover of the clouds.

A VTOL could land through the roof and settle inside.

Yeah

A sign says Philadelphia biodome proudly brought to you by Acme

We walk near the abandoned ticket booth. I squeeze myself through the spin wicket. Sasha jumps over it. An overgrown passage leads to vast glass door. A statue of a lynx guards the entrance. A billboard dark with shadows lists the 4 climates. Artic, boreal, tundra and plains

Well it’s going to be easy to get in. The front door has been smashed.

Fighter jets patrol the sky above us like

Sign lie on the ground i step over a crate

A passage lies to the vr room holographic room too small for an aircraft

We enter a vast room it looks a forest birds fly off

Wow there some life left here

What does it eat?

I wonder why it didn’t escape through the front door

Ye Ye use to say Les habitudes like invisible shackles ties down and prevent us from soaring. I miss him.

He would have loved this place we arrive in a clearing a numbered path

High above the vault glass is there.

Harry i heard something

You are like Legolas only for hearing. Trees have broken the ground and a few saplings. Vines are crawling up the walls.

It’s beautiful

Yeah it out of this world it like if we stepped through a portal

A wonder back I duck my head

The beast looks at me. Its eyes like that of a native Indian shaman. My mind says to scream but my body says to be quiet.

The 490-pound lynx is ready to pounce. Its ears follow the movement of harry who hasn’t seen the beast yet.

I think a peaceful thought

It leaps i duck and it lands on top of a tapir. I was sitting between it in its supper.

M

We acknowledge each other.

In two bounds its out of my sight

Teegan yeah. What are doing down there

Nothing I m coming especially with my finger.

Water is trickling. A rusted pipe.

A pond with water lilies. Frogs or toads never know which

If i kiss you know will you turn into a prince

Me nah I’m not prince material

You on the other hand are

Not a princess either

Having the responsibilities of a kingdom no thank you and besides i am not very lady like

Let’s give it a try wont know till you try

Harry takes my hand and spins me around.

I grab his belt buckle and pull him towards me. I caress the lose strand of hair on his forehead.

I m not sure what scared me more the whistling of the bomb or the explosion that cane after. The lynx looks at Sasha

Violent beast versus robot confrontation

Shit they are not here

Lets head to the next location

Wait

The bomb must have fallen in the Delaware river cause we hear a huge splash a flock of birds scared by the explosion takes off

A billboard blinks on off

Bioluminescent fauna the results of countless beautiful genetic experiments

Be amazed

I am not amazed

Not of this shit is real

But it’s alive

But it’s not natural

What is natural?

I don’t know the way things are meant to be

And what tells you things are not meant to be this way

Dunno just feels weird

Threes the charm (for kisses)

Diamond-shaped train box cars

Round tunnels

Echoes on the intercom

Drone serves drinks

I look around as we make our way

Everhear of a golden cage

Philanthropist Jc carrier

Leave

Wall blows resistance soldier run out

Get the fuck away from here waves at civilian shelter building where both parties agree not too attack

Harry hurt during jump or during command center fight

Harry dies during bike ride

Lieutenant general Sima protects them epilogue

They clone the McGuffin both parties get a copy

They show some McGuffin videos on the command center screens

# Chapter 25 – Taking control of the command center

1. Teegan enters command center. Are there 2 command center units?
2. T jams all weapons
3. Lockdown initiated by commanding officer who then escapes
4. Madison’s father lets her die
5. END Of CHAPTER
6. They all jump out
7. T + H save Madison who hurt herself during fall
8. Madison escapes. She doesn’t want to be captured
9. Parties arrive
10. T explains
11. Both parties want to arrest Madison
12. Both parties want Teegan and Harry to join them for a full debrief.
13. T + H Use smoke bomb done by Jim and escape
14. Parties leave
15. Bike ride

GPS 2

I glance at Harry, “And?”

“We should be very close,” says Harry, looking at his armband computer.

We turn a corner and I see the elementary school at the end of the street. It’s an unremarkable redbrick building. Tall, concrete walls surround the schoolyard. We walk up to the entrance. I yank on the handle. Unsurprisingly, the entrance is locked. We’ll have to find some other way in.

In the distance, the bombing is intensifying. Sirens are blaring. My eardrums are about to bust. Black smoke rises in columns from numerous locations. When the wind blows in our direction, it brings its acrid smell our way. A combat airplane overhead fires a missile and hits a skyscraper full on. The top floors explode and shower the sky with broken glass and bits and pieces of metal.

“I hope this is the right place,” says Harry. “There’s no way we’ll reach the third potential location in one piece with the fighting that’s going on downtown.”

“I hope so too.”

“Any idea how we get in?”

I stare up at the wall, and as my gaze moves across it, I spy a gap in the barbwire lining the wall.

I point at it. “You could boost me up.”

“Nah, it’s too high.”

“You’re right. How about climbing on that truck? It’s close enough to the wall.”

“That could work.”

We clamber on the hood of the truck and then on its roof. Harry jumps and grabs the edge of the wall before hoisting himself up on the ledge.

“Your turn!”

I jump a bit too eagerly, and my nose smashes into the wall and starts bleeding. I try to pull myself up, but I’m not strong enough. I just hang there like a bed sheet on a clothesline. Harry grabs my arm and pulls me up as if I weighed nothing.

“Thanks.”

Perched like owls, we examine the schoolyard. Kids have decorated the walls with colorful dinosaurs and silly looking plants.

“It’s not there. Fuck. I hope the bloody intel was right and this isn’t a goose egg chase. Shit!” I hit my palm with my fist.

“Harry … I have to level with you. I’m not sure we’ll survive going downtown.”

I’m just about to leap back onto the truck’s roof, when Harry whispers, “Wait!”

“It’s there. Can’t you see?” He points excitedly at—nothing.

Harry whistles under his breath. “I’ve heard of spectral cloaking before, but I’ve never seen it in action before.”

“There’s nothing there,” I say as I wipe the blood dripping from my nose with my sleeve.

“Right in front of you. See the antenna sticking out?” Harry points with his finger.

Now that I know where to look, or perhaps more accurately, how to look, I can make out its shape. The darn thing is almost invisible. There’s a vertical takeoff and landing aircraft the size of two 18-wheelers sitting right in the middle of the schoolyard.

Well, I’ll be damned. “These guys have impressive tech.”

“We should monitor the area before going in.”

Harry observes the aircraft. He examines every nook and cranny, taking his sweet time.

A loud detonation, less than a mile from our location, startles me. I think of the exhausted and frightened people we crossed path with. The mother, looking for her children under the rubbles, the young man who preferred jumping off the bridge rather than risking being captured by the URF, the homes destroyed ... This has to stop. There’s no time to waste.

“Fuck this, Harry. People are dying out there. I’m going in.” Timing myself with the detonation of a bomb, I jump from the high wall and land on my feet, stabilizing myself with my hand.

A camera located on top of the aircraft spins in my direction. Harry lands next to me, visibly upset.

“Shit, Teegan. We’ve been detected!”

“Maybe nobody noticed.”

The aircraft’s door slides open proving me wrong. A heavily armed guard equipped with the latest in military gear steps down from the footboard and heads in our direction.

“Distract him on my signal.”

Keeping to shadows, Harry positions himself behind the guard. He waves his hand.

I come out of my hiding place and yell, “Help! My friend’s been hurt! Please! My boyfriend’s going to die.”

The man aims his assault rifle in my direction. Harry aims a big roundhouse punch at the guard’s helmet, and he flinches away violently, ducks, and covers his head with his arms. He recovers enough to grab Harry around the waist while he was still off balance. They stagger back and forth like a pair of wrestlers, leaning on each other for support, then crash into an evergreen shrubbery at the edge of the schoolyard. It drops its payload of snow on them. Harry gets up first and punches the guard in his faceplate. His head spins from the impact and he topples back into the shrubbery. Harry takes a few deep breaths.

“Come and help me.”

Together, we drag the guard out of the shrubbery by his feet, and then we flip him on his back.

“Is he dead?” I ask.

“No, he’s just unconscious. We’ll need his microchip to open the door.” Harry takes out his trusted knife and hands it to me. “Here you do it.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

“Geesh! Why should I be the one cutting up his hand? I’m not a nurse you know.”

I grab the man’s hand and insert the knife tip into the webbing between the thumb and forefinger. Harry looks away as soon as I draw blood.

“Ha ha! Knew it. You faint at the sight of blood. You big wuss.”

“It’s not funny.”

“Yes, it is. It’s just too absolutely hilarious.”

“Focus on the microchip.”

“It would be easier if you occasionally sharpened the darn thing. The tip is as blunt as a plastic knife.”

The dim light isn’t making it easy. I make an incision and another. The man’s hand is covered in blood. Still, I can’t find it. “Why do they have to make these things so fucking small?” I lift a bit of skin. The man stirs in pain.

“There!” I spot the microchip, which is the size of a rice grain. I delicately remove it with the tip of my fingers. I fold the man’s arm on his chest, hiding his bloodied hand.

“You can look now.”

“I hope this works.”

We walk up to the door and brush the microchip next to the sensor. The door slides open with a soft hiss. Yes! We’re in.

As we enter the aircraft, we hear two people arguing. “We have a man down. Why can’t you fucking follow protocol for once in your life? We’re supposed to leave if we are in any way compromised.”

“I had to finish my intervention. These things take finesse. Something a dumb oaf like you will never understand. We wanted both sides to suffer heavy casualties, remember? Now, they have.”

I recognize that voice. It’s Madison from school. Holy shit. What is she doing here?

“Johnson, is that you?” asks the man who was chiding Madison.

Before the man can do anything, Harry shoots him in the legs.

The pilot comes out of his cabin. Harry knocks him out cold with a single punch.

We find Madison sitting on a chair, itself on a maglev podium that gives the impression that she’s floating on air. Her forehead gleams with a sheen of perspiration.

She’s surrounded by holoscreens plastered in blinking messages, all screaming for her attention. Using slim fingers covered with silver rings, Madison jerks a joystick to move the podium from one screen to another.

And bang – the tank stops just as it was about to do something great or useful.

“Teegan, have a seat. I’m quite busy right now.”

“You’re a battle master?”

“Sure am. Arrest these guys! Keep them alive. My father will want to interrogate them.

Three men approach. Harry presses the operation back door button. Their weapons jam.

“Now you know what it feels like, assholes.”

Harry punches the man in the jaw.

“Oh my God! There are going to blow up the Emmet tower. Thousands are going to die.”

“Madison, how do you jam everything?”

“Not telling.”

Harry slaps her.

“Oh! You’re going to pay for this. Wait until my father finds out about this.”

I look around. The controls are here.

“You’re too dimwit to be able to support the massive influx of data to your brain. Only a Mod can.”

I put on the BrainWayv monitor. “I don’t care. I have to try.”

An onslaught of input stimulates my brain like needles pricks. They are endless. I’m overwhelmed. I feel my brain melting like an ice cream left in the hot sun. My synapses are overcharged.

My brain was telling me people are dying soldiers are dying

Blame one side for massive civilian deaths.

“Yes, that’s Colonel Smith. I know him,” says Harry pointing at a screen.

The contrast between the children drawing hanging up on the classroom and the monitors displaying horrifying images from the fierce battle raging was unsettling.

Everything here is so wrong.

“You did it, Teegan!”

The tank doesn’t fire.

The battles raging all over slowly come to a halt. The soldiers on both sides look at their weapons, frustrated, that it can’t shoot, their exosuits are slowed down; they can only walk now. The tanks stop in their tracks. Both sides look at each other like they were responsible.

“Colonel Smith, Jaxon, this is Teegan Pershing. Come over to the Harvard Middle School. We’ve got an explanation for you. And for god sakes, don’t kill each other on the way here,” I say over the comm. Network. “We’ll be waiting in the schoolyard.”

Both parties arrive. Harry and I wait for them.

They look at each other and then at me.

“What is the meaning of this?” they both say at the same time.

“You’re Teegan, General Pershing’s daughter.”

“Yes. This command center was deployed by BlackIce.”

You have been played. Both of you have been played.

BlackIce can control the military equipment they sold you via command centers like this one. They have been making sure neither of you ever get the upper hand. They call it the Never-ending war.

They cant control my weapon. I look at his weapon it has the Greenwater logo.

It sure can. Using the brainwave monitor,

I point at the soldiers on both side of the Delaware River or Schuylkill River (huge train yard next to it).

In war. Nobody wins ever. Except for the warmongers.

Bob the civilian killings that got your guys so upset was orchestrated not by the URF but by BlackIce.

Scott, the death in the school that caused so many death was not done by the Resistance but by BlackIce.

Its about time you guys started to talk with interference. Bring peace back. The war has been going on for 6 years.

A soldier shouts for glory and takes out his knife and throws himself on the resistance leader. I throw him my old school pistol he shoots the guy in the leg.

Enough shouts harry.

Fucking hell. Get a grip. Look at the battlefield look at the deaths. You really want this to go on forever. How about talking instead of killing. How about listening to Cathy’s new republic idea? It seems like a nice compromise.

With each new Resistance attack, the population is terrified, and the URF then ratchet up population control to keep a grip.

Each time the URF adds a new way to control people, it removes our liberties: the SCS, the PAL system, and the mandatory tracking of vehicles.

This is the spiral of hate. Try the spiral of compassion instead.

A red light starts blinking. A countdown starts on all of the monitors. All of the monitors shutdown one by one.

My father will never forgive me for this. My father says Madison designed me for this. I have been a tool for him since the beginning. I am expandable.

Tears from in her eyes. I always tried to shine to do my best to beat his expectations. It was never enough.

She pilfers a weapon and disappears into the night.

Maybe its time I gain back my liberty.

The kid is right says the general

I know. I saw my brother on the other side he is working with you guys. I could have killed him my own brother.

BlackIce is going to pay for this. Oh believe me they will.

But lets get our bosses talking first that’s more important

Security compromised. Lockdown initiated. Unit will self-destruct in 2minutes.

Fuck Madison is there any way to stop this.

No, no, there isn’t. Wait, my father he would know.

Dad?

What the fuck is going on Nat why is the battle stopped?

I don’t have time to explain. My unit has been compromised and the self-destruct timer has started

Is there a way to stop it?

Yes. You need the override sequence to deactivate it

Great! What is it?

I can’t give it to you

You what?

No. If you’ve been stupid and negligent enough to let your unit be compromised you deserve to die. You were never worthy anyway. A captain goes down with his ship.

You’re going to let me die?

Goodbye Madison

Harry pulls the level the VTOL takes off. 10 seconds 9, 8, 7,

Harry tries to shoot at the windshield the weapon wont fire

Madison tries as well.

I think of my gun its old school

I fire the windshield shatters. Windshield is bulletproof. She shoots at door mechanism. They jump.

We jump out just as it is taking off

It explodes. Fuck all the evidence is gone.

Madison is hurt he was going to let me die she says to one in particular.

Her leg is clearly broken.

We fix up her leg.

Why don’t you live me here to die? I’ve done terrible things

You have. You are a selfish, person.

There have been enough deaths for a day.

Harry and Teegan leave by pink girl bicycles with a air horn.

# Chapter 26 – Aftermath

On the news they hear that a truce has been signed, first 4th of July with no casualties since 7 years. BlackIce leaders arrested.

They go back to concord have the boat celebration

Need to leave because of threats

Witch-hunt against BlackIce

Threats from BlackIce they leave for no man’s land.

The URF general that she knows resets her SCS to 1000.

Her father has escaped prison and is nowhere to be found.

Reactions:

From Feds:

1. some are outraged and angry on want revenge on BlackIce. Rich homes of arrested members are burned to the ground
2. some see hope that the whole silly thing can finally stop
3. some see a threat-if no villain, how can they justify abusing power?
4. Some are incredulous, cynical – no surprise about BlackIce, nothing is going to change
5. Some ask for Chinese troops to leave
6. Some want the new republic proposal to be ratified. This means less power to the feds and more power to the states and the communities
7. Reaction to Teegan and co:
   1. Hero
   2. Disruptor, loose cannon

From Resistance POV:

1. some are outraged and angry on want revenge on BlackIce. Rich homes of arrested members are burned to the ground
2. some see hope that the whole silly thing can finally stop
3. some see a threat-if villainous Feds, how can they do a coup d’état?
4. Some are incredulous, cynical – no surprise about BlackIce, nothing is going to change
5. Some ask for Chinese troops to leave
6. Some want the new republic proposal to be ratified. This means less power to the feds and more power to the states and the communities
7. Reaction to Teegan and co:
   1. Hero
   2. Disruptor, loose cannon

From BlackIce POV:

1. some want revenge on team who screwed up namely Natasha, her father, the head of the command center security, the folks who let the date be stolen
2. best bet is to lie low for a while and eventually support a coup d’état. They don’t believe war in the US is going to stop. It’s a setback but recoverable.
3. Some want to derail the new republic proposal
4. Reaction to Teegan and co:
   1. Admiration but she needs to be killed and punished

# Epilogue – Hungry Ghosts

*August 7, 2040*

Cathy Ellendale is being interviewed again while images of city riots appear picture-in-picture on the television screen.

I stop to listen to what she has to say. “Let me paraphrase Robert Kennedy’s speech after the death of Martin Luther King. ‘What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be Asian.’ We need to …”

“Mind if I turn off the TV, Teegan?” asks Jim. “The news depresses me.”

“No.”

Jim waves his hand and the TV shuts.

I’m sitting at the kitchen table with Laura surrounded by a mountain of plastic coated paper plates, tape dispensers, strings, clippings, and coloring pens.

“Can you pass me the scissors, TeeTee?”

“Sure.”

Laura snips a piece of dangling string and after a final look at her work pushes her lotus flower lantern toward the others sitting in the center of the table.

“Great, Lolo. That was the last one.”

“So, what’s this Hungry Ghost ceremony about, Teegan?” asks Jim as he cracks open a can of soda.

“I told you. At the end of Ghost Month, we help the wandering spirits find their way back to the afterlife. We float paper lanterns on lakes and rivers or set them outside our homes to light their path. When the candles burn out, it means that the spirits have found their way back home.”

“And what about those?” Jim points at a pair of shorts, t-shirt and black slippers all made of paper I made for Ye Ye.

I giggle thinking how silly this may seem for a Westerner. “I’ll burn this paper clothing for my grandfather. He’ll be able to wear them in the netherworld. Check them out!” I lift the shorts for Jim to see. They’re covered with colorful moons and stars.

Jim raises an eyebrow but doesn’t comment.

“Ready to head down?” I ask.

Laura nods her head.

We place our constructions in grocery bags and head outside. We find Harry splitting wood in the backyard. He wields the maul like it weighs nothing. Every one of his hits splits the wood with a thundering crack. His naked torso is covered in sweat. He grabs his t-shirt and wipes his face when he sees us arrive.

“We’re ready to go down to the river, Harry,” I say.

He puts his t-shirt back on.

“Do you want a ride, Lolo?” Harry squats and offers his back for Laura to climb on.

“No! I’m too old for that.”

Laura grabs my hand instead. When Jim and Lolo returned from Dallas, Harry and I went to pick them up at the train station. As soon as she saw me, Lolo ran into my arms and started crying. I brushed her hair and held her tightly until she calmed down. She speaks occasionally now—never more than a few words at a time—but it’s an improvement. Jim spends a lot of time with her. He organizes fishing trips to nearby lakes. During those trips, he tries to tease longer sentences from her. What Jim found out is that Laura’s upset with Harry for leaving her on her own so often, for sending her parents away, and for not being there for her. Jim shared these thoughts with me but hasn’t had the heart to tell his best friend. But Harry has noticed—they don’t hang out like they used to—and it makes him sad.

As we go down the gentle slope leading to the river, we walk on a vast bed of spruce needles. They crumple under my bare feet. I take a deep breath. I love the balsamic smell of the forest. This is what I love about America; it smells so nice. In Shanghai, the city was always covered with angry yellow smog. The sunset is lighting the treetops in fiery colors. I point out a patch of nettles running amok among a raspberry patch to Laura. She hops away from it. I learned the hard way that when you brush against them with bare skin it causes a nasty stinging sensation.

We come to a spot where the creek falls through a tangle of evergreen roots to form a plunge pool. There’s an old rickety dock that was once used for fishing. The planks have long lost their varnish and quite a few are broken.

Laura takes out the lanterns from the bags and lays them neatly on the dock. Harry picks one up and observes it from different angles. “It’s beautiful, Lolo.”

Lolo smiles but doesn’t respond.

“Why a lotus?” he asks.

“It stands for purity and redemption,” I say. “We did four lanterns: one for Ye Ye, Adrian, Louis, and the bounty hunter. I definitely don’t want *his* ghost coming after me.”

“Can we light them now, TeeTee?”

I nod.

We huddle around the offerings on the small dock. Laura presents the first floating lantern. Each one has the name of the person it’s destined for written on it. Jim takes out a lighter and lights the tea candle in the middle. One by one, Laura sets them adrift on the river.

She hands me the last boat—the one for Ye Ye. I set it gently on the river and hope his kind spirit will find peace. He wasn’t granted a proper send-off into the afterlife. Like all “traitors” his body was dumped unceremoniously in a mass grave. Tears pool in my eyes. Earlier today, I stood in front of the small, family altar with a framed photograph of Father in my hand. It was the one where he’d just been promoted to major. My mom always liked that picture because he seemed so happy. I was about to put it on the altar as if for any deceased family member when Harry showed up.

“Don’t do it, Teegan. Your father is still alive.”

I turned around. “But if he is, why hasn’t he contacted me? It’s been over four months, Harry. Four months!” I snapped. “I’m his daughter. Wouldn’t you want your daughter to know you’re alive?” My hand was shaking so badly, I almost dropped the frame.

“TeeTee, he escaped from prison. He has lots of enemies. He must be hiding somewhere.”

“One message. One word even would be all it takes, Harry. Don’t you see? I don’t know if in his eyes I’m a traitor or not. I don’t know if he still … loves me.”

Harry took the frame from my hand, put it aside, and hugged me.

“My gut tells me that your father is alive and that something is holding him back.”

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I’ve been barely holding it together these last few weeks, but being here and sending off Ye Ye’s lantern makes me break down and cry. Laura sees me and starts weeping. Tears well in Harry’s eyes. Soon everyone is crying heartily except for Jim who’s trying is very best not to. As he moves to give Laura a hug, the plank underneath him snaps under his weight and sends him tumbling into the shallow water. When Harry sees his friend all wet, he bursts into a contagious laugh, and this in turn, makes Laura giggle. Jim tries to get up, slips on a rock, and falls again with a big splash bringing on another wave of laughter.

I help Jim get back on the dock. Harry takes Laura in his arms, and for the first time since she’s come back, she doesn’t push him away. This makes me so happy I feel like crying again.

The night becomes chilly. We head back inside. Jim is eager to get out of his wet clothes. I’m glad we did this. I’ve never been much for Chinese superstitions and traditions, but in times of turmoil, they form a powerful anchor.

I tuck Laura in bed. Her plush toys are gone. When the URF searched the house for the device, they tore up every one of them thinking that it might be concealed inside.

I haven’t told Harry yet, but I missed a call from Senator Rupert this morning. He didn’t tell me what it was about in his message, but I could hear the concern in his voice. When I tried calling back, his secretary said he was busy and couldn’t take my call.

I suspect the nice neighbors that have moved in are guards sent by the Senator to keep us alive. I often spot them “bird watching” with binoculars. I’ve received a lot of death threats since my return. Chinese sympathizers have me in their sights. Between the death threats and congratulatory emails, the worst has been the onslaught of reporters. Do people really want to know what brand of underwear I wear? I’ve turned down every one of them. During the first few days after I had moved here, a flotilla of news outlet drones obscured the sky. Every time we ventured out of the house, the sky would scintillate with camera flashes. After a few days, Harry had enough of this. He took his rifle and shot them down one by one. Unsurprisingly, they left and never returned. The more liberal media have nicknamed me Tank Girl after the sobriquet given to the unknown rebel who defied a column of tanks in Tiananmen Square.

I head down to the kitchen. Jim is rummaging through the cupboard.

“Hey, Teegan, where did you hide the peanut butter?”

“It’s on the top shelf.”

“Still leaving tomorrow, Jim?”

“Yeah. I’m meeting up Hailey and Eiza. We’re going to go to No Man’s land together. It’ll be safer for everyone.”

“That’s in California, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Say hello for me, will you?”

“We’ll do.”

I get busy and place the pictures and tablets of my ancestors back where they were before the Hungry Ghost Festival on the small altar we have in the backroom. I light some joss sticks and burn the paper clothing I did for Ye Ye in a small bowl.

Once done, I head back outside to find Harry. It’s the new moon, and I have to tread carefully to avoid tripping in the dark. A fire is blazing in a copper fire pit. The smoke has the fragrant scent of apple logs. Sparks trying to escape gravity shoot up in the air before dying out. Harry is sitting on an Appalachian rocking chair strumming a few notes on an old acoustic guitar. I know the chair’s name now. I also know that the high-pitched thin “teesi-teesi-teesi-teesi” I hear in the morning is from a bay-breasted warbler. And that to “get a wiggle on” means to hurry up. And more importantly, that to put ketchup on a hotdog is a crime. I got a mouthful from Jim when I dared squirt some on my sausage. It's surprising how many nit-picky rules there are for such a no-fuss food as the hotdog. I don’t regret my decision to move here—my old home in Concord was filled with too many memories.

I give Harry a smooch on the neck. He looks up at me and starts strumming the first few bars of one of my favorite songs.

I start singing, “Moon river, wider than a mile …”

Harry joins me for the second line “…I'm crossing you in style, some day.”

“Oh, dream maker, you heart breaker,

wherever you're going I'm going your way …”

When we reach the end of the song, we hear clapping. Harry and I turn to see that it’s coming from Laura who has her head sticking out the window. She waves at us before shutting it.

I gently remove the guitar and sit on Harry’s lap. He wraps his arms around me and it feels good. That's when I hear a soft but annoying buzzing sound coming from above. I look up and sigh.

I get up.

"Where are you going?" asks Harry.

"Don't worry. I'll be right back."

I dart to the kitchen, get what I need, and head back outside. I aim carefully and fire. The gunshot echoes down the valley. The news drone plummets from the sky into a nearby tree. I put the rifle aside and take back my seat on Harry's lap. "Now, where were we?"

1. Ernest Hemingway [↑](#footnote-ref-2)