**United States of China**

**By Régis Geoffrion**

Table of Content

Chapter 1 – Homecoming 3

Chapter 2 – Together, We Are Stronger 8

Chapter 3 – Inked 14

Chapter 4 – Enemy Within 26

Chapter 5 – Tomb Sweeping 32

Chapter 6 – Hit and Run 39

Chapter 7 – Leaving Sector NH-26 46

Chapter 8 – Extreme Makeover 53

Chapter 9 – The Saboteurs 57

Chapter 10 – Drone 69

Chapter 11 – Crazy Pete’s House 80

Chapter 12 – Suede Moccasins 87

Chapter 13 – Trust 91

Chapter 14 – Nor’ easter 95

Chapter 15 – Buzzkill 109

Chapter 16 – Blackice facilities 117

Chapter 17 – The Exit Toll 126

Chapter 18 – Population Zero 135

Chapter 19 – The Cavalcade 142

Chapter 20 – The Abandoned Coal Plant 151

Chapter 19B – Attempting to open the storage device 187

Chapter 20 – The Black Market 188

Chapter 21 – Raid 197

Chapter 22 – Stay with Me 204

Chapter 21A – Opening the device 211

Chapter 23 – Whistleblower 212

Chapter 24 – Searching for the command center in Philadelphia 226

Chapter 25 – Taking control of the command center 227

Chapter 26 – Aftermath 236

Epilogue – Hungry Ghosts 237

# 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.

\*\*\*

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.

\*\*\*

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 media 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.

\*\*\*

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.

\*\*\*

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.

\*\*\*

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.”

**\*\*\***

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 walk down the street checking the civic numbers.

Redbrick buildings line the street. A man is plastering a government hotline poster on a telephone pole while being guarded by nervous soldiers eyeballing every passerby.

“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.

\*\*\*

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.”

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.

\*\*\*

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 start flowing 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 start eating.

“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 start to 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.

\*\*\*

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 start chatting.

“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 start to 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.

\*\*\*

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.

\*\*\*

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 holographic screen 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.

\*\*\*

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.

\*\*\*

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 SMS 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 media score has been pulled up. I have an SMS 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 SMS 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 SMS 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 start swimming 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 start combing 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 video chip. 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 see 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 starts flipping 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.

\*\*\*

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 see by how hard Laura is clutching her teddy that she’s scared to death.

“What about Cadbury?” Laura asks, a look of alarm on her face.

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

“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.

“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. She has a scar that runs diagonally from her left eye all the way to her chin.

“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.”

“Anyway, 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 coming down 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 starts frantically untying 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 start running as best we can. Once in a while, I look back. 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 start exploring. 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.

\*\*\*

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 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 start crying 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 video chip; 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 start trusting.

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.

\*\*\*

“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 start swinging and rocking 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 SMS 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 with the Cavalcade.”

“Why is it that I think I should know what 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 driving cars, trucks, and motorcycles 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. Last I heard they were in Texas somewhere. 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?”

“Hailey doesn’t. She’s way too smart for that. But the Cavalcade are nomads. They are always on the move and plus, not many people take them seriously. She’s just pretending to be born again until the government stops actively looking for her.”

“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.

\*\*\*

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 crazy. 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 start throwing 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 start bickering 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.”

\*\*\*

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 chip 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 chip. 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 chip!”

“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 chip 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 start rappelling 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 chip? *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 holo-monitor 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 chip 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 start to 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 chip?” 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 chip 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 chip 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 chip too,” says Harry.

“How the hell are we going to find the soldier you planted the chip 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 chip 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 chip 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.

\*\*\*

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 start blurring 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.

\*\*\*

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 start running. 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.

\*\*\*

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.”

\*\*\*

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 start rebuilding 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.

\*\*\*

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, tear a side off and hand it to Laura.

“Hey Laura, could you draw on this cardboard ‘Going to Rialto’ please?”

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. I see a motorcade with over a hundred vehicles: streamlined motorcycles, jacked-up cars, pimped-out vans, 18-wheelers emblazoned with the Christian fish symbol, and repurposed school buses. Wow, I didn’t realize they had so many members.

The car leading the procession 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 have 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 ask.

“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 going?”

“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 and close my eyes. 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 start 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 scorching 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 pointing fingers.

\*\*\*

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.

\*\*\*

Under oppressive clouds, we trudge towards the abandoned plant. A hundred feet high chimney 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,” 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 are standing 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 attempts to kick 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

A flurry of movement. I lift 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 and trot towards a black woman in her forties and a teenager who must be her son. Both of them are pointing their rifles at us. The teenager has the finger 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.”

“Operator. We’ve intercepted a group of four who claim to be looking for Hailey.” Pause. “Okay. Will do. Out.”

The teenager kneels next to the dog that Jim shot and checks its hind leg. “You damaged Sasha, dumbass.”

“Sasha was trying to chew my leg off,” replies 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 I’ll set the dogs on you.”

“Sasha, FOLLOW,” barks the woman. “Charlie, Buddy, Cooper, PATROL.” Their camouflage reactivates, and in no time, I lose track of their position.

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. In a flash, her lips tremble again, almost like she's trying not to cry. I’m wracked with guilt. Laura has gone through so much already, and now this. We march forward as instructed.

“What’s your name?” I ask her.

“Zari.”

I expect her to ask mine, but she doesn’t. Clearly, not the talkative type.

We go down a long 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 is the room’s centerpiece. 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 their business. I’m guessing this is the common area.

The woman nudges me ahead with the tip of her rifle.

As we’re walking, two girls jump from the catwalk and lands 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 the eyepatch she has on her left eye. She has an air of effortless self-possession that instantly makes me jealous. With sleeve tattoos, an edgy pixie haircut and smoldering looks, I have a brief thought that I could have a girl-crush on her.

“Hey, little brother!” she says, addressing Jim with a broad smile.

“Hailey!” says Jim, his face lit with delight.

“I’ll take it from here, Zari,” says Hailey to our escort.

Zari lifts her rifle in the air in acknowledgment and leaves with her son and the cyber dog in tow.

“Babe, 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 using a series of LEDs on her hand. She’s wearing a Led Zeppelin tee with jeans.

“And I don’t know who she is,” Hailey says looking at me.

I extend a hand. “I’m Teegan.”

“Nice to meet you, Teegan. Eiza, will you finish securing the plastic over the gap 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?”

“I need your help.”

“Oh.” A brief frown marks her flawless complexion. “The operator will want to meet you first.”

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 have been hand painted 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, takes my hand and squeezes it.

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. The place is bustling with activity. I see people of all ages.

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 paws. 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 cage elevator to the mezzanine level.

The place is filled with computers, cables, and machinery. A giant fan blows torpid air.

A blue-haired girl is 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. She gets up when she sees us arrive.

“Operator, your visitors are here,” she announces.

This is not what I expected to see. A thin man is lying on a tilting hospital bed. He is surrounded by holo-screens. With deft movements of his fingers, he moves, resizes, and scales windows 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 holo-screens get instantly filled 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. Each of you has made it to the most wanted list. And Teegan, you even have a hefty bounty on your head.”

“Oh, believe me, I know about that.”

Hailey looks at us, a concerned look on her face.

“By barging here unannounced, you’re putting everyone at risk,” says the operator.

“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 …”

“Really?” Did he just change his mind?

“Let me finish. But having you here is just too risky.”

“Ah, come on,” I say.

From the corner of my eye, I can see Jim hold on to Harry’s shoulder to steady himself. The bottom of his pant leg is soaked in blood.

“You’re breaking your own rules, you know,” Hailey says, 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 towards the operator.

“You can stay.” He says finally. “But Hailey, just to be clear. Now, we’re even.”

“Even, yes. Thank you.”

Hailey notices Jim’s bloody leg. “Oh, shit! Are you okay?”

“Cyber dog bit me hard, but I’m okay. See I can stand.” Jim collapses unconscious to the floor as soon as he let’s go of Harry.

\*\*\*

Harry, Laura and I are waiting anxiously in the hall beneath the operator’s mezzanine. Jim’s been gone an hour now. I hope they can fix him up. They said they had an ex-army medic working for them. Harry is quiet. More so than usual. Laura, scrawnier than ever, is sleeping in his arms.

**Option C**

The section we’re in has been repurposed into a kitchen area. There’s a dining table with benches and chairs.

A blue-haired girl is 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.

“What is this place?” I ask her.

“You just arrived?”

“That’s right.”

“It’s a safe house for darkers.”

“Oh, how many are you?”

“Sixty give or take. We have Zers, political activists, and hackers. All sorts.” With a mischievous smirk, she adds, “Mainly, people who dared to stick it to the man.”

Hailey returns a while later with Jim. She’s wheeling in Jim in an old office chair. Jim’s wearing an old-school cast made of plaster.

Not wanting to wake Laura, Harry whispers, “So?”

“No major damage”

“But he won’t be able to walk for a while.”

“That’s a bummer.”

Hailey brings Jim next to the kitchen table.

“Would you mind, asks Hailey to the blue-haired girl?”

“No, I was leaving anyway.”

You guy’s hungry?

“Are you kidding? I could eat a horse right now.”

“Harry turns to Hailey. It’s true. She could eat a whole horse.

“Okay.”

“Let’s get a bite and then we’ll talk.”

“What’s with your eye?”

She turns to Harry, her expression demanding an explanation. “What are you guys doing here?”

“I’m not sure where to start,” says Harry.

“Try the beginning.”

“Don’t give me attitude, Hailey. We’ve been through hell.”

“What’s with your eye?” says Jim.

“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?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Did she put you up to it?”

“Who? Eiza? No, maybe.”

“And how are you paying for this gear?”

Hailey hastily folds one arm over her chest. “I have the means. Don’t worry.”

“Oh no! Don’t tell me your vamperling too.”

“Stop judging me, Jim. I had enough of that from mom and dad growing up.

Eiza comes back with a first-aid kit in her hand.

“What’s wrong, babe?” she asks Hailey with a strong Aussie accent.

“Nothing,” replies Hailey with a huff.

“Of course something’s wrong.”

“Jim doesn’t like me having a Translucik.”

“Not his body, now is it?”

“Damn right.”

“Okay. Jim, lie your leg here for me,” says Eiza

Using his hands, Jim lifts his bloodied leg with a groan and drops it on the bench as requested. After removing his right boot, she retrieves scissors from the kit and cuts the tattered pant leg off at the knee. I gasp at the sight of his calf—the flesh is bruised and covered in blood. Harry looks away at the sight of it.

Eiza proceeds to clean his wounds. Jim cringes at the slightest contact. Once done, she applies some ointment before spraying instant gauze around his leg. On contact with air, the goo transforms into a soft, cotton-like sterile fabric.

“All done,” says Eiza tapping Jim’s thigh. “You won’t be able to walk on that leg for a while though.”

Hailey plants a smooch on Eiza’s neck, “Thanks. You’re the best.”

Eiza turns to Harry and I. “So, why have you guys come here again?”

“We discovered what Blackice does,” says Harry.

“The arms manufacturer? What’s there to discover? They manufacture a bunch of fucking weapons so assholes can kill other assholes. What else is there to know?”

“Oh, a lot.”

“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 scooch my chair closer to the kitchen table, “Come closer.”

In hushed voices, I tell them all about the hit and run and our adventures leading to this very meeting.

“Holy Jesus,” says Eiza, when I’m done.

“And it’s all in here?” asks Hailey.

Even though I’m not sure, I answer a resolute, “Yes.”

“When did you decide to be a transhumanist, Hailey?” says Jim as 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.”

“He said that?”

“He did. Can you decrypt it? We think it contains info that could end this stupid war—for good.”

“Pardon me if I’m skeptical about that claim, but sure, we’ll help. Eiza, what do you think?”

“You’ll need an F-13 reader for this thing. Do you know the password?”

“No.”

**Option D**

We arrive in some sort of control room repurposed into a kitchen area. There’s a dining table with benches and chairs.

“Stay here,” says the woman over the sound of the rattling pipes. “Hailey’s on her way and don’t try to leave. We have cameras everywhere.”

We’re left alone in the kitchen. A blue-haired girl is 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.

“What is this place?” I ask her.

“You just arrived?”

“That’s right.”

“It’s a safe house for darkers.”

“Oh, how many are you?”

“Sixty give or take. We have Zers, political activists, and hackers. All sorts.” With a mischievous smirk, she adds, “Mainly, people who dared to stick it to the man.”

Two girls arrive, well, more like, stomp in.

I recognize the girl on the left immediately—Hailey. She has the same eyes as her brother if you forget about the eyepatch she has on her left eye. She enters with an air of effortless self-possession that instantly makes me jealous. With sleeve tattoos, an edgy pixie haircut and smoldering looks, I have a brief though that I could have a crush on her.

She turns to the blue-haired girl, and says, “You, skedaddle. We need the room.”

The girl rolls her eyes but she takes her stuff and leaves.

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 using a series of LEDs on her hand. She’s wearing a Led Zeppelin tee with jeans.

“The fuck are you doing, Jim?” barks Hailey once the blue-haired girl has left. “I told you to message my anonymous account if you needed to reach me. The operator doesn’t like unannounced visitors. It puts everyone at risk.”

Her stare lowers to Jim’s leg.

“Oh, shit. Are you okay?”

“Your cyber dogs got to me, but I’ll survive. Do you have a first-aid kit?”

She turns to her companion. “Eiza, would you mind?”

Eiza gets up and leaves.

“I’m Teegan by the way.” I extend my hand, but when Hailey notices Laura in the room, she ignores it and immediately goes to her. She holds her face gently in her hands. “Oh, Lolo! What are you doing in a dangerous place like this?”

She turns to Harry, her expression demanding an explanation. “What are you guys doing here?”

“I’m not sure where to start,” says Harry.

“Try the beginning.”

“Don’t give me attitude, Hailey. We’ve been through hell.”

“What’s with your eye?” says Jim.

“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?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Did she put you up to it?”

“Who? Eiza? No, maybe.”

“And how are you paying for this gear?”

Hailey hastily folds one arm over her chest. “I have the means. Don’t worry.”

“Oh no! Don’t tell me your vamperling too.”

“Stop judging me, Jim. I had enough of that from mom and dad growing up.

Eiza comes back with a first-aid kit in her hand.

“What’s wrong, babe?” she asks Hailey with a strong Aussie accent.

“Nothing,” replies Hailey with a huff.

“Of course something’s wrong.”

“Jim doesn’t like me having a Translucik.”

“Not his body, now is it?”

“Damn right.”

“Okay. Jim, lie your leg here for me,” says Eiza

Using his hands, Jim lifts his bloodied leg with a groan and drops it on the bench as requested. After removing his right boot, she retrieves scissors from the kit and cuts the tattered pant leg off at the knee. I gasp at the sight of his calf—the flesh is bruised and covered in blood. Harry looks away at the sight of it.

Eiza proceeds to clean his wounds. Jim cringes at the slightest contact. Once done, she applies some ointment before spraying instant gauze around his leg. On contact with air, the goo transforms into a soft, cotton-like sterile fabric.

“All done,” says Eiza tapping Jim’s thigh. “You won’t be able to walk on that leg for a while though.”

Hailey plants a smooch on Eiza’s neck, “Thanks. You’re the best.”

Eiza turns to Harry and I. “So, why have you guys come here again?”

“We discovered what Blackice does,” says Harry.

“The arms manufacturer? What’s there to discover? They manufacture a bunch of fucking weapons so assholes can kill other assholes. What else is there to know?”

“Oh, a lot.”

“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 scooch my chair closer to the kitchen table, “Come closer.”

In hushed voices, I tell them all about the hit and run and our adventures leading to this very meeting.

“Holy Jesus,” says Eiza, when I’m done.

“And it’s all in here?” asks Hailey.

Even though I’m not sure, I answer a resolute, “Yes.”

“When did you decide to be a transhumanist, Hailey?” says Jim as 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.”

“He said that?”

“He did. Can you decrypt it? We think it contains info that could end this stupid war—for good.”

“Pardon me if I’m skeptical about that claim, but sure, we’ll help. Eiza, what do you think?”

“You’ll need an F-13 reader for this thing. Do you know the password?”

“No.”

\*\*\*

Night Teegan settles to try to open it

Laura cant sleep she joins Teegan

Doodle of 9 stripes

Laura knows history because she spent so much time reading

Points to nested dolls

She they figure it together

Shit. It’s a T-2090

What the fuck is that?

It’s a military grade storage device. Once open, you can plug into a computer port.

Well can you open it?

Well that depends. These devices activate via brain waves.

She puts on a brainwave monitor and adjusts the little electrode so it touches her temple.

So, what is it she says excitedly?

We look at each other. We don’t know.

What you mean you don’t know?

Well we don’t.

Shit. We have 10 minutes before the device self-destructs. You guys better think fast. Hailey removes the monitor. We will never get it open. They’re could be a billion possible passwords.

How about forcing it open with pliers?

Yeah

There’s a self-destruct mechanism.

Thinks of the device like an egg. The shell is in metal; the white is an acid and the yolk is the data

Shit. We’re screwed.

Do you remember anything at all?

People’s liberties are at stake. Children are suffering.

Harry puts on the monitor. He closes his eyes and thinks. After a moment, a faint blue glow appears in the middle section put it fades away.

What were you thinking? Sons of Liberty

That was the historical name back in the 18th century. Give me the monitor.

I put it on. I have a hunch. A strong hunch. The world as a long way to go still to consider women equally but I am sure, whoever has formed this secret organization would have modernized the name. I think children of Liberty. A blue rim appears, the top portion unscrews all by itself.

Laura claps, Jim gives a high five to Hailey, harry comes over and gives me a hug.

Woohoo we did it.

Hailey picks up the device. She can now insert the connector in the center of the bottom of the device to a cable. She types a few commands on her virtual keyboard.

A text appears. Accompanied by numerous photos.

We all hunch over Hailey to read what it says.

Dear Jacob,

Andrew Scott, Congressman for Pennsylvania, has been pictured having an illicit affair with numerous local women as documented with the evidence herein. I believe we could blackmail the congressperson into promoting Bill 402, which, as you know, would …

“Fuck. This is it? ” This is it?”

Jim looks at me, furious. “We risked our lives for this?” Jim pushes my shoulder.

“Jim stop it! Teegan couldn’t have known.”

Laura defends Teegan

He bangs his fist on the table.

I can’t believe this is it the person was escaping with it she said it contained a petabyte of data. They sent 12 helicopters to capture use. Nano-mosquitoes. This can’t just be about an illicit affair. “Hailey, are you sure there’s nothing else in there?”

She opens the folder. It contains exactly on text item, the one we just read and eight pictures of the congressperson in the company of a woman I presume is not his wife at various restaurants, coffee shops, and romantic places.

“Nope that’s it.”

“Show me the images.” One of them contains nested dolls. Why? All of the other ones contain a picture of the congressman and a woman.

It’s the odd man out.

Zoom in on the picture.

Why

Just do it

The doll opens up revealing a smaller identical doll

Maybe Laura does this?

Nested dolls … something containing something.

Are you sure there’s no subdirectory, Hailey.

Of course I am sure. I’m an expert

Oh wait.

See the images there’s sizes are all about 50KB all except this one. The picture with the dolls is 1.2patabyte.

The 3D image must contain the data.

She makes the image float like a hologram. She spins it around.

Pawn shop Laura points her little finger here what’s this

There’s a computer terminal inside the pawnshop and old school piece of shit

Zoom in. What does it say?

“It says ‘Zolbar is the greatest wizard.’”

Think it using the brainwave monitor

The images all turn to pixelated dust. A second layer is revealed.

A series of file marked secret and confidential

Blackice dossier – 20 years of deception

Hailey waves her hand and an animated text file opens.

Executive Summary

This organization has been playing us for fools. You will find proof that they financed left and right wing extremist groups and pushed Texas to secede which ultimately led to the second civil war. Not only that, but they are selling weapons to both sides. The DarkDawn weapons used by the URD are almost identical to the RebelTech used by the Resistance.

To add insult to injury, Blackice has been influencing most of the battles fought on U.S. soil.

The ubiquitous Blackice weapons are secretly internet-enabled allowing them to be controlled remotely. Using a backdoor access, they can alter the firing rate, make the weapon jam, make the weapon heat up, or shut it off completely, as wells as slow down an exoskeleton suit, etc. They also have a backdoor to the flotilla of drones that films the battlefield so that they can see what is going on. The experts that monitor and influence the battle results are nicknamed “Battle Masters.” They use this capability discreetly and sparingly. Their goal, and after 5 years, clearly, we can say they have been successful, is to have a never-ending war.

There is a major battle happening on April 24. Remember? How my good it’s going to be a massacre.

With the backdoor we could stop it we could jam all the weapons we could get them to talk!

Hailey can we hack the weapons from your computer?

No you need to be fairly close and in a command center.

Shit

Lets go to the battle site, infiltrate the command center and kill these fuckers.

The battle is in Philadelphia.

There’s an Hyperion train who runs from Dallas to Phillies.

We cant just a board a train like that; we need tickets.

You can get some from the black market not too far from here. That’s where I got my gear.

So we need 4 tickets ventures Laura wanting to be part of the conversation

Laura, you cant come with us. Hailey could you take care of her.

Harry takes Laura by the shoulders. “Are you okay to stay with Hailey?”

She nods. “Are you sure you won’t speak to me, Lolo? I would very much like it if you would speak 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. “We’ll deliver the video to the Senate and as soon as we’re done, I’ll come and get you, and 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?”

“Let’s stay in touch using our anonymous email accounts.”

“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 goes to 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 gently takes her hand and they head to the car.

I go behind Harry and wrap my arms around his waist. “She’ll be okay.”

“Safer than with us, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah. I’m a real shit magnet,” I say.

“It’s just us now. It feels strange.”

“I know, 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.

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.” For the U.S. bicentennial, the city planted a “moon tree.” (That is, a tree grown from a seed taken on the Apollo 14 mission.)

Closed in 1989 due to low ridership and safety concerns after nearly 60 years in service, SEPTA’s Spring Garden Street Station on the Broad-Ridge Spur is now an abandoned mecca for graffiti artists and urban explorers alike, who are arguably the only people showing the old station any love.

In total, The Broad-Ridge Spur includes the Spring Garden, Fairmount, Race-Vine and Market Street stops. And while today both the Race-Vine and Market Street stops exist in some new/updated form, the Spring Garden stop is completely non-operational and the Fairmount stop, while still partially open, has been left fairly untouched. In our exploration, it looked as though at least half the Fairmount station’s platform was closed to the public. (The half photographed here.)

Where is the resistance in Philly? They have set up a operations command center in an abandoned subway station.

The URF troops are stationed downtown.

The resistance will be arriving by subway and trains as well as elevated trains and commuter/light-rail lines.

Letterkenny Army Depot Army Base in Chambersburg, PA

The resistance wants to capture this depot take control of Philly and stop hiding from the trenches. They are also planning a similar operation in Chicago

Resistance arriving by freight train. YES OFFICIAL

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?”

Possibly re-use train station roof climb to get to VTOL aircraft, which is located on top of a roof.

Story beats

How to find vtol?

Command center is in a primary school. Truck is parked next to it. Contrast kids drawings a and computer displaying war images

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

Internet-dark-mystic

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 SMS to 1000.

Her father has escaped prison and is nowhere to be found.

Reactions:

From Feds/Chinese 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 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

I’m sitting next to a workbench, the BrainWayv on the table, the device, a pencil and a pad of paper. The paper is filled with of odds and bits I find might be relevant.

What the hit and run victim was wearing, what she said,

The fact she said I’m sorry as he gave it to me. She knew that she was putting my life in danger.

I doodle the 9 red strips I saw on her nanotats

I am discouraged. I tried about a 1000 words.

Laura comes and sits next to me.

She takes a pencil and writes Cant sleep?

No. She draws a sad emoji on the paper

You cant sleep either

No bad dreams

Sorry. I am so sorry I got all of you involved in this mess

I am not.

I am surprised.

Better this then being stuck alone in concord with no friends

Wow I didn’t expect that

We will leave tomorrow I think I’ll head out to no mans land

In California

Yes

Am I coming?

It depends about harry.

I give Laura a hug. What’s great about giving a hug is that you can’t give one with getting one back

What’s this?

Oh that’s a nanotat the girl had I think it was meant to be turned off but it blinked on and off a few times, probably because of the accident

Laura looks at me excitedly

It’s the flag for the sons of liberty

What?

American history. The secret society was formed to protect the rights of the colonists.

I am so excited I am sure this is it. I put on the BrainWayv. I think sons of liberty

Nothing happens. Laura makes a sad emoji.

I remove the Brainwayv.

Laura takes it. It takes a few moments to calibrate to her brain.

She is thinking.

A blue glow emanates from the center

The MacGuffin opens the top falls revealing a smaller device with a connector

You did it Laura!

I kiss her on the forehead.

Hailey does 3 things maybe robot helps

1. resets their SMS so they can buy train tickets. This will last only a few hours
2. gives them a one time jam weapons in vicinity device

They take the Hyperion to Philly. They get to the central station.

Hyperion almost cancelled

Arrival at train station in Philly

1. either empty with a few families panicking people because last minute. Fear of ransacking and riots

Help from haily to find command center:

1. GPS location of a few good landing spots scouted in petabyte first location will have no one cc will be in second location battle will have started by then so tough to get there

Cavalcade Hailey - members are also neo-luddites no tech confiscates

See hailey at cavalcade

Go to black market (just Teegan and harry and maybe jim?) hailey knows where it is

Go back to see hailey with brainwayv

Open macguffin

Leave for hyperion (just Teegan and harry and maybe jim?)

Go to phillie

Go to gps 1 – no one there

Battle starts

Go to gps 2 – command center is there

Morcellement radioactive, chemical, mines biological you need a map to find safe passage

Either cavalcade, safe house (for hackers), abandoned factory

To go or not to black market

The Children of Liberty talk to Teegan and Harry via a holopublicity. If they located them, so will the bad guys. The Children of liberty give them some info.

**Hailey at Cavalcade:**

Does she have her own vehicle?

* If she has a Triumph motorcycle, she can lend it to Teegan and Harry to that they can reach the black market

Do all Cavalcade vehicle have their GPS disabled?

She sleeps in a tent or in a barn.

The Cavalcade uses a few school buses to move people who don’t have their own vehicle.

\*\*\*

See Cavalcade on the road during stop. Jesus flag, fish, USA flags. Blessed by god, none of their members has ever been killed by the war ever.

Or car breaks down in the cavalcade give them a lift Kurt’s speech on tape, flyer in back seat, magazine in back seat girl’s speech as she yaps away during ride. Were you guys going Rialto. Humm the black market I suppose. yeah

It’s Jim’s excited voice that wakes me sometime later. “The Cavalcade! Oh my God! We’ve run into the Cavalcade!”

I sit up straight, rubbing my eyes. “The what?”

“The Cavalcade. You know, the cult my sister’s in. We have to stop.”

We’ve just reached the top of a hill and, from my vantage point, I can see that the country road we’re on leads to a small, rural town about a mile away. An electronic road panel riddled with bullet holes reads *Barrel Town—12 day(s) without military interventions. Curfew in Force at 10 p.m.* The town is located on the other side of a narrow river winding its way through a series of rolling hills. Just before the river, to my right, I notice about a hundred vehicles of all sorts parked in an abandoned cornfield. An old farmhouse stands at the end, all boarded up. There’s a barn next to it. Its rooftop has a lone star painted over a blue square. The whole place is a semi-organized chaos of streamlined motorcycles, jacked-up cars, and pimped-out vans. A number of 18-wheelers form a semi-circle. Each has a label painted on its side: Hospital, School, Supplies, and Cafeteria. Beyond the parking area is a sea of tents and canopies. Wow, I didn’t realize the Cavalcade had so many members.

“What a stroke of luck,” says Harry, who’s just as amazed as I am by the sight in front of us.

I’m guessing it’s late afternoon. The sun is now almost in front of us. And then it hits me—we’ve been driving west, not east the whole time.

“Wait a minute. That wasn’t luck. Jim, you lead us here!”

I turn to Harry. “Look at the sun, Harry. We’re heading west, not east.”

“What the hell, Jim! What’s going on?”

“I had to do it. I have to save my sister.” Jim pulls over and parks the car on the side of the road.

“How could you do this without consulting us?” asks Harry.

“With the time pressure mounting to reach D.C., you would’ve said no,” says Jim, looking down.

“Your best friend would’ve said no if you asked him for help? That's how much you think of me?” says Harry, stabbing a finger at Jim.

“So where are we?” I ask, trying to assess the time lost.

“Near the New Mexico border,” mumbles Jim.

“We’ve wasted at least a half-a-day. That leaves us only a day and a half to reach D.C.,” I say.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Harry bangs his fist on the car seat. Laura quivers in fear. Harry stops as soon as he realizes the impact he’s having on her and forces a smile on his face.

Jim gets out of the car and slams the door. “You would’ve done the same for Laura,” he shouts. “Here, keep the car.” He throws the key fob on Harry’s lap.

Harry takes a deep breath before looking at me. He’s seeking my approval. I don’t hesitate. I know I’m risking our window of opportunity, but Jim deserves our help. He risked his life for me on Memorial Bridge. I nod. Harry then looks at Laura. This is the first time I see Harry ask for her opinion. A proud smile appears on Laura’s face. She folds her arms and nods assent as if she had just authorized a covert operation in the Middle East. Harry throws the key fob back at Jim who catches it.

“What?”

“We’ll help you.”

“You will?

“Of course, dumbass. We’re family, remember? And family members stay loyal to each other through thick and thin. But never—and I mean never—pull another stunt like that again. Got it?”

“I’m sorry I misled you,” says Jim as he gets back in the car. “My sister—other than you guys—she’s all I’ve got. And she’s with this creep who nicknames himself Moses. She thinks she’s badass and all, but she’s just a vulnerable kid. And she’s sick. Very sick. I’ll do anything to save her.”

“We’ll do what we can. Go and park over there.” Harry points at the edge of the parking lot.

Laura is relieved that the drama is over. She’s now staring curiously at the sprawling chaos of vehicles, tents, and people ahead of us. I wonder what brings them all together in a cornfield in the middle of nowhere.

Jim drives to the location that Harry pointed out earlier. As we get out of the car, I look around. I’ve never seen this many American flags; they’re plastered everywhere. Folks from the nearby town are trickling in. As we follow the growing crowd toward the center of the Cavalcade, I notice a big banner hanging between two poles. It reads *“Welcome to all. Free BBQ tonight.”*

As we pass under the banner, a man thrusts a leaflet into my hand before I can refuse. Idly, I glance at the headlines: *How to Welcome Jesus into your Life; Why Climate Change is a Hoax;* and my favorite so far, *How Satan is Testing your Faith with Dinosaur Bones.* God, what has Hailey gotten herself into? I toss the leaflet.

Some townsfolk take it and smile, feigning interest, but I’m pretty sure that they came for the free food and not to find a personal savior. Texas has been hit hard by the martial law imposed after the Civil War, so who would say no to a free meal? I must admit it smells amazing—spicy BBQ ribs or something. Smart. This is a great way to attract new converts. Much better than their leaflet idea. God, I can’t believe the smell is making me hungry again after how much I stuffed myself at the Mexican restaurant.

So far everyone I’ve seen is dressed with style. Although poor, they’re incredibly resourceful and creative; they’ve reused household items like drapes to make skirts or handbags, cutlery has been shaped into jewelry, potato sacks have been turned into shorts, and velvet used for accessories. A lot of women are sporting scarves while some of the young guys are wearing suspenders. 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.

“We should split up,” says Harry. “I’ll go to the hospital with Laura and see if I can get her checked.”

“I’ll try to find Hailey,” says Jim.

“And … I’ll do absolutely nothing. I’ll just hang around here and soak up some rays.”

“Okay. Let’s meet back in an hour by the fire pit,” says Harry.

“Hey, guys, before you go, I’ve been thinking. Call me Mary in public. Teegan is a pretty rare name. I know the URF believes us all dead, but still, let’s not take chances.”

“I’ll try not to forget,” replies Harry. He takes Laura’s hand and heads for the truck with the red cross. Jim darts away, and I soon lose sight of him in the crowd.

I meander through the ever-growing crowd. I get quite a few stares, probably because of my Chinese looks. A few stands sell contraband cigarettes. Music is playing from a boom box. I recognize the song: it’s Neil Diamond’s *Sweet Caroline*. It brings a smile to my face. By the looks of it, the Cavalcade has been in this location for a few days.

A group of women is hanging laundry to dry on improvised clotheslines, chatting idly. As I walk by, one of them, a redhead, stares at me with a look of disgust.

“Damn chink! God will never forgive you for invading our country.”

“No, Emma. God is just,” intervenes another girl about my age. “We got what we deserved.”

She turns to me and smiles, trying to make amends for her friend. “Don’t listen to her. You’re the messengers God sent to punish us. We don’t hate you. How could we hate God’s messengers? That’d be crazy.”

The redhead spits at my feet and stomps away.

“Oh my gosh! I’m so sorry,” exclaims her friend. “She hasn’t been with us long that’s why she hates you. She doesn’t understand that you’re part of the master plan. Kurt, he told us.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, you being Chinese and all.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” I ask, feeling more and more annoyed.

“God sent the Chinese to punish us. You know, ‘cause we lost our way.” She tilts her head backward and puts on a smile, “So thank you.”

Whoa. These guys scare me more than Grayson, and that’s saying something. I don’t reply, trying to cut the conversation short. I just want some ribs and to get away from here, but the girl won’t shut up.

“We’ve decided to be nomads until the Lord brings us to the Land of Canaan.”

I had promised myself I wouldn’t drag on the conversation, but I ask, “The land of what?”

“You know, the land of milk and honey, the Promised Land. We’re so lucky to have Kurt as our shepherd, and he’s so dreamy. He is …” Without waiting for her to finish her sentence, I flutter my fingers and leave. I’ve had enough of this.

I wander around a bit more. As I near the 18-wheelers, a burly man with long hair and a bandana rolls down the back door of a truck. Just before it closes, I spot a large military crate with a ground-to-air missile logo stamped on its side. The man notices me. He looks at me for a moment as if to memorize my face before going on as if nothing had happened. Hmm. I wonder what they’re up to. I’m in enough trouble as it is so I ignore what I just saw and hurry back to the fire pit.

When I arrive, Jim is already there, shoulders hunched forward and arms crossed. I’m guessing bad news.

“So, did you find her?” I ask, sitting next to him.

“She’s here and she’s with Kurt.” He spits out the preacher’s name with disgust. “Folks say that he nicknamed Haley his “white angel.” Makes me want to barf.”

“Did you get to talk to her?”

“No. They’re away giving an interview somewhere. They’ll be back after supper. The wannabe Moses is giving a sermon to his flock tonight.”

Jim lets his arms drop. I rub his back, trying to comfort him. “We’re resourceful. We’ll find a way.”

Just as Jim is about to reply, Harry and Laura arrive.

“Hi guys,” says Harry. Laura has a fresh white cotton bandage around her waist. Her face looks like it’s been cleaned up too.

“Amazing, but they have a real doctor and nurse working in that 18-wheeler,” says Harry. “They were very nice to Laura. They disinfected her wounds, gave her clean bandages, and even treated her to a lollypop.”

Harry sits down next to us with Laura on his lap.

“But man, they’re hardcore. There was a poster saying, *Ask us how we can cure your homosexuality.*”

“Believe me, I’ve noticed,” I say, thinking about my encounter in the queue.

\*\*\*

We spend the rest of the afternoon in a somber mood. Harry tries to get Laura to talk but without success, Jim is worried stiff about Hailey, and as for me, I try not to think about Adrian. At sunset, we get some BBQ. The portion is small, but the food is delicious. We have a quiet supper. Crimson and golden lights bathe the surrounding hills. As I gaze at the changing hues, I become aware that the conversations around me have fallen silent. A Cavalcade member douses the log pile in the center of the pit with gasoline before dropping a match—the fire roars to life. The preacher is coming.

A man and a girl descend from the hilltop. I’ve never seen them before, but I’m sure one is Kurt and the other is Hailey. When Jim sees his sister, he leaps up from his seat eager to race to her, but Harry, more levelheaded, forcefully sits him back down. “Not now. I’m sure the man wouldn’t want his little dog and pony show interrupted.” Jim grudgingly agrees.

Hailey stops and stands on a rock like a statue. Her long blonde hair is floating in the wind. She’s wearing a semi-transparent veil on top of a plain linen dress. The veil billows in the evening breeze. She’s beautiful like an angel, frail like a tree after a long harsh winter. Her face is deathly pale. Hailey is sick—it doesn’t take a doctor to see that.

Her ashen face contrasts wildly with Kurt’s, which is tanned. His eyes are both penetrating and mocking like he had you all figured out. His hair, wheat blonde and shoulder length, gives him a boyish charm. With his white t-shirt, blue jeans, and motorcycle boots, he looks more like a rock star than a preacher, but I think Hailey’s right—he’s a hunk. I let out a sigh. Jim catches me staring, and I feel a heated blush rise in my cheeks. Fortunately, Harry doesn’t notice. Kurt uses a gnarly wooden staff to help keep his equilibrium as he comes down the hilltop, but it’s for show; he doesn’t need it to go down the gentle hill. He pans the crowd as he walks, acknowledging everyone and even calling a few by name. He halts when he reaches a flat ledge.

“I’ve been to the mountaintop!” His voice is clear and powerful. “I’ve been to the mountaintop to meditate on the great peril that threatens our once great country. I went to the far side of the wilderness and climbed Bush Mountain, here in Texas. There, the Angel of the Lord appeared to me from within a mesquite, all draped in flames. I saw that though the tree was on fire, it did not burn up. And thought, I will go over and see this strange sight.

And as I approached, God called to me from within the tree, ‘Kurt! Kurt!’

And I said, ‘Here I am.’

‘Do you know why the mesquite does not burn?’

‘No, I do not.’

‘Because the tree is like America. It can never die out. It will never be consumed. It will stand forever. Now, do not come any closer,’ God said. ‘Take off your boots, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.’ Then he said, ‘I am the God of your father and the God of Americans.’ At this, I hid my face, because I was afraid and humbled to look at God.”

A surge of heat hits me. Worried, I spin around. I find that the bonfire has tripled in size. I move back so as not to get singed. Chaotic flames with tints of violet and blue are now leaping high in the sky. A rumor of ohs and ahs wash upon the crowd. “It’s a miracle,” says one. “It’s a prophetic sign,” comments another, “He’s the Chosen One,” shouts yet another. But Kurt ignores the comments and continues his speech with renewed verve.

“I’ve been to the mountaintop. And there, I took off my boots, and the good Lord said to me, ‘You know I love America, but you have lost your way. You have forgotten the Holy Scriptures and I had to act. I had to punish America for its sins. And so the Chinese came to rule this land I had given to you. Do not hate the Chinese; they’re a reminder of how far off the path you have gotten.’ And then he said to me, ‘Kurt, you are tending my flock and you are true to the Bible. I have watched over you and seen your faith. And I have promised to make America great again. Under your leadership, America will transform into a land flowing with milk and honey.’”

Kurt raises his arms high above his head, gripping his staff. “Heed the words of your Lord. Together, you and I, we will make this land great again.” Kurt shakes his staff above his head. “We will make *our* land great again!”

The crowd rises to their feet. The new Moses is given a standing ovation. People clap and shout amen and hallelujah. Hailey looks at Kurt, unconcealed admiration in her eyes. With his white angel in tow, Kurt touches a few hands and foreheads before being ushered away by what can only be described as his bouncers.

“What a rousing speech,” I say, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

“I’ll follow Hailey,” says Jim as he gets up.

“Wait until she’s alone before talking to her,” says Harry.

“I will. Wish me luck.” Jim disappears into the crowd.

“She’s not going to come,” I say to Harry when Jim’s gone.

“Why do you say that?” Even Laura is watching me, curious to know my answer.

“I can see it in her eyes. She’s infatuated.”

\*\*\*

We decide to stay by the fire pit while waiting for Jim to return. The sky is glittering with stars. There are so many—it’s wonderful. In Shanghai, I would hardly see any because of the perpetual smog. As I’m pointing out the Orion constellation to Laura, I hear footsteps next to me.

“Hey guys, catch!” Someone throws a couple of marshmallow bags in our direction. I catch one.

“Woohoo! It’s marshmallow night,” shouts the black kid to the side of me. He turns to the man sitting next to him. “Dad, I knew joining them was a good idea.” The kid is positively delighted. He has a 3-D printed prosthetic arm—the cheap version that’s not fully articulated. The scars of war really are everywhere.

Harry turns to Laura and me. “Let me get you some sticks.” He goes off and scavenges for a few green branches we can use to roast our marshmallows. When he returns, he says to Laura, “Only a true marshmallow maestro like me can achieve the ideal combination of silken, frothy interior and crisp, slightly caramelized outer skin. Let me show you, my young apprentice.” Harry is amazing—even if Laura is not speaking or engaging with him, he’s not giving up on her. He pokes a marshmallow on Laura’s stick and instructs her on how to roast it.

I poke my own and begin to roast it slowly. My marshmallow becomes too hot and falls into the ashes of the fire. As I poke with my stick to pick it up again, I hear a metallic clank. Curious, I shove some of the ash aside with the tip of my stick and discover something buried. *I knew it!* I tell myself. I quickly cover the object back with ashes, thinking, *This will prove useful.*

\*\*\*

As I nibble on my second marshmallow, I listen to the soothing sounds of the crackling fire. Once in a while, a gust of wind causes the flames to flare up. The kid opposite me is tearing pages off a magazine and feeding them to the fire. As he does so, he stops and stares at a page.

“Hey! There’s an article on New America.”

“Not sure what they have to talk about,” says a young woman in a torn jacket. “The place is an urban legend.”

“No, it’s not,” says the kid with the magazine.

“And how would you know?”

“My uncle James, he got the silver coin a few months ago and now he’s gone.”

“Don’t believe you.”

“It’s true. He was a real patriot.”

“He’s gone because you smell,” snickers the lanky teen sitting next to the young woman.

“No, for real.” He lowers his voice conspiratorially. “He was working for the Resistance.”

“They say there’s no Wi-Fi or internet in New America,” says the teen. “How can you be sure he ever found it? Plus once you enter, you can never leave.”

“Yeah, it’s like in the song, ‘Hotel California’,” says the young woman.

“But he never came back. He would’ve come home if he didn’t find it. My cousins, they miss their dad. Cross my heart and hope to die. It’s true.”

“Right, like the time you told us you went to the river with Sarah to …” The teen stops midsentence when he notices me listening.

*What are these guys talking about?* “Can I see the magazine?” I ask.

The kid hands it to me, happy someone is paying attention to what he’s saying. It’s been a while since I’ve had a printed copy of anything in my hand. Magazine is a strong word for this; it’s just a bunch of articles stapled together. I find the article the kid was talking about. There’s a picture of a bucolic valley with the caption, *New America, our very own Shangri-La.* The byline is MurderCapital.

“Harry, what’s New America?”

“I’m not sure, really. Rumor has it that it’s a hidden land where true American patriots live happy and content and are completely cut off from the troubles in the outside world. A place where they can live the true American Dream. I don’t know if it exists. Some say it’s located in a vast underground city.”

I hand the magazine to Harry. He peers at the article, trying to read the text in the growing darkness. “It’d be cool if it did. Wouldn’t mind settling there with you and Lolo.” He looks at me apprehensively as he says so. I say nothing—Adrian’s death is too close. Harry flips through a few more pages before throwing the magazine into the fire. A flurry of sparks swirls up. “I’ve read this one,” he says. It seems I’ve destroyed the mood because Harry falls silent.

\*\*\*

Jim comes back after a while. “I spoke to Hailey. She won’t come back. She’s lost weight, and she has a constant dry cough. She admitted having HIV but insists that only God can save her.” Jim waves his fist. “There’s no way I’m leaving without her. You can go on without me.”

“No, we’re staying. We’re a team, remember?” says Harry.

“Let’s go back to the car and sleep on it. I’m sure we’ll figure something out.” A plan starts to form in my head. We all get up and head to the car for a second night of uncomfortable sleep.

I close my eyes and wait patiently. When everyone is fast asleep, I leave the car and head back to the bonfire, now a bed of dying embers. I find a stick and dig out the metallic object I detected earlier. *Kurt, you wily little bastard,* I think as I unscrew the canister I found from a gas line. *A real Wizard of Oz this one.* I place it in my schoolbag. Satisfied, I head to Kurt’s motorhome. The door is ajar so I just let myself in. It’s a luxurious model with leather couches, modern electrical appliances, and a giant holo-television screen. The dead whiskey bottles on a table contrast sharply with the severe-looking crucifix nailed to the wall right above.

As I step in, Hailey sees me. She’s wearing a see-through nightgown. As she scurries to the back of the motorhome, I can see her back—it’s covered with whelps and bruises. I cringe. Is this bastard beating her?

Kurt is chatting with a beefy man, a tumbler in hand.

“Hey, Jacob, how did she come in?” asks Kurt to his friend when he notices me.

“Don’t know, boss.”

Kurt pulls a cigarette stuck in the beads of the rosary wrapped around his hatband. As soon as he approaches it to his mouth, his companion steps forward, and with one callused finger flicks the flint of a lighter. Kurt takes a long drag before looking at me.

“What can I do for you, hon? I only do blessings on Sundays.”

“Not here for the blessings, I’m here for Hailey.”

Jacob walks toward me with the clear intention of evicting me from the premises. Before he reaches me, I drop the gas canister on the ground. It rolls a few feet before stopping at Kurt’s shoes.

“Miracles, hey? Listen, Hailey has HIV. She’s going to die soon if she doesn’t get treatment. She won’t go on her own, but she will, if you order her to. So here’s the deal.” From my schoolbag, I retrieve something. “I’ll give you this diamond necklace worth upwards of sixty thousand dollars, and I’ll shut my mouth about the gas canister as a bonus, but you let Hailey go. What’s she to you anyway?”

“My, my. You’re quite the negotiator.” Kurt looks at the sparkling diamonds with avid eyes. “Hand it over.”

I hesitantly give him the necklace, which he examines in details. Hailey must have heard her name because she creeps up to the glass bead curtain in the hallway and peers at us from behind.

“We also need to get to Washington, D.C. as fast as possible.”

“The Hyperion train will get you there in under two hours,” Kurt responds, wondering where I’m going with this.

“Great. So, I’ll need five tickets for that as well.”

Kurt chuckles. “Want a cherry pie with that? The Hyperion is the most expensive and secure train in the U.S. It’s reserved for government officials and their friends. Getting tickets isn’t easy, but I know someone.”

“Who’s this guy and how can we contact him?”

“His name is Humpty Dumpty.” Hailey gasps on hearing the name. Kurt looks like he’s having too much fun now. “He controls the black market next to the New Mexico border.”

“How do we get there?”

“Hold on little girl. You’ll need to be properly introduced. Mercenaries guard the entrance. They’ll blow up your car before you can say three Hail Marys.”

“Can you introduce us?”

“Sure. For the amount you’re paying me, it’s the least I can do. I’ll have one of my men escort you there.”

I surprise him by snatching the necklace back from his greedy hands. I store it in my bag.

“All right, I’ll give you the necklace once Hailey is in the car with us. We need to leave tomorrow.”

“Prudent girl. Don’t worry. Hailey will be ready. I’ll explain why it’s best for her to reunite with her long-lost brother.”

“I’ll be sleeping in the car. It’s a yellow Mustang.”

As soon as I leave the motorhome, Kurt hollers, “Hey, Hailey, haul your cute ass over here.” All my instincts are yelling at me not to trust this man, but I have no choice. How else am I going to save Hailey?

I return to the car. Everyone is still asleep. I open the door quietly, settle in and soon fall into a restless slumber.

\*\*\*

I’m on a prairie surrounded by bottle-green grass undulating in the balmy wind. The sun is dazzling; I have to squint. There’s not a single landmark in this vast, desolate place. I don’t know how long I’ve been walking when a noise attracts my attention. I clamp my hand over my mouth—a huge beast has appeared. Its head and forequarters are massive. It has curved horns, two feet long. Its shaggy coat is white as jasmine. It grunts and I step back, alarmed. I trip over a mound of earth and fall. The buffalo snorts and shakes his head. I promptly get back up, smooth out my dress and stare right back at it. Even if it towers twice my height, even if it weighs a hundred times as much as I do, even if with a single stab of its black horns it can skewer me, I march in its direction. It now seems intrigued by my presence. It cocks its head and looks at me. Its sky-blue eyes are filled with anger and sorrow. The beast grows in front of me. It’s now as tall as a skyscraper. I gape at the beast, feeling like an ant. My dress flaps in the growing wind. The sky transforms into an oppressive black cover. Torrential rains start sweeping the plain. Cold raindrops pound on me. The beast has vanished and I’m now alone. The wind is howling. The rainwater turns the grassland into mud. I run. The mud oozes between my bare toes. It clings to the bottom of my feet when I try to lift them and makes a gurgling sound when it finally lets a foot go. Soon I’m up to my calves and cannot progress any further. Lightning bolts streak across the sky. Thunderclaps echo across the land. My heart is racing. The water level is rising unnaturally fast. I try reaching higher ground, but it’s no use. The earth itself is ready to swallow me—I know it is. In no time, the water has risen to my neck. I tilt my head to be able to continue to breathe. Just when I think I will drown, from below the ground a thousand slimy hands seize my limbs and drag me screaming into the dark bowels of the earth.

\*\*\*

I jolt awake. The dream was so vivid. It takes me a while to shake it off. I munch nervously on chips and down a soda while waiting for everyone to wake.

An hour later everyone is up. Jim wants to go back and talk to Hailey, but I tell him to stay put and that everything will be all right. Harry looks at me, wondering what’s going on, but I simply wink.

Hailey arrives late afternoon accompanied by Jacob. She’s wearing a t-shirt and a pair of daisy short shorts. A wooden crucifix dangles from her neck. She has a linen backpack scribbled in doodles. Her unlaced leather boots have been hand-painted with wildflowers.

“Hey, big brother.”

Jim can’t believe his eyes.

“I’ve changed my mind. I’ve thought about what you said, and you’re right. I need help.” She has a fit of dry coughing that lasts a lifetime. When she finally stops, she approaches Jim and gives him a big hug. As soon as they’re embracing, she gives me a death stare.

“Oh my God, you don’t know how happy this makes me,” says Jim. “I’ll take you to a clinic. We’ll fix you up.”

Jacob approaches me discreetly, “Pay up.”

I fetch my bag from the car. I have a sudden fear that my necklace has been stolen during the night, but I find it underneath the passenger seat where I left it. I hand it to the man. He peers inside. Satisfied, he says he’ll be back soon to escort us. I feel bad. I’d promised myself that I’d give the necklace to Laura someday.

“Teegan, can you please tell me what’s going on,” says Harry.

“They’re going to escort us to a black market,” I say. “Apparently there’s a man there who can get us tickets for the Hyperion train between Dallas and D.C.”

“The Hyperion? Really? It’s the fastest train in the country. We’ll get to D.C. in …”

“… two hours,” I interrupt with a hint of pride. We exchange a thundering high-five.

“Hey, Jim, did you hear that? We’re going to hitch a ride on the Hyperion.”

“Hi, Lolo,” says Hailey, waving.

Laura races to her and jumps into her open arms. “It’s been a while.” She ruffles Laura’s hair with her hand.

“They know each other?” I ask Harry.

“Yeah, Hailey use to babysit Laura when she was a toddler. Before the war.”

A Jeep drives up to our car. “Time to go,” says Jacob. “Just follow me.”

We all hop into the Mustang. Hailey squeezes between Laura and me in the back seat while Jim sits in front with Harry, who’ll be driving.

“How far to the black market?” asks Harry.

“Not sure. It’s near the New Mexico border,” I reply.

“Harry,” says Hailey. “You can’t bring Lolo there. It’s *way* too dangerous. There’s organ trafficking going on. It would be like entering Mos Eisley.”

“Stop with the obscure references, Hailey, will you,” grumbles Harry.

“Mos Eisley, you know, the cantina filled with scum and villains in *Star Wars*.” Hailey pauses to gauge our reaction. We shake our heads. “You mean none of you has ever watched *Star Wars*?”

“Hailey, you mentioned organ trafficking. What’s up?” I ask, suddenly nervous.

“I don’t know any more than that. Just that Kurt said, ‘you better watch your kidneys when you enter the place ‘cause you might not have two when you come out.’”

“Well, we don’t have a choice,” says Harry.

“I’m telling you. The black market is no place for kids. Why the hell do you need to get to D.C. anyway?”

“Don’t start giving me advice. You don’t even listen to your own brother.”

“Leave Jim out of this. He’s always playing big brother with me. He’s only two minutes older for Pete’s sake. I’m tired of people telling me what to do.”

As she says so, Hailey glares at me. If looks could kill, I’d be so dead right now.

Hailey turns to Laura. “Hey, Lolo, do you want to play a clapping game?”

Laura nods.

“Okay, we’re going to play, *Miss Mary Mack*. It goes like this:

*Miss Mary Mack Mack Mack*

*All dressed in black, black, black* …”

Lolo doesn’t speak the words but claps her hands along with Hailey.

I notice Jim gazing at his sister. He’s so happy. Now that I see them side-by-side, they do look like brother and sister. They have the same eyes.

\*\*\*

We’ve been driving northwest for almost two hours when the Jeep hangs a right onto an inconspicuous gravel road. Along the way, we encounter not one but three signs saying Do Not Enter—Radioactive Area. I point out the third one to Harry. Using spray paint, someone scribbled, “Still here?” along with a mutant monster. Harry shrugs his shoulders, but I shudder; I don’t want to grow a third arm or something. We follow the bumpy road for ten more minutes. The Jeep stops in a parking lot surrounded by rusted fences. Scrap tires and abandoned steel barrels litter the weedy, overgrown lot. In front of us, a cement staircase leads to an ugly one-story building made of concrete blocks. The whole place is hopelessly romantic.

Armed guards approach Jacob’s Jeep.

“State your business,” asks a woman who seems to be the leader of the group.

“Cavalcade,” replies Jacob. “My friends in the other car have business with Humpty Dumpty.”

The woman turns to us. “All right, you can park over there.” She points to an area under a cluster of trees. A camouflage net has been installed above to make detection from the sky harder. There must be over fifty vehicles in the lot. It looks like business is booming. We park the car and get out. Hailey waves goodbye to Jacob and joins us.

“The entrance is over there,” says a guard as he points to the north side of the building.

As we start heading in that direction, Hailey taps her pockets and says, “Wait, I forgot something in the Jeep.”

As soon as she darts toward it, I know something is wrong. She hops into the back seat and turns around to face us.

“Take care brother. Don’t presume to know what’s best for me.” The engine roars to life, drive wheels spin, and the car shoots out of the parking lot onto the gravel road. As the car exits the parking lot, Hailey hollers, “Don’t make such a sad face, Jimmy. I’ll be fine. Kurt needs me. I’m his angel.”

*That slimy, double-dealing bastard!* I think to myself.

Jim runs after the car, but there’s no way he can catch up. “No, no, no!” He shouts. He punches the nearest tree and kicks some gravel before coming back, discouraged.

Laura runs up to him and wraps her frail arms around him. After a while, he gently lowers Laura’s arms. “What would I do without you, Lolo?”

“I have to go after her,” says Jim with a determined look on his face.

“I know,” says Harry.

“She’s going to let herself die. All because of that preacher.”

“Take Laura with you,” says Harry. “She’ll be safer with you than where we’re going.”

“Okay. Lolo, will you help me save Hailey?”

She nods.

“Keep the car,” adds Harry, giving the key fob to Jim. “Teegan and I will manage.”

“And here, have some money.” I hand Jim two hundred dollars. He takes the money and puts it in his pocket.

Harry and Jim embrace, then it’s my turn to hug Jim. “Take care, Jim. I hope you get your sister out of there. Where are you going to stay?”

“I’ll see if I can crash at my cousin’s place. She’s a schoolteacher in Fort Worth. We’ll stay a few days with her and then I’ll think of a rescue plan for Hailey.”

Harry takes Laura by the shoulders. “Are you okay to go with Jim?”

She nods. “Are you sure you won’t speak to me, Lolo? I would very much like it if you would speak 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. “We’ll deliver the video to the Senate and as soon as we’re done, I’ll come and get you, and we’ll go somewhere quiet and spend time together. I promise.”

Lolo puts out her pinky. Harry entwines his little finger with hers.

“Jim?”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s stay in touch using our anonymous email accounts.”

“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 goes to 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 gently takes her hand and they head to the car.

I go behind Harry and wrap my arms around his waist. “She’ll be okay.”

“Safer than with us, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah. I’m a real shit magnet,” I say.

“It’s just us now. It feels strange.”

“I know, 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.

# Chapter 19B – Attempting to open the storage device

We descend a wide, metal staircase. A guard dressed in a deep purple uniform

# Chapter 20 – The Black Market

We descend a wide, metal staircase. A guard dressed in a deep purple uniform opens a heavy airtight door for us, and we enter the black market. It’s located in a sprawling hall the size of a football field, filled with copper pipes, brass valves, rattling compressors, rusted pulleys, and gears the size of tractor tires. Giant ceiling fans stir the torpid air. The whole place reminds me of my favorite retro futurist cartoon, *Sky Pirates of Cydonia*.

The slanted windows on top of the south wall let in sunlight. I notice that there are thick steel shutters on railings that can slide in place at a moment’s notice to block the windows. I point them out to Harry.

“It makes sense that this place would have an emergency lockdown system,” he says. “You know, in case of a nuclear leak or something.”

A hovering drone is projecting a hologram reading *Aladdin’s Cave of Wonders* with a red oriental carpet as a logo. A sign says that it’s opened 24 hours a day. The place is bustling with activity. We make our way through the crowd. Stands have been set up in every conceivable space. The ones nearest to me sell food: chicken skewers, piping hot chili, beef jerky, and coffee. An old luggage cart is used to sell moonshine. The next row of merchants sells weapons, from pepper-spray guns and electroshock weapons to sawed-off shotguns and portable missile launchers. Another offers a service to remove the built-in tracking device all cars have. An essential, if you don’t want the government to track your every move. The cybercafé right next to it rents accounts by the minute that allow you to surf the internet anonymously. Wow, this place combines in a single convenient location all the services and products the government doesn’t want you to have access to. No wonder the black market has its own guards policing the place.

As we meander through the market, gunshots make me jump in surprise. Panicked, I spin around to see a guard drag a URF soldier using the chain fastened around his captive’s neck. He’s holding a smoking assault rifle in his other hand.

“We caught a live one, folks,” he hollers for everyone to hear. “This nosy little bugger was hidden in the bushes spying on us with a telephoto camera.”

The captive is greeted with jeers and hoots from the crowd. People shout obscenities at him.

“We’ll show him what happens when you don’t mind your own business.”

The guard shoves the man in the middle of the circle of onlookers that has formed around them.

“Dance for us.”

He shoots at the prisoner’s feet, making him hop from one foot to the other to avoid the bullets, drawing cheers from the crowd. After firing a dozen times, the guard jerks the man toward him with the chain.

“You know what happened to the last guy who spied on us?”

The prisoner shakes his head, visibly afraid. The man nods to a basketball hoop set high on the far wall. What at first glance I take to be a basketball is, in fact, a severed head stuck in the net. Disgusting. These guys are no better than the URF. I shudder. If they knew I was General Pershing’s daughter, they would shred me to pieces.

“You see, my friends and I, we play a game,” the guard continues, happy to have an audience. “Once we have severed your head from your shoulders, we’ll try to dunk it in the basket from that line marked on the floor. Each time we miss, we take a whiskey shot, and the more sloshed we become, the more we miss. I’m afraid your head is going to have quite a few dents by the time we’re done. But eventually, we’ll get it in. Isn’t that right, folks?” More cheers from the crowd.

I grab Harry’s elbow and pull him away from the growing throng.

“Let’s find our man and get out of this horrible place.”

As we leave, the captive cries out defiantly, “The Ministry knows about this place. They’ll … they’ll come for me,” he adds after a moment, his voice now uncertain.

“Let’s ask around,” says Harry. “Somebody is bound to know him.” We walk up to a weapon counter.

“What can I help you with?” asks a burly man getting up from his stool. He only has one good ear, the other one looks like it’s been sliced off and what remains of it, looks like faded cabbage.

“We’re looking for someone,” says Harry. “He goes by the name of Humpty Dumpty. Know where we can find him?”

“If you buy something from me, I might.” He leans his massive frame over the counter. “I have hunting rifles for sale today,” he says, baring yellowed teeth. “You should get one to protect your little Chinese sweetheart.” He stares at me with barely concealed contempt in his eyes.

I pull on Harry’s shirt. “Come on. We’ll find someone else.”

“Suit yourself,” grumbles the man.

As we leave, a girl in her early twenties spots us. She’s wearing deep red lipstick the color of a sports car and mile-high shoes. She pulls down her blouse exposing a cleavage the size of Hoover Dam and struts toward us, chewing gum. Once next to us, she tugs on Harry’s sleeve. “Hey, big boy, looking for a good time?”

Now that she’s closer, I notice a tight-fitting electronic collar wrapped around her neck and fastened with a tiny padlock. She’s clutching her studded plastic hand purse as if her life depended on it.

“Not interested,” says Harry.

The girl turns to me. “What’s your name, pretty one?” she says, caressing my arm. I resist an urge to bat her hand away.

“My name is Teegan. What’s yours?”

“You can call me whatever you like, hon. If you’re short on inspiration, you can call me Chloe.”

“Maybe you can help us, Chloe. We’re looking for someone. His name is Humpty Dumpty.”

On hearing the name, she shudders. The girl casts a nervous glance behind her shoulder before replying, “Believe me, sister, you don’t want to find him.”

“But we must,” I reply.

Chloe purses her mouth in distaste as she spits, “He’s a real sleazeball.”

“And how would you know?” asks Harry.

“I work for him.”

She turns around and pauses. For a moment, I think she’s going to leave, but she lifts her hair, revealing the words, *Property of Vermin Co.* tattooed in neat black and silver letters on the back of her neck. Wow, he’s branded her like livestock.

“But we really need to see him,” Harry insists.

Chloe shakes her head in disgust. “Fine.” She gives me the once-over as if to assess how pretty I am.

“Whatever you do, Teegan, never be alone with that man. You hear me?”

She then pokes her finger in Harry’s chest. “And you! You make sure of that, okay?” Harry nods, surprised by her insistence.

“So where can we find him?”

She lets out a sigh of exasperation at our stubbornness. “If you must, you’ll find him six floors down. I’d take the stairs if I were you. The cage elevator reeks of cat piss.”

Chloe’s electronic collar vibrates unexpectedly. She arches her back and staggers in pain briefly under an electric shock. Her hand goes instinctively to her neck, but the collar is too secure, and she can’t yank it off. She turns around. A mean-looking woman who I guess is her pimp is nodding her head as if saying, stop wasting time and get back to work.

“All right, all right, I’m coming. I *hate it* when she does that,” she says, teeth clenched, to no one in particular.

I put my hand on her shoulder for comfort, but she brushes it off. “Occupational hazard, honey. Just one of the many perks of my wonderful job.”

She puts her work smile back on and leaves.

\*\*\*

Harry and I find the entrance to the stairwell leading to the floors below. A rusted sign on the door reads *Caution—Radioactive Materials*. Not reassuring.

After going down six flights of stairs, I start to wonder at the extent of the place. It seems as if much more is underground than above the surface. We walk down a constricted tunnel that goes on and on. My breath feels shallow as I think of the tons of rock separating me from the open sky. We cross a metallic footbridge spanning a vertiginous chasm full of old piping. This section, so far underground, was probably used to store the more dangerous substances. Somehow, it seems appropriate that Humpty Dumpty would have his base of operations here. A reinforced metal door blocks our passage. Next to it, an armed guard straightens up as he sees us approach.

“Cavalcade,” says Harry to the guard. “We’ve got business with Humpty Dumpty.”

I observe the guy discreetly as he punches in a code on a panel and the door rotates open.

*120994. Might be useful to memorize,* I tell myself.

We find Humpty Dumpty sitting on a lounger, itself on a maglev podium that gives the impression that he’s floating on air. He’s morbidly obese. He has more chins than I have fingers on my hand. His shaved head gleams with a sheen of perspiration. His face is pockmarked and his cheeks flaccid.

He’s surrounded by holographic screens plastered in blinking messages, all screaming for his attention. Using sausage fingers covered with gaudy rings, Humpty Dumpty jerks a joystick to move the podium from one screen to another like a hornet gathering pollen from flowers for its larval offspring. The whole room smells of the rotten death of a jock’s gym bag.

A scantily clad girl kneels against him. She’s in a skirt so short the fabric would hardly be big enough for me to blow my nose in. She’s baring her midriff in a knotted tank top. The same electronic collar I saw Chloe wear upstairs is wrapped tight around her neck. Her head lies slumped on his lap. She can't be older than twenty. He’s petting her curly pink hair like she’s a shaggy dog.

Humpty Dumpty has noticed our presence but for the moment decides to ignore us. He opens a pearl-like container on one of his rings. He flips his hand and empties pink powder on the back of his other hand. He pinches some of it, sticks out his tongue and sprinkles the powder on it. He then lets his hand fall to the side. The girl greedily licks off what remains of the iridescent drug from the man’s hand. She notices me watching. She glares back at me, daring me to judge her. Her eyes dart to Harry and linger on him languorously before returning to me. Do I sense jealousy?

The electronic board to my left is displaying the current market price for organs:

* Pair of Eyeballs: $1,525
* Scalp: $607
* Skull with Teeth: $1,200
* Kidney: $262,000
* …

The list goes on. God, is he also into organ trafficking? Chloe was right—this man redefines the word sleaze. I feel dirty just looking at him. I find the man so revolting that I turn around to leave. Harry catches my arm and forces me to stay.

He steps forward. “Kurt said you could help us.”

With a flick of his joystick, the podium moves forwards and stops with a jerk just in front of us. “I can help anyone. For a price.”

“We need two pairs of biometric contact lenses and two Hyperion tickets from Dallas to D.C.”

“And why would I help you with any of that?”

“We have money.” I pull out a wad of cash from my money belt. “I have four thousand dollars.”

The man breaks into a wheezy chortle of amusement. The girl next to him raises her head slightly as waves of laughter jiggle the flab on his body.

“I’ll put in an extra five hundred dollars,” I add quickly seeing how unimpressed he is.

“You insult me. Fake identities and tickets for the most secure train in the U.S. That would cost twenty thousand dollars. Not a penny less.”

I’m almost relieved that we don’t have enough money. I don’t want to deal with this man. But as we start to leave, he shouts, “Wait!”

We stop in our tracks and turn around. He leans forward and squints. Do I see a flicker of recognition in his beady eyes? Does he know who I am?

“I’ll help you,” he says, waving his hand benevolently.

“You will?” I ask, skeptical.

“I need the money. I need all the money I can get. Krystal, get the machine out, we need their base curve and diameter for the contact lenses.”

Krystal sighs and forces herself up. With shoulders hunched forward, she staggers to an ophthalmic machine and turns it on.

“Come over here,” she says, in a dazed voice.

I approach. She shoves my forehead against the instrument. I hear a beep. “You can go,” she says, with a sharp tug on my hair. This girl really doesn’t like me.

She turns to Harry, “Your turn.” She guides him gently against the machine. She glides her hand along his back and totally unnecessarily touches his neck feigning to make micro adjustments to his position. If she doesn’t stop doing that soon, I’m going to slap her. *Harry’s my boyfriend,* I catch myself thinking. Well, I’m not sure yet, but he might be, so it’s all the same. Impatient and annoyed, I press the button for her. The machine beeps. Krystal gives me an ugly stare. I just grin back. “All done,” I say as I pull on Harry’s shirt.

Humpty Dumpty taps the side of his lounger a few times. Disgruntled, Krystal goes back and resumes her kneeling position. Humpty Dumpty goes to a monitor and curls his lips into a smile that gives me the creeps.

“I have all the data I need. Come back tomorrow morning and I’ll have both the custom lenses and the tickets for you.”

“Can’t you get them any sooner?” Harry pleads, knowing how little time we have left.

“I’m not a wizard. These things take time.”

I stammer, “Okay. Thanks …” completely unsure if dealing with him was the right thing to do.

As we’re about to leave, Humpty Dumpty says, “Where are you going? You need to pay now.”

I hesitantly step forward and hand him the wad of cash. He moistens his finger with his tongue and counts the bills like lightning.

“Four thousand five hundred dollars.” There’s a satisfied glint in his eyes as if he found that getting paid was funny.

“You may go now.” He dismisses us with a flutter of his fingers. The guard shuts the heavy door behind us.

As soon as we step out, I give a furious stare at Harry. “Why are we doing this?”

“You know why, so why are you even asking?”

“This guy is going to screw us over. Why else do you think he agreed to such a big price drop,” I say in a hard voice.

“Listen, I’ll do whatever it takes to get that video in front of the Senate in time. We have a chance to alter the course of history here. We *need* to take risks.”

“For you, it might be about your country, but for me, it’s also about my father. He’s in prison as we speak and his days are numbered, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t follow our instincts, and my instincts tell me that this deal stinks.”

“Teegan, the vote is *tomorrow*. Unless you can teleport and neglected to tell me, we’ll never make it on time *unless* we board the Hyperion.”

“Fine,” I grumble, not making any efforts to hide how annoyed I am.

“Fine.”

\*\*\*

We take the stairs all the way up to the ground level.

“I need some fresh air,” I say.

“I’ll be at the food court.”

As I head for the exit, I run into Chloe again. I find her next to the *Dog for Adoptions* kennel. She’s petting a handicapped gray husky in an open pen. A makeshift wheelchair made up of old stroller parts is supporting his rear end. The poor dog is missing his two rear legs.

“Hi, Chloe.”

“Oh, it’s you. So, did you meet him?”

“We did and he’s as revolting as you said.”

Chloe starts feeding the scrawny dog bits of chicken. The dog yelps and wags his tail. “His name is Hobble. I’m going to buy him someday when I’ve paid off my debt.”

“He does seem to like you.”

“You know why I love dogs?” She doesn’t wait for my answer. “Because they love you unconditionally. They’re always happy to see you and even when you’ve had a shitty day, they still manage to bring a smile to your face.”

Am I wrong or do I detect a black eye under Chloe’s makeup? Did she get beaten up for talking to us earlier?

“Not working?” I ask.

“My pimp, or my procuress as she likes to call herself, is getting sloshed at the bar. I have an hour, maybe two before she teeters back here and checks up on me. I try to make this time count.”

The lady who owns the kennel looks at me with hopeful eyes. “Do you want to adopt a dog? They’re cheap. They’re just looking for a good home.”

I shake my head. “No, sorry. Maybe when things calm down in my life. I have a lot going on right now.”

I turn to Chloe. “Nice seeing you again.”

I exit the black market and walk outside. I sit on a ridge and gaze at the sun dipping below the horizon. I think of my budding relationship with Harry. 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—the invisible cord tied by the deity Yuè Lǎo around the ankles of those who are destined to be together. But after our row, I’m not sure anymore. Do we share the same priorities? After a while, I feel a chill and decide to head back.

I find that Harry is still in a bad mood. We have an awkward, silent supper at the food court. It’s after dark now. Aladdin’s Cave is morphing into a seedy nightclub. Lights are dimmed and a starry sky appears projected on the ceiling. Thumping music starts playing. Having nothing to do, Harry and I wander the market again, exchanging banalities. Stands have been replaced by flashing slot machines and erotic virtual reality booths. Tacky holograms of scantily clad men and women entice passersby to come in and fulfill their every fantasy. I’m not prudish, but I look away as I glance at some of the more provocative ads. Prostitutes prance in platform shoes on catwalks. Every now and then, one of them beckons to us with a wink, a hand gesture, or even a peek at the goods. Hailey was right—this is no place for Laura, or for me, for that matter. After a while, I’ve had enough and announce that I want to find a place to sleep. We find a secluded corner and spend the night on the floor, separated by a dozen feet.

# Chapter 21 – Raid

“Raid!”

The word echoes in my head a few times before I grasp its meaning. The noise of panicked people running and shouting shake me from my slumber. I sit up and look around in bewilderment. Warning lights are gyrating. Sirens are blaring. Chaos. What’s going on? At first, I think there’s been a nuclear leak, but soon I realize the situation is worse, much worse, than I expected. A combat carrier is hovering next to the window bay. It’s one of the larger models—this one can transport over a hundred soldiers. The humongous screen on the aircraft’s side has the word **Surrender** spelled in giant letters next to the URF logo.

The Purple Guards must have initiated an emergency lockdown because seconds later the shutters fall into place with a loud clank and the entrance doors start to close. What are they thinking? We’ll be trapped here with no possibility of escape. There is palpable panic in the air.

In my sleepy torpor, I had forgotten about Harry. I grab my schoolbag and stand up. I look around frantically, but he’s nowhere to be seen. Is he still upset with me?

A first explosion shakes the ground. Oh my God, the URF are bombing the place! Dust and plaster fall from the ceiling. The blast triggers a stampede. I get thrown to the ground by the frightened masses and fall flat on my face. My lip is split. I see knees, boots, and shoes. Someone steps on my back, stealing my breath away. Another explosion. More screams. A large shadow looms over me. I roll sideways just in time to avoid being crushed by a heavy boot. My head gets kicked. Pain slams through my skull. Someone steps on my stomach making me want to retch. My vision becomes blurry. I’m about to be trampled to death when someone grabs my arm and yanks me up—it’s Chloe. She ushers me to a calmer location.

“You’re … a lifesaver,” I stammer, holding my head between my hands, still dizzy.

“Easy there,” says Chloe as she puts a comforting hand on my shoulder.

I take a deep breath and try to calm down. “Have you seen my friend, Harry?”

“I did, by the cybercafé. He looked panicked. I think he was looking for you.” That reassures me.

Without exchanging a word, we decide to stick together. Holding hands, we race in the direction of the cybercafé. As she’s running, Chloe frantically tries to remove the electronic collar around her neck but with no success.

We pass by the dog pen, which is now empty. I’m guessing that the owner opened the gate to give the dogs a chance to escape.

Harry spots us first. He elbows his way through the crowd to reach us.

“Are you okay?” he asks, panting. With his thumb, he wipes off blood from my split lip.

“Yeah.”

Another explosion shakes the ground. This time a large section of the outside wall collapses, creating a gaping hole. URF troops equipped with riot gear and full-face helmets enter in droves.

“Chloe, you know this place better than us,” shouts Harry over the commotion. “Are there any other exits?”

“I know of only one—Humpty Dumpty’s escape route. I heard him mention it when the Purple Guards captured the first URF soldier.”

“That’s our only chance,” says Harry. “Come on!” As we head to the stairwell, I hear gunshots and screams. My God, they’re not here to arrest people, just to kill them. We race down the stairs two steps at a time. Harry misses one and tumbles to the landing. I stop to help him up. As I turn around, a URF soldier lobs a grenade in our direction. It lands a few feet from us and bounces a few times before settling. My heart stops. Petrified with fear, I listen to the grenade as its beeping accelerates, indicating that it will detonate. I cringe, waiting for the fateful moment. It’s Harry’s quick thinking that saves the day. He kicks the grenade hard. It flies toward the wall and explodes. The deflagration knocks the wind out of me. I bring my arms up to shield my face as shattered bits of metal, some of it smoldering, rain down around me. My sleeve catches fire. I howl in pain. I wriggle out of my jacket and stamp the fire out. My ears are buzzing from the explosion. My throat and nose are burning from the caustic smoke filling the stairwell, but at least, it’s giving us some cover. The only positive is that the staircase we just came down has been destroyed, leaving the soldiers with no way to reach us.

Harry limps toward me. “Are you okay?” His leg looks badly burnt.

I nod. The burning pain is screaming at me to dunk my hand in cold water, but it’ll have to wait. I look around and spot Chloe crumpled on the landing, bleeding profusely. I panic as soon as I see her. A cement block fell from the ceiling and crushed her shoulder and ribcage. We move up to her. She’s not crying. She’s just looking up, blinking. With my burned jacket, I try to staunch the bleeding. Harry shakes his head discreetly saying silently what I know already—she won’t make it. I’ve met her only yesterday, and in this time, we’ve only had two brief conversations really, yet her impending death hits me hard, and unchecked tears start rolling down my cheeks.

Harry takes his knife. He cuts through the leather of her electronic collar. He removes it from her and throws it far. “There, you’re free.”

“It’s dark. I don’t want to die in the dark.”

“We’re here, Chloe. Right next to you.” I say, working hard to keep my voice steady. “We won’t leave you.”

“Promise me one … thing,” she says, her voice raspy and weak.

“What is it?”

“When you can, you’ll come back for Hobble.”

Harry looks at me. “We will, promise.”

Chloe smiles wanly. Blood has pooled next to her blonde hair. She looks at the ceiling as if a dazzling light was mesmerizing her and becomes still.

Harry closes her eyelids with his fingers.

A gunshot. With the smoke less dense, the URF are shooting at us from above. Shit! We have to move. I take my pistol and fire at all the light bulbs in the vicinity. Darkness engulfs us. Harry whispers, “Smart thinking.” We hear swearing from the soldiers. A few more random shots are fired, but they miss wildly. Someone shouts, “Get the night goggles and some rope.”

Holding the handrail, we continue carefully down the stairs. When we reach the bottom floor, we have light again. We walk down the footbridge leading to the reinforced door. No guards this time. He must have fled.

“Shit, the door’s locked.”

“I got this.” I walk up to the panel and punch the code in, hoping that I memorized it correctly. The door opens. Sweet.

“How did you do that?” asks Harry, astonished.

“I have my ways,” I say, trying to sound mysterious.

We enter Humpty Dumpty’s lair. All of the screens are now turned off. The place seems to be operating on emergency power. We find Krystal’s dead body sprawled on the floor. Humpty Dumpty is lying on his lounger, looking depressed. “Oh, it’s you. The escape door is jammed. I think the explosions have warped the frame.”

“What happened to Krystal?” asks Harry.

“I killed her.”

“You what?”

“I killed her. She tried to kill me so I killed her.”

“She was a harmless woman, for God’s sake,” yells Harry. “You had to take her down?”

“She was just a whore. What matters is now that you’re here, we might be able to open the escape door.” Humpty Dumpty gets up from his lounger.

I walk up to him. Not only is the man fat, but he’s also a giant—he’s as tall as a basketball player—but that doesn’t prevent me from slapping him in the face. He doesn’t see it coming.

“You’re a sorry excuse for a man.” I’m sure I didn’t hurt him, but it was for the principle.

“Someday, you’ll get what’s coming to you,” spits Harry.

Humpty Dumpty straightens his back. “I’ll have you know that it’s not easy being a giant and growing up being called The Whale or Blubber Man.” He shuts his eyes for a moment before opening them again. “No one … ever stood up for me.” He swallows hard. “My mom, she was skinnier than a matchstick and my brother …” A smirk appears on Humpty Dumpty’s face. “Nah, I’m just messing with you—I’ve always been a bully.”

Another explosion shakes the structure. Harry rushes to the door, but it won’t open. Reluctantly, he turns to Humpty Dumpty. He lumbers over to help. They strain, moan, and grind their teeth, and finally the door creaks open revealing a narrow corridor.

Humpty Dumpty was right. At the end of the passage, I see a ladder mounted on the wall, leading up a vertical shaft—our escape route. Humpty Dumpty sees it too. He shoves Harry and me aside and stomps forward like a hippopotamus. It takes him considerable effort to go up a single rung. On the tenth one, the ladder collapses under his weight and Humpty Dumpty tumbles to the ground.

The ladder—our only hope for freedom—is now broken. We’re deep underground. The manhole at the top of the shaft is eight stories above us, and soldiers will be here any moment. Argh!

“I’m sorry,” says Humpty Dumpty, getting up.

“No you’re not,” growls Harry.

We’re running out of time. If only we could fly up there magically like on Aladdin’s magic carpet. Fly. Wait. I look at the massive, corroded pipes running along the wall. I touch one. It’s cold. There’s condensation on the surface. I’m sure it’s filled with water. A noise coming from Humpty Dumpty’s office makes me jump.

“Quick, Harry, jam the door behind us. I have a plan.”

He gives me a quizzical look but obeys.

I find an old wrench on the ground and start hammering the pipe near a valve. Humpty Dumpty sees what I’m doing and understands right away. He picks up a loose rock and starts pounding with me, wheezing and panting. When Harry comes back I give him my wrench. “Here, you do it. You’re stronger than me. We need to break the pipe.” I don’t mention it, but the other reason I give him the wrench is that my burn is causing me agonizing pain. I hear a commotion outside the door. Voices. The soldiers are here.

“Place some C4,” I hear an officer command, his voice muffled by the door.

“Hurry! They’re going to blow it up.”

Harry and Humpty Dumpty bang as hard as they can on the pipe, but the metal is thick. An explosion shatters the door behind us. I spin around to see three soldiers in exoskeleton suits ready to race forward. Just when I think we’re done for, with a powerful swing, Harry knocks out the pipe at the valve’s junction. Water pours out. The pressure is so high that it propels Harry backward and he falls. I help him up. In seconds, we have water to our calves. Weighted down by their armor, the soldiers are held back by the rushing water.

We lumber over to the vertical shaft and start to float up. My plan is working! We’re going to make it out of here.

We reach the top. The only thing standing between the outside world and us is a manhole. As soon as the handle is within reach, Harry grips it and starts turning, but like everything else in this old facility, it’s rusted and won’t yield. With my burnt hand, I can’t help. The water is rising fast. Soon, we’re submerged. An emergency light illuminates the shaft tinting the water with a reddish glow. Humpty Dumpty grabs the handle with Harry and turns. They struggle with it but without success. Humpty Dumpty lets go of the handle. He looks left and right, up and down for an exit that doesn’t exist. He opens his mouth, which immediately fills with water. Panicked, he kicks and thrashes about. It goes on for a moment before he loses consciousness and his body just starts floating eerily. Harry is left alone. He makes one last desperate attempt and manages to budge the handle, but the manhole still won’t open. Air bubbles escape from his nose. He’s running out of air. He turns to me, despair painted on his face. Our eyes meet and I know that he’s thinking that he failed me.

I still have air. I wonder why that is and then I get it—not only was I not exerting myself physically, but I also have extensive singing training. I have air. I swim to Harry, place my mouth against his lips and blow a lung full of air into his mouth. He takes it all in. With renewed vigor, he returns to wiggle the handle. It’s now my turn to feel dizzy and faint. I feel an urge to open my mouth, but I know it will only make me swallow water. My lungs are burning. Just when I think they’re going to burst, the handle turns. Harry pushes the manhole open allowing the water to spill outside. He pulls me out of the water by my shirt. As soon as my head surfaces, I gasp for air. Using the rungs in the wall, we hoist ourselves up. That leaves Humpty Dumpty. Harry looks at me and I give him the stare. *Yes, I want you to save him.* He heaves Humpty Dumpty’s body out of the shaft, waterlogged and blue. Water is pouring out of the manhole and causing a rivulet to form on the side of the hill we’re on. Now in the open, I take several deep breaths. Humpty Dumpty regains consciousness and coughs, spitting water.

“We made it,” he says, smiling.

He starts typing furiously on his wristband computer.

I grab his arm. “What are you doing?”

“Undoing something.”

“What?”

“I know who you are, Teegan Pershing.”

“You sold us out, didn’t you?”

“I did. But now I won’t. Two bounty hunters are on their way as we speak to pick you up. I’m going to tell them that you died when the URF attacked Aladdin’s Cave. Now if you’d let go of my arm.”

He types for a little while longer. The water has eased the burning sensation on my arm.

“Here,” he unclasps his wrist computer and hands it to me. “Password is 040710. With it, you have access to an account with ten thousand dollars and a safe-conduct. This will allow you to board the train without the bothersome biometric scan. You are the daughter of a wealthy benefactor of the Party. Your father is in the oil industry and Harry here is your fiancé.”

I take it and wrap it around my wrist. By some mechanism I can’t fathom, it adjusts perfectly to my arm size.

“This isn’t another of your tricks, is it?”

“No. If I wanted you captured, I just needed to shut my mouth about the bounty hunters.”

He wrings water from the bottom of his shirt. He glances at Harry before returning his attention to me. “You saved my life. Let it never be told that Humpty Dumpty doesn’t pay his debts. Consider us even.”

“Anyone else knows who I am?”

“No, the bounty hunters only knew that they would be handsomely rewarded, not who they were to pick up.”

“How do we get to Dallas from here?” asks Harry.

“If I’m not mistaken, the guards have patrol vehicles hidden in that shed over there.”

Humpty Dumpty stands up. For some reason, my thoughts go back to Chloe and Krystal. I go and stand next to him. He’s so tall compared to me that I must crane my neck to look him in the eyes.

“Before we go, Humpty Dumpty or whatever your name is, if you ever start pimping out girls again, I’ll come after you,” I say, poking him hard in his flabby chest. “Got it?”

Humpty Dumpty is surprised that a young girl like me is threatening him.

“I’ll bear that in mind when I rebuild Vermin Co.”

Harry tugs my sleeve. “Let’s go, Teegan. The URF will be sweeping the area.”

# Chapter 22 – Stay with Me

Smoke is rising in the distance. Combat aircraft loom on the horizon like giant buzzing insects. We need to find shelter and fast. We head to the shed Humpty Dumpty pointed out earlier. It’s not far, a few hundred yards maybe. As we get nearer, I notice that it looks more like a bunker than a shed; it’s half-buried underground and made of concrete blocks. The roof is camouflaged with dirt, rocks, and local vegetation.

Harry is limping along, groaning in pain with each step. He’s losing blood. I wrap my arm around his waist to support him. On our way, I hear barking. In the distance, I see a dog equipped with a wheelchair. Could it be Hobble? I do hope so. I’m curious, but Harry’s face is pale and sweaty, and I’m afraid he can collapse at any moment, so I ignore the lost animal much to my regret.

The bunker door is ajar. We step inside. There’s a small office, a series of lockers, a workbench area, and a garage with three motorcycles. An old pin-up calendar hangs lopsided on top of the workbench.

As I bring Harry to the office chair, he collapses unconscious in my arms. He’s heavier than I thought, and I almost tumble down with him. Taking great care, I lower him gently to the floor. I find a rag, fold it a few times to make a pillow and place it under his head. His breathing is ragged. His eyebrows are singed. He has cuts and bruises all over, but they’re minor. The main attraction is the leg he used to kick the grenade with. After removing his right boot, I retrieve the knife Harry always carries in his pocket and cut the tattered pant leg off at the knee. I gasp at the sight of his calf—the flesh is cherry red and covered with blisters. Blood oozes from a gash on top of his ankle. I take a deep breath and tell myself he’ll be fine, that I just need to take good care of him.

I explore the place. In the bathroom, I locate a military-grade first aid kit. In it, I find scissors, painkillers, and a small tube of ointment. There’s also a can of spray-on gauze.

Using an electric kettle I find on the workbench, I boil some water and proceed to clean his wounds with strips I cut from a blouse I had in my schoolbag. Harry cringes at the slightest contact but doesn’t come to. Once in a while, searing pain shoots up my hand reminding me that I’m hurt too, but I push the sensation away and focus on Harry. I’m not meant to be a doctor. I need to force myself to look at the charred flesh and concentrate. Once done, I apply some of the antibiotic ointment I found. Last, I spray instant gauze around his leg. On contact with air, the goo transforms into a soft, cotton-like sterile fabric. I read the label on the can. This brand includes local anesthetics. That should help. I can now focus on me and treat my own wound.

Exhausted, I slump to the floor. We’re battered, my lip is split, my hand is burnt, and Harry is still out. I probably smell, too. My hair is oily and clumpy. And let’s not forget the scar on my forehead. I think of Father. Here I am risking my life to deliver the video, and truth be told, I don’t even know how he’ll react. Father is loyal to the bone; it’s how he defines himself. Serving his country is all that he knows. Will he be proud of me or call me a traitor?

Harry stirs and I go to his side. I caress his forehead, and it seems to soothe him. “You may not realize it,” I whisper, my lips close to his ear, “but with each passing day, I’m falling a bit more for you. So please, don’t die on me. Being alone in the world is what terrifies me the most.”

Harry’s eyes remain closed. Unchecked tears roll down my cheeks. I just stare at him, gnawing my fingernails. Time passes. Minutes, hours, I don’t know. He is pale, pale like a cadaver. I’ve done everything I can. The rest is up to him—to live or die. Will the red string binding us together hold or snap? His breathing is becoming more irregular. I lean over and kiss him on the forehead. “Stay with me, Harry, you’re all that I have left.”

I inch back and lean against the wall. After a while, just as I’m losing all hope, Harry opens his eyes and blinks a few times. I rush to his side.

“I don’t intend to die,” he mumbles.

“You heard me earlier?”

“Maybe.”

I blush beet red and look away.

“Come here,” he says. I approach hesitantly. He places his hand on the nape of my neck, pulls me toward him, and kisses me on the mouth.

“I’ve been meaning to do that,” he says when we break our embrace.

“I’m glad you did.” Feeling emboldened, I rest my head on his chest. He skims my cheek with his thumb. I want to forget the world and stay like this forever.

After a while, he props himself on his elbows and looks at his leg. “So doctor, how bad is it?”

“Your calf has been badly burnt. You’ll be scarred.”

“Figured as much. So, we will both have scars. How are you holding up?” He looks at my bandaged wrist as he says so.

“My wound isn’t as bad as yours.”

“Why did you insist we save Humpty Dumpty?” he asks. “You know how he treated those girls.”

“I believe everyone can change for the better even someone like him. We shouldn’t be judge and jury.”

“Wise words. Not sure if they’re appropriate for post-CWII America, but wise nonetheless.”

“I need something to drink,” I say, getting up.

I smile when I find a tin full of tea bags in a cupboard. *Count your blessings,* Ye Ye would always say, *no matter how small.* Harry kissed me. It made me feel attractive and appreciated and loved. But as I’m preparing the tea, jumbled thoughts of Adrian race through my mind—our one and only kiss, the helicopter explosion, and his sacrifice. A pang of guilt shoots through me, and just like that my smile is gone.

I offer a cup of tea to Harry. I also hand him the bottle of painkillers. He pops two pills into his mouth and swallows them with a big gulp.

“We have to go,” he says after a while. “We’ve wasted enough time as it is.” Harry manages to stand up. I’m not sure if he’ll still be able to once the painkillers wear off, but for now, it’s working.

Harry tries to touch my hand, but I pull away and pretend to tighten a strap on my shoolbag.

“Back to our daily grind of getting hunted and shot at, hey?” I say with a biting smile, trying to hide the emotions that are still swirling in me.

“It won’t always be like this, I promise,” says Harry. “We’re almost there. We’ll be in D.C. today. How amazing is that after everything we’ve gone through?”

Harry’s reply gives me hope. I want to walk up to him and give him a big hug, but I don’t. I’m so confused right now. I’m like a flipped coin that has landed on its edge and doesn’t know on which side to fall.

“You’ll need to change.” I point to the pant leg cut at the knee. “If you go out like that, you’ll attract attention.”

Harry finds a pair of pants that fits in one of the lockers and puts them on. He then goes and checks the motorcycles. A grin appears on his face. “Wow, look at those babies.”

Satisfied, he heads to a map of the region pinned to the wall. He consults it for a few minutes, before saying, “Should be a five-hour ride. Hey! Check these out.”

Harry points to a pair of radio earpieces lying around on the workbench.

“These could be useful. They will allow us to stay in touch and as a bonus, we might be able to hear what the URF are up to.”

Harry and I each tuck an earpiece and clip the discreet microphone on our collar.

“We can’t take the train dressed like this. We won’t be credible. I’m supposed to be super-rich. The daughter of an oil magnate. Remember? We look like hobos. We need to clean up, buy new clothes, and get a haircut. You could use a shave.”

“You’re right. We’ll stop at a mall before going to the train station. Have you ever ridden a motorcycle before?”

“Well, I’ve ridden a scooter a few times.”

Harry just smiles.

\*\*\*

Our trip to Dallas is amazingly uneventful (if you forget that time when I almost crashed into a truck) and I’m grateful. Riding a motorcycle is easier than I thought. Maybe it’s because it’s one of those models with centrifugal balancers. With each turn, I become more confident and allow myself to lean harder into the curve. Harry is a natural at this. He even pops a wheelie. I feel my inner-badass unleashed as I ride fast and hard, my hair in the wind. I’m thinking I’d like to keep this bike.

We enter Sector TX-34. The guard at the booth looks at my credentials on my wristband computer and lets us in. We end up going to a shopping mall in a posh area of Dallas. It appears to be an upscale shopping mecca. I check the time. We have three hours before our train leaves.

I wrap a scarf around my bandage to make it less noticeable. We hit the food court as soon as we enter. We’re starving. We order the *Working Man’s* breakfast, consisting of scrambled eggs, toast, hash browns, and pork and beans. I finish my plate before Harry. He looks at me, impressed.

“Where do you store all this stuff? You’re as thin as a rail.”

“Don’t know. I’m always hungry.”

I guzzle my tea. Harry pops two painkillers with a gulp of coffee, and we leave the food court.

Our first order of business is the hair salon. After looking at the girls in the mall, it seems like vintage is still going strong. I go to the holographic hairstyle selector and browse the various options. I find one that I like and spin the 3-D model left and right just to be sure. I point it out to the hairstylist. I go for a cute pixie haircut with long bangs. Getting my hair washed is the best feeling I’ve had in a while.

When I get out of the chair, Harry is waiting for me. He has a neat army crew cut. He kept a 5 o’clock shadow. His stubble beard gives him an air of bad boy rebellion. He looks dashing, really. The other women look at him enviously. Even my stylist, a guy by the name of Roberto, seems to find him to his liking.

Next on our list is proper clothing. We enter a chic boutique. It has no garments on display— only tables lined with clothing accessories. It must be a print-on-demand store. Good, that means we’ll get custom-fitted outfits. We walk up to the girl at the service counter who’s engaged in a lively conversation with her coworker.

I lean against the counter, “Excuse me.”

The girl sighs and turns toward us. Arms folded, she gives us the once-over. She notices our dirty, torn clothes, rolls her eyes and forces a smile.

“My friend and I are looking for new outfits.”

“Of course you are,” she says in an affected French accent. “Have a seat in one of the pods and a holoclerk will assist you.”

We go and sit in the plush velvet seats of the nearest egg-shaped pod. A moment later, a holoclerk materializes projected from a lens embedded in the coffee table in front of us. The holoclerk addresses us in English with just a hint of a French accent.

“Greetings and welcome to Parisian Pride,” comes the bright and bubbly voice. “My name is Juliette. How can I be of assistance?”

“I’m looking for a new outfit,” I answer. “Something chic and fashionable.”

“Sure. We have a lot of great options for you.” The holoclerk shrinks in size to make way for a 3-D model wearing a first outfit. “Just flick your hand until you find something that strikes your fancy.”

“Nope, nope, nope. How about this one, Harry?” It’s an elegant white dress with white high heels.

“Too plain. Not badass enough for you.”

“Well, I’m not going as biker-chic. We’re going to the Capitol, remember? I need something elegant and sophisticated yet that doesn’t attract unwanted attention.”

Harry flips through a few outfits before pausing. “You would look hot in this.”

It’s a plaid skirt with a crocodile-embossed blouse. It comes with a pair of black suede peep toe booties.

“It does look lovely.” I turn to the holoclerk. “Do you have it in red?”

“One moment,” she replies. A color wheel appears, floating in mid-air. “Using your index, select the desired color.”

I tap on a nice shade of fire engine red. This pod is much more sophisticated than the one I’m used to in Concord. The skirt instantly changes color.

“Wow!” says Harry. “I’m not used to this. I usually go to the thrift shop.”

“Careful. She’s listening,” I whisper. “We can’t let on that we’re poor.”

“It’s just software.”

“We never know.”

“Would you like to see yourself wearing it?” pipes the holoclerk.

“Sure.”

“Step on the yellow feet drawn on the ground and look at the camera.”

I follow the instructions. The camera does a full body scan. The dress shimmers briefly and then as by magic, “I” appear wearing it. My 3-D avatar even does a few spins making the skirt swirl.

“So?”

“Looks great.”

“Superb. Are you ready to have it made?” asks the holoclerk.

“Yes.”

“Please confirm your selection. Once confirmed, purchases are not refundable.”

“Yes,” I repeat.

“Your selection is now being printed.”

“Anything for you, Harry?” Wow, the holoclerk’s artificial intelligence is getting more sophisticated each time I go. She even picked up on Harry’s name.

“Yeah. I’m just looking for a suit that doesn’t make me look like I’m fifty years old.

“Not like fifty years old. Got it.”

Choosing for Harry is a lot faster. He picks the first suit that doesn’t look half bad.

“Your clothes will be waiting for you at the order counter in an hour.”

We take that time to purchase everything else we need. Harry buys a pair of aviator sunglasses while I go for Audrey Hepburn-style shades. We also buy underwear, t-shirts, coats, a hand purse, and tan leather knapsacks. We transfer all our worldly possessions into them and get rid of the old ones. The only things I keep are my money belt, my pistol, and my favorite sneakers.

Once done, we head back to pick up our custom-fitted outfits.

“Is there a changing cabin?” I ask the snotty girl at the counter.

“Yes, over there.”

We grab our purchases from the counter and enter the changing cabins. A few moments later, Harry knocks on my door.

“Stop, Harry. I’m in my underwear. If someone sees you come in, what will they think?”

“That I’m lucky.”

I grin. “Almost done. Give me a moment.”

As I step out, the girl at the counter whistles under her breath. I put on my new pair of shades, grab Harry’s arm, and walk out of the store feeling like a million dollars.

# Chapter 21A – Opening the device

We descend a wide, metal staircase. A guard dressed in a deep purple uniform

# Chapter 23 – Whistleblower

The train station is a marvel of architecture. I’ve never seen anything like it. Supported by soaring columns, a vast, wavy roof covers the train tracks. Each section looks like a billowing sail filled by favorable winds. Sunlight and cloud shadows play across its shimmering, golden surface.

The pedestrian concourse leads to a massive bluish green building inviting us in through its giant, open gate. A four-story-high phoenix has been carved on top of the entrance. Everything—lampposts, fountains, and statues—is oversized. I feel like I’m in a world inhabited by giants.

Hovering above the concourse, a screen as wide as a house reads **Tianlong Train Station**. An animated flame runs along the lettering every few seconds.

We enter the station hall. With its marble floors and gilded ceiling, it looks like we waltzed into a grand ballroom.

A woman with gold and ruby roses woven into her platinum blonde hair bumps into me without so much as excusing herself. And it’s not just one or two flowers she’s wearing, it’s a whole bouquet. The man strutting alongside her is wearing a cape with fur trimmings. Given how hot it is in Texas, that’s just plain ridiculous. With each step, his oversized pocket watch dangles from a chain for all to see. Wow, anything goes as long as it flaunts how rich you are. Compared to them, Harry and I look plain in our new outfits, but at least we have class.

Some of the more affluent businessmen are traveling with an entourage consisting of bodyguards, personal assistants, vamperlings, and bimbos giggling at anything their employer says or does.

But underneath the glitz, I sense a more ominous undercurrent. There are cameras everywhere, spinning, whizzing, and spying on us. URF soldiers are patrolling in packs, machine guns slung over their shoulders, often accompanied by growling German Shepherds tugging at their leashes. I feel like I’m entering the lion’s den and that, at any moment, someone will recognize me, point an accusing finger, and call the guards.

Propaganda holograms clamoring political slogans dot the walls: *Together We Are Stronger*. *Obedience Leads to Harmony*. *True Patriots Report Unusual Activities*.

Monitors on the walls broadcast live images of the mass protest taking place in Washington, D.C. I read the news captions: *More than 500,000 protesters have descended on the capital to make their voices heard. The nation waits with bated breath for the results of today’s historic vote.* If Harry and I are successful, there’s no doubt as to what that outcome will be—the senators will be shocked beyond belief when they hear what Zhang has done.

A forklift-elevator crew is removing a circular panel emblazoned with the words *In God We Trust*. They’re replacing it with a framed picture of Chairman Zhang shaking hands with President Plant.

With every step, Harry is getting more annoyed.

“Do you feel like you’re in Texas, Teegan? Now I’ve never been to China, mind you, but this feels like goddamn China to me.” Harry pounds his fist into his palm.

“I know. It doesn’t feel right.” I almost add *I’m sorry* as if any of this was my fault, but I stop myself.

We pass by a shoeshine stand. An Asian businessman is getting his shoes polished by a white boy. As I walk by, he whacks the shoeblack with his ivory walking cane and barks, “*Gweilo*, you missed a spot.” With his cane, he points at the side of his alligator skin shoe.

Harry’s face turns red. If he was annoyed before, now he’s angry. I swear he’s going to walk up to the man and strangle him with his bare hands. I tug on his jacket. “Come on. Let’s not get into trouble.”

Harry grumbles something unintelligible but follows me.

I spot a heavily armed guard walking in our direction, methodically scanning everyone in his path. I adjust my sunglasses on my nose and look down.

“Shit, my pistol,” I whisper to Harry. “It’s in my knapsack. I’ll never be able to smuggle it on board.”

“You could always chuck it in a trash bin,” says Harry.

I consider his suggestion but quickly reject it. The pistol is a gift from my father’s camp aide. I want to keep it.

“I’ll take it apart and hide the bits and pieces in my clothing and in my knapsack.”

“Are you sure you want to risk it?”

“Yes.” I head to the nearest washroom.

“Everything sorted?” asks Harry when I return.

“Yes. Let’s do this.”

As we head to the platform gate, I hear the rhythmic thud of boots marching in step. I’ve heard this sound a million times. My pulse starts racing. Without looking back, I know that there’s a platoon of soldiers coming our way. I adjust my sunglasses on my nose for the umpteenth time and try to remain calm. I squeeze Harry’s hand hard. I decide to risk a look. I was right. There are three squads of Fivers. The U.S. Army promises these young recruits training, food, and lodging in exchange for a five-year commitment, hence the name. During your term, there’s no way out other than in a body bag. Recruiters ask no questions when you join. Father told me that there are a lot of people with dodgy pasts among the Fivers and that they’re not to be trusted. They’re marching as if the train station belonged to them—hell as if the whole world belonged to them. Each one is carrying a heavy duffel bag. A holstered pistol is fastened to their belt. I can tell how disciplined they are by looking at the shine on their boots, and boy, they’re spotless. I just hope they won’t board the same train as us.

We reach the platform gate. I swallow hard. So many things can go wrong: the attendant could recognize me, our tickets could be invalid, they could detect my pistol, or maybe Humpty Dumpty is screwing us after all and has warned someone of our arrival. I have no shortage of ideas of how things can go south from here.

The attendant takes his sweet time checking our credentials on my wristband computer. I drum my fingers on the counter. “Anything wrong?” I ask, in the most imperious tone I can muster, trying to play my role as the fabulously rich daughter.

“No, nothing at all.” His eyes linger on me for a moment. Then he smiles broadly. “I wish you a pleasant journey aboard the Tianlong.”

Harry offers his arm and we head to the platform.

“Why was the attendant grinning like that?” I ask Harry in a low voice. “Do you think he knows who we are?”

“Don’t be paranoid, Teegan. The guy didn’t look very smart to me. He was just doing his job.”

I’m not reassured by Harry’s words and decide that paranoia is a good thing—if we want to avoid dying, that is.

\*\*\*

As we arrive at the platform, a train slows down and stops with a soft swish. A celestial dragon is painted along the length of the train. We enter the nearest carriage. An attendant asks to see our tickets. I present our boarding passes.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

I start hyperventilating. “What do you mean?”

“This is second-class. Your tickets are for first-class. We wouldn’t want you to mingle with people beneath your station, would we?”

“No, no. Of course not.” I let out a snorting chuckle. “Who would want that? We were distracted, that’s all.”

“Just move up the train until you see imperial yellow seats. Your seat numbers are 18A and B.”

We go up a few carriages and find our seats. If I thought the previous accommodations were luxurious, I have no words to describe the level of affluence our new train cabin has. It has a mini bar, a 3-D television, leather seats, climate control, a safe, and a direct-dial telephone.

Harry lets himself fall into his seat.

“Not too shabby.” He puts his feet up on the seat opposite him.

“Come on, behave. We’re supposed to be rich, not savages.”

Harry grudgingly lowers his feet.

A stewardess approaches us with a bright smile. She’s dressed in a purple dress, white blouse, yellow tie, and purple cap. “Do you want a complimentary copy of USA Today?”

“Yes, please.”

I take the disposable electronic sheet and put it aside thinking that I might read it later.

The train leaves. As soon as it’s out of the city, it accelerates rapidly. The speed indicator on top of the cabin door climbs up and up. I feel myself being pushed into my seat. My ears pop. In record time, we reach 350 miles per hour. Wow! Through the window, the world has become a blur. The train is amazingly quiet—I can only hear a faint swishing sound.

The seats are soft and cushiony. I lean my head against Harry’s shoulder. He takes my hand and squeezes it gently.

“What do you think will happen after?” I ask.

“You mean between us?”

“No. I meant, how will Americans react to the truth?”

“How should I know?”

I can tell Harry is disappointed. It sounds like he wants to talk about our newly formed relationship, but I don’t. I have feelings for him. Strong feelings even. I love it when he plays with my hair, and I trust him with my life, but my thoughts keep returning to Adrian and how it could have been between us. I will have to resolve this if I ever want to commit to Harry or to anyone else for that matter.

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. I start reminiscing about my old life in Shanghai when my father was just a major. Before long, I doze off, lulled to sleep by the gentle rocking of the train.

\*\*\*

I wake up to the sound of rolling thunder. Even though it’s daytime, the sky is now dark, sinister even. The cabin lights have turned on automatically. Heavy rain is hammering the carriage, sounding like hail. Periodically, flashes of lightning illuminate the dismal sky.

I find Harry staring pensively out the window.

“A penny for your thoughts,” I say.

“I’m thinking of Laura and Jim but mostly of Laura. I hope she’s all right.”

\*\*\*

The train pulls into the Atlanta station, our only stop before D.C. A woman enters our carriage. Darn, I was hoping to be alone with Harry for the whole trip. Behind her, a porter is struggling with enough luggage to furnish a house. The top suitcase falls from the cart.

“What are you waiting for? Pick that up!” barks the woman. With a barely audible sigh, the porter bends over to retrieve it.

The lady is all dressed in black, from her leather shoes to her long-sleeved gloves to the choker around her neck. Her hair is a spectacle in itself—miniature silvery birdcages holding silvery birds are pinned in her black hair sculpted like a hand fan. Her hair is wet and somewhat disarrayed. She lights up a smoke in a silver cigarette holder.

The porter coughs gently to attract her attention. “Ma’am, you’re not allowed to smoke in the carriage.”

“Do you know who I am, young man? I’m the wife of Edgar Deeside. I can smoke if I want to and there’s nothing you can do about it.” The porter shakes his head and resumes storing her luggage on the rack.

“The nerve of that guy.” She flops into the seat opposite Harry and smoothes out her skirt.

“Oh, my hair is ruined.” The woman tries to push her disheveled hair back into place. “That useless porter couldn’t even hold the umbrella properly. Do you know how much my hair stylist charges? Of course not. By the likes of it, you probably put cooking pots over your heads and trim your hair with kindergarten scissors. How impossibly plain your hairdos are. Do you live in the burbs? Is that it? That must be it. I pity you. I have a friend who lives in the burbs. I never visit her.”

I smile with tight lips.

“So, what does your father do?” She takes a long drag of her cigarette.

“He’s a businessman. His company supplies the government with oil and gas,” I answer.

“I was talking to the man, dearie, not you.” Wow, and she’s sexist too. This will be a fun ride.

Harry looks at me, unsure of what to say.

She leans forward. “Cat got your tongue?”

Harry remains silent.

The woman turns to me. “Tell me this man is *not* your boyfriend.”

“He’s not.”

“Ah, I’m relieved.” She takes another drag of her cigarette.

“He’s my fiancé.”

“Oh dear.” She casts a sidelong glance at Harry. “He’s not bad looking, mind you, but he does appear to be a bit of a dimwit.” She pours herself a hefty glass of Scotch from the mini bar. When she sits down again, she gives me a long look. I’m starting to regret not keeping my sunglasses on.

“The scar on your forehead. It’s so unsightly. I know a fantastic plastic surgeon. He’s not cheap, truth be told, but he is the best.” She smiles as if reminiscing. “He’s a dashing womanizer.” She takes a sip of her drink and flutters her eyelashes. “He tried to seduce me, you know. I’ll beam you his contact details.”

She picks up my electronic copy of USA Today. With a swipe of her finger, the tactile screen turns on. I can read the headline from where I sit: “Protesters Clash with Riot Police for the Seventh Consecutive Day.”

“Those protesters should be thrown into prison. They are ruffians and boors who don’t realize that without China’s intervention, we would still be playing cowboys and Indians and shooting at each other. That Cathy Ellendale woman, she’s the one who’s been causing the most trouble. What a disgrace. She’s undermining our country with her whimpering and whining.” She tosses the newspaper onto the empty seat next to hers.

“Now Chairman Zhang, whom I met just last week at a fundraiser, was telling me that he has plans for our great nation that will blow your mind.” She flicks her hands up on either side of her head mimicking an explosion. And he is so tall. Have you ever met him in person?” She doesn’t wait for my answer. “He told me, ‘Winifred, you’re not like the other women here. You’re a ray of sunshine in a land of darkness.’”

Harry grits his teeth. He’s close to his tipping point. He wants to punch the woman. I can tell by the way he looks at her. His muscles are tense, his fist clenched. I can’t blame him. I would toss her off the train without thinking twice if I knew I could get away with it. He leans forward. The woman raises her eyebrows.

“Yes, young man, you want to speak. So speak. No one is preventing you.”

I elbow Harry discreetly in the ribs and give him the stare. I know he’s going to say something that we could both regret. He grudgingly leans back against the seat, folds his arms, and looks out the window.

“Oh my God, this man is useless. Walk, no, run away while you can. Now my current husband, Edgar, he’s a real catch. He built the new Fort Warren prison on Georges Island. It is magnificent. No one has ever escaped from there. They call it the new Alcatraz. Even a scrawny rat couldn’t find its way out. General Pershing is its most famous captive right now. He tried to escape, the fool, but the guards caught him and taught him a lesson. My husband made an example of him. A single escapee would stain the prison’s flawless reputation.”

I clamp my hand over my mouth to contain a sob. Oh my God, what did they do to Father?

“Something the matter?” she asks.

“No, nothing. It’s just that … I had a heavy meal before boarding the train and I’m having a hard time digesting.”

“Well, then.” She grabs the newspaper again and swipes through a few pages idly, but once in a while, she glances at me, making me increasingly nervous. It’s hard to read her emotions—she must be in her fifties, but there are no frown lines or furrows on her frozen forehead. I just now realize that the scarf I used to hide the bandage for my burn has shifted—the white gauze is showing and she’s noticed. I nudge it back in place. I start putting my sunglasses back on and then stop myself midway thinking that it would make me look even more suspicious. I can’t wait to get off this stupid train. I hope Father is all right. I know the evil things Grayson is capable of. I need to save him, to clear his name. *I have to.* He’s the only family I have left.

The train slows down. My ears pop again. An announcement on the intercom thanks us for choosing the Tianlong. The train pulls into the station. Harry and I stand up and put our knapsacks on.

“Nice meeting you, Winifred,” I say, forcing a smile and resisting an urge to smack her in the face.

“Wait,” she commands. “I said I would beam you the contact details of my plastic surgeon.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“I insist.” She wraps her bony fingers around my wrist, right on my burn. She looks me straight in the eyes. At first, I try to pretend she’s not hurting me, but she squeezes harder. The pain soon becomes unbearable. A howl of pain escapes my lips. She holds on tight.

“Now, why don’t you turn on your wristband computer so I can beam you the details?” She’s no longer smiling. Of course, she wants me to do this because this will allow her to see my name. I think about this. Humpty Dumpty gave me the account of one Elisabeth K. Goldsmith. I decide that showing her might throw her off the scent.

I type in my password and enter Contact Sharing mode. She does the same. I see an incoming message. “A Cut Above - Plastic Surgery, New York.” She reads the confirmation message from my computer attentively. I’m guessing it would read something like this, “Message to Elisabeth successfully delivered.”

She lets go of my arm. “Enjoy your stay in D.C.”

Phew, that was a close one. I stop myself from sighing in relief.

Harry takes my hand in his. “Come on, Mary, let’s go.”

As soon as he says, *Mary*, I sense Winifred stiffen. Harry must have realized he used the wrong name because he quickens the pace. Without turning back, we march out of the carriage and hurry toward the exit leading to Union Station’s main hall. My wrist is throbbing—the burning sensation has returned, stronger than before. I notice Harry limping again. He pops two more painkillers without water. I hope to God that Winifred will shut her mouth long enough to allow us to leave the building.

We haven’t walked fifty paces when I hear a familiar harping voice behind us. I turn to see Winifred standing next to a group of police officers—she’s talking animatedly to them while pointing her finger resolutely in our direction.

\*\*\*

What happens next is a blur.

Harry grabs my hand and we run. Moments later, a shaky video of us fleeing appears on the station monitors. I look up and spot a surveillance drone following us.

Someone yells, “Out of the way!” I glance over my shoulder. The police are making a beeline toward us and shoving aside anyone in their path with unbridled ferocity. When I catch a glimpse of a monitor again, my heart skips a beat—the caption “Teegan Pershing-Harry Price: Wanted Criminals” has now been added. They must’ve run facial recognition software on the drone images. As soon as Grayson finds out that we’re still alive, he will resume his relentless pursuit. My body starts shaking. I almost sink to my knees but then I think of Father and what he must be going through and decide that I won’t let myself be captured.

Alarm bells are ringing. Passengers are panicking all around us. A woman is dragging her son by the arm. He’s holding a baseball in his hand. As I run past him, I snatch his ball, turn to face the drone, and hurl it as hard as I can. The ball smashes into one of the propellers with a satisfying crunch. The drone does a few barrel rolls before crashing to the ground. The kid blurts, “Hey! That was my ball ...”, but I continue to race with Harry toward the nearest exit. I cast a quick glance at the closest monitor—it now shows a “No Signal” image. Good! They’re no longer able to track our every move.

The police are in hot pursuit. A metal curtain starts coming down to close off the exit. Harry is limping behind me. He’ll never make it to the other side in time unless I do something. I grab a metal suitcase from a startled passenger, drop it on its side and give it a big push. The man protests, but I ignore him. It slides and stops just below the steel curtain, which bangs into it and halts. I hear motors straining, but the suitcase is solid and holds. I slither to the other side. The man I stole the suitcase from must have realized that we’re the people the police are after because he trips Harry, who tumbles forward. He lands just a few feet from me. A policeman yells, “Stop or I’ll shoot.” I extend my hand and yank Harry beneath the curtain just as he fires. As soon as he’s on my side, I kick the suitcase hard, freeing it. The curtain resumes closing. Seconds later, the passage is shut—that should give us some time to escape.

“Quick thinking,” says Harry, panting as he gets back up. I detect a note of admiration in his voice.

Lucky for us, the hallway is deserted. I put my sunglasses back on and try to walk casually, but adrenaline is rushing through my veins, making me giddy. When we arrive at the main exit, we find it crawling with policemen. A large crowd has formed next to it. Using biometric scanners, the police screen everyone as they leave. Harry surveys the room. He points at a door labeled “Personnel Only”. After a quick glance, he opens it, revealing a stairwell. I kick off my pumps and we race up the stairs. We arrive at a metal fire door. As soon as we push it open an alarm blares. Shit, now they know exactly where we are.

We exit on the rooftop of Union Station. A gust of wind pushes my hair across my face. Dark, ominous clouds roll above us. There will be thunderstorms soon. As I take a few steps, I catch my breath at the view. The city is beautiful. I recognize a few of the buildings and monuments surrounding us: the U.S. Supreme Court, the Library of Congress, the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, and of course, the Capitol—our destination. From my vantage point, I see the new rampart surrounding the building: crenelated thirty-foot-high ivory walls that were built after CWII to protect it.

There’s a sea of protesters filling every street. The whole U.S. Army must be here too. I see soldiers everywhere. Choppers are circling the sky like hungry vultures. Drones hover over most streets. This city is a powder keg ready to explode; all it needs is a single match.

They’re erecting a new building across the station. For now, it’s mostly a steel frame composed of crisscrossed girders. A crane has been installed next to it. The winch boom is holding steel beams wrapped in chains. The street below has been blocked off. There’s no work going on, probably because of the protests.

We take a few more steps and look around, but there’s no way down from here. Crap, we’ll have to head back to the entrance hall.

I hear the door behind me burst open. I spin around. Two recruits the size of linebackers come storming out. Either of them could easily pick me up and snap me in two like a twig. They look like the Fivers I saw back at Tianlong station. The tall ginger one starts laughing as soon as he spots us. We’ve painted ourselves into a corner, and he knows it.

“Shit,” I grunt. “Any idea?” Harry doesn’t respond. He’s running his hands nervously through his hair. As they approach, we take a few steps back toward the roof’s edge.

“You could jump, you know, and save us the trouble,” shouts the stouter one. “We only want the girl.”

“If you knew what our commander is capable of, that’s exactly what you would do,” says the ginger boy. “He enjoys torturing his prisoners long after he’s extracted their intel. You know, for shits and giggles.”

“He’s going to have fun with you, Harry,” says the stout guy. “The commander loves sharing pictures of his best work. I can’t wait to see what he’ll do to you.”

“Your own mama won’t recognize you when he’s done,” adds the tall one.

I feel my chest tightening. Harry paces nervously along the edge of the roof. His shoulders are hunched. He looks down to the street. I’m getting doubly worried now. I hope the lame scare tactics of these bullies don’t impress him.

Harry quickly backs up a dozen feet. “You’re right,” he shouts. “I should jump.” Before I can react, he starts running and leaps forward with arms flailing just as he reaches the roof edge. I let out a scream.

He lands with a thump on the large concrete counterweight mounted at the back of the crane—a jump of over fifteen feet. I can’t believe it.

Harry waves his arm, “Teegan, your turn. Quick!”

I turn around and stare at the gap between the roof and the counterweight. I’m afraid. No, I’m petrified at the idea of jumping. After all that I’ve been through, why is this new challenge terrifying me so? I did jump off the roof of my house, didn’t I? Why can’t I do it now? And then it occurs to me that it’s not the jump in and of itself. It’s more that over the course of the last few days, I’ve used up all of my courage—my reservoir is empty.

As Harry starts climbing the crane’s boom, I understand his plan. It should be relatively “easy” to jump from the top of the boom to one of the girders of the building under construction. The Fivers figure out Harry’s plan as well and rush toward me.

I’m not sure how I summon the courage, but I take a running jump. The roof gravel hurts my bare feet as I race forward. I know it’s stupid and dangerous, but I close my eyes as soon as my feet leave the ground. For a moment, I arc up, but when I reach the apex, gravity kicks in and I start plummeting down. I crash land on the counterweight. I open my eyes. Wow, I did it!

Just as I put my hands on either side of the boom to start climbing, I hear a howl behind me. The ginger recruit leaps toward the counterweight but miscalculates. His body slams into its side and he starts falling. He catches the ledge with one hand at the last second. He’s dangling fifty feet above street level. He swings a little and tries to grab the side with his other hand to haul himself up but misses. He’s starting to lose his grip. “Help me!” His shout is desperate and urgent. He looks at me with pleading eyes, but there’s no way I can reach him in time even if I wanted to. His fingers slip. With a heartbreaking scream, he plummets to the ground. His body hits the pavement with a sickening splat. His arms and legs bend at awkward angles. I shudder—the boy was just a bit older than me. I continue my climb, trying to block out the image of the dead body.

“You’ll pay for this, bitch!” spits his companion.

He starts emptying his gun in my direction. He’s so enraged that he misses wildly. He has one bullet left if I counted right. I climb up as fast as I can while keeping my eyes on him.

“Come back, you stupid bitch!” he yells.

“You couldn’t hit a barn door if you sat on the handle!” I shout back.

“Just you wait and see.” He lifts his pistol and aims carefully this time. He shoots but still misses by a mile. His pistol empty, he throws it to the ground in a tantrum and leaves. Just when I think things are calming down, a squad of police officers barges out from the roof door. Shit … We’re not out of the woods yet.

“Harry, more incoming!”

“I see them. Hurry up.”

I resume climbing as fast as I can. My burnt wrist makes it slow and painful. I reach Harry, who is watching the police like a hawk. One of the officers is yelling orders into a communication device.

“Are you okay?” asks Harry.

“Yeah.”

I take a deep breath. “I’ll go first this time.” The blustery wind keeps blowing hair into my face and makes the fabric of my skirt snap.

“Wait.” His hand slips around to the back of my neck, and he gives me a quick kiss.

“You’re not helping me concentrate,” I say, trying to hide how scared I really am.

I consider what I must do next. The closest girder is only ten feet from my position on the crane’s boom. I’m higher as well, which makes it a bit easier, but the beam is narrow—maybe ten inches wide. It’ll be a risky jump.

This time I hurl myself with eyes wide open. I land on the girder and immediately wrap my arm around the nearest vertical beam to break my momentum. With arms outstretched for balance, I start walking down a cross section girder like a tightrope walker to make room for Harry.

A gunshot. A bullet grazes my hand. Surprised, I jerk back and fall off the beam. With my burnt hand, I catch the ledge and hang on for dear life.

“Harry!” I yell.

If I let go, it’s a seventy-foot fall. I can’t get out of my head the image of the Fiver, sprawled on the pavement, soaking in a pool of blood. The burning sensation on my wrist grows and grows. My hand is sweaty, making it hard to maintain my grip. I can hear my heart pounding boom, boom, boom … I close my eyes. I hear a thud behind me. Harry just made the jump. I can’t hold on any longer. Just as my fingers slip, Harry catches me with his powerful arm. He yanks me back up. Bullets are flying, but the wind and our hunched position are in our favor. With both hands firmly gripping the girder, we head to a floor section that’s been completed. I hear a muffled moan coming from Harry. With all of the running and jumping we’ve been doing, his burnt leg must hurt like hell.

We’re now on the far side of the building. The police no longer have a direct line of sight to us, and the shooting stops. I look around for an escape route.

“Harry, there’s a construction chute over there! We can use it to go down.”

We haven’t taken three steps in its direction when a helicopter gunship appears above us. A door gunner opens fire with a machine gun. We’re saved by the blustery weather—the helicopter has a hard time maintaining a stable position, and the first salvo misses us.

We duck behind a cement mixer. More bullets hit the metal drum causing sparks to fly. As soon as the shooting pauses, we race toward the chute and jump in, feet first. It’s a six-story drop to the ground. As I slide down surrounded by darkness, the whole contraption vibrates and shakes. I don’t know what awaits me at the bottom. Concrete rubble? Paint cans? Studs with nails protruding? My speed picks up and it freaks me out. I start pushing outward on the tube walls with my arms and legs and manage to slow down the speed of my descent.

I tumble into a container filled with construction debris. I roll to the side as soon as I land to make way for Harry. Seconds later, he crashes next to me, raising a flurry of dust. I’m bruised all over. My butt hurts. I’m pretty sure I’ve landed on a nail. I hope my tetanus vaccination is up to date. My burnt hand is still aching, so I use the other one to help Harry up. I put my old sneakers back on—they’re much more suited to my life-threatening lifestyle.

We clamber out of the container and dust ourselves off.

“What are you doing?” asks Harry when he sees me rummaging through my knapsack.

“I need to reassemble my pistol.” In less than a minute, I’ve put it back together.

I hope I won’t have to use it, but you never know.

# Chapter 24 – Searching for the command center in Philadelphia

We skirt around the concrete roadblocks at the end of the street.

# Chapter 25 – Taking control of the command center

1. Teegan enters command center. There are 2 command centers?
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

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 holographic screens 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 backdoor 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 SMS, 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.

“Shit! Madison, what going on?”

“Jaxon turns to me. “What is the meaning of this?”

The unit goes into lockdown mode.

# Chapter 26 – Aftermath

# 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.”

\*\*\*

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 chip, 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. After all this time, I finally have a worthwhile lead on Hailey’s whereabouts. I was beginning to think that Kurt and her had dropped from the face of the earth.”

“Where do you think she is?”

“In the no-man’s land called Los Diablos. I think the Cavalcade is up to something down there.”

“That’s in California, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ll find her.”

“I know I will. My mama used to call me stubborn, but I like to think of myself as determined.”

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)