

Chapter 4

Cara stepped through her apartment window onto the sill, and slid down the fire exit pole to the landing pad below. Her instructions were to wait in the alleyway until the street was clear of people and to look for a green LSV. She sighed anxiously when she saw that all the cars closest to her were similarly shaped and in the late-night lighting, the color green was difficult to discern. She would have to walk along the row of cars and use the key fob to find it... Suddenly car lights appeared, and she backed into the shadows to wait for them to pass.

The way to turn *ridiculous* risk into reasonable choices was to get accurate information, and so far, Rachel had been her most valuable resource. Not that Cara believed Rachel's clandestine connections were trustworthy, but since every avenue available to her seemed *equally* precarious, she agreed to meet with Rachel's friend again with one stipulation, that he tell her what he wanted. Rachel said there would be 'a negotiator' at this second rendezvous who would 'explain everything'.

Relying on someone in a secret organization was undeniably, *wildly* rash, but bowing to management wasn't safe either if as many of the leaders in the Corporation were as dishonest as Gwen and Rachel said. Cara entered a no man's land of disapproval by supporting Gwen; Vanessa's willingness to discard her friendship had made *that* clear. After witnessing what happened to Gwen, Cara understood that all the conventional routes of assistance from the Corporation and the government would backfire. Cara guessed that people who fell out of favor with management usually groveled to regain it, but she wouldn't. She and Gwen had done nothing wrong.

But the risk of fanaticism in this underground organization still had to be assessed. Although Rachel appeared to be a solid, stable person, Cara couldn't ignore the possibility that she'd been brainwashed or coerced, if only because Cara was unfamiliar with what that would look like in a person. Extremist organizations were known to target desperate people and promise help in exchange for allegiance. Had they come to Rachel when she was in great need? No one was immune to desperation.

Cara did have the one advantage. Rachel said they wanted Cara's assistance but wouldn't explain further. *They're going to a lot of trouble*, Cara reflected. *What if they need me more than I need them?*

Hopefully, whatever it was that they wanted from her would reveal something about their ambitions. Learning that was key to her cooperating; if their goals were destructive she'd refuse no matter the consequences. Before agreeing to anything, she would find a way to vet them and their cause.

If logic had been the sole driver behind Cara's decision to talk with Rachel's contact again, she would have been more confident, but it wasn't. Emotions she didn't recognize and couldn't reconcile were coaxing her in that direction. Old memories and feelings brewed like a complex storm system where the fronts were easy to follow but the local weather couldn't be tracked at all.

Outwardly, she was calm, but quiet can't last in the eye of a hurricane. Her inner landscape had opposing forces trapped in a deadlock. The past and present were at an impasse, blocked by a barrier. Something was kept out of conscious reach... a mental mountain she had to climb and lately she'd felt a nudge like a whisper. *It's time.*

On the day of the second rendezvous, a key to a different car appeared in the odds-and-ends jar on Cara's kitchen counter. Rachel had said there were many sympathizers to her cause, including apparently, a member of the custodial crew with access to her apartment. But when Cara saw the emblem for an LSV on the key fob, at first she refused to drive it.

All Low-Speed-Vehicles were linked to their owners by a dermal-layer microchip containing unique identifiers. As a result, only the registered owners could enter the car without setting off the alarm, or so Cara had believed.

"Nope," Rachel said, "The sound chip's been disconnected from the alarm module."

"Then... what happens when I press the ID button on the keychain?" Cara asked.

"A light on the dashboard will start flashing *with no sound*," Rachel assured her. "We do this all the time, don't worry."

But as she stepped out of the alley into the quiet street, Cara was worrying. *What if they forgot? What if it's not disconnected?* Cara knew the answer to *that* question. If a car alarm sounded, someone would report it and with all the security cameras everywhere, Cara would easily be identified. *What excuse would I give to the authorities?* she wondered. For this she had no answer.

Except for cringing every time she pressed the car ID button, Cara succeeded in acting casual as she walked along the line of cars. But not being able to find the right one was making her anxious. *I'm at the end of the block! Where is it?* When a flashing light finally appeared on a dash, she yanked the door open and dove inside.

"This *car* does not look *green*," she declared to the empty vehicle, and then waited for her heart to stop pounding.

Cara drove to an all night, self-serve store and purchased some aspirin as she'd been instructed. From there, she took the circuitous route that Rachel devised to avoid alerting the traffic drones. Once she arrived, she followed the road around the parking lot to the back of the site where she was to enter the same warehouse as in the first encounter only this time through a street-level entrance. This sounded easy until she found that all the streetlamps behind the warehouses were dark. She stopped the car and switched from high beams to searchlight mode and automatic roving. The sweeping light allowed her to see the pothole stricken road ahead, a series of loading docks along the left, and everything else was swamp grass. She clicked back to the high beams and drove to the last loading area where she parked and put on her breather. As she sat and waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, she wondered if these people always held their meetings during the moonless hours of the night.

The inside of the building was dimly lit with the flickering of a few drop panel, fluorescent lights, an obsolete form of lighting that Cara had only seen in pictures. Above the lights, a high ceiling with a complex array of crisscrossing beams accentuated the immensity of the space. Tables organized into workstations were strewn with plastic shoe parts darkened with age and grime. A platform that once housed a conveyer belt ran the entire length of the room but only tattered bits of the belt remained. Fixtures for a robotic process hung overtop the conveyer and though much of it was still there, rusting in place, there were gaping holes in the mechanism where the valuable parts had been removed.

Cara found the hallway of offices Rachel had described and knocked before entering room 109. As the door swung open into darkness, a bright lamp switched on, blinding her with white light. "It's her."

The lamp clicked off. Gradually she perceived the faint glow of a blue bulb and two figures standing in the shadow behind it. She had color dots in her vision now, so she glanced at them sideways to view their silhouettes.

“Sorry about the light,” St. Anthony’s voice said to her. “Can’t be too careful. If you shut the door, you can remove your breather; the air’s filtered in here.” Once she’d complied, he continued. “Cara... I’d like you to meet Mason.”

The second figure stepped forward into the light. Despite the blue blotches obscuring her vision, she couldn’t miss that he was *extremely* tall and dressed exactly as she was, including the black cap.

“I see we shop at the same boutique,” Cara said.

He surprised her with a grin.

“Mason is going to train you.”

“In what?” Cara asked warily.

“On how to stay alive,” St. Anthony explained. “It’s only *suggested*. We don’t require that you remain alive.”

She sighed impatiently. “As *much* as I *appreciate* your droll humor... unless you tell me what you want, this is our last conversation.”

“Understandable,” he answered amiably. “Mason is here to help you with that as well. And now, I have to go, but I leave you in the hands of someone I trust with my life. If you agree to work with us, I’ll wager that at some future point, you’ll say the same.” He bowed ceremoniously. “Until we meet again,” he said, and left the room through a doorway in the back.

“Why am I allowed to see you but not him?” Cara asked the tall man as he switched on a lamp that lit up the whole room. “Isn’t that dangerous for you? I could turn you in.”

“You could but you’d just end up looking foolish.”

“How so?”

“I don’t exist,” he answered. “If you described me to a sketcher I wouldn’t show up in the recognition software and, since the DM believe they’re incapable of making mistakes, the mistake would be *yours*.” He sat down on the edge of a desk and motioned to the chair next to her. “Please, have a seat.”

“If I’m going to be interrogated, I’d rather stand.”

“I’m here to *inform* you,” he assured her, “and the first thing I have to tell you... well, I really wish you would sit down.”

Cara frowned skeptically but did as he asked.

“There is no vaccine for the virus that continues to destroy people’s lives throughout the world,” he said. “The Corporation manufactures and distributes an antiviral; they lie, and say it’s a vaccine.”

“Pffffff,” scoffed Cara. “That’s *absurd*. I’ve never heard anything so ridiculous.”

“*There’s presently no vaccine that protects people from the effects of the virus,*” he repeated. “A group of people in the Corporation openly acknowledge this *fact* among themselves; they are the people who oversee production of the antiviral. As soon as anyone else stumbles upon the truth and tries to expose it, he or she disappears. That’s how it is here, in the West. I don’t know how they maintain the lie in the Eastern Hemisphere.”

Cara stared down at the floor to compensate for the wild, imbalance she was experiencing internally. She felt like her understanding of the world had just exploded and her thoughts were simultaneously traveling in every direction. Finally, she found herself amidst the confusion and said, “This is impossible for so many reasons, it would take me *an hour* to list them all. The

most obvious being, that one of the *primary functions* of all analytical labs everywhere is to analyze solutions and determine their chemistry, and for something this important, *thousands* of labs worldwide have done *exactly that* with the vaccine. That's how countries in the Eastern Hemisphere retro-engineered it and began making it for themselves."

"Where did you learn that?" he asked.

"What?"

"What you just said... Where did you learn it?"

Cara sat very still. She had no first-hand knowledge of the vaccine; one simply accepted that it worked.

"Given your... educational background, you couldn't have known about this, we understand that; but I'm guessing you've had a few unanswered questions along the way in life, that you *swallowed*, because instinctively you knew it wasn't safe to voice them. So, I'm going to do my best to summarize how this insanity became reality, and you can ask *yourself* what part of it rings true.

When you were very young, an east-west, economic competition arose over a goldmine: an antiviral formulation that protected against the ever-changing, rapid mutation virus that was spreading all over the world. Nowadays, we hear about 'criminals' that sell antiviral on the black market. But what NetNews doesn't tell you is... because there's *no vaccine*, the sale of antiviral *is* incredibly profitable, but not for black marketeers... It's big money *for the leaders of the world's autocratic superpowers; a handful of people in each hemisphere control* the production and *reap the profits* from the sale of antiviral. They stomp on anyone who interferes, especially those who've tried to develop a vaccine, because... as you know, vaccinated people don't need to buy antiviral.

What started out as a lucrative business for the two, major world economies to *share* turned into an *east-west* war for control of the whole, antiviral market worldwide. Children learn in school that we're fighting a war to protect our diminishing natural resources, and that's true, but it's only part of the story."

When Cara spoke, the words that came out of her mouth sounded foreign to her ears because she'd never said them aloud. "Were my parents developing a vaccine when they had the car accident?"

Mason was discernably unprepared for the question. He sat up straight, pulling his shoulders back like arrows drawn by a bow. After a moment, he answered in a hushed tone, "We believe so. *For sure*, we know that your parents invented the first antiviral therapy... and never got credit for it."

Cara didn't move. She felt like she'd been punched in the stomach and couldn't breathe. A breath did come; it pushed itself into her chest and what followed was almost as automatic. She focused on her breathing to quiet her mind so she could hear what he had to say.

"You receive regular injections of antiviral, not vaccine. You're *pickled* in antiviral, and you live and work in a safe bubble with other, similarly protected people. This inverse quarantine is reserved for the wealthy and the fortunate. You've been in it ever since the first antiviral therapy was mass-produced."

"For what purpose?" she asked.

"To keep you separate from the infected populations, as much as possible, so you can perform the work that the Corporation values. In the real world... that is, in the world outside the shelter of the Corporation and the Government, every single person alive has the virus. Some maintain

low blood levels of the virus by taking the antiviral as often as they can afford to, and they're the lucky ones. Most people are sick all the time and just live that way."

"An inverse quarantine isn't sustainable," Cara said. "A few years, maybe even a decade, but not *forever!*"

"It turns out that you're right," he said. "Time is reality's witness... 'time will tell...' is what people say and time has told on the Corporation. The shelter the Corporation devised to protect itself is crumbling and they've no solution in sight. But *we* have one."

"The *solution* is a vaccine," said Cara.

He nodded eagerly. "We're developing a series of vaccines to address how rapidly the virus changes, and there's a role you could play to speed it up." Mason placed a chair opposite her and sat down. "But before we get into that, I want to make sure we've... that you... What I mean is, I'm wondering if you have any more questions about your parents."

"What?" Her mind was blank.

"If you could have one question answered about them, what would it be?"

An odd feeling came over her and everything in the room was suddenly brighter, clearer as if they'd moved closer. Every edge of every object was sharp and distinct and she knew what he meant.

"Were my parents murdered?" she heard herself ask. Her voice sounded far away.

Mason's face was an odd combination of surprise and relief. "I thought you might have wondered about that... *I* would've wondered," he admitted. "I researched it and all I could find, *anywhere*, were reports that repeated the official statement."

"Which was?"

"A car accident, slippery road conditions and high winds," he cited. "In my opinion, the fact that I can't find any other account is suspicious." He paused indecisively. "Do you mind if I ask how old you were?"

"Eight."

Silence stood between them like a wall of fog as a hurricane swept through her. She was a leaf on a tree, pressed flat against a branch by the deafening wind. She could see her father's face, just as it was, on the day the wind was bending the trees.

'How can the leaves hold on in the wind?'

Her father smiled. 'They hold on because they have to.'

'The place where they hold on... what is it? Why is it so tough?'

'The tree needs the food made in the leaves so the bridge between them has to be strong.'

'But what's it called?'

'The node.'

'That's a dumb name.'

Her parents' laughter blended with the swishing and whooshing sounds of leaves tossing in the wind.

Her mother's face appeared. She said, 'Then name it something else. What shall we call it?'

'The sky bridge.'

Mason was staring at her intently when he touched his ear and spoke. "She's in emotional shock. Too much, too soon. Contact Rachel; tell her she'll be driving Cara home."

Cara reminded herself that she could get up and walk out at any time. That calmed her. *I'm not afraid of them*, she thought. *I'm not even afraid of death because that's where my parents are.*

With his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped, Mason leaned forward to study her face. “I’m truly sorry that you lost your parents,” he said. “I’ve learned a lot about them recently... and it’s plain to see they were *good people*. But when they departed from your life, you weren’t alone in your loss. Hundreds of people in the company that we now call the Corporation lost them too. Those first employees watched the business your parents built enter a downward spiral soon after they passed away. These first people are witness both to the initial, inspired beginning fostered by your parents and to how the company was twisted into something else. Now, people consumed with petty jealousies, greed and general self-seeking run the Corporation. That’s all that’s left, except for the few like you, who literally *slave* to keep it afloat. But there’re *too few*. There aren’t enough hard-working, qualified people to offset the damage being done by the *many* who were handed positions of authority they don’t deserve. Too many dishonest people have access to Corporation products, equipment, supply routes, computing networks... the list goes on... that they use for personal gain. Your workplace is riddled with scammers and thieves in every tier; *thieves with access*. The Corporation now is like a giant truck that has a massive gas tank... with thousands of jerry-rigged ports where people siphon off fuel for illegitimate purposes.”

Cara watched him as he spoke and reminded herself this could be a ruse. *Did he bring up my parents to confuse me?* she wondered. *Do they want me to commit corporate espionage? Time will tell.*

“Have you analyzed the vaccine yourself?”

“Of course not.” Cara lay on her stomach atop a boulder gazing down into an old rock quarry now half-filled with water.

Rachel crossed her arms. “Do you know someone who has?”

“No.”

“Then you can’t know that it’s a vaccine,” Rachel finished. “And get down from there. I’m afraid of heights and you’re making me nervous.”

Cara jumped from her perch to the ground. “There were other scientists in the Corporation who were just as honest as my parents.”

“And there *still are*,” Rachel agreed, “but they’re outnumbered. The leadership of the Corporation has been overwhelmed and weakened by a lack of integrity for decades.”

“He said my parents’ team was the first to develop an antiviral,” Cara grumbled dubiously.

“Yes,” Rachel allowed. “Right after the outbreak. You don’t believe that either?”

“It’s not public knowledge,” Cara pointed out.

“I have old news articles printed on *paper* that will prove it to you,” Rachel said, and then added. “There’s a lot of important information that you’ll never find anywhere on the Net. The question I hope you’re asking yourself is: why would the Corporation hide something that should be commemorated?”

Cara turned away as tears stung her eyes. “When can I see those articles?” she asked quietly.

“Tomorrow. They’ll be in your hall closet when you get home.” Rachel leaned back against a tree. “There’s nothing wrong with your anger Cara... unless you let it wear out its welcome. Anger kept inside too long leads to a prejudiced perspective. Not the best mindset for a scientist.”

“I don’t know what to do with it,” she admitted.

“Use it!” Rachel urged. “Anger is energy! Harness it and build something good. It’s normal to spend time blaming others when we’re angry; we all do it. But we have to see our part in it too. Anyone who’s breathing is participating in the world around them, and is partially responsible for the way things are. So we must ask ourselves, *what part can we play in the solution?*”

“*You do lots of blaming,*” Cara noted. “You blame the Corporation for practically everything, including the war.”

“No,” said Rachel. “I’m sorry if it sounded like that’s what I think. Nothing as big as a war is that simple. There’s never just one person, or even one group of people, to blame for a whole country’s problems! *That’s* called a scapegoat.

I don’t care who’s to blame; I care who’s the roadblock to a solution. The biggest impediment is the Corporation but there are other hurdles too. The government bows down to the Corporation and its money, *as do we all*. *We all* help maintain the web of lies that the leaders of the Corporation spin, because we’re *dependent* on them.

We depend on the Corporation for our pensions, our jobs, our healthcare and all the goods they manufacture. When the war started, suddenly we had to produce everything on this continent and who took charge of it all? The Corporation. People started calling it ‘*the C*’ like it’s the ‘Sea of Life’ or some sort of *god*. Every day NetNews tells us how ‘the C’ fuels the economy, which funds the war effort. Indirectly but clearly, we’re *constantly* told that protecting the Corporation is the same as protecting ourselves, so we *overlook* the lie of the antiviral, and all the little lies that hold that one in place.”

“I hope you don’t think that having a vaccine can solve *all of that,*” Cara warned.

“No,” said Rachel, “but it’s an *unequivocal* step in the right direction. When we announce to the world we have a vaccine, and people learn they’ve been given an antiviral all this time *instead...* the public will be angry with the Corporation and the government. At that point, we’ll have some leverage.”

“But then what?” Cara asked. “Let’s say everyone in the world has an effective vaccine. What about the war and the people ruining the Corporation?”

“Once there’s a vaccine, we get rid of the gold diggers. First, all the execu-thieves raking in *obscene* amounts of money from the businesses they’re supposed to be leading, but they’re not...*they have to go*. Next, companies over a certain size will be obligated by law to pay fair wages *and* will be required each year to put a percentage of their profits *back* into the business.” Cara’s jaw dropped. “How will you do *that?*”

“Peacefully,” answered Rachel, “with incentivized but *ethical* propositions to those in power.”

“That tells me nothing.”

“Sure it does,” Rachel argued. “It tells you the most important thing there is to know about us: that we believe in *peaceful* and *just* resolutions. But first, we have to get the Corporation to mass-produce an *actual* vaccine.”

Cara did a double take. “But you said that the antiviral is the Corporation’s *big* money maker.”

“It is,” Rachel agreed, “and yes, once there’s a vaccine the bottom will drop out of the antiviral market eliminating the cash flow fueling the war.”

“They’ll never agree to do it,” said Cara. “Why would they?”

“With the proper inducements at the right time targeting the right people,” Rachel replied. “If you think about it, that’s how everything gets done; it’s just that sometimes it’s planned, sometimes it’s luck and sometimes it’s a bit of both.”

On the second visit to the office in the old warehouse, the room was brightly lit with an overhead panel of fluorescent tubes. Of the three pieces of furniture present, only the built-in, L-shaped desk was covered in decades of dust and grime. The two folding chairs were well worn but *comparatively* clean.

“My job is to teach you how to protect yourself at work,” Mason began. “Bad things happen; some can be avoided and some cannot. But the bad things that *can be foreseen* are more likely to happen when people are unaware. Those who want to control others know this very well, so they do their best to keep people *ignorant and unaware* with all kinds of tricks: lying, distracting, information overload, information voids, false details added to actual events... I’ll arm you with facts so you’ll be operating with accurate knowledge. Sometimes the facts will be things you don’t want to hear or wish weren’t true but if *not knowing them* could put you in danger, then you *must* learn them.

Anxiety’s unavoidable so you just *have to learn* to manage it. I’ll teach you techniques that remove nervous energy through the breath and muscle tension through movement. If you’ve ever done Tai Chi, you’ll see many similarities.”

As he talked, Cara kept wondering what he was *not* telling her. Rachel seemed to give carefully measured amounts of information, perhaps for fear of scaring her off. Cara had to admit that she was more comfortable denying their version of reality than accepting it; perhaps Rachel had been wise to go slowly. *This man* seemed to be in a hurry yet not willing to get to the point. What was he dancing around? What did they want?

“Not all of what Roger does is self-serving,” Mason was saying. “His activities shield people in the tiers above him. With the exception of the RM, however, the people being protected are faceless. We’d like to know who they are.” He paused as if expecting Cara to ask a question but when none came, he continued. “Rachel says they know you’re questioning what happened to Gwen and they’re afraid you’ll start digging for answers. Usually they can shut people down with bullying and blackmail but you haven’t reacted to their attempts at intimidation in the way they’d hoped.”

Cara’s brow creased quizzically. “Are you saying I should be reacting differently?”

“Not at all!” he answered with encouragement. “Rachel says you’re pretending you don’t notice the pressure they’re putting on you and that’s exactly the right response for now. Oh...sorry. Hold on one second...” he touched his ear and listened for a moment. By now Cara had surmised that he had a surgically implanted communication device.

“Yes, put her through,” Mason said, and then handed the headphones that had been lying on the desk to Cara. “There’s someone who’d like to speak with you.”

“Who?” asked Cara as she fitted them over her ears. She heard a voice talking to someone else, “He’s putting her on now? Okay... Cara? Are you there?”

Cara was stunned. “Gwen? Is that you!”

Laughter spilled through Cara’s headphones. “Yes!” the voice cried jubilantly. “It’s me! I’m so glad to hear your voice!”

“What... where...” Cara stammered.

“Al helped me get out of town,” Gwen explained. “I’m sorry to have left you in the dark for so long but they said it wasn’t safe for me to contact you. I kept after them, though. I knew you’d want to know that I was okay and they finally agreed to let me talk to you.”

“You’re really okay?”

“More than okay!” Gwen exclaimed. “I’m happier than I’ve been for the longest time. I’m back in school studying nursing! I just hope I’ll be able to see you at some point... soon, I hope.”

“You weren’t kidnapped?” Cara probed suspiciously.

“No,” Gwen assured her. “Going was my choice and staying is my choice. I’m doing great. What?” Gwen said to someone else and then spoke to Cara again. “I have to go. We can’t use this frequency any longer.”

“Oh,” Cara couldn’t hide her disappointment. “How can I contact you?”

“Through the person you’re with. Bye for now.”

As Cara removed the headphones, the room suddenly felt very empty.

“Does that make you feel better to know she’s all right?” Mason asked as he sat down in the chair opposite her.

“Yes,” Cara said.

Mason looked disappointed as if expecting a more enthusiastic response but instead of commenting, he moved on with his agenda. “Rachel gave you the basic ground rules, the most important one being ‘never speak, write down, or record’ what you discuss or do with any of us. Any drawings or written instructions from us must be destroyed as soon as you’ve committed them to memory. For now, we will handle eliminating evidence we just need you to understand that you can’t *create* any.”

“Yes,” she acknowledged, “I know.”

“Great. Also, very important, if during your meetings with us you become too tired to absorb more information, tell us, and we’ll stop for the day. Certain things are so important that we’ll have to quiz you until we’re satisfied you’re clear on them. If that means I need to repeat something for a month, every time we meet, and have you repeat it back to me five times, that’s what we’ll do. For some people, we use hypnosis to help them remember instructions, but I don’t think that’ll be necessary with you. What do you think?”

Anxiety seized her and Cara had to swallow to speak. “*Hypnosis*, no. I’ll tell you when I’m tired.”

His head tilted slightly. “Hypnosis is an *option* that’s available to you. The choice is entirely yours.”

A deep breath expanded her chest and came out as a great sigh of relief. “Ok.”

Mason peered into her face as if looking more closely could explain something. Exasperated by the scrutiny, Cara leaned forward in an exaggerated imitation of him and stared back. He laughed, then got up from the chair and sat on the desk.

“Sorry... I’m supposed to wait for topics to sink in before adding more to the pile,” he explained, “but I’m having a little trouble reading you. I got *that* message, though.”

“Some progress, then?” she ventured.

He smiled. “Definitely.” He glanced away then, and when he looked back, his expression was solemn. “This next topic isn’t an easy one... I need to talk to you about the Corporation Clinic.” Something in his tone was ominous and Cara felt her back stiffen.

“When you go for your routine viral tests, at some point they’ll be running... *additional tests* that they won’t tell you about.”

“What? Why?”

“They’ll be looking for a drug in your system that *they* put there.”

Cara tended to feel stark realities first on the nape of her neck. Chilling realizations started there as a tingling sensation, and mysteriously ended the journey in the pit of her stomach.

“Who do you mean? Who are ‘they’?”

“We know the people who are ordered to do it but we don’t know who authorizes it,” he said. All her life *until now*, her curious mind had eagerly sought out the new and unexpected. Like, when she went into the lab each day and checked to see how an experiment was progressing. But lately, new information caused her breath to snag, her words to cut off halfway down her throat, and the strength in her legs to fail.

During the day, things felt more manageable. Her mind had an automatic mechanism that took charge and handled fear for her. It was almost like she could *pretend* fear *wasn’t happening*. But at night, it crept back into her consciousness and to help herself sleep, she envisioned a wooden box. She pictured herself opening it, putting her thoughts inside, and locking it in a way that she and only she could open it. Then, she’d slip the box under a bed in a make-believe house in the center of a massive, imaginary forest.

Cara glanced up and saw that Mason was waiting for her to respond. “What kind of drug?” she asked.

“They may...” he paused as if reconsidering his approach. “They will *very likely* give you low doses of a chemical that *cancel*s the therapeutic effects of the antiviral, by way of the drinking water in your apartment,” he said.

Cara’s breath caught as another shock wave went through her. Her thoughts split into a thousand questions as if her mind had been passed through a prism. “*How, exactly?*” was all she said.

“The Corporation owns your apartment complex; they manage the utilities, including the potable water,” he answered grimly. “The drinking water line to each apartment has a filter... and someone will regularly replace *your* filter with one that’s doped with a chemical and the chemical will slowly dissolve into your drinking water.”

Cara wanted to cover her face in her hands but resisted the impulse. “A chemical that counteracts the medication that protects me from the virus... You’re saying they want me to get *sick*. Which means they either want me to die, or they don’t care if I die or not.”

“But you won’t,” he replied firmly, his gaze unwavering. “Not if you follow my instructions. As of today, stop drinking water from any faucets. A supply of drinking water will be provided every week in the coat closet of your apartment, starting tonight.

Get a water test kit at the drug store and prove to yourself that the supply we give you is *only water*. At the same time, begin testing the water from your faucets. Rachel will tell you what chemicals to expect to find.”

“But, they might not dope my water, right?” said Cara. “You can’t know this for *sure*.”

His answer was gentle but definite. “It could be a week from now, or it could be a *year*... but at some point they *will* target you in this way, because they perceive you as a threat. So,” he continued, in an almost cheerful, businesslike tone, “starting tomorrow, Rachel will supply you with *our* antiviral, the antiviral that we make. Feel free to test it too. I’m told you routinely do various forms of chromatography in the lab... Test *each* batch of our antiviral, if that’s what you need to do to feel safe-”

“Wait,” Cara interrupted, and then pressed her forehead with her fingers to help herself think.

“Why do I need to take *your* antiviral if I’m not drinking the water in my apartment with the... *anti-antiviral*? I’ll still be getting the injections in the clinic. Why would I need more?”

All joviality dropped from his demeanor when he said, “Once they add the chemical to your drinking water they’ll replace your weekly antiviral injections with saline.”

Cara closed her eyes, pulled in a deep breath and slowly released it. Then another, and upon releasing the third, her breath regained an even tempo and her mind was back in the room.

“Perfect,” Mason said. “Did a therapist in the Orphan Center teach you that? In my Center, they called it BFF for ‘Breathe, Focus, and Fix your attention.’ Is that what they called it in your Center?”

Cara’s eyes flew wide open. “How do you *know* that!”

“All the kids in my Orphan Center who experienced trauma were taught that breathing technique. It’s a good one.”

Cara’s response was to stare at him in dumbfounded surprise, so he added, “I was in the orphan system too. I mean...” and then he rolled his eyes when he said, “the *Parenting Our Children Centers*.”

“When?” Cara asked suspiciously.

“Until I was fifteen,” he said, “when I staged my death and ran away.”

“You *what? Why?*”

“I found out they were hiding my Native American heritage from me. Well, actually, they hid *all* of my heritage,” he said.

Cara was mystified. “Who told you? How do you know?”

“A brother, I didn’t know I had, sneaked into the orphanage to tell me my father was dying and wanted to see me.” He grimaced. “All my life I’d been told by the people in the Center that I had *no living family*. Silver lining: one of the perks of being raised in a Corporation-sponsored POC Center is that you live with geniuses. After my ‘death’, I asked my friend to break into the POCC computer network and delete all images of me.” Mason’s smile was smug. “Since they’d already eliminated all evidence of my past everywhere else, that’s all I needed to do to become invisible.”

Cara gaped in disbelief. “You *have to have* a photo ID,” she maintained. “You wouldn’t be able to do *anything* without it.”

“Yes.” He pulled a card from his pocket and handed it to her. “That’s my national ID card.”

She frowned. “That’s not you. It doesn’t look anything like you!”

“No ones’ photo ID looks like them. It’s just that *mine* really *isn’t* me.” He grinned.

A laugh escaped her. “Then who is it?”

“No one. The photo is a creation, as is my whole identity.”

Her brows knitted together. “What about your fingerprints? You need them to do banking and all sorts of things.”

“I use disposable fingerprints. Little plastic gummies that you can stick on.”

“Oh, *come on*,” Cara scoffed. She cocked her head slightly, squinted one eye and viewed him with the other. “What would happen if you were arrested and printed? Did you think the DM wouldn’t notice you had plastic on your fingertips?”

Mason’s face lost its levity. “Yes... Well, if I get arrested by the DM, I’ll be counting the days left in my life. Which is why, a *significant* portion of what I do *everyday* is devoted to making sure I’m never arrested for anything.”

“Oh.” Cara pondered that soberly, realizing that she was quickly entering into a similar political category. If she were caught helping them at this stage, she guessed that the DM might go easy on her and attribute her choices to cult pressure and brainwashing. But, at some point, she would cross a line... and the authorities would see her as a terrorist. She turned her attention back to Mason and asked, “Why are you living like this? Why are you taking these risks?”

“For the same reason Gwen risked telling you about the brutality in your division,” he answered.

“She couldn’t stand the thought of watching yet another innocent person get ground up like raw

meat. She knew she wouldn't be able to live with the knowledge that she could have warned you, but didn't."

"Gwen was trying to help me," Cara murmured. "I know."

"I'm not sure how much she helped *you*... but she certainly helped us," he said.

"What do you mean?" Cara demanded, thinking his comment was a criticism of Gwen.

"We had no way of approaching you. As Rachel put it, you were 'enviably content in your work bubble' and she believed you had no incentive to risk what you had. But Gwen believed your contentedness wouldn't last, that you would eventually see the abuse, but only when it was *happening to you*. She's a brave person. She was all on her own when she took the risk of warning you. She didn't know anything about us until the day Rachel's contact helped her leave town."

A niggling suspicion gradually took shape in Cara's thoughts. "Did you tell me about growing up in a Center and staging your death... *to change the subject?* Was that... a *diversion?*"

"No," he denied, but a mischievous glint appeared in his eye. "Well, maybe..."

Cara stood up in disgust and headed for the door.

"Wait!" he exclaimed, jumping from the desk.

"I won't be manipulated," she stated, and pulled the breather out of her pocket.

"Okay! Yes, I admit, *I saw you were in distress*, as *anyone* would be, when told their water supply was going to be poisoned, *on purpose*. I guessed you would use the breathing technique, that it would just be automatic for you, and started talking about it to calm you down. But everything I told you is true."

She remained poised for flight.

"It's all true."

As she stood there, she listened to the sound of her breath and felt the rise and fall of her chest as she so often, automatically did. She turned around again and faced him. He sat back down. A moment later, he broke the silence with, "Well, uh... *tonight* I was supposed to start your martial arts training, beginning with breath technique."

A laugh escaped her and he grinned.

"I guess I'll skip *that part*... and if you're still with me," he added, observing that Cara remained standing by the door, "I'll go on to the next topic, meditation." He waited.

She crossed the room to the wall opposite him and leaned against it.

He laughed. "Now this feels like a duel. Promise you won't pull a broadsword on me..."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Just thought I'd ask. So... you're in a high stress situation for an unknown period of time... To handle that, we recommend you learn how to meditate. Some people can enter a meditative state just by focusing on the breath, but others cannot, at least not in the beginning.

There're many ways to meditate. Runners say that after they run for a while their *thoughts switch off* and they experience the world around them more fully. The goal in your case is to mentally remove yourself from your situation and rest your mind for at least an hour a day.

I think the easiest way to start people out is with moving meditation, so tonight I'll show you a yoga routine that's effective if you do it every day."

Cara glanced around the small room. "In here?"

"No." He tapped a bag next to him on the desk. "I have thick mats that we'll put on the floor in the big hall. Rachel said you do an aerobic workout at lunchtime a few days a week, so it's important that you keep that up. And, next time we meet, I'll begin teaching you Tai Chi;

practicing that before work every morning will help you remain unreactive no matter what happens.”

Cara grunted irritably. “What else can happen that you haven’t told me about?”

She saw he averted his eyes before answering. “Well, Rachel will go over this with you tomorrow in more detail but... You could forget to take the antiviral she gives you and begin to experience viral symptoms for the first time in your life.”

The thought of that happening was so threatening to Cara that she became defensive and responded with truculence disguised as confidence. “I won’t forget.”

He shrugged. “It can happen. If it *did*, it would be important that you *not overreact*. You’d have to fake that you’re fine no matter how you feel, until one of us could step in and help you.

The most effective way to receive the antiviral, and maintain a zero viral blood count, is with an injection; which is the way your clinic does it. To have the same outcome with our antiviral tablets, you have to take them *like clockwork*. You can’t miss a dose.”

Cara’s head felt like it was spinning on a merry-go-round and the only way off was to voice the thought that kept going round and round. “Why do this to people? *Why?*”

“Infesting people with the virus is a cheap and effective way to subdue someone who poses a threat, but can’t be *removed* right away... at least, not without a convincing reason. You become too weak to cause them trouble and you appear crazy to everyone else. No one in the Corporation would conclude you’re acting oddly because you’re sick with the virus. It’s unthinkable.”

“What do you mean, I’d look crazy?” Cara pressed.

“Think about how the virus affects people,” he said. “Maybe you haven’t witnessed the symptoms... but you know what they are. The person begins to experience unexplained anxiety, sleeplessness, drenching night sweats, mood swings... They display irritability, combativeness, memory problems, general confusion and paranoia. The signs of the illness become very apparent to friends, family, and co-workers... but none of them, not the person affected nor the people around them, suspect what’s really happening *because they all believe they’re fully ‘vaccinated’ and can’t contract the virus*. Eventually, the infected person loses all ability to cope with the symptoms and it’s an easy next step for the perpetrators to assign mental illness as the cause.”

“There *is a point of no return*,” she reminded him. “If the infection is too advanced, an antiviral *won’t work*.”

“That’s true,” he allowed, “but someone, such as yourself, who experiences a brief lapse in taking the antiviral would probably just feel a little goofy in the head.”

Her eyes narrowed angrily. “Everyone’s immune system is different. A viral load that makes one person a little woozy could cause irreparable brain damage in another. There’re now at least five, potentially lethal subtypes. Two subtypes of the virus enter the body through the epithelial cells of the eyes, the other forms initially attack the cells of the respiratory system. From there, they can migrate and damage nerve cells anywhere in the body, or attack your muscles, including the muscle cells of the *heart and lungs*.

Now consider the effect on someone like me, who’s been *‘pickled’* as you so engagingly described it, with the Corporation’s antiviral since the outbreak... insulated from the untreated population, and as a result has developed little to no natural immunity. What do you think my chances are of surviving one of the lethal subtypes?”

He threw his arms out into the air in frustration. “*Yes, your situation sucks! Is that what you want me to say? Yes! What’s going on in the world right now sucks. That’s why we need a*

vaccine.” He rubbed his neck tiredly. “The problems you’re having at work are a result of Gwen choosing to inform you, and you choosing to become informed. *We can’t go back in time and change that*, but we can help you navigate your present work situation, and potentially turn the problem you’re facing into a means of protecting *trillions* of people from the virus. So, if it’s okay with *you*, maybe we could talk about *that*.”

She glared at him wordlessly. He shifted in his seat irately and stated, “We’re *very* close to obtaining a vaccine. I’m sure you doubt this... So, convince yourself. Ask me questions about our vaccine and I’ll tell you what I can.”

Cara considered his suggestion. She did know what some of the obstacles would be to developing a vaccine for this virus, and if they *really were* close to obtaining one, they’d have to have overcome them. “Have you found a pattern in the genetic shifts that the virus undergoes?” she asked.

He brightened. “Yes. Latency is still an unaddressed challenge... but they do see a reoccurring pattern of reassortments, even though there seems to be no end to the types of vertebrates it will infect, and the reoccurrence correlates with a sustained absence of antigenic or phase variation. They...” Mason hesitated as if trying to decide if he should say something. “They see a pattern, but it would be helpful if they knew the virus genome at time zero. That would complete the picture from past to present.”

Cara found his last statement baffling. “There *have* to be frozen stocks of it, both in Africa where the outbreak first occurred and in Disease Control labs here. They would have recovered it from the people initially infected.”

“If such stocks exist, they’re a secret,” he replied. “But there is one source that we know about...”

Cara sensed he was hedging again. “What are you trying to say?” she asked.

“There’s no stock of the original strain of the virus that we know of, except in a person.” He waited a moment, as if to see if she knew what he meant, but when Cara said nothing, he added, “One of the first people infected was your... I guess she’s your great aunt. Your father put her in cryonic stasis when she went into a coma.”

Cara was stymied. “Oh...”

“It was a long time ago,” he remarked. “You were young.”

Cara perched on the other end of the long desk. “I remember... She was in the first group of people who were infected.” She turned to view him more directly. “You want to know the original genome of the virus before you finalize a vaccine, and you want to extract it from her.” “Yes.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“Well,” Mason’s tone was cautious. “There’s a funny technicality that’s stopping us. When your father put her into stasis, he built some unusual security into the cryopod. It’s believed he designed and engineered it himself.”

“Ha!” Cara burst out. “Yes, he *would* have! One of his hobbies was developing funky security devices. He called them ‘giggles’ and we had them all over the house. You couldn’t walk in on someone in the bathroom without setting off a foghorn. My bedroom windows played ‘My country Tis of Thee’ when you opened them.” Cara laughed at the memory but Mason’s guise was grave. She studied him a moment and guessed, “You think it wasn’t for fun... It was to protect us.”

As if unsure how best to answer, he didn't, and instead returned to the previous topic. "We know his security devices always had an administrator over-ride that allowed him to bypass customer input and disarm the system," Mason began.

"Is this what you do whenever you're uncomfortable?" Cara asked. "Change the subject?" *This* amused him. "Yes and no. Sometimes the best answer to a question includes information I'm not allowed to divulge."

"Here's the thing," she said, her tone steeped in annoyance, "I used to go to the lab with my parents on the weekends but that was... a lifetime ago. If you want me to remember something, as it *very much* appears that you *do*, you'll have to tell me something that will jog my memory. Like... can you tell me what's so 'unusual' about the security on the cryopod?"

He touched his ear and listened for a moment. "Yes," he answered finally. "We have reason to believe we need your assistance to bypass the security alarm."

"Me? Why? Give me some *details*," she insisted.

He listened again, then said, "The keypad on the cryochamber has a hidden panel of injection ports. Would you know anything about that?"

"Huh," she responded. "Well..." She closed her eyes and tried to envision her parent's lab. The counters were filled with instruments. She had her own stool... "Oh!" Her eyes flew open. "He had one instrument that had a light that changed from red to green when he pipetted in a solution of my hair and keratinase. The keratinase enzyme degraded the hair," she added.

"And... *he used the DNA* from my spit as a control in most of his experiments." She began tapping the desk with one fingernail. "You know," she said, as the tapping quickened, "if all you needed was my DNA, you could have just *asked me for it* and saved us all a lot of time and trouble. Or, kidnapped me, if that's the kind of thing you do."

Mason grew visibly irritated but attempted to mask his aggravation behind practiced politeness.

"I know what they say on the news about 'terrorists', but *we* aren't terrorists, and we don't kidnap *anyone*," he replied. "NetNews would have you believe that anyone who criticizes the Corporation or the government is a terrorist, and all terrorists kidnap people. If that were true, then everyone in the government or 'the C' who offers a suggestion for improvement is a terrorist and kidnaps people.

NetNews is right about one thing; people mysteriously "disappear." Some of those disappearances are people who join us *of their own free will*, but the vast majority of the people who disappear have *nothing to do with us*; and when they go, they vanish from everyone who's ever known them." Mason went over to a boarded-up window and slid open a peephole to see outside. "We'd like to know where they go, the mechanism by which they *evaporate*, and who it is that decides their fate." He slid the little door shut and turned around again. "You could help us achieve this goal."

Cara gasped. "How?"

"What I described to you... contaminating people's water with a drug that counteracts the antiviral, and infecting people with the virus... It's done all the time *with impunity* and we want to know the people in the Corporation who authorize it. It's not just the RM; there are people above him. If you helped us, that wouldn't happen to you. We'd extract you before they kidnapped you, like we did with Gwen."

"Is this a joke?"

"No." He grabbed one of the chairs and sat down. "Because you're the daughter of two of the Corporation founders, the decision to remove you would necessitate the involvement of top tier people and careful planning."

“But how would I help you?” Cara argued. “I don’t have any connections in management.”
“There’s always a communication trail,” he answered. “We just have to get our hands on it before it’s erased. I’m not going to lie and tell you there’re no risks in working with us, but what you’re facing at work is hazardous without us.”

Cara didn’t know if it was the weird, overhead lighting or that it was two in the morning... but sitting there didn’t seem real. She felt like she was in a dream viewing a slideshow of her life, but the images were being projected onto the wavy surface of a funhouse mirror. Everything was familiar but nothing was clear.

“I know the Corporation avoids negative PR at all costs,” she allowed, “so I understand why you think they’d need a convincing excuse to remove me from the workplace, something that would allow them to escape public scrutiny. What I don’t understand is... how *I* could *possibly* be *so big* a threat, that they’d go to the extremes you’ve described.”

“Paranoia often doesn’t make sense,” he replied. “The RM is afraid of you. We know this. He thinks you’re going to start poking around and uncover secrets he’s supposed to conceal. Talk to Rachel. She knows these people; she can tell you a lot more.”

Cara sat in silence staring up at a crack in the ceiling. She was trying to find an argument to refute what he was saying. Instead, all that occurred to her was a gritty practicality. “How would you know when to ‘extract’ me?” she asked.

“Before they kidnap someone,” he said, “they add a urinalysis to the victim’s routine viral tests. They do this as part of an ongoing study to monitor the effectiveness of the chemical they put in the drinking water. Worst case scenario, as soon as we see they’ve ordered that test, we’d extract you.”

Fright made Cara’s body weak and her limbs too heavy to move. Speaking very slowly, she said, “Because... when they find that the urine test is negative for the chemical, they’ll search my apartment and review all my communications.”

“That’s right. But expect them to go into your apartment long before that... Which is why, starting next week, we’ll have a different drop-off location for car keys, antiviral and water. Don’t worry about your apartment, though. We have someone keeping an eye on it. They’ll check it each day after you leave and before you come home, to make sure it’s safe for you, and to remove any evidence of your interactions with us.”

This time, her mind didn’t slip away and seek escape from the horror she felt. Instead, she felt a calm come over her, the kind of peace one feels in recognizing the truth: she wasn’t looking at her life in a distorted mirror. She was seeing the reflection of a deranged reality.

“Did you know that your great aunt is stored in a building on a DM base?” Mason asked.

“You changed the subject,” she observed.

“Seemed like a good time to do it.”

Cara got off the table and sat in the other chair. “Even if you could get her out of a military facility... then what? Resuscitate her? Cryonics was in its infancy back then; the probability of her surviving must be close to zero. And who’s doing the viral work for you?”

He looked relieved by the turn in the conversation. “We expected you’d have questions and, today, I learned that some of our scientists have agreed to meet with you in person. Would you want to do that?”

“Yes.”

He cleared his throat. “It would mean you would be taken on a car trip that lasts *many* hours... blindfolded. You’d wear a hood, actually.”

She felt herself go pale and Mason hurried to add, "Please understand! We have a team of mathematicians, geneticists and bioengineers who have to be protected with *absolute* secrecy. A vaccine depends on it." He saw that he had her attention again. "Rachel will prepare you *fully* for the trip. All you need to do is schedule time off from work and we'll take care of the rest."

The Great North Woods,
Maine

Evelyn had been hiking next to the road all night and dawn was approaching. There was no discernable light, but the nocturnal animals had disappeared and the robins had begun their gentle convocation to the new day. Time to move further into the forest so she couldn't be spotted...

She'd hoped she'd have reached the cave by now, but yesterday's escape had been a narrow one and her body was weary. She rejected the admonishing voice that stalked her mind; *she* knew was going as fast as she could. Instead, she chose to recall wonderful mornings from long ago, of waking in a warm, soft bed smelling hot cereal.

"Hot oatmeal with raisins," she said aloud.

Her eyesight was dimming, her mind was failing and, as if to distract from these realities, a lovely face took shape in her thoughts. Evelyn's breathing deepened as she allowed herself to melt into the memory of her mother's smile. A grin crossed over her own face, until her eyelids woke her from this sleeping walk.

Blink, blink.

She realized what was going on. The virus was taking her. She tried to pull her mind back to the present but... the memories came anyway. They flooded her consciousness and she had no choice but to remember, for the ten thousandth time, how her mother had been taken away.

Her mother had been heavily pregnant with the brother Evelyn never met. Men came in cars and when Evelyn peaked through the crack in the loft floor, she saw them grab the person most precious to her. Eve was frozen mute as she watched her mother's violent struggle to get free, watched the men punch her until she was unconscious, and saw them drag her from their home.

For that whole day Evelyn waited in the loft for her mother's return, never daring to make a sound, barely even breathing. In the dark of the night that followed, she sobbed over the lack of her mother's presence and how empty it made the house. So consumed with loss, it didn't occur to her to be afraid until the next morning when she began to feel hungry. She crept down the ladder to find something to eat and was in the pantry when someone discovered her. A few days later, six-year-old Evelyn was sent to live with cousins she'd never met.

A year passed before Evelyn ever relayed the memory of her mother's abduction aloud, and she'd never forget the reaction to the telling. She was serving tea at one of her aunt's luncheons. A lady invited Evelyn to sit down next to her and talk about her favorite subject in school. But when the woman asked,

“Where were you born, child?”

Evelyn responded by telling the whole story of her mother’s kidnapping.

At first, the room was still. No one spoke or moved, until suddenly everyone began talking at once. Her aunt, being the leader of the Ladies Cultural Society, talked the loudest of them all and soon, only her voice was heard. Aunt Dahlia told Evelyn that she was confused and wasn’t remembering the facts. Evelyn’s mother, God rest her soul, had been taken by *illness*.

“So sad,” murmured the ladies.

“Very sad,” said all the bobbing heads.

Evelyn’s aunt told the room what a terrible tragedy it was that Evelyn’s mother had stopped taking the vaccine. No one understood why she would have done such a crazy thing. Aunt Dahlia told Evelyn that what she remembered about her mother was actually a bad dream and that the things Evelyn described never happened.

“No one would have *kidnapped* your mother!” insisted Aunt Dahlia. “People don’t *do* things like that, dear. You watched a scary movie on the Net, and then had a bad dream. I remember when it happened,” she recounted for the ladies. “I stopped that movie watching right away!” One woman said, “What an imagination the child has! Dahlia, you must see that she channels it into art.”

Evelyn didn’t argue. She didn’t say one word. Instead, she smiled politely as they jibber jabbered out their stress. They talked so much they strained themselves and had to leave before dessert. Evelyn didn’t care what they said, because she felt secure in her knowledge that it was a *real memory*. She also knew there was *absolutely nothing* in the world *that could shake that realization from her*.

Blink, blink.

The daydream was over and Evelyn was no longer tired. The anger she felt about the treatment of her mother always energized her.

She crossed to the other side of the dirt road and began beating her way through the thicket. Once past the brambles and into the open forest, the tall tree canopy rose above her like skyscrapers. For hours, she walked across forest floor cushioned with hummocks of pine needles, dried leaves, and moss. Part girl, part homing pigeon, she easily distinguished the direction to the mountain paths she knew so well. When finally she recognized where she was, her whole body relaxed but her mind slipped into self-reproach.

‘I *should* have been there *hours ago*!’

This was the struggle she always had when she skipped doses of the antiviral. The chastising statements and untruths from her aunt somehow pretzelled around and came back as self-criticism. Knowing that she didn’t dare allow negative thoughts to sap what little strength she had, she pictured a button in her mind that read ERASE and a finger that pressed it, but this time the anger-overdrive didn’t kick in. Instead, her mind raced backwards to the disaster of the previous day.

Live communications had been banned from the final stage of the operation to prevent the Domestic Military from intercepting their transmissions. The DM couldn’t decode Resistance messaging but if they saw the chatter, they’d automatically quadruple security in response. *That was the first problem* she thought to herself, and it was Evelyn’s only gripe with the Resistance. She kept telling them that it was *ridiculous* that they didn’t have the ability to mask their communications unless they set up a controlled perimeter.

But I should have seen the increased security, she reproached herself. If she'd been more alert, she would have noticed it and then realized the rescue had been aborted! But she'd missed it completely...

That was a huge error, but not the first. *Mistake number one* was that she'd skipped the meet-up the day before. Well, no... that was mistake number two. A much bigger mistake had caused all the others and *now* she had no choice but to admit it.

The virus acted like a truth serum in her system. When she became infected and had even the slightest fever, she confessed everything, even the things she would normally not want to face. Fortunately, she was alone and had only herself and the trees to tell.

She stopped mid-step and leaned against a tree for support. What would have happened if the DM had caught her while she was sick like this? Would she have talked? What if the DM had used track and attack dogs? They didn't, but if they *had*, the DM would have nabbed her and anyone with her.

Evelyn kicked a rotted log and pieces of it spewed everywhere. Everything was all screwed up and backwards! She only escaped yesterday because *they* saved *her*.

"Okay, I admit it!" Evelyn yelled to the forest.

The *first mistake* was when she gave her antiviral tablets to someone who probably would have died without them. Wait! She couldn't call that a mistake; it was the right thing to do. Yes!

No. It was both. Right because she helped that man, but wrong, because now she was completely losing her brain to *the damn plague*.

The forest started spinning, so she shut her eyes and held onto the young tree. But with her eyes closed, an avalanche of regret struck, making it impossible to keep the memory of the previous day from tumbling through her thoughts.

The auction was scheduled to take place at two PM, which meant the girls would begin filing into the clearing around half past one. When Evelyn arrived in the morning at the appointed place, she knew something was wrong only because no one showed up with the change of clothes she needed. While trying to decide what to do, she heard voices ahead and slid off the trail into the thicket. She glimpsed gray frocks moving toward her and, hoping this was the group bringing the clothes, Evelyn imitated the coo of a dove. In seconds, a group of young girls was upon her, followed by two older women.

"What're you doing here?" the one woman barked. "Didn't you hear? The rescue's been called off! Oh Lord," she groaned, "look at how she's dressed. A walking terrorist flag! You have to get out of here RIGHT NOW."

In response to the woman's words, chemical messages of alarm sped through Evelyn's body, readying her for flight, but instead, she stood her ground. "How many extra DM have been posted?" she asked. "Are they only posted along the road or are they patrolling the woods too?"

The woman glared. "MAYBE YOU DIDN'T HEAR ME. I said, GO. You're putting us all in danger!" She turned to the older woman with her. "Mother, please! Tell her to go!"

The old woman said nothing in response but one of the little girls piped up. "I think they're mostly along the road and field."

"The DM swept the forest all night," an older girl added, "and questioned many of us, especially the ones who are walking today. Sometime in the night, an extra group of DM drove in and when your people found out, they called off the rescue. You're all alone here," she finished.

"And the auction's about to begin!" exclaimed another.

Evelyn didn't quite register this last news. "About to... *begin*?"

“They pushed up the start time,” the girl affirmed.

Evelyn took a moment to assess this new information. The auction was still on. This likely meant that, after combing the woods all night and getting reinforcements, the DM felt they had everything under control. She could at least still test out the new receiver she’d designed. If it could pick up secure military wavelengths without giving away her presence, then she would have accomplished *something* that day. Plus, she might still be able to help one or two escape. “I can still try to help some of them get away, if you help me blend in,” said Evelyn. “I just need the right clothes.”

The younger woman was aghast. “Are you mad? Your people are *gone*. Who would help you escape?”

“If they still want to go, I can get them out,” Evelyn promised.

The younger woman threw her hands up in disgust. “*You’re in danger*, and you’re *endangering us*. You have...” she began, but was overcome by a coughing fit, “...cough, cough...you have to...”

The older woman interrupted with quiet authority. “Faye,” she said to one of the girls, “run back and check to see if they’ve begun seating the guests.”

“Yes Maam!” the girl answered as she spun around, and raced back along the path.

Then the old woman turned to Evelyn. “Continuing with the rescue would be suicide.”

“I’m not afraid to die,” Evelyn replied thickly.

The old woman lifted her eyes up to the pines towering over them, and then bowed her head. With her eyes still closed, she spoke again. “I’ve no idea how you managed to cross the road with all the soldiers there, but I know you’d never make it if you went back the same way you came. This is what we will do: you may not take any of the girls with you, but we will help *you* join the rank-and-file at the far end of the field. In this way, *you* may escape from the rear rows into the woods.”

Evelyn stared wordlessly. The old woman had just described the plan the Resistance was going to use to rescue seven girls who’d been sold in advance of the auction. Evelyn was supposed to help them escape from the last row, the side of the field farthest from the buyers.

“I will tell the girls,” the old woman continued, “to create the diversion as your people had planned, so that *you* may slip away into the woods.”

Evelyn persisted. “A few of them could come with me.”

“No,” the elder refused gently. “You’ll go alone.”

Evelyn folded her arms across her chest. “The choice is theirs. You’ve no right to decide for them.”

The old woman’s eyes grew soft and her next words were loving but measured, like a mother apportioning the last piece of bread to her starving children.

“*If-I-agree-to-that*, it could lead to your deaths. Not just yours, theirs too. The DM would rather shoot to kill than let you get away.”

“Some might prefer death over enslavement,” Evelyn replied grimly.

“Your understanding is very young,” the old woman told her.

Evelyn began to plead. “I know these woods and I know how this auction works. I’ve watched it *here*, in this place, *five times*. The back rows will file all the way to the end of the clearing to the thicket. Behind those bushes, there’s a ravine and a swamp, but because of the drought, the swamp is dry and the river’s just a stream. Once we’ve crossed the water and get into the forest, we’re in my world. They’ll never find us, I promise.”

“And the road?” the old woman asked. “There’s at least one DM every thirty feet on both sides for a quarter mile and there’ll be traffic in and out until after sunset.”

Evelyn understood the significance of what she was saying. The most expedient escape route into the safety of the mountains required crossing the road. Until the DM left, it would be practically impossible to cross unseen.

“We’ll hide in the woods until everyone’s gone and go across at night,” Evelyn answered. “As long as we leave the field unnoticed, we’ll-”

A sudden, loud commotion took them by surprise and filled their ears. In the quiet of the forest, sound travels down a wide path like smoke up a chimney. They stood together in silence listening to the crowd of people cheering the arrival of a dignitary.

Evelyn felt a sharp stab of panic. The necessity for going ahead with her part of the mission was as clear to her as a blazing sunset in a cloudless sky. Even though it made no sense to anyone else, she knew she had to try.

“Mother, this is insanity,” insisted the other woman. “We can’t go through any more nights *like last night*. Look at *her*. She’s a just a girl! And last night was...”

The old woman patted her arm. “Even a tiny torch can light the way, when raised against the night.”

The girl dispatched earlier had just returned. “They’re,” she panted and then gulped, “still leading the buyers to the stands!”

“Are the auctioneers on the platform yet?” quizzed the elder.

“No, Mother.”

The old woman seemed relieved. “Thank you Faye. That leaves us thirty minutes or so.”

“Mother, I must-”

The old woman raised her hand to stop the other woman’s dissent and spoke to Evelyn, “You can’t go out there like that.”

She’s agreed, Evelyn leapt for joy inside but tried not to show it. “I’m wearing gray tights under my clothes,” Evelyn informed her, “and walking shoes like all the girls have. All I need is the smock.”

“Huh! You’ll need a lot more than that!” the younger woman declared, and all the girls giggled.

The elder nudged one of the girls and said, “Why don’t you switch clothes with her?”

“Yes, Mistress.”

Mind in high gear and body mobilized, Evelyn yanked off her sweatshirt but stopped short of handing it to the girl. “Oh wait! I need something in here,” she said as she zipped open a pocket in the lining of the shirt and removed a tiny object. Evelyn proceeded to unwrap the plastic around it and place it snugly in one ear. Then she flipped open a locket that hung around her neck, revealing a miniature electronic device. “Ok, my little receiver,” Evelyn spoke to it. “Are you working?” She touched it once to activate it and listened intently to the piece in her ear. Soon, she answered herself with a perfunctory, “Yep,” and clicked the locket shut.

The old woman’s eyebrows arched in surprise. “That’s an interesting piece of jewelry, you have there,” she remarked, as the others moved closer to see it.

“Thank you, I made it myself,” Evelyn said, tucking it under the smock.

Mystified, the elder peered at her curiously, “How old *are* you child?”

“Twelve and a half.”

As the old woman’s face lit up with amusement, one of the girls sang out, “I’m twelve too!”

“Dear heaven help us,” grumbled the one woman, but nonetheless took charge of making Evelyn more presentable. In minutes, Evelyn was standing in a white dress, the sash tied around her

waist, her hair coifed neatly in a French braid and all the dirt rubbed off her hands, face and neck.

“She’ll pass, won’t she girls?” the younger woman asked, as she stepped back to admire her work. All the girls murmured their assurances. “As long as no one smells you!” the woman added, and they all laughed.

Their elder spoke to the girl now wearing Evelyn’s clothes. “You can’t be seen dressed like this,” she warned her solemnly. “Go the back way to the chapel, change into a serving gown and hide those clothes behind the altar.”

“Yes Mistress,” the girl responded and immediately sped down the path, the way Evelyn had come.

The old woman then turned her gaze to Evelyn and realized, to her dismay, that Evelyn was a pretty girl. There was a risk then... Unlikely, since no one would be promoting her sale... but it was still possible that someone might spot her and place a bid. The only guiding principle of the auction was buyer satisfaction, so if someone decided they had use for a twelve year old, she would be sold.

The elder pulled her shawl up over her head and said, “Girls. We met *no one* in the woods today. We went to the chapel to pray, and now we’re returning to watch the ceremony. Do you understand my meaning?” she asked, her steely eyes commanding them.

“Yes Mother!”

“Good. Come along.”

As they headed down the path towards the clearing, Evelyn overheard the younger woman speaking with her superior. “None of the girls will want to go with her; they know the mission was aborted. You don’t even have to tell them. Just stick her in at the end of the line and let her slip into the woods on her own. That will work.”

The old woman reached into her pocket, pulled out a red scarf and tied it loosely around her neck. Appalled, the other woman stopped abruptly.

“No Mother, please! Don’t signal them! Let her escape by herself,” she implored, but the old woman waved her away and walked on.

They were close now... Evelyn could hear the cars arriving on the gravel road. *The sick parade of limousines and deranged people*, she thought, remembering what it was like when she’d been there before. A few minutes later, they reached the clearing and Evelyn shuddered. The Domestic Military were everywhere! This meant they’d need to leave within the hour to have time to get away, because as soon as the event was over, the DM would enter the forest like a swarm of ants.

The old woman pulled Evelyn aside. “Dear one,” she said softly, “you must smile. The buyers look closely at the girls, even through binoculars. They expect you to smile and if you don’t, you’ll stand out like a mutt in a dog show.”

Anger flitted across Evelyn’s eyes but only for a moment. “I understand,” she answered. Then, flashing her most brilliant smile she added, “I mean, thank you Mistress.”

The old woman chuckled but then she leaned closer and spoke so only Evelyn could hear.

“There’s another reason why you must force yourself to smile.”

“Ma’am?”

“You can’t let anyone know that you’re ill,” the elder said.

Evelyn’s face fell. She felt like such a failure. What good was she to anyone anymore?

“Tsk, tsk none of that,” the woman chided gently. “The buyers are hyper-vigilant about illness and if they spot it, they’ll pull you from the line and won’t stop until they know everything about

you. That could put many people in danger. For our sakes, you need to leave as soon as possible. For your sake, *get to your people*, because you'll need medicine before the day is done."

She studied Evelyn's face carefully for only a moment, then said, "I see you understand me. Good. OK then, shoulders back, yes, and smile... that's it. Now, come with me."

The elder spotted a fan lying on a table and swiped it up as deftly as a thief, concealing it in her shawl. As they walked arm in arm toward the lines of girls, she handed Evelyn the fan. "Do you know how this is used?"

"Yes, Ma'am, I do. When you're told that a bid has been placed on you, you open your fan."

"Do you know *how* to open it?" she asked. "There's only one right way."

Evelyn hesitated. "I use a fan in Tai Chi..."

A hint of a smile fluttered across the old woman's face. "I'm not asking if you know how to use a fan as a weapon. Do you know how to open it gracefully?"

Evelyn grinned. "Yes."

The elderly woman appeared unconvinced. "You hold it here, like this," she demonstrated discreetly, "and just let it *drop* open. No flicking, no force, just let gravity do all the work."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"And very, very importantly, always watch the girl's feet in front of you as you walk, to ensure that your head is *tilted down*. Throughout the procession, it is *essential* that you keep your head bent slightly downward in a posture of submission."

A growl escaped Evelyn's throat and she grimaced in disgust.

"Channel that anger, dear," the woman said. "Throw it into your smile!"

Evelyn glared at the buyers in the stands. "How can you work with these maggots?"

"It's the only way I can help the girls," she answered. "You have your way; I have mine."

"How are you helping them if *this*," she indicated the open field, "is where they end up? Going home with non-humans. That's what they are, you know. Only monsters would think auctioning people is okay."

"Imagine these girls having to go to those homes and businesses without spiritual strength," the elder said.

Something about what the woman said, or how she said it, caused a very strange thing to happen.

Evelyn beheld the old woman's wonderful, beautiful face and felt overcome by something.

What was it... wonder? No, it was *reverence*.

The old woman smiled. "What's your given name, dear?"

Once again, Evelyn was stunned by how much the elder knew. A 'given name' was code for a person's alias in the Resistance.

"Lily."

The ever-increasing roar of the crowd was beginning to sound like thunder in Evelyn's ears and she could feel panic rising along with it. What had happened to the other Resistance members?

Did they all get away? She mustn't think of that now...

They'd reached the line of girls waiting in single file alongside the road. They all wore smocks of white, the younger with white sashes and the older with gray. Evelyn touched her dress.

"I just realized..." she said. "The girls with you on the path all wore gray smocks except the one with this white dress. *Was she supposed to walk in the auction?* She was, wasn't she?"

The old woman's eyes were somber. "You already saved one girl from this depravity today. If that's all you save, let it be enough." Shielding her eyes from the sun, she raised one hand to her brow and searched the lines of faces. "There they are. Come."

As they neared one of the lines, Evelyn noticed shocked expressions on the faces of a few of the girls. Seven girls, all lined up one right after the other, stared in disbelief at the red scarf around the old woman's neck and continued to watch as the woman guided Evelyn to a position in the line between them.

The elder then went and spoke to each of the seven but Evelyn only heard the last part of what she said to the girl right behind her.

“Go with her if you want. You know what awaits you if you stay.”

A horn sounded.

“Good bye, Lily.”

Before Evelyn could respond, her line started moving and together they entered the mammoth sized, sun-drenched meadow. The field was half-filled with hundreds of girls standing in rows with hundreds more walking in, their white gowns billowing in the breeze.

“The forest is alive on this perfect spring day!” a man's voice boomed from the loudspeakers.

“The birds, the bees, and the butterflies are all reveling in the beauty parading before us!”

That did it. Evelyn wanted to explode. *The bleachers should be full of family and friends rejoicing for their beloved girls, she fumed inside, full of people celebrating their talents and accomplishments!* Instead, it was a nightmare of ghouls. Their march was a pageant for strangers and degenerates leading to a life of strict obedience, unending labor and, far too often... unspeakable abuse.

For most of the girls, wherever they ended up, one of their primary roles would be to give birth to children. But the healthy children those girls would bear would never be their own. Their babies would be taken and raised in orphanages, some of which were adequately subsidized by the Corporation but most were not. The fate of the newborns that were deemed *unhealthy* was a mystery; they were stolen in the night and never seen again.

“Hey!” called a voice from behind. “Mother told me to tell you to straighten your shoulders and smile.”

Evelyn flinched angrily but knew she was right and complied.

The oldest girls had silken shawls instead of fans, indicating they would turn eighteen the following year. For all the other girls, the color of the fan they carried revealed their age. Typically, the youngest that would interest a buyer was a sturdy twelve year old but younger girls than that would sometimes walk too, to teach them the art of parading. Evelyn understood that the old woman had given her the gift of a lie, a green fan that declared she was ten years old. A memory flashed into Evelyn's thoughts. Her instructor in the Resistance had said, *‘Protecting innocence from atrocity is the only excuse for a lie. We work toward the day when there need be no lies.’*

“You're slouching!” warned the girl behind her.

“OK,” Evelyn acknowledged and straightened her posture.

All the girls in the procession had been raised in orphanages. After much preparation, this was their pinnacle of success. They'd been deemed worthy of the highest honor and were about to be carefully examined and sold. Every one of them had been tested for the virus and their headmistresses had papers to prove they were ‘clean’. The orphanages were excessively careful in this aspect of the sale because if any buyer found that a purchase was ill, the orphanage would have to supply one clean girl for-free to compensate the buyer for this inconvenience. That kind of mistake would cost the headmaster or mistress their job.

“Shoulders back!”

“Right.”

The men and women who walked the circumference of the field, the assessors, carried magnifying lenses to closely inspect a girl's skin and hair. The people in the bleachers peeping through binoculars would call the assessors and video chat about a particular prospect. This was a way to see girls of interest up close and get an assessor's opinion on an opening bid, without ever leaving the festive atmosphere of the stands.

"Stop gawking!" hissed the girl behind her. "Watch the feet in front of you, nothing else!"

The auctioneers stood on a canopied platform at one end of the field and, in the stands to either side of them, sat the buyers and the brokers. Brokers typically represented multiple businesses in need of clean, hard-working girls and came to buy in bulk. The brokers would leave with ten or more girls, whereas the buyers came to purchase one that would work in their home as a governess, caregiver, or mistress. But the majority of the crowd consisted of parties of people who accompanied the brokers and were there for the fine food, fresh air, and fun.

For the head masters and mistresses of the elite Parenting Our Children Centers, auctions were important business opportunities. This was where they advertised their expertise as assessors and vied for the high-paying clients. They flitted through the crowd all through the event, chit chatting, promoting their 'treasures', and exaggerating the role they played in preparing the girls for this day.

Although selling girls was illegal, the law was easily circumvented because the auctions made a lot of money. The event planners could ignore local law enforcement as long as they invited a few, high-profile dignitaries under DM protection, because the Domestic Military outranked the police.

Hiding an event from the general population was simple since the auctions were held in remote locations. Politicians had to be paid off, of course, but such fees were a pittance compared to the amount of money earned.

Rationalizing the purpose of the sale in order to assuage the conscience was an integral part of every auction. People expecting to come to the sale simply never used the word 'auction' to describe it, but instead referred to it as an FGH event, the acronym for the Find the Girls a Home government charity. Comments on the subject by women attending a sale were invariably some version of: "These poor orphans... there are so many of them! What else could we do with them all?" Men's remarks tended to be more practical: "They'd never find decent paying jobs in this economy. On their own, they'd starve."

Evelyn worked as a serving girl at the last two auctions, providing refreshments to the people in the grandstands. She'd learned that certain subjects were accepted and others taboo by what was talked about and what was not. No one, for example, discussed the fact that they were participating in the illegal sale of girls, or even whispered the reason why they were all under eighteen. The auction could only sell girls under the age of eighteen because of the Conscription Act, a law that had consequences. Purchasing an eighteen-year-old orphan girl would have interfered with the draft, potentially resulting in a stiff fine.

Evelyn noticed that none of the revelers in the grandstands ever mentioned the *reasons* why the age of military conscription had been lowered to sixteen for boys and eighteen for girls. She suspected the subject was unmentionable because it might stir up uncomfortable and embarrassing feelings they endeavored to disown. This was their privilege... to ignore and forget that the draft age had been lowered because everyone older had died from the virus, was killed in the war, bribed their way into the Domestic Military, or paid a *huge* sum of money to legally evade the draft.

The people attending the auction *did*, however, chat openly about the government campaign to increase the number of males in the population. That campaign encouraged virus-free women to get pregnant as much as possible, offering a cash incentive to married couples who produced a boy. A popular perspective was summed up by one of the brokers when Evelyn heard him say, “If boys have to go to war, it’s only right that girls be given the wartime-duty of birthing boys, especially girls from orphan homes run by *our tax dollars*.”

Girls who were not orphans had a choice. At eighteen, they could be conscripted and work in the military or they could participate in the government Population Program as a married woman. If they chose the latter, they would be expected to go weekly to a Population Center and undergo treatments that increased their chances of conceiving a male child.

An entire industry had grown up around gender genetics, the science of increasing the odds of giving birth to a boy. Every page of the Net had ads and infomercials promoting it. The Net bandwidths that were available for-free to the poor advertised the advantages of participating in the government Population Program. On the paid-for bandwidths viewed by the wealthy, gender geneticists advertised therapies that increased the probability of conceiving strong, healthy boys. But gender genetics wasn’t always successful and sometimes a girl baby was born. Female infants were shipped to orphanages and, at the age of two, those that achieved high scores in the IQ tests ended up in a Parenting Our Children Center. Orphan girls, including those in the POCC, were promised to buyers as soon as one could be found and all of them attended some sort of finishing school, like the one offered for a few weeks before each FGH event. Their entire education was designed to ensure that the girls understood their role in society.

The people running the orphanages weren’t permitted to fully inform the girls of their *fate*. Instead, they referred mystically to the girls’ futures, describing their important role in the *inevitable cycle of life*, leaving out the part about how lucrative that cycle was for the head masters and mistresses.

As soon as announcers on NetNews began promoting it as a patriotic duty, producing more boys became a national obsession. The main obstacle to the *timely* production of new boys was the length of the human gestation period. While scientists worked diligently to shorten gestation, government officials tried to find ways to increase the National Number of Pregnancies. Hoping to raise the NNP and simultaneously test advances in abbreviated gestation, the Population Program provided housing to indigent women.

In Population Program Homes, women were trained to serve as incubation chambers for fertilized eggs from females who’d achieved a high score in the Population Program’s Motherhood Test. A woman who lived in Program housing could *herself* take the test, and upon scoring perfectly, carry her own in-vitro-fertilized egg to term. Sometimes women were selected to act as surrogate mothers for the fertilized eggs of women who paid one million dollars to the Population Program for a baby boy. This was a favored circumstance, since the surrogate mother received a monthly stipend as long as she underwent all the prescribed gender treatments. “*Head down!*” the girl behind Evelyn cautioned.

Evelyn’s line had finished their procession along the field and taken their place as the last three rows in the back. Row after row of girls in white spanned the meadow in front of them like yard lines on a football field. She’d counted as she walked: thirty-nine rows, each with at least twenty-eight girls. That meant over one thousand girls under the age of eighteen were for sale that day and the worst part was... most of them *hoped* they’d be purchased, because they wanted a home.

Facing forward and barely daring to breathe, the lines of girls stood without speaking as they'd been taught to do. Evelyn scanned the event but nothing struck her as unusual. No one was staring at them or singling them out and all the DM seemed unperturbed.

"The mission's aborted," whispered the girl to Evelyn's left, the one who'd instructed her as they'd walked.

"I know," Evelyn replied.

"There won't be an explosion," the girl explained, "but if we do *our part* of the original plan, that should be enough of a diversion to get one person out. But you have to go soon."

The Resistance had planned to broadcast the sound of an explosion to help the seven girls slip into the thicket unnoticed. Members of the Resistance would have been positioned in the woods to assist their escape from there. They could have left this madness behind.

Bursting with frustration, Evelyn blurted out, "What! *None of you* want to go with me?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because of what happened last night..." the girl began, but then cut herself short.

The girl on the other side of Evelyn spoke up. "It's not like our disappearance would go unnoticed. Five of us have people expecting us to leave with them at the end of the day, people who've already paid. They'd hunt us down."

"You're slumping again," warned the girl to Evelyn's left. "Straighten up."

"We're going to join the R as embedded operatives instead," the one to her right continued. "Get it? *Embedded*." She snorted. "Mother said she would let the R know and then they would contact us in our new... homes."

Evelyn closed her eyes and slowly pulled in a deep breath. She envisioned her disappointments as tiny white dots that all left her body when she exhaled.

"Don't worry," the girl on her left said with grim resolve. "We'll get you out."

"Yes we will," assured the other. "Everyone in our row and the row in front of us knows the trick. We're good at it now because Corin made us practice it to death, didn't you?"

The girl on Evelyn's left chuckled in response and to Evelyn she said, "We'll use the 'cloth trick' to cover your escape. You know how that works, right?"

"Yes."

"I'll signal to one of the girls at the very end of the row in front of us to faint, right before the play. We're so close to the bushes, I think we can get you out in two rounds." She was quiet a moment before she added, "We appreciate that you tried to help us. But for everyone's sake, you need to go and you need to go *now*. Every minute that passes, increases the risk."

"I understand."

Although Evelyn had never met her, she knew about the girl on her left. Corin was already in the Resistance. She'd joined when she was eleven years old when her parents were killed trying to free a group of girls from an auction. At thirteen, Corin agreed to infiltrate the slave ring and had been leaking information about auctions to the Resistance for years.

For Corin, this auction was very different from all the others she'd witnessed. This time, *she* was for sale and the escape plan meant to spring her and six others had failed.

Evelyn realized that how she felt about the mission was like dwarf star to a supergiant, when compared to the grief Corin had to be experiencing. Evelyn shuddered as a wave of anger passed through her. Corin would be sold this day to a stranger, someone who could be any kind of person.

"Ready on the count of three?" Corin hissed.

“Yes.”

“On my mark...one...two...three!”

One end of a gray silk cloth fluttered upward in the breeze. From the grandstand, it appeared as if an unruly shawl had gotten loose from a girl, and that a second girl grabbed the flapping end. The incident was over so quickly, the auctioneers never noticed. One head mistress in the stands lifted her opera glasses to inspect and frowned at what she saw: a girl had fallen faint and two others were attending her. She sniffed her indifference.

Evelyn was lying facedown on the ground, with the rustle of silk over top of her. The girls had used their shawls first to distract, then to conceal her behind them at the edge of the clearing. By the skilled way that the girls had performed the sleight of hand maneuver, she knew she could trust that she was hidden.

“Hold positions!” Corin’s voice sounded alarmed. “Problem coming on the left.”

Evelyn peeked from beneath the shawls and saw a matron walking toward them along the sidelines, inspecting girls with her eyepiece. The woman stopped to slap a young girl and yelled at her when she dropped her fan. But when the horn blared, heralding the next stage in the entertainment, the woman turned and headed the other way.

Evelyn touched her ear and was relieved to find that the device was still there. She’d coated the outside of it with watered down glue so it would stick.

“Get ready to move on my word...” she heard Corin whisper, and knowing what came next, Evelyn tensed every muscle.

“Crawl!” Corin croaked.

The back row of girls shifted to make her invisible, as Evelyn slid like a snake from the meadow grass into the bushes. Scuttling a few feet further, she felt the last of the silky wraps slip off. She clawed her way through the underbrush, not noticing the sharp stubble beneath her hands or the thorns scraping her skin.

“Faster!” Corin barked.

Focused only on getting free of the thicket, Evelyn pushed forward furiously and tumbled headlong down the ravine. Rolling uncontrollably, she smashed through ferns and saplings, until the ground leveled abruptly and she stopped. There she lay, still as a stone on the cool ground, fearful of the racket she’d just caused. But the forest was quiet.

Then she heard running water and realized she was very near the riverbed. She’d rolled all the way to the water! Flipping onto her belly, she looked dizzily about and as soon as she spotted a group of boulders, she darted to them.

Safely hidden among the rocks, her breath slowed and she began to orient herself. She squinted at the sun gleaming through a thin veil of leaves, and saw it was close to midday. Evelyn closed her eyes and silently thanked whatever-made-the-universe for the clear sky because it was going to greatly ease the journey ahead. By day, the sun was her compass but in the coming night, a supermoon would rise and be her guide.

She touched her ear. The piece was still there! She opened the locket and began adjusting the receiver to try to intercept a DM frequency. A big smile spread across her face as voices came through clearly. After a few minutes of listening to different wavelengths and hearing nothing but chatter about VIPs, Evelyn slowly relaxed in the realization that, for some crazy reason, *no one had heard her go crashing down the hill.*

They’d done it! They’d gotten her safely off the field! Evelyn looked up the steep ravine to the spot from which she’d fallen. *That drop could have broken my neck,* she thought soberly. *But it*

didn't. Instead, the fall had put her a good distance from the crowd in seconds and she still had at least three hours before the DM began searching the woods for runaways.

She sat perched on a stone listening intently for the sound of footsteps crunching on dry leaves and heard nothing but the trickling stream. Slowly she poked her head up just above the rocks and scanned the circumference. No movement in any direction, no sign of dogs or humans.

Go! Evelyn commanded herself, and scampered to a group of rocks closer to the creek. From there, she had a clear view of where the thicket ended on the other side of the stream and where the tall trees began. Her heart began to pound. She was so close.

She dug a hole with a stick to bury the white smock and as she covered it with loose rocks and sand, she noticed the soil sparkled. Scooping up a handful, Evelyn examined it. "Bits of beryl and mica", she murmured, and wondered if anyone else in the world would find that interesting. She turned off the listening device and, putting her palms on the earth and her ear to the ground, she felt and listened for unusual vibrations.

Suddenly, the sound of a crowd cheering boomed from the field above. This meant the entertainment was over and the auction was about to begin. By sundown, almost every girl in the field would be taken. Some of these would file as a group into the windowless compartment of a truck. Others would enter alone, into the back seat of a limousine.

Evelyn winced. What must they be thinking now, the ones parading in front of the goblin people? Did they hope their looks would land them a life of luxury or that they looked strong enough to scrub and serve? And the seven who were supposed to escape that day... What were they thinking when they picked the twigs and leaves from the shawls that had concealed her? Evelyn hoped they felt what they deserved, a sense of dignity and peace.

They'd all been right. Many would suffer if she were discovered, including the old woman who'd escorted her to the line. She had to get the hell out of there.

Using the bushes as cover, she crept to the water's edge. There, she surveyed the creek up and down as far as she could see and studied the streambed for the quickest crossing. One last time, she listened, but there was only the slow-moving stream, the bustle of a chipmunk and the untroubled chirping of birds in a quiet wood.

Time to go!

Like a thing struck by lightning, she shot straight up and bounded across the shallows. From the bushes on the opposite bank, she visually marked a path to the tree line and bolted for the forest.

The tangle of dense underbrush left behind, Evelyn quickened her pace. She didn't dare cross the heavily guarded road, and that worried her, because it meant a much longer trek. Even if she walked all night, she wouldn't reach the cave until late in the afternoon on the following day and... by then, she'd be very ill.

"Maybe my natural resistance will kick into high gear and I'll be fine," she told herself, but knew it wouldn't happen.

She hiked all day, picking dandelion leaves, lambs quarters, and fiddleheads to eat and drank from every stream. By early evening, she couldn't walk a step further, so she dug a nest in a pine needle bed and covered herself with leaves.

The night song of a mocking bird woke her but when Evelyn opened her eyes, she felt intensely confused. She knew she'd been dreaming, because she'd heard her mother say, "Mocking birds have come to the North Woods." Yet, how could it be night if she could see so clearly?

Gradually she remembered where she was and saw that the big moon had risen high in the sky. She rolled from her bed, ignoring that she ached all over, and used a tree branch as a broom to

conceal the place where she'd lain. Then, using a sturdy stick to help her, she dragged herself up onto her feet and set out again.

The sun was setting by the time she reached the outcropping of rocks that marked the entrance to the cave. The animal trail leading through the boulders was shrouded in darkness, but that didn't matter. She was in her forest now and this path was engraved on her heart. She felt no fear, only gratitude that she still had command of her limbs.

Her mind, though, had been slipping for hours, focusing on whatever brought it comfort. She kept seeing images of a time before her birth and of places she'd never been. Were they photographs she'd seen? She saw faces... She saw her father and his younger brother before they'd gone off to war, and she saw her mother.

These people and this life no longer existed because... why? Evelyn felt a surge of rage in response to her internal dialogue.

"Because grown-ups are immature, greedy, selfish bastards," she said aloud, but continued the rest of the rant in her mind:

who, whenever they get power, can't help but get back at the people they think have hurt them, whether the hurt was intended or not.

How could you live all that time and still not know that revenge is an imprecise tool that almost always strikes the wrong person and always hurts some completely unrelated and innocent people? How could you even reach the age of twenty and not know that?

Evelyn had seen the wreckage of vengeance so many times... and her uncle was the worst of them all. If her aunt had taught her that living with Immature-Greedy-Selfish-Bastard grown-ups could be life threatening, then her uncle had taught her that being under the thumb of a vengeful IGSB was worse than death. They were the opposite of her mother, a person who had counseled against retaliation of any kind, even in thought. To honor her mother's memory, Evelyn had pledged *not* to avenge her, and to herself she pledged to never-again live with assholes.

She shimmied up a gnarly tree that had twisted and curled backwards against a wall of granite. She loved this tree. It had grown up between two halves of a split rock and, over the years, the tree and its roots helped to widen the split. The tree taught her that if a rock is holding you down, or preventing you from growing normally, you spread your roots. Grow them deep, spread them far and then align yourself with nature, because over time, the combination of ice, wind, rain, and roots can reduce a rock to rubble.

Holding onto one of the branches for balance, she stepped from the tree onto a ledge jutting from the rock and inched along it until she reached a crevice. She slipped through the opening sideways and was immediately enveloped in darkness.

To announce her arrival to the inhabitants of the cave, she stomped loudly and listened to the rustle of their departure. That was another change in the North Woods, more snakes. She began clapping her hands to encourage stragglers to depart, and a frightened bat shot out, missing her head by a millimeter.

"You don't want to get caught in *this*," she said, pointing to her tangled hair. "You'd never find your way out."

She gave one, last CLAP! then stopped to listen, trying to stretch her ears to the farthest corner of the cave. Nothing. Not a sound. A great sigh escaped her. Finally, she was hidden!

"But not safe," she reminded herself.

Feeling along the floor of the cave, she found a lantern and gave it a shake.

"Yea!" she cheered.

It had kerosene! Not much, but some! She crouched over it and gingerly pressed the lever to raise the chimney. Patting the floor again, she found a cookie tin with matches.

Oh, please be dry, please be dry...

“YES!”

The match blazed and as the smell of sulfur filled the vestibule of rock, her face shined jubilantly in the tiny light, until her trembling hands dropped the match. Doggedly she lit another and, this time, she tensed the muscles in her hands and hastily lit the wick. She'd just slipped the chimney back in place when a wave of dizziness overcame her. From her crouch, she fell back against the wall and slid to the floor. For some time, she just sat and stared gratefully at the small but steady flame.

Maybe it was just that her mind was going, but the light seemed like a fairy that had come to dispel the catastrophe of the previous day. She nibbled on a biscuit that she found in another tin and then searched for antiviral tablets, but there were none.

She had to get to the contact point, the place where the Resistance posted people every night, unless weather won out. But to get there, she had to cross the gorge and Evelyn knew the only safe way to cross at night was inside the cave. Someone would eventually find her if she stayed where she was, but she knew she was bad off this time. Why had she been so stupid?

There was a rule in the Resistance about the antiviral. You weren't allowed to give yours away. They always said, 'You have to have your own breather on, before you can help someone else.' If she did survive, she was going to be in *a lot* of trouble. She groaned involuntarily. The thought of facing her superiors was worse than how much her body hurt. They'd probably assign her to the base forever. Who knows when they'd trust her again, enough to assign her to another mission.

She fitted the lids back on the tins to protect the matches and the desiccant, dimly recalling that both items were hard to find and in big demand on the black market. She rolled over onto all fours and used a large rock to help herself to a standing position. Grasping the lantern handle, she leaned onto the cold, damp wall for support and hummed a little tune as she inched her way down the craggy passage.

The still air vibrated with slithering sounds as snakes scurried to escape the revealing light.

Snakes didn't worry her. She knew if she moved slowly and made a lot of noise, they'd disappear long before she got near them. Plus, they kept down the bats.

She'd reached the crevasse that cut through the jumble of boulders that made up the cave. Water used to rush through it during spring melt, but because of this year's drought, she could barely hear the water trickling way down below. Then she saw, to her dismay, that the cables used to safely cross the chasm were gone.

“Guess somebody needed cable,” she grumbled.

There was still a rope spanning the gap that was doubled over onto a set of pulleys, one on each side. She could use it to send the lantern over but it couldn't be trusted with the weight of a person. She'd have to jump across.

Evelyn peered down into the crevice full of angled, jagged rocks and across to the other side. She'd have to clear four feet. Easy breezy when she was well but the way she was now, her legs could buckle... give in, right at the leap.

She tied the lantern to the rope and sent it across with the pulley. Once she could see the other side in the light of the lamp, she backed up a full ten paces. *Better overkill than be killed*, she thought, as she dug her shoes into the rock and launched herself forward. She landed on the

other side in a patch of loose stones, her legs flew out from under her and she slid on her belly across the rubble.

“Safe at home plate,” she announced feebly and groaned as she lifted her hands to view the bloody scrapes. She rolled to the lamp and untied it, but when she tried to stand, that’s when it hit her. Her body was besieged by exhaustion.

This is how it always is, she thought. Once the virus takes you, there’s nothing you can do.

She couldn’t move. A voice far away whispered insistently, pleaded with her to go on, but her body wanted to sleep. *I could die here, she thought.* Then the kerosene lamp went out.

Tears stung her eyes as she crawled out of the labyrinth of rocks on her hands and knees. By the time she got to the contact point, she couldn’t feel any part of her body. She attempted the barred owl call, but it was so garbled, there was no reply. She tried again, and again... When finally there was a response, she collapsed on the forest floor.

“It’s Evie!” a voice whispered.

“No way... I know Eve’s call,” another replied.

“Look! *Told ya so.*”

“Oh, damn!”

The two young girls standing above Evelyn were no more than ten years of age. One appeared disgusted and the other panic stricken.

“Is she dead?”

The other bent down and felt Evelyn’s neck. “No, she passed out. Bet she gave somebody her medicine again. She’s burning up.” She put two fingers to her mouth and produced a shrill whistle. Sounds of rushing footsteps came from every direction and instantly, five women surrounded the girls.

“I’ll get a stretcher,” one woman said.

“No,” her leader responded, “This is Cédric’s territory. It’s his call.”

“Where will they take her?”

“I don’t know,” answered the leader, “but the base is too far. She could die on the way.”

A broad shouldered man appeared and when he saw Evelyn, he said, “The chipmunk has returned.” He felt her forehead. “You really did it this time.” To the others he said, “I’ll take her to my wife.”

“Petit suisse,” the man said as he lifted Evelyn like a sack of potatoes and slung her over his shoulder, “t’es faite à l’os.”

Québécois translation:

petit suisse- little chipmunk

t’es faite à l’os- you’re in trouble