

I Got'cha!

Wilizy, #1

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Dedication



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This book is dedicated to my wife, Dale,
whose support and patience made it possible.

Chapter 1

I woke up abruptly – suddenly aware that I was lying on something flat and hard and that my head was really hurting. I flashed my eyes open and shut – testing to see if that made the pain worse. It didn't. I squinted them open again.

I could see my study chair flopped on its side. The tip of one of its wooden legs was pointing right at me so I had a close-up look at the years of dust and grime that were plastered to the little plastic glidey thing that made it easy to move the chair. “Why is my head hurting?” I asked the grime. It didn't answer.

I was lying on my right side in my dorm room, my head flat on the concrete floor and my right arm pinned uncomfortably beneath me. Opening my eyes wider, I could see the front of my study desk and the edge of my bed. I freed my pinned arm and prepared to make it into a pillow. To do that, I had to lift my head. That was a mistake.

I knew what pain was. All kids my age had felt pain. Like everybody else, I had to live by a certain number of rules. If I knowingly broke a rule, my brain-band would squirt a little pain juice into my brain. If I broke the rule again, I'd get a longer squirt – one that would really hurt. I must have crushed a major rule to be getting this kind of punishment. The problem was – I couldn't remember doing anything wrong.

The pain from my head was surging in time with my heart that was beating far too loudly in my head to be healthy. I hadn't been zapped by my brain-band since I was eleven-years old. It was the year that my care center's *Let's explore new foods* experiment had gone horribly wrong. I could still remember staring at the inert circular blobs on my scarred tin dinner plate when it was placed in front of me. We were given permission to begin eating, but instead of the usual clink of cutlery and noisy chatter from two hundred eleven-year old boys, there was dead silence in the food hall. A few guys were poking at their suppers with their forks. Me – I was smelling it. It smelled yucky. I knew I wouldn't like it.

One of the proctors announced that tonight's meal was part of a lesson in life. He told two hundred scrunched up noses that we should be prepared to explore

new foods. How would we know if we liked or didn't like something unless we were willing to give it a chance?

I knew the answer to that question. "If it smelled yucky, it would be yucky." I wasn't dumb enough to say that out loud.

Nobody made a move towards the repulsive looking mush on our dinner plates until all forty of the proctors stood up and pointed their brain-band activators at their assigned tables. Since everyone in the dining hall knew what would come next, two hundred forks made tentative gestures at two hundred plates. I was trying to find the smallest amount of mush that I could pick up on my fork and still have it fall off when a painful zap made me drop my fork. I looked up to find that my tablemates had deserted me. Three of them had a finger and a thumb pinching their noses shut and were chewing with their eyes closed. The fourth was trying to flush the paste in his mouth into his stomach with big gulps of water. A second brain zap made me vibrate for a couple of seconds. My theory that a yucky smell equals a yucky taste was quickly confirmed. I didn't get much satisfaction from being proven right.

I was watching one of my tablemates using the edge of his knife to scrape some lingering tastes off his tongue when one of the proctors started a speech about learning to accept change. None of us believed it for a second. After all, we had been living in the same bedroom in this same dorm since our fifth birthday when we had been transferred out of the Infant Care facility. Only the furniture and our uniforms had changed to match our growing bodies. All of us knew enough of the history of the It's Only Fair society to know that nothing had changed in the daily lives of Alberta's adults for years and years either.

I figured tonight's dinner was some sort of deranged psychology experiment. I managed to confirm that three of the four semi-hidden cameras in the dining hall were in record mode without getting zapped for being rude when an adult was speaking. I was carefully adjusting the tilt of my knife so that I could see the camera behind me when one of the A's put up a hand. This was not a surprise. Everyone in the room knew that the A's were the most aggressive gene-type, the most likely to speak out, and the most likely to take charge. I was a Z. I would have been the last boy in the room to raise my hand. "What was that stuff?" the A asked.

"Sushi," the proctor replied in a neutral tone. "Raw fish."

There was a pause of about two-seconds and then two hundred mouths gagged open, and two hundred eleven-year old stomachs convulsed their contents all over the tables. We also splattered the floors, the chairs, our neighbours, and everything else in the vicinity. I heard afterwards that the eleven-year old girls in the dining hall across the common area had been forced to go through the same experiment and they had delivered the same unanimous verdict to the kitchen staff.

Now, four years later, I was vividly remembering the sushi because my stomach was going to produce the same eruption if my brain-band didn't kick in quickly with some pain control. Brain-bands are supposed to reduce this level of pain automatically and since mine hadn't, something was clearly wrong.

Was I in another experiment? I could see my personal *Are you behaving yourself?* camera on the wall above my desk and the camera's light was off. That's

when I saw thin fishing lines dangling from the grungy ceiling tiles. Each line had a black metal hook at its end and each hook held a large, numbered sign with some printed words on it. I couldn't read the signs from where I was lying. Gingerly, I sat up, propped my left elbow on the leg of my upended study chair, and swiveled my head to find note #1.

#1. You may be in pain. You're probably disoriented. Breathe deeply and your body will return to normal. Don't try to use your brain-band. It won't work.

I did as the sign told me and began to feel better. Sign #2 was right next to #1.

#2: When your brain-band stopped working, you may have lost some of your personal memories but those will come back. Your name is Zurt. You're fifteen-years old. You're a boy. You're going to your grad'bration tomorrow.

Yes, my name was Zurt! I could remember wishing that I hadn't been given that name because nobody else in the center had a name that started with a Z. But, my proctor had told me that I was given a Z-name simply because I was the last baby to be manufactured that year. He said it was totally fair for everyone to get a name created by a computer. That way, nobody received a name that was better than anyone else's.

#3: You're not going to like what comes next. Keep reading the notes and everything will be OK. Take some deep breaths and then look directly above you.

I craned my head back and saw three thick, heavy-duty fishing lines dangling from the ceiling right above my head – each with a fishing hook at the end. A brain-band was nestled securely on those three hooks. I could see dried blood on the skull rivets on the inside of the band. I grabbed for my head and, ignoring the renewed pain, I groped through my hair looking for the reassuring feel of my smooth metal brain-band. It wasn't there.

An image of both of my volunteer-parents popped into my head. They were sitting across from me at a picnic table on my fourth birthday. My volunteer-father was so distinguished looking. He always wore such fine looking clothes. My volunteer-mother had this air about her. Earlier, the principal of our school had approached our table and she had wagged her index finger at him in a No gesture and he had immediately turned and walked away. The oddest thing – both of them had perfectly groomed fingernails. I had never seen anyone else with manicured fingernails. My volunteer-father leaned over the table close enough to touch me – but of course he wouldn't – and looked sternly at me. "You must never, never, never try to remove your brain-band, Zurt. You will become extremely ill if you do."

Then, I remembered my volunteer-mother's annual phone calls. She always ended them with some gruesome story about what some stupid kid had done to his brain-band. One time, she had to operate on a boy who had pried his brain-band off with a screwdriver. She had managed to save his life but he'd never move

his arms again. I remembered all of her other warnings too. I'd pee in my pants for the rest of my life. I'd be blind. I'd spend my life drooling and rolling around on the floor. I stared at the floor where I was lying. A wet patch of drool was on the carpet where my mouth had been. Then, not knowing how I had managed it, I was standing up, my head was hurting like crazy, and I was dizzy. I looked down at my hands – they were covered in blood!

In one of our health and safety classes, the instructor had reassured us that accidental brain-band detachments need not be fatal so long as a doctor was called immediately. Flinging aside the fishing lines, I lunged for my study desk and the communicator that would be on its top. I was thrashing through the clutter on top of my desk looking for it when I noticed the series of pictures taped to the dingy gray wall of my dorm. They clearly revealed the person who had hung the fishing line from the ceiling and had attached the hooks. I recognized him immediately. Me! I had taken off my own brain-band!

I went back more slowly to the centre of my bedroom and found sign #4.

#4: Those stories you've been told about what happens to people who remove their brain-bands – they're all lies. Removing the brain-band causes temporary pain from the rivets being yanked out of your skull. That's all.

#5: Don't let anyone find out that you've removed your brain-band. Be sure to destroy these notes and wash all the blood out of your hair before you leave for grad'bration. Your hair will hide the fact that you don't have a brain-band. That's why you grew it long. Avoid contact with everyone. Being a Z, you'd have done that anyway, but you need to be extra careful now. You mustn't be seen without a brain-band.

#6: I put a data storage bot in your pocket with instructions on what you should do for the next couple of days. I don't know what emotion you're feeling right now, but isn't it really, really cool that you are having an actual emotion?

I pulled the storage bot out of my pocket. Parting the sticky hair at the back of my head, I slid the bot into my scalp plug and read the last poster board sign while I waited for my brain to download the bot's directory.

#7: Grad-bration is the only month you'll ever have in your life when you're allowed to break the rules. Memorize this excuse in case you get caught. "I wasn't interested in grad'bration activities. I just wanted to find out what it was like to live without a brain-band." Keep telling that lie if by some chance the DPS catches you.

Chapter 2

I cleaned up as directed and then examined the two heavy packs of gear that I had prepared for myself. One was for local weather conditions and the other contained cold weather gear in case I decided to do some high altitude climbing in the Rockies. I stuffed both packs into my copter and headed west.

As I flew over Calgary, I saw that the conversion of the old decrepit city center into farmland was progressing steadily. Of course, the city's asphalt-covered streets had been melted down decades ago in a desperate attempt to produce gasoline after the last drops of precious oil had been sucked out of the Earth's ground. Leaving Calgary's skyscraper relics behind me, I made my way to the foothills of the Rockies, landed at the park-and-plug next to the grad'bration site, and connected my copter to a solar panel that would recharge its batteries.

I left my pack with the cold weather gear in the copter. Humping two big bags deep into the forest wouldn't be necessary if I decided not to make the long trek into the mountains. I noticed that the other copters in the lot were full of valuable personal possessions too. This was not unusual. Alberta's children were raised from birth to follow society's rules. Since a brain-band was always present to provide a painful reminder, **nobody** broke **any** rule – not even the ones about covering your mouth when you coughed or chewing with your mouth closed. Life was better for everyone if everyone followed the rules. It was only fair.

The grad'bration site was in a large wide valley surrounded on all sides by thick forests. I strode down the path that meandered the length of the open grass fields pausing only when I reached the swimming hole for guys. I spent ten-minutes there, as per the instructions I had left for myself. Zs are notorious loners and nobody would be surprised if I disappeared into the woods for a month. But first, I needed some students to see that I had actually come to grad'bration in case the DPS came around asking about me. I was shocked to see that all of the guys in the pool had bare ears. Then, I remembered that the brain-bands had been turned off for grad'bration. We were free to do whatever we wanted without fear of zaps.

In a society where everyone had essentially the same body, guys were used to seeing other guys with naked heads. But, from an early age, we had been taught to keep our ears covered whenever we were in public. Some guys felt awkward even taking their ear-gear off to go to bed. I wasn't that modest, but I couldn't imagine myself swimming with naked ears even with a de-activated brain-band. I had known for some time that I had smaller than average ears and it wasn't something that I wanted to advertise.

I felt uncomfortable watching the naked swimmers, so turned to climb the tree-covered ridge leading away from the fields. Seeing how full the pools had been made me realize that students from other Albertan schools were here. That meant that other Zs would be graduating and they'd probably be roaming around in the wilderness too. I'd have to be careful that they didn't see me.

Anxious to get my memories back, I clambered high enough up a tree with dense foliage that anyone roaming through the woods would have difficulty spotting me. Minutes later, I was reclining in comfort in my camouflaged sleeping hammock and waiting impatiently for the contents of the bot to transfer into my brain. The first file was a video clip that I opened with some curiosity.

I must have taken my pinky-ring computer off, placed it on some flat surface, and pointed it towards a stump. I watched as I walked into view of the computer's

camera, sat down on the stump, looked straight into the lens, and began to talk. It was weird listening to a brain image of yourself talking. However, after the first sentence, I had other things to concentrate on.

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"Zurt," I heard myself saying. "I didn't take off our brain-band to discover what life was like with emotions. If you haven't already remembered the real reason, here it is."

"Halfway into the term, I received an email from my physics instructor who had noticed that I had never earned a grade higher than a C+ on any of my courses. He said that I'd have to start working a lot harder if I was going to get a B- in his course. He'd be looking for a very creative invention in my end-of-year project."

"His message bothered me. Like everyone else in school, I had been earning straight C+ marks for eleven full years; why was he criticizing me for that? And, why was he suddenly trying to pressure me not to be average? When I read his email a second time, I scrolled down and found a series of messages between my instructor and another person – someone with a coded ID but with a Department of Public Safety email address. I learned that the unknown person was going to give me a physics research job with the DPS, but he wanted to see what I could accomplish if I had to work under pressure. My teacher was supposed to encourage me to get a B- grade in his course."

"At first, I was relieved that I was going to have a physics research job for the Department of Public Safety. I had expected to be assigned to work on a farm just like almost every other high school graduate. But, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. The DPS man wanted me to be better than average; but, that didn't make sense. The It's Only Fair society is based on a fundamental philosophy: *It's only fair that everyone is the same*. Why would the DPS suddenly want me to be different?"

"I began investigating. The more I discovered, the more I found to investigate. Now, two months later, I'm left with a lot of unanswered questions and a strong feeling that something may be very badly wrong. But, I can't prove anything. And, I certainly can't take my questions to any of my teachers who I believe are all working for the DPS."

"I know that the IOF's Department of Public Safety is responsible for making sure that every citizen is kept safe. They were the ones who gave us the toys when we were in infant care; they were the ones who told us how wonderful the IOF was and how lucky we were to be living in a province where life was totally fair; they were the ones who sent us presents on our birthdays. We were taught that if we ever felt unsafe, we could go to them at any time of the day or night, and they would protect us."

"But, something isn't right. And, brain-band zaps are stopping me from figuring it out. I'm taking our brain-band off so that you can complete the research before you start your job with the DPS. I'm not going to tell you any of my specific suspicions because I don't want to influence your findings. I'm going to help you get your memory back and ask you to think about what you've learned. If I'm wrong about the DPS, then you'll find nothing. But, if I'm right... well, you just can't go to work for them. You just can't."

"Four weeks of grad'bration should be plenty of time to figure things out. You'll be able to wander around Alberta and discover what it's like to have emotions. And, every now and then, think about the DPS and the IOF, and keep thinking about them until everything fits. Until that happens, you should consider anyone you see in the woods as a DPS agent looking for you. **Do not let the DPS catch you without your brain-band!** They won't believe that you yanked it off out of curiosity. Get deep, deep into the woods and **hide!** There are rumours of dissidents without brain-bands living in the woods for years before being caught. A Z should be able to avoid discovery for a month."

#

The first data folder in my bot held all the course assignments I had submitted over the last five years. As Zurt the First had promised, they brought back lots of school memories, so I lay back in my comfy hammock, looked up at the full yellow moon that was shining into the silent forest, and let the thoughts roll through my brain.

I didn't really have any negative thoughts about school. I actually enjoyed being alone in my dorm room for days at a time with instructional materials playing into my brain. That didn't mean that I never saw other kids – I was required to eat meals with my dorm mates and show up at the compulsory recreation events. Most students played games and socialized together in the evenings. However, I chose to work on my courses. What can I say? I was a Z.

The individualized instruction we all received guaranteed that no student ever failed a course. If a particular lesson was too difficult, the student got additional instruction and practice until he mastered the content. The lowest mark ever assigned was a C. The highest mark ever awarded was a B-. Since we all had essentially the same brain in the same body, it was only logical that just about everyone would receive straight C+ grades.

It was time to sleep, but my stomach was grumbling for something to eat. I popped the end of a food bar into my mouth, took a big chomp, and almost levitated out of my hammock. I had never tasted anything so wonderful before!

Food bars are dense packs of nutrients and are time consuming to chew. As I ground away at what was usually a tasteless piece of fossilized sawdust, the sensation of exhilaration subsided, only to be replaced by a variety of different tastes that swirled around in my mouth. They were good, but that first taste had been like eating ... I don't know what it was like eating, but I knew one thing. I wanted more.

I held the bar up to my nose – trying to find the origin of that sensational taste. As I passed it back and forth in front of my nostrils, I inhaled deeply but couldn't get enough of the alluring scent. So, I placed the edge of the bar against the skin underneath my nose and breathed deeply. Each inhalation left me sighing. I raised the tip of my tongue to the bar and got a big gob of something soft and mushy as a reward. It made my tongue tingle. Leaving my tongue in the air, I gazed at the stars and then waited for this delicious goo to melt and trickle down my tongue. I could feel the little numbies on my tongue come alive as each tiny drip made its way into my mouth.

There was enough light from the moon to read the package. *Chocolate covered nutrient bar.*

That wasn't the chocolate I was used to. This chocolate was rich. This chocolate was mind-numbingly sweet. This chocolate was ... delicious.

I put one end of the bar in my mouth and tongued the chocolate off the top of the bar. Rotating the bar, I repeated the process again and again until half of the bar was bare. Then, I reversed it and sucked the chocolate off the second half. By this time, my fingers were covered in the melting chocolate, so naturally, I had to lick it off. Slowly – one finger at a time. I could feel a little bit of goo on my face so I used a finger to transfer it into my mouth. When all the chocolate was gone, I sliced off little chunks of the bar, which I rolled from one side of my mouth to the other until it had disintegrated. It took me an hour to finish the bar and I never noticed the time passing at all.

Forget getting any sleep! I could swear that my body was vibrating. My brain certainly was. I stood on a branch, hopping in place while watching the end of the branch flap up and down. If I could find a big enough branch, could I walk out far enough to jump to the nearby tree? Squirrels did this all the time. I was far heavier and not as nimble. Still, the urge to jump from tree to tree seemed like a perfect way to celebrate my discovery of real chocolate.

Then, the perfect idea just popped into my mind. I took out my bow and put it together. Since my bow was collapsible, I always had it in a pocket when I was in the woods. Grabbing my backpack, I groped for the reel of my all-purpose fishing line that I had invented during Spring Break. In its normal state, the line was a single filament that actually could be used for fishing. If you needed something stronger – say for constructing a raft – individual segments of the filament could be fused together. A line that was three filaments wide was enormously strong.

Of course, other ropes had similar qualities. Mine was different because it could be electrically charged from the battery in my pinkie ring computer. Drive a low pulse down the length and the filament would instantaneously bind to a filament lying next to it. Change the pulse slightly and two filaments would separate. Increasing the voltage slightly would create a magnetic field around the filament. A different type of pulse would transmit an electronic signal from one end to the other. I hadn't played with it since I had invented it, but I already had stored away some mental plans for a variety of electronic gadgets that could be created from a single piece of filament. All I needed was time to experiment and I'd get plenty of that this month.

Time to try out my brilliant idea. I cut off a long piece of filament, attached an arrow to one end, and buried the arrow into a distant tree. I wrapped the filament's loose end around the trunk of my sleeping tree and magnetized the line so that it became a taut cable connecting the two trees. I cut off a second, much shorter slice of filament and made the two ends into makeshift handles. Then, I suspended myself from the taut cable with that short line. The different fields in the two filaments propelled me quickly to the distant tree. A high voltage pulse caused the long cable to reel itself in. All I had to do now was shoot another tree, suspend myself from the cable with my short filament strap, and fly over the forest floor to my next destination.

I grabbed some water and a couple of food bars and an hour later, I was at least five kilometers away from my former camp and very much relieved. How could anyone track me through the woods if there weren't any tracks on the ground to follow?

#

It was late, I was tired, and I had no reason to return to my tree-camp, so I decided to bed down on the forest floor. The night was warm and I was soon asleep. I'm not normally bothered by forest noises, but the rustlings of some large animal pushing through the underbrush woke me. I think I would have gotten back to sleep quite easily if I had heard it moving away. I began thinking about what Zurt the First had said about dissidents being able to hide in the woods successfully for years before being caught. I couldn't help wondering what had happened to them after they were caught. With no chance of getting back to sleep, I decided to return to my base camp.

I sky-treked to within a kilometer of my tree-camp before continuing on the ground. I was approaching my camp when the sky started to lighten, but, by then, I had become extremely angry with myself. In spite of Zurt the First's warnings, I had already made some stupid mistakes and I hadn't been hiding for even twenty-four hours yet. I shouldn't have camped so close to the 'bration site; I shouldn't have left my pack unattended; and, I shouldn't have skipped gaily out of camp without first setting some intruder alerts. This total disregard for security was very unlike me and I could only explain my foolishness as a reaction to the emotions that I had felt after eating the chocolate.

Resolving to pay close attention to security from now on, I began the slow spiral belly-crawl around my tree-camp that would reveal if anyone had come by in my absence. I was about three-quarters done when I heard the noises of what must have been a deaf, blind, and crippled deer. It wasn't a deer.

A noisy hiker settled into a hiding place that was well away from my tree-camp but with an adequate view of it so long as she used the 'nocs hanging from her neck. If I was to believe Zurt the First's warning, she had to be a DPS agent. She was certainly spying on my camp. Since I had been my normal, careful self entering the woods yesterday, only an expert tracker could have spotted what few tracks I might have left.

As I watched the DPS agent, I began to get doubts. Not about her spying. She made no effort to examine my camp close-up but she was clearly waiting for me to return. I began to wonder how she could have found my trail when she obviously wasn't experienced in woodcraft and especially not in surveillance. You see, no expert in woodcraft would ever wear white in the woods but she had shiny white sheaths on her lower legs that could be easily seen from a distance. And, of course, there had been all that noise when she arrived. I checked her back trail and became even more assured of her lack of woodcraft. Her trail was full of broken branches and was marked by clear footprints. Much more worrisome was the fact that she hadn't followed my trail! She had walked in a straight line directly to my camp and from an entirely different direction than I had used to get there!

I wanted to follow Zurt the First's warning and take off for the deep woods, but I had to retrieve my pack. The second pack in my copter had ample supplies and

equipment; however, my brain-band was in the pack in the tree and I couldn't let the DPS spy find it. I rubbed some mud and rotting vegetation over my exposed flesh and then eased my way closer to her hiding place. I'd just hide in the underbrush until she left.

Chapter 3

The bright sun was high in the cloudless sky and I could feel its warmth in my hiding pit, so why was I shivering? All I had to do was stay hidden until the DPS agent left, grab my pack, and slip away undetected. After all, I had my filament and could escape without leaving a trail. So why was my mind obsessing about how the DPS could have known that I had taken off my brain-band? I stared at the squirmy agent munching non-stop on snacks and wondered how anyone so inept in the woods could have found my camp. The more I thought, the more I shivered. The more I shivered, the more I worried about what the DPS would do to me if they caught me.

By early afternoon, I had gotten an itch in the back of my neck. You know – the itch you get when someone behind you is staring at you. The urge to scratch the back of my neck became so intense that twice I circled around looking for signs of a second spy. Twice, I found nothing. But, moving around helped me to figure out why I was shivering. I had never been frightened before.

The DPS spy packed up and left at nightfall. I had spent the entire day trying to answer two nagging questions. How could the DPS have learned that I was band-less so quickly? And, why would they care enough to track me into the woods? The only way I could get the answers was by following the spy, so I did.

She didn't even try to leave the way she came in. She just pulled a compass out of her pocket, shone her pinky-ring light on it, pointed herself in the direction of the 'bration fields, and started walking with her pinky-ring light on max. She altered course only when she encountered an obstacle too big to blunder through.

At 10 p.m., the 'bration site was illuminated by bright floodlights so the spy was able to walk easily along the edge of the fields. I kept pace with her from a position about fifty-meters in the woods. A shadow stepped out of the woods near the Tower of Doom in the waterslide area and she changed course and followed the shadow into the woods. I had already spotted the glow of the campfire and so arrived there ahead of them. I used the noise of their arrival to crawl within hearing distance. Sitting around a campfire, their night vision would be destroyed so I didn't have to worry about being seen. After watching them long enough to recognize them again, I kept my eyes buried in my sleeve to protect my night vision in case I had to leave suddenly.

Three people were around the campfire. The spy was a woman named Abby. The man who had met Abby and guided her to the fire was Rick. He was about the same size as Abby but was different from her in every other possible way – at least as far as woodcraft was concerned. Where she was clumsy and noisy, he was agile and quiet. She sat down with a grunt; Rick folded into the ground effortlessly. She

couldn't get comfortable; he adopted a yoga position and remained motionless. When Abby went to get more firewood, I could hear her progress from where I was hidden; Rick rose directly from his yoga position, glided into the darkness, and returned fully laden without making a sound. Of course, not everyone is skilled in woodcraft, but that was all I was concerned about right now – could I stay hidden from the DPS? Abby may have had other skills, but she was not a threat to discover me. Rick was another matter.

Like Abby, the third person was out of place in the woods. While Abby and Rick were wearing camouflage, Gary had a white shirt and tie. Abby and Rick sat on the ground; Gary had a folding camp chair and remained in it the whole time, leaving the other two to replenish the fire, food and drinks.

The initial conversation was mostly greetings and getting food and drinks distributed. Abby complained to Gary about having to swat at insects in the woods all day long and that started the real meeting.

Gary: "Zurt never returned to his camp?"

Abby: "I was there at dawn and I left when I could no longer see my hand in front of my face. He never came back."

Gary: "But, it was Zurt's camp, right?"

Abby: "He had a sleeping hammock high in a tree. It held a heavy weight that must have been his pack. I had expected to see the remains of a camp fire, a cooking pot or two, but I saw no other sign that he had been there."

Gary: "Are we sure it's his camp?"

Rick: "It's his camp. The pack is in the tree to keep his food safe from animals. Zurt never leaves any sign on the forest floor where he camps."

Gary: "With all of his supplies in the tree, he should have returned to eat and sleep. You must have scared him off, Abby."

Abby: "I was nowhere near his camp. I was hiding behind a rotting log full of ants the entire day. I was put on this assignment with only a half-hour notice and in an environment that I haven't been trained for. I catch dissidents who hide in cities, not in the wilderness. I'm tired, I need a hot bath and I resent you..."

Rick: "It would not be unusual for Zurt to spend one or more days away from his base camp. He could have decided to explore the area and simply didn't want to haul his pack around with him. He'd only need a few food bars and some water. A one day absence means nothing."

Gary: "So, he'll return?"

Rick: "If he didn't notice Abby and if that was his only pack. Did anyone check his dorm room to see how much of his camping equipment is gone? That will give you an idea of how many packs he brought. You have a full inventory of everything in his dorm room, right Gary?"

Gary: "Of course we do. But, I've been busy coordinating our response. I'll send someone to inventory his dorm room tomorrow."

Rick: "Have someone find his copter too. He may have left a pack in it."

Gary: "So, if Rick is right, he'll return to his camp in the next day or two..."

Rick: "IF he didn't see Abby and IF he doesn't have another pack. I'm not guaranteeing anything, Gary, and don't make it out that I am. This never should have happened in the first place."

Gary: "My office has had no experience with a Z. How was I supposed to predict what Zurt was going to do?"

Rick: "Letting his hair grow was an obvious change in behaviour. You better hope that a certain person doesn't ask why you didn't alert us."

Gary: "Had I been properly briefed on Z behavioural patterns, I would have. You're supposed to be the expert on Zurt – do we have Abby stake out his camp again or not?"

Rick: "What were you going to do if he did show up at his camp, Abby?"

Abby: "I was going to tell him that he and I had been given a school year-end project in preparation for working together as a team for the DPS. Naturally, I'd be wearing my teen-age face. After the project was over, we were expected to report into DPS headquarters in Calgary to be debriefed and then assigned to our first real job."

Rick: "How will you explain his brain-band being off?"

Abby: "I'll tell him that a DPS doctor safely removed our brain-bands in order to increase the stress and difficulty of the exercise. He'll have lost most of his memories and will be confused. I'll have a copy of the DPS letter to me and it will identify him as my partner. I'll show him my fake brain-band to prove that I took off my band too."

Rick: "You're confident he won't see your real band?"

Abby: "I have a miniature version for these kinds of situations. Nobody can see it and he won't be pawing through my hair."

Rick: "He may have already recovered some memories of why he really took off his band. What then?"

Abby: "Without the brain-band to dampen all of his emotions, he'll have normal male sexual urges. I'll do what I do best. I'll have my tight white sheaths on. Unfortunately, they'll have been ripped from trekking through the woods and some naughty pieces will be visible. Perhaps, I'll even let him see my bare ankles while I'm washing my feet in a stream. I'll let him kiss me. I'll get him so confused, he won't know what hit him. In the end, he'll walk into the Calgary office to please me."

Rick: "And then?"

Gary: "We'll get as much information from him as we can from a soft interrogation. If we're lucky, he took the band off as a fling to celebrate his graduation. If so, he won't object to having it re-installed. We'll hire him, he'll enjoy his work, and everybody will be happy."

Rick: "And if he doesn't want to report to the Calgary office?"

Gary: "Abby will immobilize him and send me the coordinates. I will copter him into the office and there'll be a hard interrogation. We'll find out why he decided to bolt. If he received help from dissidents, we'll give you their names and you can do what you do best. Restoring the brain-band will erase the memories of his little excursion. He'll wake up in his new job and the doctor will tell him that an accident in his lab had zapped his band and damaged some of his memories. He'll enjoy his work and everyone will be happy."

Rick: "I'm concerned about the pick-up."

Gary: "Rick, you know that no matter how old they are, men who find themselves suddenly without their brain-band are unable to handle normal sexual

urges. How could they? Other than Grad'bration, they've never been allowed to experience them before. Abby has done this hundreds of times. She's never failed to bring her man in – whether he was willing or not.”

Rick: “She has never failed when her targets hide in the cities. She hasn't worked in the woods before. Plus, I'm not sure that your pick-up plan will work with a Z. They don't like being around people and Zurt will avoid Abby as much as he can. Any form of aggression may scare him off. It will certainly worry him. If Abby uses a sexual approach, he will wonder why she is acting so immodestly. The slightest hole in your cover story will also raise questions in his mind. When a Z starts to wonder about something, he won't stop wondering until he has an answer that explains everything perfectly. Zs are very perceptive. They notice everything, even if it doesn't register consciously. If Zurt's curiosity is piqued by something that doesn't make sense to him, he will pick and pick and pick at that problem until he solves it. I've seen that often enough with my superior.”

Gary: “The cover story is solid.”

Rick: “No, it's not. Zurt is an expert in the woods. Abby has never worked in the woods. He's a Z; she's an A. The two personality types conflict on many dimensions. Zurt will know that he could never get along with an A for more than a week and he's going to wonder what kind of manager would require the two of them to work together. He'll know that something isn't right.”

Gary: “We'll refine the story. Or, do you have something better to suggest?”

There was a long silence.

Rick: “Zs don't like being around people, but I've always thought that they would respond to an appeal for help. I haven't had the chance to prove it yet.”

Gary: “A chivalrous hero saving a damsel in distress?”

Abby: “I've imitated women from H to M before. They all tend to be swooning maidens. I could play that part.”

Rick: “No offense, Abby, but you'd never pull it off with a Z. We'd need a real swooning maiden.”

Gary: “Well, since we don't have one of those available right now, we'll go with the first plan but with a better cover story. Abby, you'll go back to Zurt's camp tomorrow. You can get a few hours of sleep in my tent.”

Rick: “No. Not tomorrow. If Abby spooks him, then he'll run. If he disappears, we may never find him again.”

Gary: “How could he get away? You know as much about the woods as he does.”

Rick: “Perhaps, but first I'm going to bring in some other problem-fixers to establish a net around him. If we're lucky, we'll discover his trail and catch him tomorrow. If not, we'll put Abby in place. I can have three of my colleagues here early tomorrow; the other four soon afterwards.”

Abby: “Why the caution? You can find him wherever he is. Gary put me within one hundred meters of his camp and, as we all know, I'm a klutz in the woods.”

Rick: “You weren't carrying the signal reader with you, were you Abby?”

Abby: “No, we're not stupid. Gary was doing the monitoring and communicating with me by pinky computer.”

Gary: “Abby is right. With the bug locator, we can put a helicopter on his head any time we want.”

Rick: “Unless he figures out that he’s been bugged. Or, unless he accidentally becomes bug-free. If so, it will take professional trackers and dogs to find him again. I’m going to get them in place first. Just in case. You better be as good as Gary says you are, Abby. I’m not allowed to make Zurt disappear.”

Chapter 4

Zurt the First was right. Something definitely was wrong. I had found an answer to the question – “How had they discovered me so quickly?” But I still didn’t know why the DPS was so concerned that I might escape. I certainly wasn’t going to hang around to find out! I knew that the winter backpack in my copter was bug-free – otherwise Gary’s instruments would have seen it. I snatched it out of the copter and had sky-trekked deep into the woods within half an hour.

By that time, I had calmed down. Fear. I had experienced fear. And stupidity. I had been stupid. I couldn’t leave the brain-band in my summer pack for the DPS to find. And, I needed that pack if I was to survive in the woods for more than a month. Nobody was watching my camp right now, so I hid my winter pack and went back. An extra hour to find the bug wouldn’t hurt. Along the way, I had time to think. Which is what I should have done first! Rick’s comment that I might become bug-free suggested that I could accidentally lose the bug. That meant it was either in the clothes I was wearing now or it was somewhere in my summer backpack.

The extra hour stretched into two. I couldn’t find the bug! I had ruled out my consumables, soft clothing, and any gear that was too hard or thin to conceal a device. That left three possibilities – my boots, my brain-band, and the material of my summer backpack. I was pretty sure the bug was in the brain-band, but what if they had planted two tracking devices on me? I probably would have done that – redundancy is something physicists think about. The Z in charge would have too. I could do without an extra set of boots, but I needed the backpack if at all possible. A simple plan came to mind.

I managed to store all of my unbugged supplies inside my sleeping hammock and then hid that in the woods partway to my winter backpack. Back in camp, I grabbed my brain-band, hiked about thirty-minutes north, hid it in a tree, and then returned to camp. I repeated the process twice more but in different directions – once to hide my boots and then again to hide my empty summer backpack. All I had to do was wait until Gary’s men came to my camp. They’d follow the bug to where they thought I was hiding and then I’d know what to leave behind. I’d wait invisibly for them leave, collect my backpack (hopefully) and then collect the rest of my gear and be out of the area before Rick’s trackers could converge. I found a good vantage point that gave me a view of the trail the trackers would take from the ‘bration fields into my camp, and settled down to wait.

Of the three agents I had seen, Rick was the most dangerous. In a physical fight, a fifteen-year old kid like me would give him no contest. But, I did have my filament and he didn’t know anything about that. As long as I remained hidden, I

might survive. However, the most dangerous person was Rick's boss. The unnamed Z. He would know how my mind worked; he'd be able to predict what I was going to do. I had to be far away before he became directly involved.

#

I had stared at an empty trail for over twelve hours. By now, the DPS would know that I had two packs. They'd know that I had moved camp but yet they still hadn't appeared. Were they waiting until Rick's trap was ready? They didn't need light to track me; were they just waiting for nightfall? Would they investigate my first camp? Or, would they go directly to where they thought I was? I could be sitting here while they were finding all of my supplies.

A food bar later, and another bout of obsessive worrying later, I realized that I was losing control of my emotions again. Since I was in my second day without sleep, the swings were worse than they had been before. I needed something to keep my mind occupied while I watched an empty trail. Homing beacons in brain-bands! That would do it. I was already stressing out about homing beacons – but what if I thought about them more productively?

I'm the anonymous Z in charge of the DPS. I have found a way to put homing beacons inside brain-bands. Now, what would I do? Would I put a homing beacon in Abby's brain-band, for example?

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Yes, I would. She was an agent. If she got into trouble, I'd want to be able to locate her. What about the other DPS agents? Would I give all of them homing beacons too? Sure, why not? Once I had designed a brain-band that held a homing beacon, it would be easy to produce one for every DPS agent.

Then, I got lost for an hour or two in the electronic details of how that could actually be done, but eventually resurfaced to examine the larger problem.

OK. I'm the Z in charge of the DPS. I have invented a transmitting device that can be installed inside a brain-band. What else would a scientist do with that device?

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I would look for other potential uses for that transmitter. What might those applications be? I have all these agents; I know where they are at all times; I'm able to communicate with them via pinky-ring computers, but what if they entered a wireless dead zone? What if they got into trouble? I'd still know their location because the brain-band's transmitting device would be on a radio frequency; but the pinky-ring requires wireless towers. How could they call for help?

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When I was on Catch me if you can woodcraft assignments, I'd use a trip wire to alert me if an intruder approached my camp. If I was the Z in charge of the DPS, I could use a trip wire to send an alert that an agent was in trouble. I'd wire the brain-band so that it would transmit an alarm if the connection to the brain were lost. Then, I'd fasten agent brain-bands lightly to their skulls so that they could rip them off without the pain that I experienced when I pried my band off.

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That's how they knew that I had ripped off my brain-band! As soon I interrupted the connection between my brain-band and my brain, the homing device

transmitter began sending out an alarm. The Z didn't give his brain-band transmitters only to his agents; he had given me one of his bugged brain-bands too.

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Why would the Z give me one of his bugged brain-bands? According to Gary, Zs were relatively rare. But, we're still normal, average people. I had never gotten a grade higher than a C+; I had no special physical abilities; nor did I have any great skills or aptitudes. According to Rick, I was a loner who perceived things and didn't like to quit on a problem. Big deal! Why would they bugs someone like me unless...

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...unless they bugged everybody! They wouldn't have two kinds of brain-bands – those with transmitters and those without. They'd mass-produce the same band. If any citizen in the IOF took off his brain-band, the DPS would know that immediately. Then, people like Abby would hunt them down and turn them over to people like Rick who would make them disappear. I couldn't believe this! I got extremely mad! I could remember getting mad once before. Back when I was in infant-care, some kid had snatched a toy sailing ship out of my hands and I had hauled off and hit him flush in the nose. This time, I wanted to do more than that.

It took me some time to cool off. When I got back to thinking scientifically again, I realized that taking off a brain-band didn't necessarily have to end with a *disappearance*. Even if the DPS had inserted a combined alarm/homing beacon into everyone's brain-band, it wouldn't be very effective for tracking them. I had kept my band with me but what if I had thrown it away? Our cities are big enough to hide in – it would be easy to grow your hair, or wear a fake band, and get away with it so long as you didn't do something to reveal you couldn't control your emotions. The DPS must have some other way to track fugitives. Something that allowed them to put people like Abby onto their trail.

I knew that in olden days the Unfair Society could listen in to cell phone conversations and track emails. Electronic tracking had probably improved a lot since then. I looked down at my right hand and suddenly realized where the bug was. A pinky-ring computer would be a perfect tracking device. Like everybody else, I wore it constantly.

Then, the implications of their perfect bug hit me. I could leave my pinky ring computer here and flee into the deep woods. But, without my computer to control my filament, I couldn't sky-trek! Without the ability to sky-trek, I'd leave a scent. The dogs were already on their way. I would be caught, perhaps not this minute, but inevitably. The DPS would take me back to Calgary. I already knew what they'd do to me there.

#

I was lying flat on my back when I woke. I sensed the scrapes and dried blood covering my knuckles first. Both hands were sore and I couldn't make them into fists. I could feel dried-blood scratches on my face as well. My pinky computer was on the ground. I couldn't remember taking it off.

I slipped into a bout of depression that I'd just as soon not talk about. It ended because I couldn't stand being so pathetic. I told myself that I wouldn't quit

without a fight. I would leave my computer buried in the ground. That would give me a head start and I could put dogs off my trail if I could find a deep stream. I started digging a hole and then stopped.

Abandoning my pinky ring computer didn't make sense without confirming that it actually held a tracking device. What if I had only one bug and it was in my brain-band? All I had to do was hide my pinky-ring like I had done with the items that I suspected might be carrying bugs. I turned my pinky-computer on, but even with its expandable band, I couldn't get it over my swollen knuckle. I put it in my pocket instead, hiked north, and hid it in a tree close to the tree holding my brain-band. I put near-invisible trip wires on both trees. If there were indeed two bugs, they'd see them in the same general location and assume that was my new camp. There was a good possibility that Rick and his trackers might come directly to this new camp and I'd miss them, but I knew where they were bound to start their search. I got there before dawn. A propane light was burning brightly inside Gary's command tent.

#

Rick and three burly men arrived just after dawn. They were in civilian clothes as they emerged from the park-and-plug and joined Gary who was waiting for them by his tent. It took a scant ten-minutes for them to get into camouflage clothes, don communications headgear, unpack four collapsible bows with four quivers full of arrows, and strap on four rifles with scopes. Rick moved two hand-held devices in a wide arc until both were facing in the general direction of my lures. Bug meters, I assumed. Each calibrated to home in on a particular signal. I had been carrying two bugs after all.

From a position well inside the woods, I stayed even with them as they walked easily beside the 'bration site fields. They were in loose formation with no obvious concern about being seen so early in the morning. That changed when they arrived at the most natural spot to head into the forest towards my original base camp. They spread out into a two hundred-meter wide band and began a slow, switch-backed advance that would discover any trail I might have made or flush out any stakeout position I might have taken in front of them.

I left them sneaking up on my camp and moved more quickly ahead. I didn't care if they found evidence of my tracks in and out of the camp, but if they maintained the two hundred-meter wide search pattern, they might discover where I had hidden to watch Abby. I found some of the litter that Abby had buried in her observation post – some food bars, sunflower seed shells, and gum wrappers – and relocated half of it to the observation post where I had watched her. The signs would suggest that Abby had changed stakeout locations partway through the day. Then, I took up a position three-hundred meters northeast of my camp and dug in behind and below a fallen log. I too was in full camouflage gear with dead leaves pasted to my face with mud. So long as I didn't make any sudden movements, I would be invisible to them.

It was half an hour before I got my first glimpse of a camouflage suit and that was only because I knew they were coming. These guys were good! I glimpsed two others approaching from two other quadrants at about the same time. I never saw Rick until all four trackers stood up simultaneously and walked into the camp.

One of them took Rick to where Abby's stakeout had been while the other two sat against a tree, sipping occasionally from their canteens.

Rick formed a sit-down conference when he returned. They shared some negative head shaking – nothing of any substance to report, I assumed. Rick then stood up, moved into the center of the clearing, produced his two bug meters, gave one to another man, presumably his second-in-command, and began the search for the bug signals. They conversed for a bit and then stood side-by-side, each pointing his hand in the direction of a signal. They were pointing in two entirely different directions.

I watched as Rick sent his second-in-command and another man in the direction of my hidden boots. Rick and the remaining tracker set off for either my brain-band or for my pinky computer. It was too early to say which held the second bug. I was free to collect my backpack, but I was reluctant to go anywhere near the brain-band and pinky-ring hiding places until I was sure that all four men were out of the woods. An hour wait by my former base camp wasn't going to make any difference.

It was closer to two hours before I heard the running footsteps. Rick and his partner were first to appear and then disappear. Both had emotionless faces. The other two were about a minute behind – similarly with blank looks. I waited until the sounds faded into nothingness and retraced Rick's steps as quickly as I could to the brain-band and pinky computer caches. One trip wire was lying on the ground and the other was undisturbed. I hustled up the tree, grabbed my pinky ring computer and took off to where I had hidden my sleeping hammock with all of my summer gear.

#

It didn't take long before I was sky-trekking to the cache holding my winter pack. I was now about ten clicks west of the outskirts of Calgary. There were no towns of any size west of Calgary – just the foothills and then the full Rocky Mountains. I could go north, south, or west and remain in deep, dark woods. Or, I could make my way northeast to Edmonton. But, what good would that do me? I couldn't go around asking for a job – the IOF assigned everyone to their jobs and they stayed in that job for their entire lives. With no money, I wouldn't be able to buy food or arrange lodgings. Cities were out. I'd have to live in the woods. Like a rabbit.

I had enough dried and packaged food to last a month. Two months if I cut my rations. I had the rest of July plus all of August and September before cold weather became a consideration. Even if I decided to winter in the woods, I knew that I could survive for years off the land once I had set up a base camp. Until then, I'd have two packs full of gear to hump. Right now, a mule would come in handy.

I rock climbed to the top of a steep cliff and stopped to enjoy the view before moving back from the cliff edge and out of sight from the forest below. I walked through a gentle meadow sprinkled with a few alder saplings until I reached the base of a rockslide. My second pack was about twenty-seconds away. I'd retrieve it after I had decided where I would go. North? West? South? I plopped down, leaned

against a large boulder and stared off into nothingness. Waiting for an inspiration to strike.

I don't know how long I was leaning against my boulder, but I came back to the real world stiff and with a sore bum. I stood up, walked around a bit, pulled a food bar out of my pack, and sat down against the boulder again. I might as well start half rations now. I chewed methodically, still enjoying the novelty of new tastes, but burdened by the situation facing me.

The meadow in front of me had ankle-high grasses. I began to dredge up what I could remember of my course on survival vegetation. Lots of grasses could be used for food, but some did not agree with the human digestive system. Then I realized that, thanks to Zurt the First, I had a bot containing all my woodcraft course assignments. That meant that I had access to pictures of the poisonous plants along with recipes for nutritious concoctions of other plants. Perhaps things were looking up. One of the grass stalks winked at me as though in encouragement.

Stretching, I got up again and found a more comfortable spot to rest. I took another bite from my bar, pulled my legs in tight, placed my elbows on my knees, rested my head in my hands as though in fatigue, and used the screen of my interlaced fingers to stare at the meadow. A stalk of what appeared to be a dead plant rotated slowly. I couldn't see the lens, but it was there somewhere and I sensed it was looking right at me. A few centimeters away, another thick stalk protruded from the ground. It looked like an animal had bitten off its top. *Air supply*, I thought.

I changed position slightly to stare into nothingness again. In time, I got up, found my canteen, and strolled out of the meadow. I resisted the urge to scratch the back of my neck. Still facing away from the spy stalk, I tilted my head and squeezed a short stream of water from my canteen into my mouth. My other hand would be hidden from view so I took the opportunity to unbutton my shirt pocket and take out my knife. After a second drink, I opened the knife and shielded it behind my canteen as I slowly turned around. One stalk was gone. The air hole remained. The spy was blind.

With the vision-stalk withdrawn, I didn't have to hide what I was doing. After stowing my knife and canteen, I picked up a large boulder, carried it stiff-legged until I was directly over the air stalk, and let the boulder drop. There was a hollow thud. The spy wouldn't be going anywhere without my help. I assembled my bow, notched an arrow, put two others through the loops in my pants, and moved where I could watch the concealed pit. Some self-preservation instincts kicked in and I stood back from the turf that was hiding the spy. Rick's people had guns. I sat on my haunches and waited for the oxygen in the pit to run low.

Chapter 5

In about three minutes, the boulder started to jiggle, but the spy didn't have the room to generate enough power to shift it. A minute later, I heard a muffled shout,

“Let me out!” I rolled the boulder off the lid and stood back with my arrow notched and pulled.

The sod over the grave slid sideways and I could hear the spy gasping for breath but he hadn’t opened it enough to reveal his face. The sod was packed in some sort of hard plastic slat frame, presumably collapsible and portable. Right now, it had a big dent where the boulder had landed.

I moved to the foot of the shallow grave – that’s exactly what it looked like – and said loudly enough to gain his attention, “Slide the lid completely off and then don’t move. Just lie there.”

The guy was in full camouflage gear from top to bottom. Only his brown face and hands were exposed. A black and brown cap covered his head. He had some weird goggles over his forehead. The goggles, his face, and the entire front of his camouflage suit were covered in a dusting of silt. He moved his hands very slowly and brushed the dirt off his eyelids before complaining. “The least you could have done is say Peek-a-boo, I see you. You didn’t have to get nasty.”

“What’s that on your forehead?”

“Goggles.”

“Why?”

“To keep the dirt out of my eyes. Why do you think?”

“Why were they on your forehead?”

“I thought they were on my eyes. Sometimes, I get disoriented in the dark.”

“Your goggles have special lenses in them, don’t they?”

“No.”

“Take them off and throw them to me.”

“OK, you were right; they’re night goggles. They help me to see in the dark.”

“I’ve never heard of night goggles that let you see in the dark.”

“Guess you’re not as well informed as you thought you were.”

“Where’d you get them?”

“Family heirloom.”

“Toss them up. I want to see them.”

He did. I left the bow at half pull and lifted the goggles with my free hand to my eyes. They didn’t make any difference. “Why’d you lie?”

“I didn’t lie. They don’t work in the daytime.”

“Why did you have them on your head then?”

“I didn’t know how long you’d stay here and wanted to be ready.”

“How do they work?”

“I don’t know. I only know how to care for them and replace the batteries.”

“Batteries?”

“On the side.”

I felt for them and found two bumps. I didn’t see how the goggles could be a weapon, so I tossed them back into the pit. “Why were you spying on me?”

“End of school year assignment. Find the dumbest looking guy in the area and follow him around for a day or two without him finding out.”

“You’re a student?”

“What did you think I was?”

“You’re taking part in the grad’bration celebrations?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t interested in exploring my emotions, so I decided to see how long I could trail you. You seemed to know what you were doing in the woods.”

“Climb out of the pit. Slowly. Stay well away from me.”

He did. Arms folded across his chest. Defiant. He was about my height, perhaps a bit taller. Thicker eye brows, narrower nose, wider mouth, thinner neck, narrower chest, wider hips, but just a normal kid as far as I could see.

“I didn’t do you any harm. It was just a rush to see how long I could track you, that’s all.”

“What did you see?”

“You watched some guys who were running around in the woods this morning. They left. Then you left. I figured you’d stop to pick up your pack, so I dug a pit and waited for you to get here.”

“Where’d you get the lid?”

“So I came prepared. What’s it to you?”

“Take your cap off.”

He unfastened it and flipped it onto the ground. His short brown hair flopped over the top of his brain-band.

“What’s your name?”

“Izzy.”

“What school did you go to?”

“Lethbridge High.”

“That’s not one of the schools graduating.”

“Sure it is.”

“No it isn’t!” I said that as though I knew it to be true.

He shrugged.

“You don’t lie very well.”

He shrugged again. “I don’t like being interrogated with an arrow pointed at my throat. I wasn’t doing anything wrong. A little invasion of privacy. I’ll promise not to do it again and go on my way.”

I flexed the bow and he stayed where he was. “How long were you watching me?”

“Just today.”

“But, I didn’t cache my pack here today. How’d you know it was here?”

“Guess I got you confused with someone else.”

“Someone else stashed a pack here too?”

“Did they? Wow! What a coincidence.”

I took a deep breath. “Let’s start again. How long were you watching me?”

“I told you, just today. Rick didn’t look too happy when he got to your hiding spots. Just in case you’re interested, he never went near the tree with your pinky ring.”

“How do you know his name was Rick?”

“I don’t. He just looks like an R and I assumed his name was Rick.”

“How do you know that I had hidden things?”

“I watched you.”

“But that wasn’t today. That was yesterday.”

“Aha. So, you admit to hiding things yesterday. What else did you do yesterday?”

“Nothing,” I answered automatically.

“Are you sure? I may have been watching you, so you better not lie.”

“I’m not the one lying.”

“But, you just did. You said you didn’t do anything yesterday but I clearly saw you staking out a trail yesterday. You’ve probably lied about other things as well. I don’t know how I’m expected to trust you now. I’m through believing anything you say.”

He started to turn around. “Don’t move. I have more questions.”

My captive put his hand to his mouth to cover a big fake yawn. “Is this going anywhere soon? I have to get back in time for bunk-check.”

“How long were you watching me?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I was just lying here in my coffin, having a nice little nap, when you dropped a boulder on it.”

We had reached an impasse. All he had to do was deny everything or lie about it. There was nothing I could do to make him admit he was spying on me. But, I was now almost certain that he had been spying on me for several days at least. I remembered the itch at the back of my neck when I was watching Abby. A pit with a periscope, the night goggles – they’d give him a big advantage. But, why would he be watching me? The idea of picking me out at random and following me around wasn’t logical.

He hunched up a shoulder, put his head against it, and started to snore.

Then I understood. Rick had talked about using the Damsel in Distress ploy, but Gary had quashed it because they didn’t have the right agent available. Rick didn’t say anything because he didn’t want them to know that he had already put an agent into place. This wasn’t a guy – it was a girl! The one thing wrong with my theory was that the agent in front of me was a guy. Girls never grew that tall. Well, there was one way to find out if she or he really was this tall. “Take off your boots.”

“Why?”

“To slow you down in case you try to get away.”

He bent down and un-velcro’d them.

“Toss them over here.”

He did so with a large sigh of exasperation.

Again, I went with a one-hand hold on my bow, bent down and felt inside one of the boots. No height-enhancing insole. I tried the other one. Again, no insole. No weapons either.

“Lift one of your pant legs to your knee.”

“Why?”

“Checking for weapons.”

He did it without hesitation. His lower legs were bare and he didn’t blink an eye when I looked at them. A girl would have refused, I thought. “Now the other leg.”

“Satisfied?”

“Drop your pants.”

He did. He was wearing loose pantaloons with a bulge where there should have been a bulge.

“OK. Pull them up.”

“I don’t carry any weapons except for a knife in my shirt pocket. I use it only for getting fires started and things like that.”

He didn't have a pack in the pit. Probably had it hidden somewhere near. It could have held a weapon, but I doubt I could convince him to show me where it was. I might as well finish the search for weapons.

"Toss your knife over here. Use two fingers. Be careful."

He did as he was told and then got back into his defiant stance, arms crossed over his chest, legs wide apart, chin pointing straight at me. "Lift your top," I instructed.

"Haven't been getting enough shower time with the guys?" He lifted his shirt and at the same time turned away so that I could see his bare back. It was kind of scrawny, but otherwise just a normal brown back.

"See. No brace for a throwing knife. No hidden bow. Nothing."

"Face me."

He did. Shirt now about halfway down.

"All the way up," I ordered.

"Not a chance, pervert!" a girl's voice said.

#

"So, you're Rick's damsel in distress," I observed with some satisfaction.

"Dis old ting? Dis ting ain't no dress!" She was speaking in a higher voice – her normal voice.

"What?"

"I'm not a damsel in dis dress. It's not even close to being a dress. I'm a damsel in dis camouflage suit."

"You're working with Rick. You're supposed to invent some terrible crisis and convince me to help you with it. After I trust you, you'll lure me to Calgary where you'll interrogate me and turn me into a zombie."

"Me? I'm supposed to do all of that by myself? I'm just a damsel in dis-camouflage suit. How would I do all of that?"

"Stop saying that."

"Stop saying *How would I do all of that?* I only said that once. Why can't I say it again?"

"No – the bit about the damsel."

"You don't think I'm a damsel? Want to check out my ankles again?"

She lifted both pant legs, raised her legs, and waved them in the air. Since she was sitting on the edge of the pit at the time, that put her off balance and she flopped back onto her elbows. "Keep your eyes on the left leg. Those ankles are a little bit plumper. I'm quite proud of them. The right ones are a bit bony. Couldn't be helped, I suppose. I'm thinking of getting an operation – you know – to make them bulge out more."

She continued to wave her legs up and down.

"Stop doing that. It's disgraceful. Put your feet on the ground. Cover your legs."

She sat up again. She didn't bother pulling her pant legs down. Her lower legs were exposed for anyone to see! "I'm hurt," she said. "My ankles are every bit as attractive as Abby's, yet you stared at hers for a full day and now you won't look at mine for more than a minute."

"I wasn't staring at Abby's ... legs. I had her under surveillance, that was all."

"What's she got that I don't got?"

"I wasn't looking at her ankles!" I was getting so mad that the real word for ankles almost slipped out.

"I gave you a free look, and you didn't even drool, not even a little. What's the matter? You don't like me?"

"You're very exasperating." I was getting real tired of her mouth.

"Thank you. It's a pleasure to accept this honour. I'd like to thank the members of the academy...."

"Be serious."

"OK, I'm serious. I used to be Izzy – a damsel in dis camouflage suit. But, I'll be *Serious* if you want. You can call me *Sery* for short."

I had to turn away to get control of myself. She made no attempt to bolt. I had put her boots with my pack.

Turning back to face her, I spaced out the words slowly, as though I was mad and exasperated. "What else did you see when you were watching me?" I didn't have to act.

"I saw your naked ears. Whoo boy! It was all I could do to stop from throwing myself at your feet."

My ear gear had been in my summer pack – the pack that had been up a tree. "You saw me without my ear-gear?"

"Yeah, but don't worry. I didn't take any pictures. I like how you fly through the trees, by the way. How do you get your rope to coil back to you?"

"What gives you the right to watch me naked?"

"What? You think I should have posted a sign saying, *Don't frolic naked in the woods. There's a damsel in dis camouflage suit hidden nearby?* Besides, you forced me to disrobe at the point of an arrow. I still think you could have drooled just a little."

"What's your story? What problem am I supposed to help you with?"

"You won't believe me."

"You're right. I just want to know what you think I'd fall for."

"OK, let's try this one. I have a vegetable garden that's getting out of hand. There are two rutting rutabagas in it and I'm too frightened to weed near them. Please come and protect me while I garden. I'd be VERY appreciative." She winked at me, and then raised her eyebrows up and down several times.

I couldn't believe that her brain-band would let her lie like that! "Get real!"

"As in real *serious*? Or just *real*. You gave me the name *Serious* and then you take it back? Perhaps you want me to keep it as my middle name? Can I keep *Izzy* in there somewhere? I've grown attached to it."

I was thinking that the best thing to do was to ignore just about everything she said. I'd try that from now on. "What's your real story?"

"Abby cooked up the first one. I didn't think it would work. Rick now, he said that I should appeal to your intellect. Let's see... How could I do that? ... I know. Someone registered me in the regional chess championships coming up soon and I haven't got the foggiest idea how to play the game. Silly ol' me. Could you teach me? You'd save me from a whole lot of embarrassment." She interlaced her fingers, raised her arms and hands so that they formed a floating table and rested her chin on her fingers. Tilting her head a bit, she flashed me a beautiful smile and blinked her eyes rapidly at me. "Pulleasssse?"

"I don't know how to play chess." The lie was out of me before I realized it. I tensed, waiting for the brain zap. It came from her instead.

"Liar! You won the Alberta championships when you were ten. You got away with it because it was a virtual competition."

"That was against other ten-year olds!"

"It was the open competition. You gave yourself away big-time with that win, Z-man."

"My instructor said that they were ten-year olds and I shouldn't feel too proud of myself because they were all novices."

"You believe everything the IOF tells you, don't you?"

"Not anymore."

She snorted in response and sat on the edge of pit glaring at me.

"How'd you know my name starts with a Z?"

"You have a big Z tattooed on the back of your neck where you can't see it."

Obviously, she was trying to distract me with meaningless drivel. "What's the real story you were going to use on me?"

"Ah... the single-minded pursuit of knowledge that makes a Z so endearing. Gary now – he's a bureaucrat kinda-guy, but he can be real devious when he wants to be. Gary said I should appeal to your latent hostility to the DPS. Right now, you're probably feeling very angry with them. So, I'm supposed to tell you that I'm the granddaughter of the woman who was a key person in the dissident movement fifty-two years ago. My mother is now the leader. I will become the leader when she dies or when the DPS catches her. I'm really frightened about that responsibility and I need someone to help me. I don't want to be tortured. I'd probably disclose all of our hidden camps and I couldn't bear to do that, so I'll have to kill myself first. I chose you because you're a Z. Plus, you're kind of cute which makes up for that fact that you have absolutely no sense of humour whatsoever. I want you to join me in the dissident movement, we'll go back to our hideout, you'll invent something that will help us, and together we'll expose the IOF for what it is. I need your help. I'm so scared!"

She put her hands to her face and made a few wracking sobs. When I didn't say anything, she looked up at me, dry-eyed. "You're not buying this, are you?"

"Gary doesn't know anything about running an operation. I'm supposed to believe that some dissidents have been living outside the IOF for over fifty-years?"

"Yeah, I thought that part would give it away."

"I haven't heard from Izzy yet. What story is she going to make up?"

"Are you going to make me strip again if I don't tell you?"

"Look, I'm sorry about that. I thought you were a guy. Then, I thought you were a damsel – a girl, but you weren't embarrassed showing your bare legs, so I figured you were a guy. But I knew that you were trying to hide something from me, and I thought it was a weapon, so I had to make sure. I still don't know, do I? So, I'm sorry for making you get undressed. "

"You should have said that a long time ago."

"What? There are rules for how I'm supposed to behave when I catch a DPS spy? You guys are out to kill me!" This girl was outrageous!

"Catch you. Not kill you. We want you alive."

"So, you ARE one of them. What's your story?"

She shrugged, got up, and walked toward the cliff. I didn't stop her. Now that I had caught her, she wasn't going to let me out of her sight.

She looked out in the distance for a bit and then turned around. "Look, Z-man. It doesn't matter what I was going to tell you. You've seen through me, so nothing would work now. Knowing what I was going to say won't help you. So, why not just let it rest? I caught you. You caught me. The important question is – what are you going to do with me?"

All of a sudden, she seemed different. I didn't see any reason to hide the obvious – she was too smart to be deceived. Part of her training, I suppose. "I could tie you up and leave, but if you got free, you'd just make a smoky fire. A few hours later, I'd be in a DPS helicopter. If I tied you up so that you couldn't escape, you'd die from starvation and thirst. Or, I could just kill you now. I'll try and find another solution."

"You won't kill me or tie me up today or tomorrow?"

"No," I said.

"OK. Since you said you said you were sorry so nicely, and since you're going to let me live for another day, I won't disable you today or tomorrow. Plus, I won't leave any tracks today or tomorrow or alert the DPS in any other way."

"Promise?"

She made crossing motions over her heart. That was an old fashioned symbol for telling the truth that I had discovered while researching the 1950s. I did the same in return.

"Now that we've got that out of the way, have you decided what you're going to do about those?"

I followed the direction of her finger. Off in the distance, I saw a whole lot of black dots in the air. "Copters?" I asked her.

"No. They're airplanes. Nobody is supposed to know that we have them, which is why we only fly them out in the wilderness. They carry soldiers who drop out of the plane in parachutes and land safely on the ground. You might be able to see the falling little specks. We're setting up a perimeter to stop you from getting out of our trap."

I had read how governments used airplanes as weapons during wars. Supposedly, the army had been disbanded when the IOF was established. But, if what she had said was true...

"You have a more immediate problem. After they drop their soldiers, the planes will fly in a search grid taking pictures of the ground from a camera in the belly of the fuselage. Even if the plane is high in the air, the cameras are good enough to pick out humans."

I looked at the dots again. They were definitely getting bigger.

"Airplanes can fly a lot faster than copters. You have about thirty-seconds before the closest one is overhead."

I looked around frantically for a place to hide. I couldn't get into the deep woods in time. I looked up again. One plane was getting very close.

"Twenty-seconds," she said.

I looked away again and she took that opportunity to attack me.

Chapter 6

“You don’t think very quickly, do you?”

I was flat on my back in the darkened pit. The spy was lying face down on top of me, her cheek pressed against mine. She had whispered the words in my ear – her breath kind of tickling me. With her head against mine, I didn’t want to shake my head *No*, so I whispered back instead. “I was trained not to make decisions without deliberation.” To emphasize the importance of this practice, I repeated one of my physics instructor’s favorite criticisms of my assignments. *Thorough deliberation is preferable to rushed judgment.*

“But, you play chess.” Her cheek was warm against mine.

“There’s no time limit in chess.”

“Well, slow thinking isn’t going to work now.” She shifted the sod lid a little and listened. Then, she shoved it aside and rolled out easily onto the meadow. She stood up and extended her hand to me.

I grabbed it and pulled myself out.

She waited by the edge of the pit as I took a few steps towards my pack.

“Haven’t you forgotten something?”

I went back to the pit and looked in. I was sure that my hands had been empty when she tackled me and knocked me into the pit. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Think hard.”

I patted my pocket. I had my knife. My arrows were still in their loops. She had flung my bow against the rock wall. “No, I have everything.”

“But, I don’t have everything. You owe me something.”

“I didn’t take anything of yours.”

“You owe me something. Were you raised in a barn?”

“No. It was an infant-care facility. Nobody is raised in barns these days.” I looked at her, wondering what world she lived in. She was mouthing something at me. Was she losing her voice? It took me a bit to catch on. “Oh. Thank you for throwing me in the pit.”

“And?”

“Thank you for helping me out of the pit.” I felt embarrassed and I was sure that my face was red. We had learned what were called social graces as young children, but after infant-care, I had never had any occasion to use them. I felt I should explain. “I’ve never spent any time with anyone before. I’m a Z, you know. I’m a loner.”

“You’ve just been told you’re a loner. We’ve kept you in isolation because anyone who was with you for more than half an hour would realize that you aren’t normal.”

Now, she was getting me back for not saying Thank you. “Thank you,” I sarcasticated. “So kind.”

“I didn’t mean that in a bad way. You know you aren’t like anyone else. That’s a good thing. It’s good to be different.”

What was with this girl! She must love living in the argument fog that surrounded her. “You’re different,” I accused. “How come you can get away with it?” I may have raised my voice a little.

“Cause I catch so many people, why’d you think?”

She had raised her voice to match mine but she didn’t have to jab her finger in my chest. Then, she removed it and just glared into my eyes. “The planes are gone for now. There was nothing out in the open that could have been photographed. What are you going to do now?”

Changing the subject. Good. “Will the soldiers stay at the perimeter?”

“No, once they get reinforcements, they’ll gradually tighten the circle.”

“How many will there be?”

“More than you could hope to hide from.”

We completed that last exchange in about five-seconds. She was red in the face and I’m sure I was too. It wasn’t embarrassment this time. I took a breath, stepped back so our chins weren’t nearly touching, and thought. I certainly wasn’t going to be rushed into quick decisions. She glared at me the whole time I was thinking things out, all the time repeating “Tick tock, tick tock...” in an extremely irritating squeaky voice. I realized that this was an ancient way of referring to time passing, but pretended not to know.

“I should get to their perimeter as quickly as I can so that there’s more space between the soldiers to slip through,” I finally said. That was only logical. And then, I got the flash of inspiration that often comes when I’m trying to figure something out. I realized what her assignment was. It wasn’t to gain my trust and lure me into Calgary. With her personality, she wasn’t going to gain anyone’s trust. She used her mouth to distract while she went about her real business. She was a professional thief!

“What?” she said.

“Nothing.”

“Yes, something. I saw it in your eyes.”

“I need to pick up my second pack.”

“That’s good. I hid my pack next to it.”

“How big is your pack?”

“Same size as yours. I might have some of the same supplies as you. We could trim down a bit.”

“No, after I leave you for the soldiers to find, I’m going to need everything I’ve brought. I can handle both of them – I’ve done it before.”

“Are you planning on using your... sky-rope?”

“Uh, I don’t think so. We’ll walk.”

“Good. That’s going to get me a promotion for slowing you down. You sure are making it easy for me. Why don’t you just start a fire and send up smoke signals? That way, you’ll be able to conserve your energy for the interrogation.”

I wondered if she’d give up if she knew that I was aware of her real assignment. That theory needed immediate testing. “I’m not going to make it easy for you to steal some of my sky-rope, as you call it. It’s going to remain in my pack and I’ll keep my pack closed and with me at all times.” I wasn’t going to give her a chance to steal the only advantage I had against the DPS.

She didn't say anything. Sullen in defeat, I guess. That meant that there wasn't any point in continuing the farce of her trying to steal my pack and me stopping her. I picked up my bow and notched an arrow just so that she'd know I was serious. "I'll leave you here. I'll put out lots of water and food. I'll tie you up so that you'll still be able to eat and drink. I'll leave a well marked trail for them to find you."

"You forgot one thing. You promised. I did too and I kept my promise by throwing you in the pit."

We stared at each other for the quietest, most enjoyable minute that I had had since I had captured her. "OK. For today, you can stay with me, I guess."

"You promised tomorrow too. You have a spare bow. We'll be able to go much faster if you cut off another length of sky-rope and let me go ahead attaching the first rope to the next tree. You go second. When we're at the next tree, you retrieve the sky-rope behind us. I keep shooting a front rope, you keep unfastening a back rope."

"How did you know that I have a spare bow?"

"I searched your pack, silly. How else would I know?"

"So, you're a thief!"

"Hey, I stumbled across a pack in the woods. I rummaged through it looking for some ID so I could tell the owner that I had found it. Then I realized that you were the owner and hadn't lost it."

"Is there anything that you won't do?"

"I won't break a promise. I won't take off my clothes for you. That's pretty much it."

"What about stealing my sky-rope?"

"Oh fine!" She raised her hand in the air. "I solemnly swear that from this moment until the moment that you decide to ditch me, I won't steal even a tiny piece of your sky-rope." She made the crossing signs over her heart.

"Which will be tomorrow." I noticed how she had left herself an opportunity to steal the filament on the last day we were together, but didn't say anything.

"We'll be able to conserve our energy and travel further if you attach the packs to the rope and use your pinky computer to make them move. Then we won't have to carry them."

"You were that close to me?"

"No. I just have this little collapsible scope in my pocket." She fished it out and showed it to me.

"You said that you only had the knife on you."

"I said I only had one weapon on me. The scope isn't a weapon."

I picked up my pack and headed out in the direction of my second pack.

"Where are you going?"

"To get my second pack."

"You didn't pick a very safe hiding place and I have things in my pack that I can't afford to lose so I moved it. You should probably head that way."

She pointed to a spot that was at least forty-five degrees off the course I had planned. "You lead," I said.

"Now, you're thinking."

#

We made good progress sky-trekking from one tree to another while it was light. Since the sky-ropes were carrying our packs, it was easy work. She set a quick pace and even urged me to think of a way to get the commands into the sky-ropes faster. I turned my back to make the necessary adjustments. "It's going to be close," she said. "The wind is freshening. That's not good."

When it became too dark to see, she pulled out her night goggles. "I'll use these to pick out the next tree. Can you see well enough to load and unload the packs?"

"I could put a little light on my pinky-ring."

"Too risky now. We go completely by feel from now on." Then she was off.

About half an hour later, I found her hanging from her tree with a finger to her mouth. We were using climbing spikes to anchor our feet to the tree while we manipulated the lines and the packs. She motioned me to come closer so I leaned sharply to my left. She leaned to her right and put her hand against my cheek to pull me in tight. She had her cheek on mine while she whispered in my ear. "We're getting close to where they might have advance scouts. The arrows make too much noise when they strike the trees. From here on, we walk. We have about four hours to dawn. I'll take the heaviest pack. You take the other two. If we attach ourselves together with a sky-rope, can you make the night goggles go back and forth between us?"

I whispered back, "Yes."

"I'm used to working with the night goggles, so I'll always be the advance. You let out the sky-rope as I scout ahead. When I'm in position, I'll pull hard on it twice, and then twice again, and you can retrieve the night goggles. Then you use the goggles to catch up to me. Keep the sky-rope fairly taut. If you ever feel just two tugs, that means Freeze in place. I'll give you two plus two tugs for the all-clear signal. You have the much heavier weight, so watch yourself. Take the time you need to do it absolutely silently. We're lucky that the moon's not up yet."

"How many are out there?"

"No way of knowing. They'll be spread out but they'll have mobile communications. If one sees us, a hundred will be chasing us ten-minutes later. I doubt they'll have electronic sensors in place. The troops won't be on high alert this far out. If we do this right, we'll be well past them by dawn."

She was good; I'll give her that. I never heard a sound from her the rest of the night. I didn't make a sound either. We didn't try to conceal our trail – that wasn't possible. But she did avoid the established deer trails, and since it hadn't rained for weeks, we weren't likely to leave any obvious footprints. About every half hour, she'd make drinking motions with her hand and we'd rest together. Silent passage requires a lot of focus and energy and I was beginning to droop. At one point, she pulled a chunk of something out of a pocket and slipped it to me. Again, she leaned her cheek against mine to whisper. "High energy pick-me-up. Don't chew. Just let it dissolve in your mouth." Then she was gone again. My energy came back after that.

I never did see or hear anyone. At one point, she gave me the freeze signal and made a sharp detour. I guess a soldier was in our path, but I don't know that for sure.

We went back to sky-trekking after dawn. She kept us on a steady compass bearing, but I never saw her with a compass. It must have been around 10 a.m., when I arrived at her tree and she was already heading to the ground. "Privacy break," she said. I got back to the tree to find her already bundled on the ground. "I'll wake you in three hours. We should be safe for now. All of their attention will be on the forest fire."

"What forest fire?" I asked.

"Later," she said.

Chapter 7

The narrator

While Zurt and Izzy are sleeping, now is a good time to introduce myself. I'm the author/narrator of this Wilizy series of books and a self-confessed fan of the Wilizy Legend. When I found myself with unprecedented access to Will and Izzy's journals, I decided to make their contents public by writing a series of historical biographies on the two of them.

Everyone is familiar with how the Wilizy legend ends. My role, as I see it anyway, is to take you from the very beginning when Zurt and Izzy meet and then fill in the story of their time together with tidbits of information about the pair.

Let's start with some dates. Zurt, as we are referring to him right now, was born on June 30, 2066. Along with other members of his graduating class, he turned fifteen the day before our story begins, July 1, 2081. Izzy was also born in 2066. Izzy never talked about her birthdays, but there's good evidence to suggest that she was born on April 27, 2066. I may be out a day or two. There's no question that she was older than Zurt.

Now for some background on the *It's Only Fair Society* that was the government of Alberta at the time. The IOF came into existence during the tumultuous years after the world ran out of oil and gas. What follows is an excerpt from an IOF history bot that was used in the 2070s to remind students how lucky they were to be in the IOF. I must emphasize that the words that follow were written by the IOF and not by me.

#

Everybody knew that before Alberta citizens gratefully accepted the IOF, life in what could be called The *Unfair Society* had been full of injustice. Citizens had complained that it wasn't fair that people who happened to be abnormally tall, or strong, or fast should become athletic heroes. It wasn't fair that people who happened to have certain body types should be considered glamorous, or handsome, or sexy. It wasn't fair that people who had the right skin colour were favoured. Success and happiness in the Unfair Society depended on being lucky enough to have parents with the right genes. *It's not fair*, citizens had screamed, but nobody had listened.

Of course, it wasn't fair. So, our It's Only Fair society undid those wrongs by putting our geneticists in charge of making the babies. Today, with computers in control of the fertilization process, each child receives his genes in an entirely fair manner – namely through random assignment of one of twenty-six different gene profiles. Each child is also assigned a computer generated four or five-letter name that starts with the letter of their gene profile – A all the way to Z. These gene profiles are public knowledge. Knowing a citizen's first name automatically tells you everything you need to know about that person's abilities and personality.

Fairness dictates that all IOF children are tilted out of their gestation incubators on the same day each year – June 30. The first to emerge on the conveyor belt are the As, and then the rest of the alphabet arrives in order from B through to Z. Having the identical birthday with every other child in the birth class means that nobody has the unfair advantage of being older than any other.

With genetic controls ensuring that everyone has a fair share of the good genes, at a distance, Alberta's citizens appear the same. Every IOF citizen has basically the same height, the same weight, the same beige skin, the same dark brown hair, the same body type, and the same mental ability as every other citizen.

With the geneticists' computers making the babies, the IOF was able to undo the unfairness of one gender being forced to endure unhealthy birthing pains. Now, female bodies are adjusted before birth so that they will no longer be exposed to that risk. The female body has now evolved to become almost identical to that of the male, at least in outward appearance. Naturally, women dress differently than men and that is now the main way of differentiating the genders from a distance. Of course, as with any society, each gender has its own modesty zones and uses clothing to keep them out of public view. In this bot, we will not discuss this topic any further since it could lead children such as you to experience some unhealthy thoughts.

With babies created truly equal, the IOF has dedicated itself to bringing up children more fairly. Without formal parenting instruction in the Unfair Society, most couples did not know how to raise children. Naturally, that led to a tremendous number of mistakes and the Unfair Society was full of crime because children hadn't been taught the difference between right and wrong. Today, child care professionals are in charge of raising every IOF citizen from birth to their fifteenth birthday. Children all receive the same healthy nutrition, the same safe environment, the same fair but firm discipline via an impartial brain-band, and an effective education that prepares them for life in a fair and just society.

Even though most Albertans are no longer involved in creating or rearing children, the IOF recognizes the value of two good role models and so has established a system of volunteer parenting. Only citizens who are willing to dedicate the time and effort necessary to write a monthly letter to their assigned child, visit on holidays, and send a birthday gift make it through the screening process.

It's only fair that all Albertans should all be the same. Every other organism on the planet follows that rule. One male bluebird looks pretty much like any other male bluebird. But, before the IOF, every human had been markedly different from every other human on the world. Was it a coincidence that only the human species killed and abused its own members? Clearly, it was not. So now, in the second

half of the 21st century, thanks to the IOF, all Albertans are the same and we live in peace and harmony. Life is good for everyone, not just for a privileged few.

(End of excerpt from the IOF document.)

#

Now, as your narrator, allow me to add some explanation to references that were made about the IOF that you read in the opening chapters.

As in any society, the IOF had critics. Members of the dissident movement who resisted the tumultuous changes when the IOF was formed still lived in the woods of Alberta in 2081. Other citizens from time to time did take off their brain-bands. Zurt correctly identified the process for finding them. The consequences they faced were described somewhat kindly. Rick and his colleagues were not *disappearance agents*; they were *executioners*. The IOF had carefully calculated how many citizens their agricultural economy could support. If some citizens rebelled, the IOF's only concern was that they wouldn't be left alive to infect other citizens. If a large number of citizens were disappeared in a year, the IOF would just increase the number of babies that they'd make the next year.

Life on Alberta's farms was harsh. Some farms had horses or oxen, but many did not have such luxuries. Mechanized farm equipment did not exist. That's why most school graduates were assigned to work in farms where they would serve as replacements for the machines that used to run on oil and gas. With a harsh life, and no health care to speak of, many Albertans died comparatively young. The IOF simply increased the number of embryos that would be fertilized if numbers dropped too far.

The head of the IOF was a man named Zzyk and it's possible that his body was the model on which all citizens were created. It's also possible that Zzyk had been rendered impotent as a child since under his direction, the IOF strongly discouraged citizens from having sex. As children, they received brain zaps if they tried to research the topic or even discuss it with classmates. For adults, their brain-bands treated any physical behaviour where one became breathless and/or excited to be a health issue and the citizen received calming chemicals immediately. Graduation was the one time in an Albertan's life where sex was permitted, or even remotely possible.

It's unclear why Zzyk created the modesty zones. It wasn't done as a form of whimsical humour. By all accounts, Zzyk had no sense of humour whatsoever. It's possible that he conditioned all of Alberta's citizens to wear silly little pieces of cloth, and to avoid looking at ankles or ears, simply because he could. Modesty zones were the proof of his absolute power over every aspect of Albertans' lives. He could make them do whatever he wanted them to do, no matter how ludicrous it was.

Chapter 8

I felt a light touch on my left shoulder and woke up immediately. The DPS agent was kneeling beside me, a food bar in the hand that woke me and a canvas canteen in the other. I had never heard a sound when she approached me and I'm a light sleeper.

"Just in case this ever has to happen," she said. "If you're sleeping and I have to wake you quietly, I will put my hand over your mouth to be sure you don't make a noise. I won't be trying to suffocate you. If I'm going to kill you, I'll do it so that you won't wake up."

"Thank you. I'll do the same."

She kind of smiled at that, but I was serious. I didn't want her looking at me if I had to kill her. "You're safe from me for today and tomorrow," I said.

"Right back at you, Z-man."

I munched for a while. She did too.

"How do you know there's a forest fire?"

"We've used that tactic before. One time, we had some dissidents trapped in a forest – much smaller than this. They were heavily armed. It was a lot easier to set fires around the whole perimeter and wait for them to run out."

"How many did you catch?"

"None. Mass suicide. Since then, dissidents don't congregate in large groups any more. Much harder to capture them that way."

She seemed angry at that. "I didn't think that dissidents had weapons."

"They have them. Their current philosophy is to hide and do nothing."

"Why are you angry?"

"What makes you think I'm angry?"

"You just seemed angry, that's all."

"Well, I'm not. So drop it!"

I was glad she wasn't angry. Being around her when she was un-angry was hard enough.

"Wind's shifting," she said.

"Is that important to us?" I asked.

"It's good for you. The fire the troops set last night will burn back on itself. If Gary believes that you are still inside the perimeter, he'll bring in the whole army now and almost all of the attention will be on the Calgary forest. The fire will explain all the copters buzzing around. He may have to start fires from the other side of the perimeter if the wind doesn't shift back. That would be hard to explain so I expect he's relocated every civilian out of the area."

"He's going to burn the whole forest?"

"Just a bunch of trees to us."

I was half way through my bar. She had already finished hers and was slumped on the ground. She looked as tired as I felt.

"I didn't think the IOF had an army," I said.

"Scattered around in small units in DPS offices in every city. That makes it tough to mobilize them quickly, which is what saved your bacon. In a few days, there won't be a single unit left anywhere in the province except in the woods around Calgary. Dissidents would have a field day if they knew."

"Do they?"

"How would I know?"

I chewed some more. “How did you get to be in such great shape? I was dying when you were still going strong.”

“I have a treadmill in my office next to my torture chamber. I use it when I’m not busy turning my thumbscrews. Time to go, question man.” She started to fasten the pockets on her pack.

“One more.”

She stood up, hefted her pack to one shoulder, and looked at me. “We’re not safe yet.”

“What was in the stuff you gave me to eat?”

“Natural food – no drugs. But, it had some things to stimulate your adrenal glands. You looked like you needed it.”

“Thank you. I did.”

“You’ll have to rest tomorrow. I need rest too.” She turned away and began walking.

I got up and started lifting the two packs onto my shoulders.

“I have a question for you, Z-man. Do you like your name?” The DPS agent threw the words back over her shoulder as she trudged away.

I had to think about that, but in truth, I guess I didn’t really have to think. Her question just brought out a feeling that had been there for a long time. “No, I don’t. But, what can I do? It’s only fair that everyone is given a name at random.”

“Is it fair that just about everyone gets stuck with a name that they probably don’t like?”

“You don’t like Izzy?”

“That’s not really my name. I like my real name, but that’s because I chose it.”

“How did you get to choose your name? What is your real name?”

She dropped her pack at the base of a tree and unlimbered her bow. “Questions. Questions. But, no answers. I’ll trade you. I don’t like your name and I’m not ever going to use it. I can’t keep calling you Z-man. So, pick another name that I can call you as long as we’re together. No rules. Any number of letters you want. You can choose any letter for its start except Z. You select a new name and I’ll answer your two questions. Oh, and the name *finger-licking-good* is already taken.”

I snorted and felt my face break into a grin. In the past that would have been rewarded with a brain zap. *Be serious! You’re supposed to be studying.* “You saw me the first time I ate chocolate without my brain-band?” I had caught up to her and dropped my packs besides hers.

She smiled back. “Yeah. That was cool.”

She slapped me on the back and began to climb the tree to attach the packs.

“Cool, man, cool!” she purred out the 50s slang term. “I did exactly the same thing the first time I ate chocolate too.”

#

Near the end of the day, we were back to carrying the packs because we had no trees to shoot. Our pace had slowed considerably, not only because it was much more tiring to carry three packs, but also because we were going through much rougher terrain. We were making our way down a steep canyon wall and the poor footing meant we had to go carefully. When I saw her glancing up at the sky every

time it was her turn to anchor us, I thought she was just worried about losing the light. Turns out it wasn't that.

We reached the canyon floor and she set a brisk pace. "We need a cave, Z-man and we need it before dark," she said.

"I have cold weather gear," I replied but I didn't see why we would need it. Yes, we were at a moderate altitude, but the nights weren't going to get anywhere near freezing.

"It's not the weather," she said. "We have to hide."

"There were lots of trees before we started coming down the canyon. No plane's camera would be able to see us in a dense forest."

"This time they'll be collecting heat signatures. We can't be in the open when they pass over."

I was going to ask her how she knew they'd do that, but realized that a DPS agent would know their standard search procedures for fleeing dissidents. I still couldn't understand why they would go to all this trouble for a single fugitive like me but didn't get a chance to ask her that question either. "Follow the creek" she said to me and then started running ahead of me, heavy pack and all.

I'd see her every now and then when we hit a long straight section. She was casting from one side of the canyon floor to the other – climbing a vantage point and peering up the opposite canyon wall, and then running through the creek to the other side, finding another vantage point, and searching the opposite side again.

It got dark, and what with the steep walls, there was no moonlight. I put a dim glow on my pinky-computer and did the best I could. By this time, I was close to exhaustion from wrestling with the two packs. I figured she had to be in the same condition since she was running and climbing with hers.

I heard her running footsteps and hard breathing well before I saw her. She wasn't using a light, but I hadn't expected her to need one because of the night goggles. "Coming in, Z-man," she warned and then she was beside me. She panted out an instruction, "Open your mouth," and I felt her fingers drop a dry cube into my mouth. "I didn't think it would take this long, otherwise I would have left one of these with you," she said in an apologetic voice. She made me drop both packs, lifted both to gauge their weight, and then helped me get into the lighter one. "Are you OK for water?" she asked and I nodded. "As quickly as you can," and she linked her arm in mine and we started shuffling forward as best as I could. I'm not ashamed to admit that she had to prop me up until my energy booster kicked in.

We recovered her backpack a couple of clicks up the canyon. The climb up to the cave she had spotted was a killer but both of us were able to make it with one pack each. "I saw another cave earlier, but we'd have never made the climb," she said. "This one has a very narrow entrance – I'm hoping that it opens up further back. Otherwise it's going to be a tight fit."

She asked me to make the cave habitable while she went back down for the third pack. "I'm not absolutely sure that the planes are going to only do a night run. If they make a visual sweep in the daylight too, we can't afford to have a pack sitting out in the open and we wouldn't know when it was safe to retrieve it." With that, she disappeared.

When she still hadn't returned by *my I'm definitely not going to wait any longer than this* deadline, I started back down the trail – pinky light at max. We met shortly afterwards, she handed me the pack, and followed me up. I could tell that she was in pain. “Slipped,” she said unnecessarily.

I had already cleared out the loose rubble from the cave and had deployed all the soft, padding type of gear that I had in my two packs onto the cave floor. I unrolled my sleeping bag and had her to lie down on it while I rummaged through my pack for medical supplies. Her left pant leg was dirty and blotchy with blood. I could see from the stains that she had been hurt just below the knee. She hadn't been limping terribly badly so there probably was no structural damage; but I figured she had some deep scratches and abrasions and I had the disinfectant bottle opened when she held out her hand.

“I'll do it.”

“I'm certified,” I replied.

“So, am I. I'll do it,” she repeated.

I shrugged. If that was the way she wanted to be, I didn't care. I handed over the bottle and sterile swab. Then, she said something that didn't make any sense at all. Remember, this was the girl who yesterday had pulled up her pant legs without any hesitation whatsoever and had deliberately flaunted her ankles in my face.

“Turn around,” she said.

I hesitated.

“Z-man,” she said with some heat. “Turn around. I don't want you looking at me.”

#

When I was facing the wall, she max'ed out the light on her pinky-ring. I heard her pull a pant leg up, I heard her douse the swab, I even heard the slight intakes of breath when she touched something sensitive. Then, she rummaged in her pack. I heard the rip of a package and some cutting sounds on what I assumed was a sterile pad. There were other undistinguishable sounds – presumably, she was applying medication to the pads. That was followed by more cuts with the scissors – probably adhesive tape. I heard the tape being applied. I was getting ready to turn around but waited for her to tell me it was OK. She didn't.

I heard more rummaging sounds. Something was opened. Then, no sounds – just the rustle of her body moving from time to time. I did get a faint scent of something, but couldn't place it. I heard the pant leg coming down again, the sound of a zipper on her pack being closed, and then her voice. “You can turn around now, Z-man. Thank you for not looking.”

I turned around to find her on her knees on my sleeping bag. “If you move to the front of the cave, I'll get my own sleeping bag out.” I did, and she did. She got herself comfortable on her bag – half leaning on her side against a cave wall, her legs curled up underneath her, the injured left leg on top. I crawled on hands and knees onto my own bag and made myself comfortable in a sitting position against the cave wall and with both of my legs straight out in front of me.

I wanted to ask her why she had acted so strangely about her scrapes, but didn't want to provoke an argument, not after all she had done to get me hidden.

The cave itself wasn't much. It was high enough that we could move around on our hands and knees, but we had no room to stand. The cave was in the shape of a rough rectangle, barely wide enough for two sleeping bags. We were against the back wall, our packs beside us. There may have been a meter or two of cave floor between the ends of our sleeping bags and the opening. In such confined conditions, our body heat would make the sleeping bags unnecessary.

She must have realized that at about the same time, but this meant something more to her than it did to me. She crawled to the lip of the cave, pulling her bag behind her, and began hanging it over the opening. Once again, the adhesive tape was in use, but this time I got to see the operation. "Have to keep the heat in," she explained. "We wouldn't have to do this if the cave were deeper."

"Air supply?" I asked.

"Shouldn't have to wait much longer," she replied cryptically.

She turned her pinky-ring light off and I did the same. We sat in the darkness. I fought off the urge to close my eyes, wondering if there was a real threat or not. I had never seen the soldier in our path. Had he been real? Would airplanes really be collecting heat signatures or was this just a trick to convince me trust her?

My question was answered before I succumbed to exhaustion. A very distinct droning sound passed close by our position. In the silence of the cave, it was very noticeable. I heard her move out of her sitting position and crawl to the front of the cave. Her hand grazed my knee as she passed by. I felt a cool breeze when she pulled the door down. Then, she crawled back to her place, arranged her bag, and I heard her slide down into a prone position on top of it before saying, "It's still not safe to go outside, but we don't have to bake in the cave any longer," she said. "During the night, a fleet of copters will investigate every heat signature they recorded that was big enough for a human. If they find a reasonable explanation for each signature, they'll conclude this area is clean. However, we can't afford to take the chance that some deer went for a midnight stroll and was photographed. If so, they'll be back in force tomorrow for visual checks. We're stuck here for at least a day."

I heard her drift into sleep and I guess I did too. I never did hear any copter sounds, but I did believe that they were out there checking heat signatures. I also believed that a soldier had been in our path last night. What I couldn't understand was why a DPS agent was helping me to hide.

#

I awoke once in the night. At first, I thought there had been a sound, but the cave was silent except for her soft breathing. It was then that I realized that we were touching. She may have been the one to change position; perhaps I did. Both of us were facing towards the walls, but I could feel the touch of one of her feet against mine. I pulled myself away slowly and hunched further towards my wall. I listened for as long as I could – trying to detect anything in her breathing that would indicate she was faking sleep. Were all DPS agents trained to use the sex approach? I tried to forget the feel of her ankle against my leg and was eventually successful.

Chapter 9

The whop-whop noises of a large copter woke me and I was getting up to take a peek when she put a hand out to stop me. “Sometimes, they rotate in place while the camera takes a panoramic shot. Best not to take a chance.”

Her voice didn’t sound sleepy, so I assumed that she had been awake.

“I was just wondering what kind of copter it was.”

“Twelve passenger capacity plus pilot and copilot. It’s armed, but they’ll conceal the weapons on this expedition. Top speed about 500 kph when loaded. They can be on you before you realize they’re coming.”

No solar engine could achieve that speed, I thought. I didn’t disbelieve what she had said as I had heard the reverberating beats of the rotor. However, the world was out of oil and that was the only energy source I knew of that could generate 500 kph on such a beast.

We listened as the copter whopped out of hearing. “Now’s the safest time to be out of the cave,” she said. “The search area is too broad to assign more than one copter to a sector. We know where it’s going to be for the next five minutes. Are you in a big rush to get out of this cave?”

I knew what she was asking and I had been wondering last night what we were going to do about being stuck in a cave all night and day. “I’m OK for now,” I said.

“I’ll reconnoiter to the left. When I get back, you can check out what the terrain is like to the right.” Neither of us was going to say what we were really doing. “You won’t be waiting for me with a notched arrow?” she asked at the cave entrance.

It was a good thing that she asked. I had completely forgotten to get her promise not to escape. I crossed my heart; she did the same and disappeared.

#

When I returned to the cave, she was sitting on her rolled up bag, munching on a food bar, and nodding her head up and down. “We’re going to be stuck here for the day,” she said. “I have some music bots from the 1950s and 60s if you want one.”

That explained how she knew that making a cross over her heart was a symbol for telling the truth. She must have learned about it in her *How to Be Rebellious* course. Obviously, given her outrageous behaviours, she had earned a B- in the course.

Since both of us had been assigned the same era to study, that meant that we were in the same graduating year. So, now I knew that she was fifteen-years old and not an adult disguised as a teenager. The touch of her ankle on my leg last night was probably an accident.

The *How to be rebellious* course was all part of the IOF’s efforts to give us a healthy childhood. As my teacher explained – teenagers have always rebelled against the preceding adult generation. Before the IOF, teenagers would adopt their own unique styles of dress, hair, music, and slang. Some minority of the population generally inspired these changes but, in time, the entire generation adopted them. Of course, this meant that the next generation had to demonstrate its rebellious nature differently. In today’s IOF however, every generation acted

pretty much the same as the generation before it, and the one before that, and the one before that. Music hadn't changed much in the 5 decades of the IOF, hair styles were the same, dress was the same, and so on.

So, to make sure that each generation could release its rebellious feelings, the IOF gave us classes on how to rebel. My graduating class was assigned the 1950s and 60s years and we were ordered to adopt the lingo and music of that period. Anyone not rebelling in the proper manner would be *reprimanded* – code for a force 3 brain zap. I didn't use the full set of vocabulary they gave us to memorize, but I did like to pepper my conversation with the word *cool!*, which I thought was cooler than neat or sweet or any of the other expressions from other decades. I remembered that she had used the word as well. The school gave us a bot full of music from the 50s to study but I rarely listened to it. I guess I wasn't too rebellious.

I politely turned down her offer; I had other things to study.

#

Zurt the First had left me another video file. I opened it up to find him sitting on the same stump in the same woods.

"Zurt, I've been trying to answer two questions, but I've reached a dead end. I'm hoping that you'll be able to answer them. Don't bother searching for answers on the Internet or in any of the course materials. The answers aren't there. Perhaps, you'll have learned something since I took off your brain-band that will help you."

"By now, you'll have remembered the history of the IOF and you'll realize how it was so different from the old, Unfair Society. IOF history books paint a picture of a peaceful transition from one society to the next. But, the Unfair Society was full of violent, selfish people. They prided themselves on having the right to do whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, to anyone they wanted to – no matter what injury or suffering that behaviour caused. However, today's IOF citizens are expected to believe that everyone in the Unfair Society willingly agreed to wear a brain-band and let the IOF be in charge of making babies. That just isn't logical. Those kinds of people wouldn't have done that willingly. But, everything I've read claims that it happened that way. Here's my first question for you to reflect on: Are we being told the truth about the peaceful birth of the IOF?"

"Next topic: Everyone knows that there are still a few dissidents who oppose the IOF. We have been told that these are violent sociopaths who refuse to belong to a peaceful, prosperous society. The IOF protects us from these dangerous people and that is why, from time to time, we have to obey orders that may not make sense at the time. I tried to learn more about these dissidents. I found nothing, absolutely nothing on them. Here's my second question to you: Why isn't there any information available on the dissidents?"

"These are very important questions, Zurt. I've been thinking about the dissidents and the IOF for a long time. The more dead ends I encountered, the more I knew I had to find the truth. This is why I took your brain-band off. You see, I have a memory of something happening to me a long time ago. If that memory is real, I'll know that the IOF has hidden the truth of how the IOF was created. If they've hidden one truth, what else have they hidden? Until you can

answer my two questions to your satisfaction, you must not accept the IOF job offer."

"I'm going to give you a hint about my memory now. If you remember it too, that will mean that it really did happen to us. Are you ready?"

I nodded before realizing that it wasn't necessary.

"Babies should be born, not manufactured."

[End of Zurt the First's video.]

#

I remembered a picture. A picture of a woman lying on her side on some black pavement, her bright green coat open around her. A white dress was under the coat. I was immediately struck by a body type that I had never seen before. She was taller and more slender than today's IOF women. But even more noticeable – she had long locks of red hair framing a white face.

The woman's face was frozen in pain. She had raised her head and shoulders off the pavement and was reaching out to someone with her right hand. The hand behind her body was keeping a piece of wood upright. A placard was attached to the top of the post. It read *Babies should be born, not manufactured!*

#

I didn't have to think about Zurt the First's questions – taking my brain-band off had indeed led me to the answers he wanted. No information could be found about the dissidents because DPS agents like Abby captured them soon after they took off their brain-bands. Then, problem-fixers like Rick made the problem disappear. If the fleeing dissident had confided in anyone else, I expect those people disappeared as well.

As to whether or not we were being told the truth about the peaceful birth of the IOF, the answer was crystal clear. If the IOF made dissidents disappear now when only a few were left and all were in hiding, I had no doubt that it would have used violence five decades ago too. The transition between societies could not have been peaceful – the proof was in the picture of that red-haired lady lying in pain on the pavement.

If the IOF had created a completely false description of its birth, I was sure that it had lied about other things as well. Again, I had proof immediately at hand. The DPS agent sitting next to me and bobbing her head to music was an expert liar. I had seen her in action.

#

I was munching a food bar for lunch – the DPS agent was doing the same next to me. She had taken the bot out of her scalp plug and was just staring out the cave entrance. It seemed like a good time to try to get some information from her. I thought I'd start with an easy question – one that I already knew the answer to. "How old are you?" I asked.

"How old do you think I am," she replied in a non-answer.

"Fifteen."

She continued to chew.

"Am I right?"

“Why do you want to know?”

“Just curious.”

“How very much like a Z,” she muttered to herself, but I know that she intended me to hear.

“So are you fifteen or not?”

“Why don’t you cut off my leg and count the rings?”

“That only works with trees.”

“You don’t say.”

Since she hadn’t disputed my estimate, and since she previously had shown herself to be argumentative in the extreme, and she hadn’t been argumentative when I suggested she was fifteen, I concluded that I was safe in assuming that her correct age was fifteen. I could proceed with my next line of inquiry. “How long have you been a DPS agent?”

“Long enough to learn how to catch you.”

Obviously, I needed to phrase the question more specifically. “For how many years have you been a DPS agent?”

“For enough years to learn how to catch you.”

I’d have to think of another approach. It took a bit of time before I had devised a question that I thought would pin her down. “Have you worked for the DPS for one year or more?” I asked. “Please answer Yes or No.”

“Yes or no,” she answered.

She didn’t even have to think. The evasion had been automatic. I’d try again. “Please answer Yes *or*..... No.”

“I did.”

“No, you didn’t. You answered Yes or no when I wanted you to answer EITHER Yes..... OR No.”

“You should have said that.”

“I have now.”

I waited. She munched. I had to ask her again. “Have you worked for the DPS for one year or more? Please answer **either** Yes..... OR No.”

“**Either** Yes ORNo.”

“Why are you being so difficult?”

“I’m answering your questions. It’s not my fault if you don’t know how to interrogate a prisoner.”

“I’m not interrogating you.”

“Sure feels that way.”

It was like we were back by the rock cliff. Another impasse. She could keep stringing this out until I gave up. But, this question was something she didn’t want to answer and so that was telling me something. I didn’t know what that meant yet. I spent some time thinking up a different approach. She was nodding to music again when I turned back to face her. I had to touch her on the shoulder to get her attention. She took the bot out of her scalp plug and looked at me.

“What?”

“I’m having difficulty understanding how you could be an experienced DPS agent and yet be barely out of high school. High school students aren’t given their jobs until they graduate. Could you please explain how you were able to gain DPS work experience before you were eligible to have the job?”

"I'll give you two explanations. You determine which one is true. OK?"

"OK."

"Answer #1: As a sophomore in high school, I developed an addiction to brain-band chemicals. The DPS found out about my secret shame and forced me to work undercover for them. Because I'm so young, nobody suspects that I'm an agent. They sneak me just enough chemicals to keep me cooperative. You got that?"

I nodded.

"Answer #2: I worked part-time for the DPS during harvesting. Again, they like me because I'm too young to be suspected. Got that one too?"

I nodded.

"Knock yourself out."

#

Several hours later, I felt a touch on my arm and looked up. She had a bot in her hand and an inquiring look on her face. "Did you figure it out yet?"

In truth, I hadn't. If I had had solid information on how a brain-band junkie acted, I could have created a behaviour profile and checked her behaviour against it. In the absence of that information, I had to think of everything I had seen her do and then try to determine how many of those behaviours could be put down to being chemically induced. All of them could have been. Especially the mouth!

Her second answer was equally plausible. In the fall, every able-bodied IOF citizen is assigned to a farm to help with the harvest. High school students are included in this labour pool. This was one of the reasons I didn't want to have a farm job – I had found harvesting wheat with a scythe to be extremely boring as well as tiring. I had heard of a few cases where students were assigned to work in offices as replacements for the adults who had been sent to the fields. It was theoretically possible that she was one of them. They might have thought her too scrawny to be of much use on a farm.

I felt her touch me again. "And the answer is..."

I had to explain that I didn't have an answer yet. When she asked why, I felt it only fair to tell her.

"Too scrawny to be of much use?" she asked. She got up on her knees and pushed me sideways. "Was that a scrawny push?"

I levered myself back upright only to find myself slammed back down on the cave floor. "How about that one?" she asked as I lay on my side. "Still too scrawny?"

So, that led to a challenge. We did five different physical contests. I lost every one. She just overwhelmed me. And each time she won, she asked, "Scrawny enough for you?" and gave me a two-handed shove in the chest. I was expecting it by the third time. Didn't make much difference on what happened to me afterwards though.

I lay on my back, stretching out a sore muscle after the last defeat, and watched her stuffing things into her pack. Then, she was crawling to the entrance and I was frantically jamming things into my first pack, so I asked, "I thought it was too dangerous to leave before night?"

"Rick can have you for all I care!"

“Why are you so mad?” I asked. “I didn’t mean to insult you by calling you scrawny.”

“I’m not mad because you called me scrawny.” Then she was gone.

I crammed everything left on the cave floor into my packs and scrambled out. She was already halfway down to the canyon floor.

“Why are you mad,” I yelled after her.

She turned to face me and screamed back, “Because you actually thought I could be a brain-band junkie!” Then, she turned and began to run.

“But it was theoretically possible,” I yelled after her but I don’t think she heard me.

Chapter 10

Humping two heavy bags, I couldn’t run fast enough to close the distance. It wasn’t until she took a rest break that I caught up. At least she let me catch my breath before we continued at a walking pace. When she offered to help carry one of my bags, I figured it would be safe to talk. But I kept my mouth shut anyway.

We were taking breaks every twenty-minutes when she pointed to the east canyon wall and spoke to me. “That’s the only path out of this canyon that has been remotely possible. We have to get into the woods again – we’re too visible here. It will be a tough climb and we’re already tired.”

“Energy restorative?”

“Potentially dangerous. There’s a theoretical possibility that it could harm us.”

“Theoretical possibility?”

“Yeah, one chance in a trillion, but you never know with theoretical possibilities.”

She was facing away from me when she made that crack. It didn’t have much of a bite to it. I realized that she was giving me an opening and I had my speech all ready. I moved so that I was facing her before speaking. “Look, I’m sorry I made you mad. I was treating it like an intellectual exercise and I should have realized that you couldn’t be a junkie.”

“Not even one chance in a trillion?” she asked with an expressionless face.

“Not even one chance in a *google*,” I said as confidently as I could. A google is a one followed by one hundred zeroes – it was the largest named number that was currently in use. I mean, with those odds, theoretically, anybody could be a brain-band junkie. I certainly wasn’t going to say that though.

“Not even one chance in a *koogle*?”

I had never heard of a koogle before. I doubted very much that the word even existed. She was looking at me, her face still expressionless except for a single arched eyebrow that was daring me to say that there was no such word. I was fishing around for something to say that wouldn’t offend her when I noticed a possible pattern. Google to koogle. “Not even one chance in an *oogle*,” I said.

“What about a *soogle*?”

That meant I got to say *woogle*, which made her lips twitch.

She took a breath and blurted out. "I'm sorry that I said that I didn't care if Rick caught you or not. I didn't mean that. I'm not going to let Rick catch you."

"Thank you." I didn't know what else to say. She was looking at me, and I was looking at her, and we were standing very close to each other, and it was a really awkward moment, so I said the first thing I could think of. "I've heard that the geneticists are close to giving everyone the same shaped eye balls. It will mean that nobody will need to wear contacts any more."

She turned away and began scanning the canyon wall. "Too late for me, I guess."

I was going to ask her what kind of vision problem she had, but didn't get a chance. She said that the canyon should be narrow enough that we could climb a tree on this side, shoot an arrow across the canyon high into another tree, and use the sky-rope to carry us and our bags up the other side. I agreed that it could be done but only if the sky rope wasn't at too steep of an angle to the other side. I offered to make the necessary calculations.

While I was creating a crude transit to measure our projected angle of ascent, I noticed that she was just sitting on a boulder in the stream, sloshing her bare feet back and forth in the water. Then I got busy with the calculations – the maximum weight of passage, co-efficient of friction, expected power output of my ring, and so on – and I lost track of time. When I looked up to give her the answer, she was sitting under the tree that I had planned to use and listening to music.

I first had to determine where to attach the sky rope, so I started up the tree first – using the transit repeatedly to take measures of the angle to the obvious tree target on the other side of the canyon. "This should do it," I announced with some certainty when I was high enough and stuck my knife into the trunk where we should wrap the filament.

"Hang on a sec," she said and clambered past me an additional meter, pulled her own knife out of the opposite side of the tree, and rejoined me. We made it safely to the other side without any further conversation.

#

We stopped hiking well before sunset. She had found a small clearing with a brook nearby. "We'll stay here tonight and tomorrow," she said. "No fire tonight."

I flopped down on the ground. I was beginning to regret I had packed so much. Some of it was winter gear that I didn't need right now. I was safe for now, but was I going to walk around Alberta with two huge packs for the rest of my life?

I felt a food bar fall into my lap. "Just keep saying to yourself... each bar I eat makes the pack lighter," she said.

"You're tired too?"

"Yeah, I'm beat. We need to rest. Tomorrow, we'll cook up some of your dried food. I have some too. We'll have a feast."

#

We were sitting around the fire pit I had built – the one with no fire in it yet. She was talking about her favorite foods but I had nothing to contribute. My school's cafeteria had a very limited, and very predictable, menu. Her school must have had a much better nutrition program, which surprised me a little since I thought

all the IOF schools were identical. She asked me what foods I didn't like and so I told her about the incident with the raw fish. She started to giggle when I told her about trying to keep the food falling off my fork so I wouldn't have to eat it. When I described what happened when we found out it was raw fish, she burst into laughter and was actually hugging herself, she thought it was so funny. Then she got the hiccoughs and couldn't stop.

"You'll have to scare them out of me," she said.

"How?"

"Tell me a scary story."

"I don't know any scary stories."

So, she tried to tell me a story about some dead guy who had a deformed hand and haunted the woods waiting for unsuspecting campers but she was hiccupping so badly that she couldn't get the words out, and that made her laugh even more which made the hiccoughs worse.

"Try holding your breath," I suggested.

Well that didn't work too well because she kept erupting into giggles. It was not an unpleasant sound.

"Scare me, Z-man! You haf to scare me!" She said that last part in some strange dialect. "Tell me what's the scariest thing you can think of."

So, I told her. "Rick."

That seemed to do the trick although I don't know why she would be scared about Rick. They were co-workers after all.

#

The sun had already disappeared behind the hills and the sky had become a mass of purples and pinks. She suggested that we walk to the edge of a bluff, which would give us a better view of the sunset, and so we did. We stood there just looking at the sky. I was going to say something about refractions of light and how that created the colours, but she stopped me just as I opened my mouth.

"Don't explain it, Z-man. Just enjoy it."

So I watched for a while, wondering what I was supposed to enjoy.

When the colours faded away, we walked back to fire pit and flopped down on the ground, leaning up against our separate logs. She disappeared for a bit and came back with our two sleeping bags. "Pillow or blanket – whatever you need," she said. We watched the stars come out and took turns trying to stump each other on names. She had to shift her bag over to my log so that I could see where she was pointing.

We were side-by-side, both in our bags, watching the stars twinkle due to the impurities in the atmosphere that I assumed I wasn't supposed to explain when she surprised me with a question.

"Are you really scared of Rick, Z-man? Or were you just making that up?"

I didn't see any reason not to tell her. "I'm really scared. I think of Rick all the time. But what scares me the most is the interrogation. I don't know how to lie and so I'm going to get the hard interrogation. They'll keep doing whatever they're going to do to me until they find out how I learned the truth. Then, they'll know how to prevent anyone else from finding out what the IOF really is."

She didn't say anything for a while. Then, "I agree that's scary."

I thought for a while too before blurting out. "I don't understand how there can be people like Rick and Abby and Gary in the IOF. I don't understand how they could do their job – hunting and capturing dissidents and making them disappear. I don't even understand how they could get angry at each other at their camp. Why didn't their brain-bands stop that? They all were wearing them."

"Z-man, you've assumed that all the IOF brain-bands have been programmed in the same way."

"Aren't they?"

"If they were, how could people like Abby and Rick exist?"

"But, if brain-bands were programmed differently, kids in school would notice that some kids weren't behaving like the others. I never saw any kids acting differently."

"You've assumed that everyone goes to the same infant-care centers and schools."

"They don't?"

"We agree that Rick is a murderer, right?"

She waited for me to nod before continuing. "If Rick had been raised in your care-center and school, he would have been conditioned to not hurt others. Changing that conditioning afterwards so that he would enjoy murdering people would be nearly impossible. Logically therefore..."

"He was programmed from birth," I conceded, but something still wasn't right. She gave me the time to think it out. "I've known other Rs outside of school and none of them looked or acted remotely like Rick. Same with Abby. The A types can be bossy, but ..."

"Z-man, you have to throw out every assumption you've ever made about the IOF. You can't assume that anything they've told you is true. In this case, you've assumed that they are telling the truth when they say there are only twenty-six gene types."

"A twenty-seventh gene type, with its own form of brain-band programming, and educated apart from everyone else?"

"More than twenty-seven. You're forgetting about me. I'm not one of the twenty-six gene types either."

#

We both slept well past sunrise. I woke first, started a fire, and had a pot of water turning powder into edible food when the smell must have roused her. She peered over the edge of her hammock. "You're actually domesticated, Z-man. I'm impressed."

"I've spent a lot of time in the woods," I said.

"Yeah, you're proficient, I guess."

"Better than you."

"Only with your sky-rope. Worse than me without it."

"You have your night goggles."

"Wanna trade? I'll give you my goggles, you give me a piece of your sky-rope and show me how to work it."

"Are you crazy? I'd never see you again."

"Can't blame a girl for trying."

#

It was an hour after breakfast. We were both lying in our hammocks. I was studying a bot. She was listening to a music bot and singing along with it. It wasn't an unpleasant sound.

"Hey, Z-man, have you thought up a name for yourself yet?"

I was trying to study and she was going to start talking again. "No, I have better things to do."

"Like what? What'cha doing?"

"Reviewing the characteristics of poisonous plants."

"I have an easy way to identify them."

"How?"

"Feed them to you. If you get sick, they're poisonous."

"I thought the DPS wanted me alive."

"Sick is still alive. You're easier to control if you're sick."

I let it drop. No point in rising to her bait.

"Hey Z-man!"

I ignored her.

"Hey, Z-man, you want to do something together? I'm bored."

THAT was abundantly clear.

"Hey, Z-man. I know you're trying to ignore me. You can't. I have this skill of getting underneath people's skins." She paused. "You're supposed to tell me that I'm good at it. Then, I get to say, *Thank you. It's a pleasure to accept this honour. I'd like to thank the members of the academy...* Remember, we've done this before."

I remained silent.

"Hey, Z-man? Are you up for a challenge? I'll bet you that I can beat you at chess. Loser has to clean up after every meal while we're here."

"That's not much of a penalty."

"I plan to burn porridge for lunch. It'll take you an hour. You up for it or not?"

I retreated into my silent *Please go away shell*.

"So, you admit I can beat you at chess?"

"No, I don't admit that. I'm better at chess than you."

"Prove it, Z-man!"

So, of course, I had to. She didn't want to play mental chess. Said it was too much of an advantage for me. So, I told her to pull out a set. She gave me a bot and said there was a game on it. It was a general access bot, so I was able to look at it. You could turn off the computer opponent, but we didn't have a console that allowed the two of us to play against each other. I told her as much and figured that would be end of it. I went back to reviewing poisonous plants.

"You could use your filament to hook our two brains together, I bet. Just so that each of us could see the game console."

She just wouldn't give up. "That's never been done before," I reacted without thinking. It wasn't much of an excuse, especially since in the back of my mind, a schematic was starting to form.

"So, you're saying that you're not smart enough to figure a way?"

I ignored her. Couldn't ignore the schematic though.

“I bet'cha you could. You're probably just chicken about getting beat. Tell you what I'll do, Z-man. I'll spot you a pawn in our first game. You should get some reward for fixing it so we can play a game with just one bot and no console.”

I ignored her some more. She started making these obnoxious sounds, which I suspected were chicken sounds, but since I had never seen or heard a chicken, I didn't really know. It took me the rest of the morning to adapt the filament so that it could connect our brains to a single bot. But, it worked first time. Like I said, *Never been done before* is not much of an excuse.

#

“Fifteen out of twenty games for me, Z-man. You ready to give up?”

“No, but I'll admit you're better at speed chess than I am right now.”

“You're catching on real fast.”

I had won three out of the last five, so she was right. “I've never played it this way before.”

“Yeah, I figured. I kinda suckered you into that bet. I knew you weren't good at thinking fast. I'll give you a chance to wipe out your debt after supper. Which you are going to make and then clean up afterwards, right? I made lunch.”

“Yeah. What are we going to do tonight?”

“It's a surprise. My brain is tired right now. You wanna listen to some music?”

“I don't have a music bot.”

“You could listen to mine. Your brain connection thingy should still work right? We could listen to the same music. Maybe even sing along. You CAN sing, right Z-man?”

“I don't know. I've never sung before.”

“But you've listened to people singing before, right? On your bots?”

“Sure, but I always got brain-zapped if I started to sing, so I stopped. I wasn't supposed to waste good study time on frivolous activities.”

“I have some 1960's music here. You could give it a try. I won't brain-zap you. I may smother you if you're way off key, but only if you really mangle it. I go off-key too on the very high notes. Have you ever heard of Sonny and Cher?”

Since we had been sitting on the ground for hours playing chess, we decided to rest our butts by lying in our hammocks. Izzy brought hers into the same tree as mine. She was close enough to kick my hammock whenever I muffed a song. Fortunately, I had made the cable long enough so I didn't have to keep repairing the connection.

#

I was washing the supper dishes while Izzy lay in her hammock. She was using her collapsible scope to supervise my work. I even had to hold each dish high in the air and turn it so that she could see both sides. One time, I left a big gob on one side, but she didn't say anything. I figured that she was just pretending to be obnoxious.

“You mentioned something about giving me a chance to redeem myself?”

Izzy grabbed something and tumbled out of her hammock in a free fall descent. “For times when you have to make a quick exit,” she explained when her toes bounced lightly off the ground.

I watched as a handle recoiled. "How much cable?" I asked.

"I only have fifteen-meters on this hammock. It adds too much weight otherwise. You could probably do something similar but even better with your filament, couldn't you Z-man?"

I started to think about that – *the whole hammock could be...* I come back to the real world when Izzy started to tap on my head with the clean pot. "Earth to Z-man, Earth to Z-man."

"Uh, sorry."

"Connect us back together. We'll play real chess."

"What does Earth to Z-man mean?" I asked as I was fiddling with the filament connector. She wanted to lie in the hammocks again. Then, we could just go to sleep after we had played our game. I didn't say that it would still be too early for sleep.

"When the Unfair Society wanted to talk to their astronauts, they'd have someone say something like *Houston to Armstrong* and that indicated that the astronaut, in this case, Armstrong, should answer the person who was calling from Houston."

I guess I snorted out loud because she looked annoyed for a second. Well, it was an obvious attempt to distract me with a ridiculous idea! I ignored her and concentrated on the game. It lasted over four hours. I won eventually, but it was the hardest game I had ever played.

"Good game, Champ" she said, took the cable out of her head, and rolled over. "Your debt is wiped out."

She was asleep in minutes. It took me a lot longer.

#

A strange dream woke and I couldn't get back to sleep. So, I just lay in my hammock thinking about the dream. I must have been about three years old. Perhaps, four years. It was my birthday and my volunteer-father had brought me a jigsaw puzzle as my gift. It was the first puzzle that I had tried with over two hundred pieces so I was concentrating on it real hard. I remember thinking that it was very difficult. It was a seascape with a lot of dark blue waves at the bottom. The top was the light-blue sky. A gray whale was jumping out of the ocean and I had completed that part first.

I managed to finish the ocean next – there were pieces of seaweed, ducks, and some foam from the waves to help. The last part – the sky – was very hard. Probably about 80 pieces. All exactly the same colour. I had figured out that I would have to use the shape of each piece as the clue. I'm sure an adult could have done it quickly, but it took me a long time. I had one piece left, and I was looking at my volunteer-father feeling pretty proud of myself as I put it in. It didn't fit!

Turning the piece around didn't help. I stood up and tried jamming it in with both thumbs. The piece just sat there, half in and half out. I resorted to pounding it with my palm – it had to fit! My caretaker started to approach me – he had my brain-band activator in his hand. I knew what that meant.

My father held up his hand and the caretaker stopped. "Let him have this emotion," he said and the activator disappeared into a pocket.

I remembered crying for a while.

My father picked up the mangled jigsaw piece and straightened it out. “Zurt, do you think that this puzzle can be solved?”

I looked up, wiped my tears away with the back of my hand, and nodded. He wouldn’t have given me a broken puzzle for a birthday gift.

“Then, since the last piece doesn’t fit, that must mean that you’ve made a mistake somewhere. Look for a piece that doesn’t quite fit.”

I stared and stared. It had to be in the sky so I only had to look at the top half of the puzzle. I put my face up real close and went row by row until I found one piece that had a little empty space where there shouldn’t have been any space. I ended up re-doing about thirty-pieces and when I put the last piece down on the puzzle, it fit perfectly. I looked up at him and he nodded at me. I felt really happy and I saw the caregiver reaching into his pocket. My father held up his hand again and I was allowed to enjoy the moment.

In the dream that woke me up, I had been holding a mangled piece of a jigsaw puzzle. The piece had the words Cool, man, cool printed on it.

Chapter 11

Izzy recommended that we put more distance between us and Calgary, so we were moving north and making steady time. She didn’t think that we needed to hide our trail, so we were walking comfortably through some lightly forested mountains. Izzy was able to hit targets a good 150 meters ahead of us, so we attached a very long strip of filament to an arrow that she stuck into a tree at chest level, and we used the line for carrying our packs. I set the velocity so that we were able to walk comfortably beside them. Right now, we were brain-connected. She was humming to some music of the Beatles. I was mostly ignoring the music in my mind and was trying to think.

Izzy was a really confusing person. She was the best chess opponent I had ever faced, but she was very undisciplined in her behaviour. I couldn’t understand how you could be both smart and undisciplined. I thought I should learn more about the person who was trying to deliver me to the DPS which, by the way, was not going to happen today. We had renewed our promises.

“Why are you so weird?” I asked, after pausing the music at the end of a song.

“Excuse me! I don’t insult you!”

“But, it’s not an insult if it’s true. I just wanted to know how you could grow up to be so weird.”

“You could have used another word. *Independent*, perhaps? *Unconventional*? Even *intriguing*? Do you think I’m intriguing?” She did her eyelash batting routine again so I knew that she wasn’t mad.

“No, you’re weird,” I concluded objectively after considering the choices she had given me. I then listed all the things I had seen her do that qualified as weird. I had categorized them already so I gave them to her in numbered sets and subsets.

She didn't seem impressed with my categories. When I was finished, I asked, "Why did the IOF want you to have such..."

"Appealing idiosyncrasies?"

"Hardly appealing."

"Endearing eccentricities."

"Not endearing either."

"Quixotic quirkiness?"

"If the word *quixotic* actually exists and is another word for obnoxious." I wasn't trying to be insulting. She was smiling at me when she was making the ridiculous suggestions. She had explained about teasing, so I knew that it was like a game she wanted me to play. I made sure I smiled back.

"Warm whimsicalities?"

"Weirdness, I suppose. Were you always like this or did they have to zap you a lot?"

"I was given special treatment from an early age. Just like you."

"I wasn't given special treatment. I was treated just like every other student."

"Nah, you weren't. You want me to prove that you're weird?"

"I know I'm a Z, so that means I'm a passive loner. I have a full set of strong, medium and weak genes. I could give you my gene profile, if you wanted. But, I'm not weird."

"Yes, you are."

"Am not."

"Are too."

She always did this. Turn things around. I was trying to find out why she was weird and suddenly I was the one being accused of being weird! We walked along for a bit. She started singing the chorus to Don't be Cruel by Elvis but changed the words to Don't be Weird. Now the song didn't make any sense! "You see, that's just plain weird changing that song," I told her. "Nobody is that different."

"So being different is the same as being weird?"

"Yeah, I guess. You're different in every way I can imagine. For example, you don't hide your ankles, but you refuse to take off your top. Girls go topless all the time, especially in the summer. They have nothing to hide. Girl chests look exactly like guy chests. Why are you so different?" I was getting a little exasperated. Why couldn't she admit that she was weird?

"Why should I hide my ankles? Girl ankles look exactly like guy ankles."

Now she was just being ignorant! "No they don't!"

"How many girl ankles have you seen, Z-man! How do you know they're different?"

"I haven't seen any except yours, but everybody knows that a girl with big ankles, we'll she's going to be..."

"Good at sex."

"Yeah."

I rolled up the filament that Izzy had just ripped out of her head. We walked for a while in silence.

"Guy ears look the same as girl ears," she shot at me.

That gave me a perfect opportunity to use her argument on her. "How many boy ears have you seen?" I challenged. "How do YOU know they're different?"

"I've seen plenty. They're exactly the same. I'll prove it. You take off your ear-gear and put your ear against mine. I bet'cha our ears are almost exactly the same."

"Pervert!" I gasped. I couldn't believe that she'd suggest such a monstrous thing to do! I slowed down so that she'd be well in front of me.

She sensed what I was doing and slowed down. I slowed down some more. She peeked back at me and slowed down some more. I slowed down some more. Eventually both of us were standing motionless in the middle of a trail. The packs continued on without us until they bounced off a tree.

She turned to face me. I set my feet to repel her in case she had a sexual fit and tried to strip my ear-gear off. Our health bots had warned us about uncontrollable sexual urges.

"Z-man, the ear is shaped the same whether or not it is attached to a guy or a girl's head." She was facing me from about two-meters away. She wasn't getting any closer but she did have a finger pointing at my nose. I kept my eyes on her hands while she continued. If they changed into claws...

"Big people of both genders have slightly bigger ears. Small people of both genders have slightly smaller ears. It doesn't mean anything at all."

"Wrong! A guy with big ears is better at sex than a guy with little ears. Everybody knows that."

"Have you read anything scientific that proves that? You're the science man, can you prove it?"

"Well, no, but that's because brain-bands will zap if you do too much research on sex. That's because people who know too much about sex turn into perverts."

"How do you know that?"

"Everybody knows that!"

"Don't you think it's a little weird that something like an ear or an ankle can predict how good you are at sex?"

"Hey, I didn't make the human body! It's true. Everybody knows it." How could she not see that?

"So, if everyone believes it, that makes it true?"

Why would she say that in such a sarcastic way? I tried to make the illogic of her argument clear. "It's true, and because of that, everyone believes it."

"You're weird!" she accused and started walking backwards along the trail. "Weird, weird, weird," she whipped each word at me while simultaneously snapping her arm at me so that she ended up with her index finger pointing right at my face.

"Am not, am not, am not." I shot back, walking towards her and pointing my finger at her face too.

"Are too."

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

"Am **not!**"

"Are **too!**"

"**AM NOT!!!**"

"**ARE TOO!!!**"

Then, she turned around and stormed off the trail and into the woods. “Am not,” I muttered, but I was the only one close enough to hear my brilliant closing argument.

#

Ignoring Izzy as best I could, I reached the tree where our packs had stopped. I unhooked my two packs from the filament but I didn't see why I should take Izzy's off, so I let it hang there while she thrashed around in the woods. There wasn't much point in continuing on by myself. She could make faster progress with her single pack than I could with my pair, so I had no chance to escape from her. Instead, I lay on the ground, my head resting on a pack. Waiting for her to come to her senses. Instead, she climbed a tree halfway up the hill and sat in the fork of two branches, glaring at me. I glared back at her for a while, but she was too far away to get the mental message I was sending, so I quit transmitting after a while and closed my eyes. I thought of all the things I should have said – things that would have convinced her that she was weird and I was not.

After a while, I heard some rustling. She had dropped out of her tree and had relocated a little closer to the trail. Her back was turned now. Doing the same thing as me probably. Pretending to sleep, but still re-living the argument.

We sat like that for a while. I started getting hungry, so I rustled around for a bar. Not chocolate. That would make me feel good. I didn't want to feel good. I would have liked to have some trail mix, but that was Izzy's. I grabbed a strawberry bar instead. It was my least favorite.

I looked at the back of her camouflage hat. She was probably hungry and thirsty too. She wasn't going to come near her pack while I was here. At least, that's what I wouldn't have done. I found another strawberry bar, grabbed the canteen hanging on the outside of her pack and walked half of the distance to the spot where she was busy ignoring me. I found a bare spot between two lodge-pole pines, lobbed her food and water to the base of the second tree, and plopped down at the first.

I studiously ignored her as she picked her way through the bushes, sat down, and took a long pull on the canteen.

“If I was talking to you, I'd say *Thank you.*”

“Mphh,” I replied. She was sitting cross-legged, attacking the bar. Her pant legs had risen all the way up to her shin, and both her lower legs were fully exposed. What with all our talk about forbidden parts of the body, I couldn't tear my eyes away from her ankles. They seemed to be the same as mine, but I couldn't look for long without feeling guilty. I guess part of me was expecting a lightning bolt from my brain-band. I tried looking up at the sky while I munched, but that gave me a crick in the neck. Or, maybe I was just using that as an excuse to stare, because my eyes kept shifting back to her legs. What was I supposed to do for the rest of the trip? Look up at the sky while we walked? I shifted the front part of my ear-gear down over my eyes and munched more contentedly.

“Oh, for heaven's sake!” I heard her say. Then there were some noises of someone walking angrily away, some rustling in a distant backpack, and then a quieter return. “I've put some sheaths on, Z-man. You can look now without fear of becoming a pervert.”

I lifted a corner of my ear-gear. She was wearing black, shapeless sheaths. I lifted the rest of my blindfold back to its normal position. "If I was talking to you, I'd say *Thank you*."

We ground away for a while.

"They're just ankles, Z-man. Really, that's all they are."

"Not to me, they aren't."

More grinding.

"You're right, Z-man. They're just ankles to me, but they're forbidden ankles to you. I'll wear sheaths from now on."

"Thank you."

More grinding. If food bars had been less dense, we might never have had the rest of this conversation.

"I'm not interested in your ears, Z-man. To me, they're just ears. I'm not going to attack you. You're safe."

I made drinking motions with my hand and she tossed the canteen over. A bag of something followed. Trail-mix.

"I don't like the strawberry flavour," I said. "Trail-mix is much better."

"See, we can agree on something." She started digging a hole with her knife and I threw her the remainder of my bar and she buried both. My stomach was all knotted up – I couldn't chew on the bar any more.

We tossed the trail mix bag back and forth for a while. It would have been easier to sit closer, but I wasn't going to make the first move. Apparently, she felt the same.

"It's not right what they've done to you, Z-man," she said in an almost normal voice.

"Who did what to me?"

"Your instructors. The DPS. The IOF. It's not right what they've done to you."

"What do you mean?"

"They messed with your emotions; they messed with your brain. You can't help what they did to you."

"I know the brain-band stopped me from having any strong emotions when I was growing up. But, I've done some stupid things without it. I think I tried to punch out a tree a couple of days ago. Today, I was so angry, I wanted to throttle you so that you'd listen to reason."

"Really? You could do that?"

"Not now. But, I might have earlier. I'm not used to being angry. I can't control it."

"I got angry at you too. My mother says that red hair gives people a temper."

"What's that have to do with you?"

"Nothing, I guess. She probably meant when you see red. I was seeing red at you too."

"But you have a brain-band, so you wouldn't have been allowed to hurt me. Your brain-band programmer would have put in those commands at least. I think people could be very dangerous without a brain-band."

"I've known some like that."

"When?"

"When I was working. You know. Catching dissidents."

We tossed the trail-mix back and forth for a bit. “Finish it,” she said. “No point in packing away an almost empty bag.”

I did. We both got up and returned to our packs. “What did you mean about them messing with my brain?”

“Do you have any idea what other kids learned in school?” she asked in response.

“Same as me.”

She opened her pack and pushed her arm all the way to the bottom, felt around for a bit, and pulled out a case of bots which she opened. “The bots in this case contain all of my high school texts and my assignments.” She found one and handed it to me. “This bot has the index to everything in the case. Tell me which subjects you’ve studied on this list.”

I slid it into my brain plug and scanned the index. “Chemistry, mathematics, and physics which includes electricity and electronics,” I said.

“No literature, writing, poetry, geography, history, art, or any of the others?”

“No. I had my hands full with three subjects.”

“I’ve studied everything on the list.”

“That’s impossible!” I reacted immediately. Why was she making such a preposterous claim after we had just finished a huge fight? Was she trying to start it all over again?

“Deep breaths, Z-man,” she said, taking deep breaths herself in unison with mine and stopping when I had calmed down. “If this IS a lie, you could easily prove it. All of the other bots would be empty.”

“But, how could you have taken so many courses? I wasn’t able to do more than three subjects because it took me eleven-years to get to the end of them. How did you get to the end of all those courses?”

“Do a search for *School curriculum*, find *Mathematics*, and then scan through the topics,” she said. “What’s the final topic?”

I looked at the list. It ended with *Equations in two variables (advanced students only)*. I told her that.

“When did you study two variable equations, Z-man?”

“Grade 5,” I answered.

“Other IOF students stopped when they reached the unit on two variable equations, but you were given six more years of math. Six full years more! Look at Chemistry. Tell me when you learned the topics in my grade eleven course.”

I had studied them all in my middle grades. “You’ve made up this list!” I accused. “Just because it says that it’s the IOF Approved Curriculum doesn’t mean that it is.”

I was flapping my arms around, so she grabbed them both and mimicked taking deep breathes for me. I was too agitated to object to her invading my privacy zone. We breathed together for a while and she removed her hands. She spoke slowly and quietly. “I know what I’m saying sounds outrageous to you, but I’m not trying to upset you. Think for a minute. Why would I make up such a fictional curriculum list, and then give you a case of bots with all my assignments and projects on it that matches this list exactly? There are years of hard work in this case. How could I fake that? Why would I fake that? What do I stand to gain?” She

held out the case. "Here. Browse through my courses some time. Try the literature course. Read *I know why the caged bird sings* by Maya Angelou. It's a poem."

"What's a poem?" I asked.

She turned her back on me, shook her arms in the air, and screamed at the top of her lungs for about ten-seconds into the sky! I couldn't believe I had seen her do that. The hairs on my arms were standing straight up. I stepped back a couple of paces when she turned back to me.

I heard her mutter "I hate'm! I hate'm!" Well, that made her feelings pretty clear. She wanted a fight, so she was going to get a fight! She hated me just because I didn't know what a poem was? What was wrong with this girl?

She must have seen the look in my eye, because she didn't try to get close. "Find the last physics course in the IOF curriculum. Tell me what grade you were in when you took it."

I found the end of the list quickly. It wasn't that long. "Grade 6," I said.

"And yet, you and only you have continued to study physics. What have you taken?"

"Magnetronics, chaos theory, quantum physics, digitized simulations of brain chemistry. Other things too. It's just physics. I read the text. I do lab work. I experiment for six-months or so. I create an invention. I test it. I get my C+."

"Have you ever seen anyone else in the lab?"

"No. I'm the only one allowed to be in the lab so that nobody can disturb my experiments."

"Z-man, nobody else in the IOF has their own fully equipped physics lab! Don't you think that's weird?"

I couldn't answer.

"Look down the list of physics topics that I learned. Do you see anything there that you didn't study?"

I knew most of them, but not all. "I didn't take anything about fireworks, rockets, nor explosive power for sure. I'd have to look more closely at some of the others."

"Z-man. Man has been to the moon and back. We used to have man-made satellites circling the earth, giving us improved communications and weather predictions. Unfortunately, satellites could also be used for warfare so they all were destroyed in the time of chaos."

I started to interrupt, but she was back to her seeing red self and wouldn't let me get a word in. "Z-man, read my history courses. It's all there. It has an IOF slant – why those things were bad and why it was good that we lost our ability to put objects into space. But, those wonders of science existed. We've lost them because the IOF only allows one person to study physics in any depth – they call him the Z-man. The DPS controls everything a Z-man learns very closely. Math, physics and chemistry only. No literature or artistry because that would give him a soul. No history because that would give him perspective. No psychology or sociology because that would give him an understanding of people. Nothing frivolous because that would give him a sense of humour. No poetry because that might allow him to love. They only want him to study pure science. Later, they have him convert his inventions to weapons, or to devices that can control the masses. They are very careful to prevent him from learning anything about man-

made power: how to make fireworks; how to make controlled explosions; how to make rockets. They don't want him to have that knowledge because then he'd be able to break out of the disguised prison they're going to send him to after graduation." Now she was the one waving her hands in the air.

"But, I'm not very smart. I've never received anything higher than a C+."

"They give you a C+ because everybody gets C+ on everything they do. The IOF teaches kids that average is good; anything other than average is bad. But nobody does the same work. Smart kids take different courses from non-smart kids, but they don't realize that because everyone is working individually. The IOF says that every child is born with a fair set of genes. People believe that because everyone looks the same. The IOF knows how to manipulate genes that control body size, colour, and shape. They haven't the foggiest idea how to control intelligence. And, about once every two decades, a truly exceptional child is born just because of random chance. They give him a name starting with a Z. And, because they don't know how to make any more babies like him, they make sure their Z-man can't escape."

She shoved the case of bots into my chest. "I'm going to check our back trail," and she turned around and ran away from me. I could follow her progress clearly from her screams into the air. "I hate them. I hate them. I hate them."

#

When Izzy returned, she said the back trail was clear but she was going to check ahead. She took her pack and disappeared into the woods and I didn't see her for the rest of the day.

I got bored walking along by myself, so just for something to do, I read some of her history bots. It was exactly as she had said. Man had flown in space. The bot also lectured about all the terrible things that had happened in the past with warfare, tyrants, genocides and so on. The bot said that all of those atrocities had been caused because people were different. After a while, I couldn't think any more. My head hurt. None of this was logical! I had thought the IOF was good. Then, I learned some stuff and realized that the IOF was bad. Then, the bot showed that the IOF was right about warfare being caused by people being different. What was the correct answer? Math had correct answers. Everything that wasn't correct was incorrect. In physics, something worked the way it was supposed to or it didn't. How can anyone make sense of something that doesn't have a correct answer?

Izzy cooked supper that night. We ate it silently. She was upset too. Afterwards, she wouldn't look at me; wouldn't listen to music; just stood there drilling arrows into trees.

Just before dusk, she came and sat in front of me. "Perhaps we're the only normal people in the world, Z-man. Perhaps, everyone else is weird. We could agree to that, couldn't we?"

I thought for a bit. "No, we're both weird," I said.

We were quiet for a long time. Then, she sighed. "Yeah, we are. But, that's a good thing, right?"

I didn't answer. How could being completely different from everyone else be good? Average is good. Not being average is bad. I just didn't see it.

“I won’t turn you in tomorrow,” she said as she went to her hammock, which was several trees away from mine.

“I won’t tie you up or kill you tomorrow,” I replied. I didn’t want to do any of those things. I just wanted to understand all the things that were happening to me. I read one of Izzy’s bots until I finally fell asleep.

Chapter 12

Izzy threw pinecones into my hammock until I decided to let her see me wake up. “Let’s do something fun today, Z-man” she called up to me.

“OK,” I said. I didn’t want to fight. In truth, if someone had said that I could put my brain-band back on and all would be forgiven, I might have taken the offer. Probably not, because the DPS were terrible people. But, what alternative did I have?

We had a quick breakfast and set out on the trail. Izzy asked if we could leave the bots in their case for a while and I agreed. My head was hurting anyway. Then, she started asking me silly questions.

“Z-man, why are boring classes like dragons?”

“There are no dragons,” I replied.

“Because boring classes drag on and on and on.”

She had to explain it to me.

“What kind of knight sings when the wind is blowing hard?”

“How do you know if he does?”

“A knight-in-gale.”

She had to explain it to me.

“What happens when a duck flies upside down?”

“They can’t. It’s aerodynamically impossible.”

“They quack up.”

She had to explain it to me.

“Are we having fun yet?” I asked her.

“Those are riddles. They’re sort of funny. Try this instead.”

Then she told me a long story about someone who was named Opporknocked who was a piano tuner but he only tuned once. It didn’t make any sense. I told her that.

“OK, you tell me, Z-man. What makes you laugh?”

I had to think a long time. “I laughed when you told me that I couldn’t give myself the name *finger-licking-good*.”

“Why was that funny?”

“Because it would be such a silly name and because it reminded me of how foolish I must have looked when I was sticking my fingers in my mouth and licking them clean.”

“Way to go, Z-man. It IS a silly name. And, it’s good that you can laugh at yourself. What else have you laughed at?”

Again, I had to think. I couldn't remember anything else that I had laughed at. She got impatient when I didn't answer. "Izzy to Z-man. Are you there, Z-man?"

"Is that funny?"

"Not yet."

"What am I supposed to say back?"

"Z-man to Izzy."

"Why is that funny?"

"It's not yet. Then, you and I would play a game where you pretended to be an astronaut and I was a person in another rocket ship trying to talk to you. Like this. Izzy to Z-man. We're all out of food, our water is gone, and the alien marshmallows are getting puffy. I think they're trying to grow arms so that they can take over the ship. What should I do?"

"Marshmallows are aliens?"

"Pretend."

Izzy didn't make even a tiny noise while I thought. "Start a bonfire, put a stick through them, and eat them for supper?"

"Now THAT's funny! Way to go Z-man."

So, we played *Let's pretend to be ridiculous* for an hour. It was better than her riddles.

#

We were having a rest break. Izzy had her squeeze-canteen and was soaking her hair with it. Suddenly, she squirted me in the face. "Got'cha," she said.

"Hey! Why'd you do that?"

"Got'cha is a game. I just gave you a squirt. Now, you give me a squirt back."

So, I did. Then, she started ducking and weaving, all the time giving me squirts on my clothes and face, but mostly aiming for my face. I hit her a few times, but she didn't stay still long enough for me to get her very wet.

"You can move too, you know."

So I did, and that made it more even. She explained the time-out rule, when both people stop and fill their canteens. Then, we played a bit more, both of us dodging around a bush. She made a bird call.

"Hey, Z-man. Look up there. A raven."

"That wasn't a raven..." I couldn't finish my sentence because my mouth was full of water and the air was full of another Got'cha! So, that's how I learned it was all right to distract the other person. Of course, when she knew it was coming, it was hard to do. We ended up both soaking wet and lying on the ground, panting.

"Was that fun, Z-man?"

"Yes, that was fun," I agreed.

She lay back on the ground with her eyes closed and a smile on her face. So I squirted her and said Got'cha. Then, we had to have a wrestling match. "D'ems de rules," she said but I think she just made that up.

I had her down on the ground and was straddling her, trying to pin her knuckles to the ground like she told me I had to. Every time I almost had one hand flat on the ground, she'd wriggle and pull the other one up. I was concentrating on the task – she was impossibly strong.

"Z-man?"

“What?” I grunted.

“You think of a name yet?”

“Why?” I pushed harder.

Suddenly she relaxed and I fell forward so that our noses almost bumped.

“Because I don’t want to call you Z-man any longer.”

I was looking straight into her eyes, and she was looking very serious. *Some sort of trick?* I wondered. “Why not?” I asked.

“Some people, when they say *Z-man*, they mean it as a terrible insult. That’s not the way I’ve been saying it, but I don’t want you to remember that I called you *Z-man* and think I was hating you. Give me something else I can call you, please?”

My face was about two centimeters from her face, and I was looking in her eyes, and they were looking sort of sad, which is kind of weird because we had been having fun.

“Please, Z-man.”

She wasn’t making the funny eyebrows, so I guessed that she was serious. Then, I thought of how she had been so mad at the IOF because I hadn’t been taught any literature and I remembered what I had read last night by the guy who never said anything straight out, but was always messing around with weird lines of words. “William,” I said.

“William?”

“Yup. William, or Will for short. Not Bill, not Billy, not Willy. Will.”

“Well, Will not Willy, what made you choose that name?”

“It was the first name of that Shakespeare guy who wrote all that flowery stuff in one of your bots.”

“Yes, Shakespeare is a flowery kind of guy.” Then, she said Thank you and she bobbed her head up and kissed me right on the lips. The next thing I knew, she had me in a headlock and was grinding her thumb knuckle into my skull. She said I had to be taught a lesson because I had forced her to kiss me. I couldn’t remember doing that.

We walked the rest of the day, mostly listening to music bots. She really liked Sonny and Cher so we were singing along to one of their big hits when she paused the music and turned to me. “We should do an act, Will.”

“What’s an act?”

“We pretend to be Sonny and Cher and sing their songs together. We make up all the movements too.”

“Who gets to be Cher?”

“Me, silly. I’m the girl.”

“Only sometimes,” I answered, and she shot me in the forehead with her finger. She had to explain that one too.

So, we pretended to be 1960’s rock stars. We’d share a verse. Then, we’d do the chorus together. But for the chorus, we had to stop and face each other and make silly movements with our hands and bodies while singing *I got you babe. I got you babe.*

We sang songs like that for ages. Then, she taught me how to play the *Hip-check game* where someone pretended to accidentally bump the other person off the trail. Then, she did the *Ooops, you accidentally tripped* game on me by distracting me and almost tripping me. I did it on her too but I forgot that I was supposed to

stop her from falling, which she did quite dramatically. She said she was OK and she was smiling when she got up. "That just means that I owe you one, Will. I'll get you back some time when you least expect it." She shook her finger at me and said it threateningly but her eyes were smiling.

We crossed a ridge and she said we had to be quiet now. She wrapped both arms around my waist for a moment and squeezed me, and told me that it had been a wonderful day. We walked down into a deserted valley where she said we'd be able to wash our clothes and have a bath. She was being nice so I didn't ask why we had to hump the packs through a fire-blackened path into the valley when we could have hiked more easily through nearby trees with the sky-rope.

Chapter 13

I slept well into the morning and scrambled down my tree to find Izzy gone. Her pack was still there so I wasn't too worried. She came into camp when I was on my knees, looking through my pack for some powdered food. I looked up as she stood over me and received a shower from her wet hair as my greeting. "The lake down yonder is all yours, stranger," she said after running out of wet hair. "Say, I didn't catch your handle. What do you go by in these parts?"

"Why are you speaking in a different dialect?"

"I'm being funny. I'm pretending to be a cowboy and I'm asking you for your name. You've seen some old flics. Try it."

She gave me time to think.

"Ain't going to tell you my handle. These woods ain't big nuff for the two of us."

"Not bad. Not bad at all. Stranger, I'm telling you for the last time. Get your miserable carcass down to that lake and don't come back without you being all squeaky."

"Huh?"

"Take a bath, Will. You stink."

#

I returned to camp to find her squatting next to a smokeless fire, stirring some porridge in her beaten-up pot. "Fire OK in the daytime?" I said more as a statement than a question.

"Yeah. You know what type of wood burns clean, right?"

"Sure. Wet pine usually works well."

She looked up with a big grin. "Way to go Will, not Willy!"

I felt kind of embarrassed, so I looked down at the ground and then an idea popped into my head. "Aw shucks, Ma'am," I said. "I just gets all tongue-tied around you."

She giggled. "Thank you. It's a pleasure to accept this honour. I'd..."

"...like to thank the members of the academy," I finished.

Then, she gave me some porridge and showed me the little container of brown sugar that she had been saving especially for me.

#

I was washing the porridge pot and plates in the creek, Izzy was on the bank supervising me and splashing me with water every now and then. "So, what's your real name?" I asked.

"Melissa," she said. "It means that I can go by Izzy which is both a boy's and a girl's name."

"Do you want me to call you Melissa?"

"No. It would attract attention. I'm always called Izzy, but in my mind, I know my name is really Melissa."

"How'd you swing getting seven letters in your name?"

"I guess I'm special, eh?"

"That's not a real answer."

"It will have to do for now."

Later, when I was packing the pot away, she said. "There's a big flat rock down by the lake that will be in the sun by now. I want to wash my clothes in the lake and then sunbathe on the rock without any clothes on. Will you promise not to spy on me?"

"Sure, I promise" I said and made the necessary signs.

"You won't peek even if I do something like this, beckoning you to join me?"

She began swaying her hips sideways and making gestures with her hands.

"Sure, I promise," and closed my eyes because she was making me feel kind of funny.

"Keep your eyes closed, Will. Do you promise that you won't peek at me even if I do something like take my ankle sleeves off which I'm doing now?"

I knew she didn't really want me to peek. So, I shook my head and promised, "I won't peek."

"The shirt's coming off now. You aren't peeking, are you Will?"

"No. I promised."

"Thank you, Will."

I stayed by the fire the whole time she was away from camp. Once or twice, I felt the twitch of someone spying on me. I had thought she trusted me enough not to check. It made me kind of mad that she had doubted me.

#

I didn't go near Izzy for the rest of the afternoon. She come up from the lake early in the afternoon and yelled over to me that I could have the rock if I wanted it. She sounded angry. So, I washed my clothes, but lying in the sun didn't help my mood. I was willing to trust her not to turn me into the DPS to get tortured, but she wouldn't trust me when I had promised to stay in camp for a few hours? I stayed a long time on the rock wondering why she suddenly wouldn't trust me.

When I returned, it was dusk and she was spreading the coals of the fire around so that they would go out without smoking. There was a pot of something set aside. "Supper's ready," she said. "I don't know that you deserve anything since you broke your promise. You said you wouldn't peek!"

"I didn't."

"You did. I checked and you weren't here."

"I was here. I never moved. If you trusted me, you wouldn't have checked."

“If you kept your promises, I’d be able to trust you.”

Well, things got hotter and hotter. She kept accusing me of peeking; I kept saying that I hadn’t and got madder and madder when she didn’t believe me. She gave me one of her shoves, so I shoved her back. We started wrestling and I gave as good as I got. At one point, the pot of food went flying upside down into the air. I think it was her foot that did it, but I was too busy defending myself to know for sure. The fight went out of her soon after and she just collapsed on the ground. I was straddling her and we were hand wrestling like we had done yesterday, but angrily this time, and I felt her hands guide mine to her throat. “Pretend to squeeze,” she whispered. “I brought you into a trap, Will. We’re being watched.”

She bucked and kicked, but it was all show. I held her down without even trying. She whispered, “I’m sorry, Will” and started clawing at my face. As she was flinging her hands around, she whispered, “Look at my nose, Will. Look closely at my nose.” She was crying freely as she said it, but I knew I hadn’t hurt her at all. I was the one bleeding all over her hands. I looked at her nose and saw a big rip in its skin. Only it wasn’t real skin. It was brown fake skin with some padding underneath that would have made her nose thicker than it actually was. Underneath were her real skin and her real nose. They were white.

Izzy continued to fake fight me, all the time whispering instructions. “When I’ve finished talking, lift my shoulders up and bang me against the ground. When I pretend to be unconscious, slap my face hard. Don’t hold back – you have to leave a mark. Then, open my jeans like you’re looking for something. You’ll find a piece of your sky-rope. I stole it from you days before you found me and that’s the only piece I ever took. I swear that on my grandmother’s name. The night goggles are on top of my pack. Use them to get away. Go northwest. The watchers are coming now but you’ll have a ten-minute head start at least. They have a copter but it will be dark by the time they can get to it. I put a bot in your pack that will explain everything. Don’t come near me again, Will. They’ll kill you. Pretend to knock me unconscious now, Will.”

“Hurry, hurry, hurry,” she urged as I fumbled with her clothes. I found the filament tied loosely around her waist, and never looked back.

#

I couldn’t run very far. The two packs were just too awkward to handle. So, I got the sky-rope going, although it was a lot harder now without Izzy.

I had thought that I was beginning to understand Izzy. The vital clue was what had been written on the jigsaw piece in my dream. Cool, man, cool, she had said about me licking my fingers the first time I had tasted chocolate without my brain-band. She admitted that she had licked her fingers too. But, how could she have experienced the real taste of chocolate if she had a real brain-band? The brain-band that she had let me see was obviously a fake.

That led me to review all the confusing things that she had said and done but this time I knew that she was wearing a fake brain-band. Everything fit. If Izzy could enjoy chocolate, she couldn’t be an agent of the DPS; she had to be a dissident. When she told me that long lie about her being the granddaughter of a dissident when I first met her, that was probably the truth. Once I had that worked out, all of her anger about what the DPS had done to me was logical.

Tonight, when I saw her white skin and when she swore on her grandmother's name that she had only stolen the one piece of filament, I knew that I had figured it out correctly. I could even understand why she had led me into a trap – she wanted to get me to work for the dissidents. I would have agreed if she had asked me. Dissidents might be weird, but at least they weren't out to torture and turn me into a zombie. But, once I was in the trap, why did she push me out? And, why did she warn me not to come near her again? Why would the dissidents kill me?

I trekked most of the night, listening for copter noises, and wondering if she had deceived me again. I didn't think about that for long. She had been crying really hard. That was real. I kept telling myself that as I fled northwest.

Chapter 14

From Izzy's journals: July 10, 2081.

Dear Will, not Willy.

You have probably figured out by now that I'm not a DPS agent. I'm the next leader of the dissident movement. I knew that you might not believe that I'm white, so I ripped my fake nose skin during our fight so that you could see for yourself. Speaking of fakes, I put my fake brain-band in the bottom of your pack. It will stick on tight, but you can pry it off if you use enough pressure. Don't worry: it doesn't have a tracking device.

I've lied a lot to you, Will. Well, perhaps not quite lies, but I've been deceiving you. Especially at the beginning. Not so much at the end. Everything in this letter is the truth – again I swear on my grandmother's name. You may not believe me, and if you don't, I understand. I just hope that you'll forgive me for what I almost did to you. I didn't have a choice, but you may not believe that.

I have to go back over fifty-years if you are to understand why I led you into a trap.

When the IOF leaders first announced their intentions of imposing genetic controls and producing cookie-cutter babies, the dissident movement was a mixture of many different groups who hated the idea. We had to cooperate together because we were facing overwhelming force. The White Supremacists were very influential in the movement from the beginning. There's some information on them on one of my bots, but it was written from an IOF perspective so they really look bad. That's probably fair because they were, and are, evil. They hate anyone who isn't white no matter how good that person might be. I am NOT a White Supremacist, although I do have white skin.

The Radical Militants were also very influential. For decades they had been warning people that the government couldn't be trusted, that the government was corrupt, that the government was secretly controlling people, among other very extremist views. When the IOF came right out and said what they were going to do, the militants went berserk. They started to use their stockpiles of weapons.

The supremacists had weapons too and the two groups found themselves joined together by a common hatred. I am NOT a radical militant either.

A lot of other groups were in the early movement. Most weren't violent. My grandmother was the spokesperson for this third group – I'll call them the moderates.

After the extreme dissidents began shooting people, the movement fell apart. Most of Alberta opposed the IOF at the beginning – they just didn't know how to do that effectively. When the militants and supremacists started ambushing IOF leaders, the IOF brought in the army. That escalated the violence. The militants began killing anyone who supported the IOF, and the IOF responded in kind by killing anyone suspected of terrorism. In time, the population as a whole decided that perhaps the IOF was right about needing to control extremist behaviour. In effect, the dissidents behaved so dangerously that they guaranteed the IOF's success. I wonder sometimes if the IOF had agents planted in the early dissident movement, but I've never been able to find any evidence of that. We were certainly our own worst enemy.

You won't find any mention of the mutual atrocities in the history books now. All reports on the real beginning of the IOF have been purged. People who remember what really happened are dying, and soon the true story will be lost. A science guy like you may not appreciate how impossible it would be for a society to shift to such a different model like the IOF. Read some of my history courses and you may realize how the IOF's picture of a peaceful transition has to be false.

After a couple of years, the dissident movement was thoroughly beaten. Our members hid in the cities, trying to fit in but still defying the IOF edict that everyone had to wear a brain-band. We continued to have children in a natural way. When it became apparent that our children could be detected just by looking at them, we fled to the wild-lands. The IOF eventually decided to ignore us. We were well hidden and we had lots of weapons. We all became skilled at woodcraft, we knew how to hide, we knew how to track, and we knew how to ambush anyone coming into our territory.

That balance of power has begun to shift recently. We are still a force to be feared; however, we are losing members slowly but surely. Unfortunately, most of our losses have been from the moderate group. The mood of the movement is now heavily influenced by the supremacists and the militants who warn that we'll become extinct soon if we don't make some *difficult decisions*. That means they want to start killing again.

My mother joined the White Supremacists a few years after my grandmother was murdered. Being the daughter of a martyr, she quickly rose to the top. My father was raised as a militant. At that time, the two groups were in a vicious struggle for control. My father and mother were married so that the two groups could be merged. My mother always hated my father. They would argue about what the dissidents should do, but because he was her husband, she had to do what he told her. Sometimes she'd keep arguing and he'd beat her for talking back to him. My father urged violence at every opportunity. My mother wanted a more restrained approach. She didn't mind the violence; she just wanted it to be effective against the brown horde taking over the world.

Doc Bedard, the movement's doctor and my teacher, once told me that I was the only thing my parents had in common. He said that I was supposed to be my parents' claim to fame – their legacy to the movement. He said that each of them tried to make me think like they did. Since they both had powerful personalities, I grew up confused. Doc's been helping me with that ever since.

I had my first undercover operation when I was four-years old. My dad had developed a plan where I would ambush and kill an important target. My mother opposed it because she thought I was too young to do it properly. Since I kept messing up in practice, she won the argument. The operation was cancelled. However, when my dad killed himself after DPS agents cornered him, she changed her mind. She told me I had to do the operation; otherwise, my dad would have lost his life for nothing. I was vital to the operation because, as a four-year old, I was the only person who could get close to the next Z-man and murder him before he could grow up. You were my target, Will.

#

My mother rehearsed the operation with me for weeks. Only, it was a teddy bear that got the poison. Eventually, she pronounced me ready. She took me to your Infant Care Center, gave me the poisoned drink, reminded me that I was doing this for my father, and pushed me through a tiny hole in the hedge. I'm going to describe what happened in detail because I don't want you to think that I'm making this up.

I was dressed like all the other four-year-old girls in your dorm. Your care center had a big dormitory building for the boys and a similar building for the girls. The care center had a common eating area and a variety of different play areas open to all. There was a big outdoor play area – sand box, swings, and the usual. Inside, there was a little padded room where kids could run and bounce off the walls – boys liked that a lot. There was a mini-trampoline as well. They also had separate areas where they kept all sorts of different toys – a separate small area for each kind of toy.

The day I snuck into the dorm, you were playing with a toy sailing ship that had sails that could go up and down, or left and right. You were sailing it in circles and adjusting the sails depending on if it was sailing into the wind or with the wind.

You played by yourself the whole time I was watching you. Whenever any other kid came into your area, you'd back away if they came too close, hugging your ship to your chest. I think you were scared of someone taking it from you. I watched you for a long time, pretending to read my book and followed you around like I had been told to do.

One time you walked right in front of me and I asked if you would like to read my book with me. I was smart enough to know that you were attracted to sailing ships so I said that my book had a picture of a sailing ship. I said that there was some blue sky and a fog on the ocean and a ship was sailing through that fog. The picture made it look like the ship was sailing in the air. I had seen you flying your ship in the air, and so just made that part up when you didn't seem interested at first. You sat down next to me and chattered away about your ship. You still had it in your hand – you carried it everywhere. You kept talking and talking about how you were going to learn to sail a ship. Think about that, Will. This is important.

You weren't a loner back then. When someone was friendly to you, you were friendly back. You were just a little shy. The IOF made you into a loner so that they could control you more easily.

You wanted to show me how it was very important for the sails of the ship to be adjusted according to the wind. So, we went into an empty room and you flew it around in the air for me and you wanted me to be the wind, but I couldn't because I didn't want to put down my cup of juice. It had a blue cap on it so that I couldn't spill the poison by accident. I didn't want someone else picking the poison up.

I asked if you would like to read my book with me, and you said OK, so we sat on the floor against a wall and I leafed through the book slowly with you. We reached the center of the book where my mother had pasted our *Message of Defiance*, as she called it.

I didn't understand that part. It was a copy of a newspaper picture of my grandmother. The picture had been front-page news when it was first published back when the IOF society was brand new. My grandmother was murdered for protesting that women couldn't have babies any more. In the newspaper picture, she was holding a big sign that said, *Babies should be born, not manufactured*. She was wearing a bright green coat. I thought since she had been so brave, I could take her name and I'd be brave too. Instead, the only thing I've inherited from my grandmother was her red hair.

When we reached that picture, I was supposed to offer you my drink. I was supposed to have already watched you to see what you liked. You liked grapefruit juice. So, I was supposed to tell you that my drink was grapefruit. It wasn't, but by the time you had one sip it would be too late. You were supposed to die quietly – you'd just fall asleep. I was to leave you curled up on the floor with the book face down, but open to the right page. Nobody would think much of that – kids were always having naps on the floor. I was to walk, not run, to the outdoor play area and through the hole in the hedge. I'd have revenge for my dad. I didn't know what revenge was, but it was something my mom said would make me feel better.

When we reached the center of the book, you read the caption out loud, and asked me what it meant. I said I didn't know, which was true. You got these two cute little creases in your forehead and thought and thought. I had the cup ready to give you, but I couldn't open my mouth.

You saw me with the cup and asked what was in it. I said grapefruit juice. You said you liked grapefruit juice. I said I did too. You asked if you could have some. I said "No, because it was mine." You seemed to respect that and didn't ask again. You leafed through the rest of the book but didn't find the sailing ship picture that I had promised. You asked me where it was. I said that I had lied. You said that I was a bad little girl and walked away from me.

I went back outside and waited until nobody was watching me and slipped through the hedge. I gave the cup to my mother and said that I couldn't do it. She slapped my face really hard. Twice. She never forgave me. I'm supposed to be redeeming myself today.

#

After I disgraced my mother by not murdering you, she wouldn't have anything to do with me. Since she had become the leader of the dissidents after my father's

death, she had to visit all the camps and give inspirational messages. She carted me around with her, but I was left to fend for myself. Mostly I hid in the back of the adult meetings so that people wouldn't point at me and whisper how I was a coward.

At some point, I don't know exactly when, she and Doc got into a big argument. Afterwards, my mother said that since I wasn't doing the dissident movement any good, I had to stay with Doc when she traveled. Being left with a brown man was my punishment for being a coward. He's such a nice man that I never did think of it as punishment. I still had to go on one trip with her each year, and Doc and my mother always had an argument about how long that trip would be. She never talked to him other than to have that argument.

Our base camp had mostly adults when I was growing up. Some teenage boys were getting military training, but I was Doc's only student. Doc started me off on some stolen IOF teaching bots.

Doc would talk with me after each lesson and ask me what I had learned. Then, he'd let me help him in the clinic – at first, just cleaning up, putting on band-aids and so on. After a while, he'd interrupt my lesson whenever someone came in and ask me to be his nurse. He was also teaching everyone woodcraft classes, so I got to go with the teenagers and adults on those. I was always paired up with Doc though. We spent a lot of that time making up riddles, telling jokes, and teasing each other. The games I taught you yesterday were the games he taught me. We also talked about my lessons and what was real and what was not. He told me how my parents had tried to make me think like them – brainwashing, he called it. And, he described all the ways that the IOF was brainwashing its citizens and especially their children. Will, we may be very different people, but both you and I have been brainwashed, so we have that in common.

Other than the clinic work and the woodcraft trips, I spent all my time on the bots. I had nothing else to do and I did enjoy learning, so that's another thing that you and I have in common. Like you, I finished the IOF high school courses early. Doc found some old bots for something called university – it was a place you attended after high school if you wanted to learn more. Both you and I took what used to be called university courses. You did yours in math and science; mine were in military science, sociology, psychology, political science, literature, and other non-science courses. I didn't tell you that I had those course bots with me because I knew you wouldn't believe me. I've put them in your pack in case you're interested in reading them.

Other than Doc and the occasional patient, I didn't get to be with too many other people. Especially kids my own age. That's another thing you and I have in common. My cousin from my father's family would come around with his friends from time to time. He was twelve years older than I was so I didn't consider him a kid. One time, my cousin tried to get me to ditch my studies and go play *Hospital* in the woods with him. Doc gave me the sex lessons after I told him that. I was ten at the time. Doc must have gotten mad at my cousin because he never came around the school again, but every now and then, I'd see him following me when I was running errands for Doc. A couple of years after that, my body began to change and Doc had me do the lessons again.

I hated going on the trips to the other camps with my mother because she'd force me to be with kids my own age. She didn't want me anywhere near her, she'd say. But, all the kids knew about me and would call me *Coward* whenever they had a chance. I'd try to explain that murdering people was bad, but that just made them laugh at me even more. So, I snuck into the back of the adult meetings and hid under a chair.

After a while, I'd get scared if I had to be with other kids my age. I learned to hide my fear behind a smart mouth. If I made myself really annoying, they'd eventually leave me alone. When you caught me that first day, I was frightened and that's why you saw that side of me. I found out that there's another side of me. I can actually be with someone else my age and not be frightened about what you might say, so thank you for that.

Because my mother dragged me around with her for a month every year, I know all the dissidents in the movement, I know where everyone lives, I know their disguises, and I know their fake names. I know everything. If I'm captured by the DPS, I won't be able to keep that information from them. Even though I hate most of the dissidents, I don't want to be the one who gets them killed. That's why I always have to be doing something – listening to music, studying, playing games against the computer – anything to keep my mind from thinking about how I'll disgrace my grandmother's name after I'm caught.

So, when my mother gave me a chance to redeem myself with another operation against you, I agreed but only if she'd let me have a kill-me crown for one of my teeth. She was surprised that I knew so much about the movement. My mother said that I can have a fake crown if the operation against you succeeds. Will, I had to do this to you in order to save other people's lives.

I was supposed to lure you away from the graduation site with the damsel in distress ploy. I watched you spying on Gary, Rick and Abby and knew that you had caught on to them. When I saw the way that you set up the lures, I figured you would escape. But, when you took forever to pick up your second pack at the cache, it looked like you were going to make camp there. You were running out of time so I scrapped the Damsel in Distress plan and let you find me. I've been winging it ever since which is one of the reasons I've been so edgy. You are a very difficult person to deceive. You could have discovered the real me the time I scraped my leg. I knew that my white skin was exposed so I couldn't let you see me bandaging myself.

My mother's operation against you had only one goal: prevent the DPS from using you. However, I had two options. The first was to recruit you to work for us. My mother knew that once you found out what we really wanted from you, you'd probably resist but she'd get you to cooperate with us. She never told me how and I didn't want to know.

My mother described what I had to do to seal the deal as she said. I told her that I didn't want to do that, but she said that if I wanted to be the dissident leader, I'd have to make sacrifices just like she had to. She wants me to be the leader because she doesn't want someone with the wrong skin colour to be the leader. There aren't that many pure white woman left in Alberta, so that's why she's giving me another chance. That's not why I want to be the dissident leader.

My mother said that you'd be unable to control your emotions without your brain-band and all I had to do was find an excuse to take off my clothes in front of you. Then, I was to let you do whatever you wanted to do with me. I knew my mother and my cousin would be watching from the woods. They'd know if I backed out.

That's why I took off some of my clothes. I knew you wouldn't peek or come down to the lake because you had promised. But I had to convince my mother that I had tried so that she'd give me the fake crown. Will, thank you for not looking today. Thank you for not coming to the lake. I only checked on you to make you angry. I knew you wouldn't break your promise.

Chapter 15

From Will's journals: July 10, 2081.

I started reading Izzy's letter the morning after she told me to run. I was almost finished when I heard some copter noises and had to scuttle into some underbrush in case it flew overhead. It didn't, but I realized that I had to get further into the wilderness while I had the chance. I returned to her letter that night, after I was safely hidden up a tree on some deserted mountain side. Here's what she wrote.

#

Will, if I couldn't recruit you, my second option was to kill you. That was not my idea! It was my creepy cousin's idea. He's the leader of the Radical Militants and the second most influential person in the movement after my mother. He wants to kill you because when you learn new things in your woodcraft courses, you give the DPS new tactics for tracking us or invading our territory. If they ever learn about your sky-rope, that will mean our end. I had already grabbed a piece before I swore to you that I wouldn't steal any. If you remember, I said "from this date until the moment you decide to ditch me," so technically, that wasn't a lie. But, I did deceive you. I feel bad about that.

I had to feed you poison because my mother and cousin didn't think I'd have the nerve to use a weapon. They didn't even trust me to mix the poison properly. They put it in a special dry food mix. I'm writing this letter before supper, but the poisoned food is cooking now. I'll be able to prove that I had the meal ready as ordered. But, I'm going to pick a fight with you, and find a way to kick the pot over, and then get you to choke me unconscious before escaping. My mom and my cousin will see that I tried to poison you but you were too smart and too strong for me. That's why you had to leave a mark on my face. That's why I had to have your skin under my fingernails.

I didn't agree to be part of this operation only to get my suicide crown. I had another reason too. Will, I hate the IOF. You haven't been out in the villages of Alberta, but I have. Nobody has anything to be happy about. People do not have children that they can love. They have boring jobs because the IOF doesn't want

anyone learning anything that could be used to overthrow them. Very few people know about good literature, poetry, or theatre. They watch old flicks because nobody has the emotions necessary to create new art. People's eyes are dull; their faces are dull; their lives are dull. In time, they start inhaling more and more of the artificial brain chemicals that make life tolerable. Then, they become addicted. I hate the IOF. I hate them. I have to fight them.

But Will, the dissidents are violent, bigoted wackos who measure success by the amount of DPS blood that they spill. I couldn't fight the IOF that way. People are more scared of the dissidents than they are of the IOF. I want to show the dissidents that there's another way that we can fight the IOF. The second reason why I agreed to go against you was so that they'd let me have my own operation. If I succeed with that, I'll be allowed to try other operations that don't start and end with bloodshed.

I had two very good reasons to trap you, Will. Are you wondering why I couldn't?

I started the operation determined to hate you. It was very important to me that I hated you. So, I thought of you as a thing – a robot that had been pre-programmed to harm not only the dissidents but also everybody else imprisoned in the IOF. Since you weren't human, I was able to convince myself that what I was going to do to you was justified. But, I couldn't hate you after the night you lost it. Do you remember that night? Probably not all of it. I do.

I didn't know at the time what caused you to go crazy. It was the day after you had hidden your brain-band, backpack, clothes and other things in order to trick Rick into revealing the bugs. I knew that the bug was in the brain-band, but you obviously suspected that there was more than one bug. Smart.

You were lounging around your camp and then you became all agitated and started cursing at the IOF. You were swearing and bawling all at the same time when you started punching your pack. You punched it and kicked it and bawled and swore, but it wasn't enough. You decided to take on a tree. You reminded me so much of me – minus the tree – that I ended up bawling too. I couldn't let you keep hitting it. So, I slid out of my pit, tackled you from behind, and knocked you to the ground. We had our first wrestling fight that night, Will, only you don't remember it. Your eyes were wild – you couldn't see me, I'm sure. I know some sleeper holds, and after you wore off some of your panic, I managed to get one on you.

I knew that you were finding it difficult to cope with new emotions without your brain-band, but there was obviously something really wrong. You had been raving about your pinky computer, so I figured you thought it might be bugged. I dragged you to the creek, soaked your hands in the cold water, and managed to get it off before your pinky knuckle swelled up too much. I let you sleep for a bit, and then dragged you back into the clearing, and left it on the ground next to you. I'm sorry about scratching your face during the fight. I didn't mean to.

Afterwards, I knew I couldn't hate you. You were too much like me. It would be like killing or kidnapping myself. I just couldn't do it. When I found out that you were as scared of the DPS as I am – and for exactly the same reason – I knew I had to help you escape my trap without getting shot by my cousin.

When we had our argument about being weird two days ago, I wasn't mad at you. I was mad because two kids couldn't be real kids without being considered

weird. Then, when you said that you could have strangled me when you were mad, I realized I had a way out. I was so relieved to have found a way for you to escape my trap that I forced you to have fun with me yesterday. I hope you don't mind. I wanted one day that I could remember you without feeling guilty.

So, now you're safe somewhere northwest of this camp. Remember, don't trust the dissidents, Will. They'll have your picture. They'll kill you on sight. You can't trust the DPS either. They may not kill you immediately, but their efforts to erase what you've learned may fry your brain. Then, they'll kill you. You may be able to get some help from people who don't like the IOF but be careful. Paid DPS informants are in all the cities and even in the smaller towns.

Me, I'm not likely to be blamed for letting you get away. I think we put on a pretty good show. Thank you, Will. Thank you. Tomorrow night, every moderate dissident I've been able to recruit will break into an empty DPS offices and take every bot or scrap of paper that we can find that will give us insight into their operations. Tonight, my cousin, my mother and I will travel northeast. Tomorrow night, I'll lead the raid on Edmonton's DPS headquarters.

If these raids work, I'll have credibility with the dissidents. I may be able to convince them that there are other ways to gain an advantage against a superior foe. All my military strategy course work and years of playing chess against a computer may finally pay off. I'll have to marry my cousin, but not until I'm eighteen. My mother says that we have to join our forces together again. Doc says that my cousin and I are too closely related. My mother doesn't care so long as my babies are white. I've gone along with it because my cousin will agree to me being the leader if my operation works. My grandmother made a sacrifice. I can too.

I know that I'm just buying some time. I'll try to change things, but we don't have many thinkers left. At some point I'll be caught by the DPS. That's when I'll crunch down on my fake crown. At least I'll die without your blood on my hands.

As you know, Rick works for a Z. The Z is persistent, powerful, and ruthless. He's the one who invented the brain-band. He's the one who orders people to be disappeared. Rick isn't allowed to make you disappear because the Z wants you to invent things for him. The job offer the DPS sent you was his first attempt. It won't be his last. If he can't get you to work willingly, he will wipe your memories and get you that way. Be careful. He's as smart as you are. He doesn't know about your sky-rope so you have to keep that a secret. I promise that I won't tell anyone about it. Yesterday, I had us carry our packs into camp on our backs so that the dissidents wouldn't learn about it.

I can't tell you much more about him. Only people like Rick can identify him. He lives in a fortress in Edmonton and apparently never comes out. He is the most feared and hated person in the IOF. His official title is Director and Chief Research Officer of the DPS. His name is Zzyk.

Your friend (I hope)
Melissa

#

I knew something that Izzy didn't. I knew that Zzyk liked to have his nails manicured and that he wore fine clothes. I also knew what he looked like because he had visited me every year on my birthday.

Chapter 16

From Will's journals: July 31, 2081.

After three weeks of aimless wandering, I settled into a secluded campsite in the mountains near a small town called Rocky Mountain House. When I wasn't hunting or fishing, I would read Izzy's course bots. One time, I looked up the poem that Izzy had recommended – I know why the caged bird sings.

It was about two birds. One was flying in the wind; the other was in a cage. The one flying in the wind thought about fat worms but the poet didn't mention it singing at all. It just thought about flying in different kinds of breezes. Birds sing all the time, so perhaps this one had been injured or something. Perhaps by another bird?

The one in the cage could sing so loud that it could be heard on far away hills. It must have been a very good singer. The poet said it sang that loud because it was in a cage. That may have been because it was happy that it was safe from attack from other birds.

I don't think that a poet would make a very good scientist. It was really hard to understand what she was trying to tell me. Plus, there wasn't any information on the birds at all. Nothing on colouring, size, or where they lived. I wished that the poet had told me what kind of bird the loud singer was. I could have looked up its song.

#

From Izzy's journals: July 31, 2081.

Dear mother had watched my fight with Will and congratulated me on my bloody claws. I was awarded a suicide crown in spite of him escaping and I slid it into my mouth before she could change her mind. I made sure that its trigger point was on the inside of my jaw, as everyone with a fake crown was required to do.

Clem complained that he had come all this way to bag a Z-boy and all he had caught was a drippy nose. Clem the phlegm. Dear mother tried to catch the *brown-boy* in the copter but somehow got the idea that he was heading northeast into the open plains; go figure.

The Edmonton operation was a bust right from the very beginning. Instead of my team of moderates meeting me in Edmonton, Phlegm's militant buddies were there. Apparently, Phlegm had decided to help me on my little project; husband and wife togetherness was important to him. I suggested that it would be safer if

only one person made the entry. Namely me. I was overruled. Phlegm was along to protect his little lady. Aarggggh!

Dear mother was able to bring the short-bladed copter close enough to the building for me to jump to a window ledge. I scaled the wall to the roof where I found one dozing sentry. I put a sleeper hold on him and waved the copter in. Phlegm cut the sleeping sentry's throat. **Why?**

The roof gave us access to the building's air ducts and, from there, to removable ceiling tiles. I found the data storage computers in two large unguarded rooms on the top floor. The computers in the first room held only statistical data so I went back to the air ducts and dropped down through the ceiling tiles into the second room. Phlegm and his panting horde were getting antsy; wouldn't wait in the ducts; followed me noisily into the second room.

I hit gold! The first computer I tried was full of management level files. I felt my way from one computer to the next, turning each on and putting out some storage bots for copying. Phlegm began pressuring me to hurry so I explained that I had to go slowly in the dark so not to make noise; gleeping idiot turned on the lights to help me.

Sirens shrieked; computers died; elevators made cranking noises. "Get the computers going," Phlegm yelled.

"I can't; I have no power!" I yelled back.

"What's your backup plan?" he asked.

I had no backup plan for losing power. I didn't think anyone would be idiotic enough to turn on a light in a guarded building that we were breaking into. Phlegm backhanded me twice across my face for not having a backup plan in case my operation was destroyed by his terminal stupidity. He and his buddies headed to the hallway, almost peeing their pants in anticipation of being able to make boom-boom noises.

I found Phlegm dropping grenades down the elevator shafts while his buddies were similarly engaged at the stairwell. I brought him back to the computer room, pointed to the outside wall, and asked if he could blow a hole in it; told him why. He sent a Phlegm wannabee to do the job.

I humped the computers to the gaping hole in the wall while the Phlegm wannabee fired rockets into cars on the street below. I told him that these were most likely civilian cars but he ignored me. Wannabee ran out of rockets about the time dear mother arrived. She brought the copter as close as possible and I jumped in. Turning to face the building, I held out my hands in a catching position. "The computers," I yelled at Wannabee. His eyes got wide and then he used my precious computers to bomb more cars.

I put my head into my hands; wondered if Wannabee would make good bomb too; probably wouldn't fall; air in head would make him float.

Phlegm and his buddies arrived to find me already in the copter with my head in my hands, shaking in rage. They assumed that I was a cowering coward.

"She had no back-up plan," Phlegm told dear mother on the flight back to camp.

"She didn't help with the defense," he told dear mother.

"She was a mouthy bitch too," Phlegm told dear mother.

"She always was mouthy," dear mother said.

"She was too frightened to fight," Phlegm told dear mother.

“She’s been a coward from the age of four,” she said.

Phlegm patted dear mother on her back to console her.

Back at base, only Doc would talk to me. All the other operations I had planned retrieved lots of data. However, since no computers were blown up, since no unconscious sentries were killed, and since no civilian cars were flattened, the camp concluded that those operations were a failure too. The bots of information my team stole from the DPS offices never made it to base camp – so said Phlegm.

I was brought along when dear mother and Phlegm made their victorious tour of the camps. Phlegm and dear mother sat at the front of the room. Phlegm gave a rousing description of dear mother coming to our rescue; also gave rousing description of how he had destroyed an entire floor of invaluable equipment and data; didn’t say that the operation was to obtain information, not destroy; didn’t say that the DPS would replace computers within hours; didn’t say that the DPS would have backup data loaded into new computers in hours; didn’t say that we’d never get a chance at stealing these data again. However, Phlegm did say that dear mother had proclaimed him as the movement’s next leader.

Dear mother pointed to me in the back of the room, made me stand up, and introduced me as the next leader’s fiancé. Lots of white children were promised. People looked and pointed at the coward with the white skin and red hair.

Doc said Phlegm wasn’t that stupid. Had to agree; hindsight wonderful. Phlegm took over the dissident movement's leadership without breaking a sweat.

#

From Will’s journals: August 31, 2081.

Although I had a safe base camp, I realized that I wouldn’t be able to handle two large packs if I ever had to leave quickly. The sky-rope was much more difficult to use without Izzy to help. The biggest problem was that it had to be attached to two trees. I thought that it would be a lot better if I could get a rigid piece of the sky-rope carrying my packs to move through the air on its own. It would mean no more shooting trees; no more loading and unloading packs.

It took most of August, but I finally got it to work. I built a field around the filament that would push against the Earth’s gravitational field. If I calibrated it just right, the filament would hover in the air. With a stronger field, it would hover higher. A weaker field – lower. To make it move forwards or backwards, I changed the density of the field at the two ends. Reversing the polarity in gradual increments would make it turn. I made a back pack carrier so strong that I could load everything I owned on one six foot, triple width filament and walk with my packs floating beside me as though they were on a leash.

After that, I wondered why I had to walk. Turns out, I didn’t have to. I could load the packs on the filament, get it hovering in the air, step aboard, and move slowly through the air. The problem was that I kept falling off. So, I built two parallel filaments, hooked a solid platform of branches onto the two pieces, and then it was much more stable. I could get it going pretty fast too. I called it my Sky-Surfer, because I could stand up on my platform and surf through the sky if I ever wanted to do anything that dangerous.

#

From Izzy's journals: August 31, 2081.

I forced myself to endure Phlegm's victory tour because I wanted to talk privately with the people who had raided the DPS offices; all assured me that they had sent their bots of stolen data to base camp. I thought that I would just conduct my own private search. The camp's storeroom was locked and only Phlegm and dear mother had keys.

Camps were full of rumours that since we had lost a lot of men recently, the leadership would loosen the one husband-one wife rule in order to increase our population. Phlegm told me that he and dear mother were considering a number of options. Tried to verify if that were true; dear mother just lay in her bed; wouldn't talk; had vacant look in her eyes.

One of our itinerant teachers disappeared this month; big loss. Phlegm declared that education was too important to lose; announced that a school would be set up at our base camp; children would be safer here; four orphans would form our first class. Phlegm ordered a girl's dorm to be built.

I asked about a boy's dorm; was told that only girls would be coming to the camp's school; boys would receive military training in satellite camps instead of education.

Phlegm was worried that I didn't have enough to keep me busy; said I would be a good teacher. I suggested Doc would be better. Phlegm said I was being selfish putting a heavy load on an old man. I should put all my schooling to some use; people were talking about how I wasn't supporting the cause.

Four recently orphaned girls aged 10 – 13 arrived. I did what I could to teach them. All were emotional basket cases.

Phlegm and dear mother announced their marriage ruling. Given strong support from all camps, henceforth, men would be allowed to have more than one wife. Doc objected but was told that the ruling had already been made. Doc raised concerns of risk of coercion. "How can doing something that is good for the movement be coercion?" Phlegm asked.

Two new orphans arrived at the school; twelve and thirteen-years old. They came from two different supremacist families. Four parents had disappeared within a week of each other!

#

From Will's journals: September 9, 2081.

Cleaning camp is a mindless activity, so I was mostly just daydreaming about the time that Izzy had made me do the dishes. She had warned that she'd supervise me closely, but it was only pretend. Every time I had glanced up from the pot of sudsy water, she was looking at me through her scope. She'd waggle her fingers at me, and I'd wave back and hold up the plate for inspection. One time I pretended to hide behind a plate, and she laughed and said that wasn't going to work. She could still see me.

After I had finished the chores, I remembered her using a cable to do a free-fall descent from her hammock to the ground. We were going to play chess. She had to bang on my head with a pot to get my attention because I was thinking about... I was thinking about constructing an entire hammock out of my filament. Now, I had something interesting to do.

First, I built the basic shape of a hammock with thin filaments. Then, because I didn't have any fabric over them, I created a field around the filaments that would allow me to lounge inside the hammock without actually touching the filaments. Essentially, I used a version of the gravitational field I had built for my sky-surfer but made it into a flexible shape. When I had finished the filament hammock, I didn't have to attach it to a tree. I could get it floating in the air at knee level, climb in, and propel it as high in the air as I wanted with a simple thought command. That naturally led to another set of fields to make it fly through the air. That was cool. Lying on my back in my hammock, looking up at the stars, and flying soundlessly through the air. I couldn't think of it as a hammock any more. Hammocks are for sleeping in. This was going to be my sky-sling.

I was testing the sky-sling, thinking that Izzy would enjoy flying like a bird. That made me think about the poem that Izzy had liked – the one about the caged bird. I had stored it away in my brain, so I brought it back up to my vision field. Reading it again made me think that a similar poem could be written about the IOF citizens. We weren't actually doing any singing and we weren't actually birds. Plus, we didn't have any clipped wings or tied feet, and we didn't think of worms. But, we all were like the bird in the poem. We were caged by the IOF and our feet were tied by our brain-bands, and in our minds, perhaps we were dreaming about freedom even though we might not know that was what we were doing. I wondered if the poet realized that some of her poem could be applied to humans as well as to birds. Probably not. She was pretty fixated on describing how loud the bird sang.

I did look up the concept of freedom, though. Eventually, I did a full search through all of Izzy's bots for anything to do with freedom. I found some interesting writers who made me think a lot.

#

From Izzy's journals: September 9, 2081.

I couldn't shake the creepy feelings I got whenever Phlegm was around. He had eyes like a snake; always furtive and shifty. Doc had the same feeling. Phlegm had never been concerned about education before so why was he bringing orphan girls into camp now?

Doc also wondered about Phlegm's plan for multiple wives. He said Phlegm's buddies were licking their lips. Myself, I wondered why Phlegm would not want me to see the bots of information that had been stolen from the DPS.

I had lots of questions, but no answers. But, I did have my collapsible scope. It would be good for the dissident movement if I kept my spy-craft skills sharp, right?

I spent two nights watching guys getting drunk in the woods. Ugh! Not my favorite form of entertainment. Tonight's party was no better; couldn't stop my

mind from wandering. Using the scope reminded me of the time that I had watched Will washing dishes. I didn't care about clean plates; was looking at Will. He had nice eyes; kind eyes; not snake eyes.

I came back to the present when Phlegm left his carousing buddies and slipped into camp. He took excessive precautions even though the camp was in its customary blackout. Phlegm opened the locked storeroom, stayed inside for a few minutes, and then returned to the woods. The merriment resumed; but not the drinking. What did you just take out of the storeroom, Phlegm?

We had several small storage areas in camp, but only the main storeroom was restricted. Supposedly, it held sensitive files as well as anything scarce that might have to be rationed. It would be good for the movement if I made sure the storeroom was burglar proof, right?

The storeroom was a big, windowless, log cabin. The single door was the only possible entrance and it was secured with a heavy-duty padlock. I didn't know how to pick a lock; however, I did know that dear mother was a sound sleeper.

I waited for Phlegm and his buddies to retire for the night because I didn't want to be in the storeroom if Phlegm returned for more of whatever he had taken out. The padlock was well oiled and opened silently; obviously, Phlegm didn't want to be discovered opening that lock in the middle of the night either. I wedged the door shut and waited for my eyes to adjust, but even then, I couldn't see a thing. I put my pinky-computer light at a medium setting, left it inside, and stepped outside. A storeroom built of logs was bound to have some chinks. I ended up applying a few mud seals, but in the end, felt comfortable turning my light up high enough to be able to see the details of the storeroom's interior.

Wooden crates were stacked head high along each wall. Careful to avoid any noise, I chose a stack, lifted the top crate down very carefully, and emptied about half of it onto the floor. When I had seen enough to determine that it held no bots, or other potentially incriminating DPS evidence, I repacked the crate and repeated the process with the next.

It was very slow going as I wanted to scan all the paper files and there were tons of minutes, resolutions, declarations of resistance, etc. along with personal papers. After two hours, I had found nothing of importance. I made two clay impressions of dear mother's key, returned it to her cabin, and had two hours of sleep in mine. Since I could only search the storeroom when I was sure Phlegm was sleeping, I'd have to space this out or I'd become exhausted. It would be good for the movement if Phlegm made another inspirational tour of the satellite camps, right?

Chapter 17

From Will's journals: September 16, 2081.

Flying around in my sky-sling was a little breezy with no fabric skin to deflect the wind. It got positively cold at any kind of altitude or at any slight speed. So, I started looking for a way to insulate it.

I didn't have any fabric that I could use to cover the sling. I had some clothes, but none that I wanted to rip up. I had a tent, but I didn't want to risk it on an experiment that might not work.

My second thought was to make a filament lid that I could close over the bottom. Then, all I would have to do is create a field that kept the air from rushing in. Since I was totally enclosed, my body heat would make it quite toasty. That was fine in theory.

I needed all of my remaining filament for fishing and other essentials, so I had to rebuild the whole sling to get enough for the lid. When I was finished, the sling was big enough for me and my packs, but not much else. Since the sling was so compact, it built up heat quickly. I needed to let a little air in, but not too much when I was flying. I needed to let the inside air out when I was immobile, otherwise I'd end up inside a misted balloon. The thermostat function took several days to calibrate.

When I was done, I could wear a tight filament covering that allowed me to fly in any physical position I wanted. I could be standing up and fly straight up for as long as I wanted – theoretically speaking of course. The sling slowed down as I reached the higher altitudes because I was getting further away from the Earth's gravity. Plus, it was harder to breath and it certainly got cold, but I could cruise comfortably at any height in the lower atmosphere that I wanted. I could be standing up; sitting down; face down on my stomach, or even upside down.

Flying upside down gave me the idea to try to duplicate some of the entertainment rides that kids my age had had in the Unfair Society. These were little cars that ran at high speed on narrow rails that went up and down and around in the air. The intent I think was to make kids throw-up although I never did see any pictures of them doing that. The pictures I saw always showed them smiling and laughing. So, I built all those kinds of movements into a program I called *Upchuck* – the idea being to see if I could have the same kind of fun that they appeared to be having.

I defined a five-kilometer cube of sky that would be remote enough, and high enough, that nobody could see me. Then, I programmed the sky-sling so that it would not leave those boundaries. I started with a speed of fifty kph, which turned out to be pretty tame – I guess because I had such a wide area of sky to play in. So, I upped the speed and randomized the sling's movements it so that I couldn't anticipate what was going to happen. Of course I had to field test my invention. I field-tested it a lot.

My most recent version of *Upchuck* flies me between 100 kph and 300 kph, straight up or straight down, or in a series of tight circles, in various kinds of loops, or right-side up or upside down, or in a rotational spin, or in a longitudinal tumble – all of this in the middle of a pitch-black sky. Now, THAT'S exciting. I haven't christened the interior of the sky-sling with the name of the program yet, but I've had to build in a *Stop flying if I lose consciousness* command.

#

From Izzy's journals: September 16, 2081.

Doc told Phlegm that he had heard rumours of women being pressured to become second wives and that he was planning some trips to the camps to verify if such was the case. Nobody would like that; Doc was too valuable to lose. Phlegm ordered an investigation and took dear mother with him. I had a clay copy of her storeroom key in my pocket just in case she lost hers on the trip.

Doc took over my class after I developed a potentially contagious stomach problem. Everyone gave my cabin a wide berth after they thought they saw me upchucking in front of it.

I found Phlegm's stash on my first day of searching. From what I had seen of the carousing nights, I figured it was an oral form of brain pleasure chemical, but of course the nondescript container didn't come with a label.

Confirming that Phlegm had some unknown substance hidden in the storehouse raised two questions. Dissidents have very little cash; we use the barter system to obtain supplies from friendly citizens; so, who was supplying the powder and what was Phlegm trading for it?

On the fourth day, I found a complete roster of Alberta's dissidents. The list contained their location, marriage status, and number of children along with everyone's real names, ages and physical descriptions. The information had been prepared within the last 6 months. Something this sensitive should never have been put on paper.

The missing DPS bots turned up on the fifth days. I made copies and returned the originals to their hiding place. I found nothing of any importance after that. Phlegm was bound to get suspicious of me sooner or later, so I made sure that I left the storeroom as I had found it and buried my key in the woods. I didn't want Phlegm pawing through my clothes, but other than that, I didn't care what he found or what he did in my cabin. Thinking that he might wonder what had happened to my music collection, I spent a day downloading. Hello Sonny; hello Cher; welcome home.

Two days before Phlegm was due to return, I put my life back to normal – teaching during the day and spending the evenings with Doc. Sort of. I spent most of my evenings in the clinic's back room pouring through tons of data from six different DPS offices. In time, I might find it useful; fortunately, I had plenty of time.

#

From Will's journals: September 23, 2081.

I now had a sky-sling that allowed me to fly in comfort while I read a bot or listened to music. If I wanted to move my camp, I could load everything and be off in less than fifteen-minutes. For faster travel without luggage, I could use the smaller sky-surfer. However, at high speed or high altitude, the sky surfer got quite cold, so I decided to save it for hauling luggage until I could make more filament to cover it.

I kept remembering Izzy's comment about IOF citizens being unhappy. Here I was living contentedly with my full set of emotions. I think I had them pretty much under control. I did feel a little guilty about being able to live with emotions when nobody else could – I hadn't learned to control that guilt yet. But, I didn't have any great fits of anger anymore – probably because Izzy wasn't around to provoke me. Unfortunately, without Izzy, I didn't have to worry about being too happy either. My high-speed rides in my sky-sling were exciting at first, but after a while, my days became quite monotonous. I tried inventing some riddles, but asking yourself riddles doesn't work when you've written them yourself. I tried playing NASA to Z-man, but that doesn't work by yourself either.

I decided to see for myself if what Izzy had said about the people was true. I was old enough for my whiskers to appear and I was trying to grow a beard. It looked real scraggly – but that didn't matter because it changed the outline of my face. Everyone would know I was just a young kid, so a scraggly beard was part of the territory. I cut my hair almost completely off, leaving myself only a centimeter or two. Izzy's fake brain-band fit perfectly against my skull. I looked quite presentable, and nothing at all like the real me. I thought about changing the shape of my nose like Izzy had done, but didn't have to. My nose looked like a thousand other noses. When I put on some old clothes, I found that I had bulked up a bit and may have even grown a bit. I might be taller than Izzy now. Again, this was enough of a difference to disguise me some more.

I did a test flight one night to see how fast my sky-sling could go. Obviously, all of my flights had to be by night. People might talk about seeing a kid flying through the air. I looked up the distance between Rocky Mountain House and Edmonton on one of Izzy's geography bots. About 160 kilometers if I flew there directly. So, I took my sky-sling up to high altitude, put the fields on maximum and let it loose. The trip took about ten-minutes but the ski-sling was bucking the whole way. I realized that I had been approaching the speed of sound, which was probably not a good thing to do what with the sonic boom I would create. On the way back, I dialed it back, arrived in twenty-minutes and it was a much more comfortable flight. Now that I could travel in comfort anywhere I chose, all I had to do was decide where I wanted to go.

#

From Izzy's journals: September 23, 2081.

Phlegm returned from another victorious tour of the camps to announce that he had found no evidence of any pressure on women to marry against their will. As proof, several buddies even came back with soon-to-be second wives. Their first wives weren't particularly overjoyed; they weren't expecting this kind of "Honey, I'm back!" gift.

Doc objected to the lack of prior discussion between married couples but ruled that the first wife didn't have a right to know in advance. What a man talked about with a second wife was privileged information between him and that second wife. Doc tried to involve dear mother figuring that a radical feminist would have

something pungent to say. Dear mother was passed out in her cabin; couldn't be roused; Doc moved her into the clinic.

When Doc refused to conduct second-wife marriages, Phlegm appointed Wannabee as the new marriage maker. As his first act, Wannabee married himself to a seventeen year old; then he married the other second wives to his buddies.

Little Patty spilled the beans about my lengthy illness. Phlegm acted concerned. How long was I away from school? How did I feel now? Was I bored spending all that time by myself with nothing to do? I heard in my head the soft rattle of a snake's tail. Leaving my students unsupervised for a bit would be a good way to promote responsibility, right?

Phlegm didn't make me watch him for long. My scope gave me a safe view of him sauntering over to the storage cabin and examining its exterior. He checked the padlock, entered, came out after a couple of minutes, strolled over to Wannabee's cabin, and disappeared inside. After a couple of minutes, Phlegm reappeared, resumed his nonchalant pose, and strolled into the woods. What gave him away was Wannabee's big gawky body loping along behind, his head on a swivel like a chicken looking for an axe. Like that wouldn't be noticed?

With Wannabee clearly acting like a watchdog, make that a watch-chicken, it was obvious that Phlegm had something in the woods that he didn't want revealed. He couldn't have found any evidence of my presence in the storeroom – I had even removed the mud plaster I had stuffed into the chinks between the logs. However, Phlegm was worried enough about my extended illness to not only check the storeroom but to also take a guarded trip into the woods.

I waited at least a full minute before taking the well-worn path to the women's privies. These were in the opposite direction from Phlegm's jaunt in the woods. With no risk of Wannabee being able to see me, I slipped into the trees behind the privies and ran to a vantage point that I thought would give me a view of Phlegm's possible destination. No such luck. I searched for a while and found lots of tracks, but they could have been anyone's so I returned to the privies. Wannabee's dozy wife came out as I arrived, gave me a cold stare, and took the trail to her cabin.

Stupid, stupid, stupid!!! Me, not her.

That night, I found a DPS file that revealed five years of payments for *Services rendered*. The person receiving the payment, the amount that was paid, and the type of service that was rendered were coded. Such secrecy was quite unusual for DPS offices that apparently identified and recorded the minutest detail of their business operations. The file had been stolen from the DPS office closest to our base camp.

Several days later, I returned from school to find that my room had been searched. The search had been very careful; not careful enough.

#

From Will's journals: September 30, 2081.

I was hovering in my sky-sling over a remote lake. I hadn't decided where to set up my permanent camp yet because building up my food supply before winter was more important. Before inventing the sky-sling, I had gathered only enough food

for a day or two. But now, I could catch a month's supply of food, pop over to the top of a nearby mountain, and let it freeze. I had four filaments with worm-laden hooks trailing in the water as my sky-sling trolled above the lake in a pre-programmed route. I wasn't paying too much attention to fishing.

I was tired of hiding from the DPS. Hiding wasn't going to change anything. Sooner or later, I'd get sloppy and they'd catch me. So, perhaps I should make their life miserable first. The problem was: I didn't know how to make their life miserable. That's when the phrase Know your enemy popped into my mind. I had read that phrase in one of Izzy's course bots weeks ago, but hadn't thought much about it. So, I retrieved Izzy's courses on military science and I was studying them while I fished.

One thing I realized right away was that Izzy had used military strategy when we had played our really long chess game. When I play chess, I build my offense slowly, moving pieces into positions that do not appear immediately threatening. Then, I move a single, innocuous little piece to trigger a trap. Since I plan eight to ten plays in advance, I am able to disguise my moves so that the trap is unexpected. I had just naturally assumed that my opponent was doing the same. Now I understood from what Izzy had said about me being smart, that this hadn't been the case. In effect, I had always won because I could plan into the future further than my opponent.

But, when I played Izzy, she didn't let me build up any overwhelming force so that I could trap her. Instead, just as I was getting my pieces in place, her queen would go on a solo run down an unguarded column of the board. It would look like a sacrifice play, but after I analyzed it, I could see that with a little support from other pieces, she could threaten my entire back row. I had to move some pieces back to prevent that, but I couldn't relocate only a few pieces without leaving my forward positions exposed. I had to re-deploy my entire offense. I'd just get back into an impregnable defense when she'd remove her queen and I'd have to start all over again.

It took me hours to beat Izzy because she kept on finding a weakness on my board where I was vulnerable to that single powerful, sudden stroke. Now that I looked back on it, Izzy probably had been doing to me what she wanted the dissidents to do to the DPS. In our chess game, she had used a powerful, mobile piece to threaten a much larger, but slower force. That was a strategy that I could use against the DPS because I was now a mobile opponent. So, I was reading all about military strategy and thinking how I could use it to fight the DPS. I was also thinking how nice it would be to have another chess game with Izzy.

Sure, Izzy could be aggravating. But, that was when she had been scared, and I had been scared too. I thought we might actually be able to get along now that we knew each other better. I didn't like arguing with her, but I did enjoy having fun with her. That got me humming a Sonny and Cher song, so I put one of Izzy's music bots into my scalp plug and just let my mind drift along for a while. Izzy had given me not only all of her course bots, but all of her music bots too, which I thought was very nice of her because they meant a lot to her.

Izzy had done something that nobody had ever done before. Not any of the other students in my dorm, not my instructors, not my brain-band programmer, not my

childcare attendant, not even my volunteer-parents. She had touched me with her hand.

You see, nobody touched anyone in the IOF. At least kids didn't. I didn't know about adults. We were taught that each person had a private space around him or her, and you mustn't invade that space. You might brush somebody's hand when you were passing food, but other than those kinds of necessary contacts, our brain-bands made sure that we didn't touch each other.

Izzy was different. Not that she touched me a lot. She had touched my face when she was whispering to me in her pit, but she was sort of forced to do that because we were crammed in a tight space. She touched my face when we were hanging from a tree and had to talk quietly. She slapped me on the back when she told me she had gone crazy over chocolate too. She had held my arms a couple of times when we were arguing – just to calm me down. She touched me, and I touched her, when we were doing the hip-check game. Also, the *Oops, you tripped* game. We touched each other a lot when we were play wrestling. That made me remember of our last wrestling fight and I knew that I had to get that picture out of my mind, so I thought about her two best touches: when she put her arms around my waist and told me she had had a good day; and when she kissed me on the lips when I took my new name.

I was thinking about those touches when my sky-sling rocked in the air. A flock of Canada Geese was landing on my lake. One of them had bumped into my sky-sling and was wheeling away squawking like mad.

Blind geese, if there were any such animals, would not survive for long in the wild. They certainly wouldn't be able to fly. Therefore, that irritated goose was not blind.

#

From Izzy's journals: September 30, 2081.

Dear mother still ill; Doc found evidence of brain-chemical poisoning.

Early in the week, camp sentries reported possible intruders in the area. Phlegm took decisive action in face of this threat by banning all travel to satellite camps and ordering all non-military personnel confined to the main, fortified compound. I hadn't realized Phlegm cared so much about my safety. Doc said that sarcasm wasn't attractive on me; then, we laughed. I had learned sarcasm from Doc.

Phlegm's fake intruder ploy wasn't only to keep me out of the woods; it was also a follow-up to dear mother's poisoning. Phlegm asked dear mother in a council meeting what would have happened if a more serious threat had emerged when she was ill? He wouldn't have had the authority to act! Dear mother gave Phlegm full decision-making authority. I had underestimated Phlegm again.

Phlegm struck again a few days later. He told dear mother that he was concerned that those possible intruders could have lead to deaths in his militia. He wanted to leave a child behind if he had to give his life for the movement. Dear mother praised his nobility; said that he wouldn't have to wait until I was eighteen; moved marriage up to October 21st – three weeks from now!!!

Doc complained about the wedding date at a council meeting; said that fifteen-year old children shouldn't be married. Dear mother said that he wasn't my parent – she was. Doc listed the dangers of cousin-cousin marriages; dear mother said that she didn't care how many two headed monsters I popped out, so long as they weren't brown and weren't cowards. Doc was banned from further executive council meetings for his constant criticism of the executive.

I really appreciated the council members who made a point of passing on what dear mother had said. Doc tried to console me. Dear mother's words didn't make me any sadder; already at max sadness about her; just made me more determined.

I searched though the DPS bots every spare minute I had – analyzing, cross-referencing, and looking for inconsistencies. By the end of September, I had managed to identify the DPS agent who had made the payments to the traitor. All I had was the agent's code name. It wasn't enough yet; not even close.

Only three weeks to the wedding. I shuddered every time I thought of pudgy Phlegm touching me; stored suicide crown in my mouth so that it couldn't be stolen.

Chapter 18

From Will's journals: Sunday, October 1.

The goose bouncing off my sky-sling could mean only one thing. Migration season was in full swing so I gave the hypothesis a good test the next day. Every time a flock of geese approached the lake, I put my sky-sling directly in their flight path. With the lid to the sky-sling closed, the geese either collided with me or came close. With the lid to the sky-sling open, the geese changed their flight path long before they came near. Was geese vision substantially different from human vision? I thought not, but there was a simple test.

I flew into Rocky Mountain House that night. I was dressed in my most presentable clothes in case I was seen. My beard was trimmed – sort of. It's hard to trim tufts of scraggly, curly hair. I hovered the closed sky-sling in various locations, some of them quite busy. Nobody showed any signs of seeing me. In fact, I could speak to someone and they would look around trying to locate the voice.

I had one more test but had to wait for the right conditions. As it got closer to midnight, pedestrians became fewer and fewer. Finally, I saw a man in grubby clothes weaving his way toward me. He'd walk on the sidewalk for a while, trip into the street, trip back onto the sidewalk, and generally stagger his way towards me. I moved so that I was in his view, hovered three feet in the air, and waved my hands. He didn't notice a thing. I opened the lid, his eyes got big, and he collapsed onto the ground in what appeared to be a dead faint. I left him snoring. Interesting!

#

From Izzy's journals: Sunday, October 1, 20 days to the wedding.

By cross-referencing geographical data from two separate bots, I was able to determine that the traitor was in our base camp. I knew in my heart that the traitor was Phlegm, but I had no way to prove it.

I couldn't squeeze any more information out of the bots; didn't know what to do next. What would Will do? I decided to pretend he was here; couldn't do any harm; would make me feel better seeing him even if only in my imagination; wrangled a trip to the woods from my guard.

Wake up, Will. I began throwing clumps of dirt into his sling. That wasn't a particularly nice thing to do, but there were no pinecones where I was sitting.

What do you want now? I put a touch of exasperation in his voice, as though he had been sleeping. Will doesn't wake up in a good mood.

Need your help. Do you mind?

Grumble, grumble... No, that wasn't right. Will wouldn't grumble. He'd be willing to help. Try again.

OK, I'll help you Izzy. Will grabbed a handle attached to his sling and was on the forest floor before I knew it. *I copied your idea, Izzy. I'm working on some other inventions now too.*

There was no point in asking him what those inventions were. I wouldn't know what words to put in his mouth; might as well get right to the point. *I'm in trouble, Will.*

Will got those two cute little creases in his forehead that showed he was thinking. Then, they disappeared. He walked right over to me, pulled me into his arms, and gave me a passionate, searing kiss. While I was lying back in his arms trying to catch my breath, he reached out a hand, grabbed a vine, and we began swinging through the jungle. I could feel the tickle of a beard against my cheek. *What are you doing?* I sighed into his ear.

Taking you away from here.

Whoa! Whoa!! Whoa!!! First, I did not want Will to kiss me. Second, even if I did, and I'm not saying that I did, Will is not the kissing type. Third, I would not be lying back in his arms. I'd be scratching his eyes out. Fourth, where did Tarzan come from? Oh, I remember. Story time in class. OK, that explains that part. New fourth, Will would not have a beard. He didn't even have any whiskers a few months ago. Fifth, I don't like beards. Militants wore beards! Sixth, well sixth was all right. I did want to get away from here but that was impossible. Flying through the air at the end of a vine with Will was impossible too. Get a grip, Izzy! Try again!

Will, I'm in trouble. I need you to help me figure out what to do. I don't want you grabbing and kissing me. No swinging through the jungle at the end of vines either, OK?

There are no vines in Alberta, Izzy, and I'm not the kind of person to be grabbing and kissing you. You're the one who kissed me and you got away with it only because you surprised me. That's a perfect example of you being weird. You're weird, admit it!

Am not!

Are too!

There. That was better.

Will, I know a DPS informant is in our camp. I have DPS records of his existence. I'm sure that it's my fiancé Phlegm, but I can't prove it. I know Phlegm has a stash of banned substance in a storage cabin in camp, but I can't prove that it's his or that he's using it for recreation and for poisoning dear mother. He also has a stash of something, probably DPS money, buried somewhere outside of camp. I don't know where that is. I can't search for it because I have a guard confining me to camp. How do I prove Phlegm's the informant?

Will got these two cute little creases... Get a grip, Izzy!

Will looked up at me with two disgusting furrows in his face. You can't formulate a course of action when you don't have enough data, Izzy. You need to find out more about Phlegm. Try to predict what he's going to do next; then, slowly but surely set a trap for him so that you can get that information without him finding out.

Thanks, Will.

Don't bother me again.

He wouldn't say that. Would he?

"Who wouldn't say what?" Wannabee was leaning up against a tree, looking at me with this bored look on his ugly face. "Why were you throwing all those mud clumps around?"

"Just day-dreaming. I like sitting in the forest."

"Clem won't like you being outside of camp. We have to go back now."

"You don't have to guard me all the time."

"Clem says you're his little woman. DPS would go after his woman. He's not going to let that happen. Clem says you should get used to seeing me around a lot."

#

From Will's journals: Sunday, October 8.

I had spent a couple of days getting used to being invisible in my sky-sling. I practiced walking and running through the woods in it, I practiced escapes, and I even tried swimming in it. It felt weird swimming without getting wet.

Last Friday, I went back to Rocky Mountain House and practiced moving around in the daytime. I had to make sure that I was invisible in bright sunlight. Nobody showed any signs of seeing me. I worried about rain and snow. I'd be a bubble of dryness.

I found that it was impossible to maneuver in crowds. I had a real body. I couldn't let people bump into me or they would notice that. Also, it was really hard to enter a building. I couldn't just pull the door open because people would notice that. I could sneak in immediately after someone else had opened the door but I had to be careful not to tread on his heels; also, it was dangerous if a person was following the first person. Moving around in a building was treacherous. Hallways were far too narrow. I resorted to floating along at ceiling level.

Getting into locked rooms was tough. It was impossible if people have been trained to close the door firmly behind them. They'd close the door with their hand on the handle and that would block me from following. It was easier if the door

closed automatically on its own, but if a security guard were present, he might see the door staying open longer than it should have. I figured I'd be able to get away with it because even if the guard checked, he wouldn't see anything.

Izzy disagreed. At least, I think she would have.

You see, I was accustomed to going full bore into a chess match and wearing the opponent down with offensive power. That wasn't going to work against the DPS. They had the power; I didn't. Instead, I'd have to use strategy. I'd have to be sneaky. Sneaky like U-Know-Who. So, I pictured Izzy in my mind and asked her questions if I wasn't sure about something. She had told me that I absolutely had to avoid moving around in crowds. I had been the one to think about floating along at ceiling level, but I had seen her nod as soon as I tried that. Now, these locked rooms were causing a problem.

Izzy, should I just hold the door open and not worry about the guard seeing it?

Izzy was lying in her hammock, probably listening to her music bot. She looked up when I interrupted, gave me a little smile, and answered. *Your invisibility is your secret weapon. If you give the DPS even the slightest hint that you have it, you'll lose your advantage. They'll think of a way to detect you.*

How could they detect me?

She shrugged. *You're the science man, not me. But if I were a smart DPS guy, and strange things were happening in my building, and I knew that a Z-man was loose, I'd connect the two. Would you be able to slip through wire-mesh?*

No.

Pretty cheap solution too. She waited for me to respond. When I didn't, she went back to her music. I could hear her singing softly. It was not an unpleasant sound.

I listened to her sing for a while and then interrupted her again. *Izzy?*

How did I get to be your personal Ask-me Service? I'm busy here.

I bit off my *You don't look busy to me* response. She wouldn't refuse to help. Try again.

Izzy?

What, Will?

That was better. *I need to be able to get into locked rooms. If there's a punch-code, I'll just wait to see what the code is and then come back when nobody is around. But, what should I do if there's a key lock and a guard present? I don't have enough time to slip in the room either before or after the person entering the room.*

She had to think about that too – that made me feel better. At least I hadn't missed an obvious solution. She got these two pretty little wrinkles in her forehead so I knew she was thinking, not ignoring me. She wouldn't ignore me.

Go in when they come out? It was more of a question than an answer.

I pictured it in my mind. *When people come out of a door, they'll stop outside, turn around, and shut the door. They take longer to get out.*

And you don't have to worry about treading on their heels.

I'll have to be right above the top lip of the door ready to slide in as soon as it opens.

She nodded.

I'll be in an empty room all by myself. I could stay as long as I wanted.

She nodded again.

Leaving could be a problem. I wouldn't be able to slip out when a person came in; if I tried to follow him out of the room, I'd be treading on his heels again. What's the point of getting into a room if I can't get out again?

Just because you came in by the door doesn't mean you have to leave by the door.

Sure I do – the room has only one way in and one way out.

Does not.

Does too.

Izzy was back to listening to her music when I figured it out. *Air vents*, I said to her.

Bingo.

Could I use them to get in too?

Possibly, but you might not be able to find your way to the room you want on your first time in the building. Plus, not all rooms have ceiling vents that will allow you to see if the room is empty. You don't want to be lifting ceiling tiles when people are in the room.

I was about to say *Thanks* and stop pretending, when she interrupted my thought.

Will? Air vents are dusty. Don't sneeze. Don't leave any crawling marks – they may have cameras in them now.

Got it. Anything else?

If you go into a dark room, don't turn on a light.

I'm not that dumb!

Might be.

Might not!

Aren't you're the one who thought that Angelou's poem was about a bird?

#

From Izzy's journals: Sunday, October 8 to Friday, October 13.

Determined to become a most dutiful wife for my esteemed husband-to-be, I decided that I would explore Phlegm's cabin – strictly to see if I should be making any plans to change his interior décor. Phlegm and his buddies were carousing in the woods when I was inspired with this housewifely motivation. Wannabee's wife was watching my cabin but she wasn't very good at it and I was able to slip out easily.

With a conference room, storage room, visitor bedroom, and master bedroom, the cabin was bigger than all the others in the compound. Found a solid lock on Phlegm's bedroom door and I didn't see a way to get in through the ceiling. The location of his bed was critical to the success of my plan and I didn't think that I could just ask Phlegm to give me a tour. "Can I see what colour pillows you have on your bed, Clem?" Yeah, that would work.

#

Monday night: I made a return visit to Phlegm's cabin after midnight. The wall separating the visitor's bedroom from Phlegm's bedroom was constructed of solid

sheets of thick, artificial wood that were held in place by screws on the visitor side. I happened to have a screwdriver with me this time. Discovered that Phlegm's bed was on the far side of the room from the visitor's bedroom! Great! An early morning entry through this wall was possible, although dangerous.

I did a quick search of Phlegm's bedroom but hadn't expected to find anything incriminating with Wannabee's wife cleaning his room weekly. Before leaving, I drilled a peephole in the wall between the two rooms, concealed it as much as I could, re-positioned the wall panel, and returned to my cabin undetected.

#

Wednesday night: I waited for the moon to rise before sneaking out to the privies in full camouflage gear minus war paint. If asked, I was going to say that I always slept in camouflage gear in case we were attacked at night. I didn't expect to be believed. My poor little head must have been all filled up with plans for my upcoming wedding because I accidentally stepped on some dry branches. Twice. Wannabee's wife finally noticed. Oopsy.

#

Friday night, October 13: Doc came to my cabin intent on discussing the wedding. He started by telling me that there were only eight days left – a totally unnecessary reminder. Then, he asked me why I was still here. Told Doc that I was going to expose Phlegm; told him about my plan but didn't say that Will had helped; didn't want Doc questioning my sanity.

Doc was worried about the danger. I had to admit that I had no reasonable explanation if I was caught – but I did have a special tooth in my mouth. Doc got madder than I had ever seen him before; demanded the crown back. I refused. Doc became like smoking volcano trying to dislodge big granite plug.

First time ever that I didn't want to be around Doc. He made me go through what I suspected about Phlegm; asked "Can you prove this?" to everything I said. I had to say "No" each time. Doc said that Phlegm would have an explanation for any accusation I made; I had to agree. Doc said I had no credibility with anyone in the camp except him; I had to agree. "Why are you still here?" Doc asked again.

"I have to expose Phlegm."

"It won't make any difference if Phlegm is the dissident leader or if he is replaced. The dissident movement will still be run by a wacko."

I told Doc that I refused to quit; couldn't quit; wouldn't quit; Grandmother wouldn't have quit; I wouldn't either.

Doc became very agitated; told me that the movement was doomed; moderates were almost all gone; DPS forces were now catching supremacists a few at a time; militants would soon control the movement; did I really want to be part of that? Then, Doc got this look in his eye and held up his hand to stop me from answering. I saw him thinking.

I did the same.

We agreed. The traitor hadn't been passing general information to the DPS; he had been passing a Capture now list. Moderates had been on the top of the list previously; now, the supremacists were being captured. I wondered out loud if supremacists with young daughters had been specially targeted? Would Phlegm

really do that? Neither of us knew the answer. Both of us knew the answer to how long I would be needed after the supremacists were outnumbered.

Doc asked if knowing now what Phlegm was doing would help me get proof; I had to say "No."

"Leave tonight. I'll distract the guard," Doc returned to his theme.

"No place to go," I said. Was true; paid DPS informants were everywhere. I wouldn't survive long with no job, no money, and no food.

"What about U-Know-Who?" Doc asked.

"No way of finding him." I didn't want to tell him that Will wouldn't want to have anything to do with me after what I had done to him.

"And if you can't expose Phlegm and have to go through with the wedding?"

I mimed biting down on the crown of my tooth.

"What if you do expose him? What will you do then?" Doc was almost yelling at me, but in whispers. Doc had never gotten mad at me before; had to hold back tears.

Shrugged. Didn't state the obvious; leave and get caught by DPS; stay and wait for Phlegm to turn me over to the DPS. What's the difference?

"You can't throw away your life for nothing!"

Shrugged; didn't say that exposing Phlegm WAS something, even if it was only important to me. It would prove that I wasn't a coward. I remembered a Dylan Thomas poem; thought it was one of Doc's favorites; he seemed to be especially moved by it when I was studying it; changed Thomas' ending a bit.

"I will not go quietly into the night," I told Doc. "I will rage, rage against the dying of the light."

Doc said he wouldn't let this happen twice and stormed out. That made no sense but I wasn't making much sense by then either.

Chapter 19

From Will's journals: Monday, October 16.

Getting into the DPS building in Edmonton was time-consuming for the workers since security guards checked everyone's ID in minute detail. But, because they didn't want to keep opening and closing the main doors for each person, they just left them open and I floated above the line-up and into the building.

Most of the building was full of large offices with cubicles carved out of the open area. Doors into these offices had punch-locks that I could solve if I wanted to. That would be a low priority, I think. I wanted to find the computer data-storage room.

I found it on the top floor. There were armed guards at the elevator, at the stairway exit, and spaced out along the corridor. Nobody got onto the floor without a pass. Coats of any kind and briefcases/packs had to be left at the security station by the elevators.

Only two hallway doors were on the floor. Both doors displayed big signs: *Top Security: Restricted Access Only*. I watched for a while. Everyone was entering the same room so that made me think I should go into the other room. I had to wait a long time to gain access. The two armed guards on that door never left their post except to change shifts hourly with two other guards.

Only one man entered the second room the entire day. The guards at the elevator's security station just looked at his gold brain-band, saluted, and let him proceed without asking for a pass. He walked to the hallway door and stood staring at the guards. The guards had him sign his name on a clipboard – he used an indecipherable scrawl that had already appeared many times on the page.

The door had two locks. The guards had one key, the man the other. Both keys had to be put into the locks and turned at exactly the same time for the door to be opened. The man took a half step into the room, held the door open with his right hand, turned on the lights with his left, and waited. I took that opportunity to glide in. Flicking the lights on caused an alarm to sound, which prompted every guard in the hallway to pull out a weapon. The man nodded in approval and entered a code that turned off the alarm. I memorized the code although I doubted that it would save me. The man closed the door behind him and I heard the locks re-engage. He went directly to a filing cabinet and pulled out a file. A single wooden table with two uncomfortable-looking chairs was in the center of room. He slipped his suit coat onto the back of one of the chairs, sat down, and began reading.

I looked over his shoulder. The file had a stamp on it – Security Level A-3. The text was dry and impersonal – a government report. Something about economic projections. I took the opportunity to scan the room.

From the position and number of network outlets, I could see that the room at one point had been a computer room. One wall had been repainted recently. Now the room was full of filing cabinets that were labeled from #1 to #125. None were locked. The filing cabinets were shiny new. The code labels on each cabinet were new. The file folder that the man had withdrawn was new.

I floated up to a corner of the room and lay back in my sky-sling watching the man. I shouldn't have done that. Shortly afterwards, he slipped his brain-band off, scratched the back of his head, and then put it back on. I looked away from him after that.

After fifteen-minutes or so, the man put the file back in the cabinet, went to the door, and knocked on it three times. He put his key in the lock on his side of the door and I guess the guards did the same. He said "Now" quite clearly and I assume that the guards turned their key at that time. Then, he turned the lights out and the door shut behind him.

On this first trip, I had wanted only to determine how to get in and out. Now that I knew where this room was, Izzy's idea of using the venting would give me access on my next visit. I'd be able to determine from the glow of the lights if someone was in the room and the routine at the door would give me ample warning before someone entered. All I needed now was to find a way out of the building; that would also give me the way back in.

I lifted a ceiling tile and slipped into the air duct system – closing my sling around me first in case there were cameras. *Thanks, Izzy.*

You're welcome, Will. Slowly; carefully; it's easy to lose focus when you think you're safe.

She was right. I had thought I was home free. I found the first camera when I reached the outside wall. You were right, Izzy.

Thought there might be cameras now. Where to?

Exit to the roof might be possible.

They'll think that too. Try going down.

The air ducts gave me access to each floor. Each floor had four cameras in the venting – one at each outside wall. I could drop out of the venting into a hallway or office on any of these floors, but there was a certain amount of risk involved because of the crowded hallways. Using this route to get back into the air ducts was also risky for the same reason.

I found the staff cafeteria with its high ceiling on the mezzanine floor. It was a wide-open space with no locked doors, no guards, and probably little traffic at certain times of the day. I waited until the cafeteria was empty, pulled up a tile, and slid into the smell of badly cooked food. A set of stairs led to the ground floor. I left as soon as I could do so safely, returned to my camp, and started putting together what I would need for a long stay in the building.

As long as I was patient, I could get in and out of the DPS building without too much risk. But, I didn't want to tempt fate with repeated visits. I figured I'd just camp in the building. With 125 filing cabinets I might need a lot of time, so I planned on a four-week stay. I could afford to take all the time I wanted. I had already learned some interesting facts. This senior DPS executive's gold brain-band was a fake. Although I couldn't prove it from just this one incident, it was clear to me that the executives running the IOF did so with their emotions fully intact and with no brain zap controls whatsoever over their actions. That made me even more determined to read every single piece of paper I could find.

#

From Izzy's journals: Monday, October 16, 5 days to the wedding.

I didn't need to avoid Doc; he was avoiding me too. Fine by me. I was finding it difficult enough to do this; didn't need him badgering me to run away. Grandmother wouldn't have run away; neither will I. I didn't need Grandmother's picture frowning at me for the rest of my life.

Wannabee's wife must have tattled about my midnight excursion. Phlegm came to see me; told me that people were talking about my great teaching. He wanted more students in my school but the camp was not set up for children. My cabin would be available soon, but they'd need time to make it into a small dorm. Since I'd be living in his cabin in five-days, why didn't I move in with him now?

I resisted at first and then gave in to his overwhelming logic. After all, what was good for the movement was good for me. However, I insisted on separate bedrooms until after the wedding.

Phlegm said that the visitor bedroom happened to be available.

"Oh, really? Well, OK. I'll move my things in tonight."

My trap was now in place. *Thanks, Will.*

Chapter 20

From Izzy's journals: Tuesday, October 17, 4 days to the wedding.

Dissidents were drifting into camp for the glorious wedding. I was in my white skin to reassure them that the master race was being saved. Phlegm was kept busy meeting and greeting; I got to be on the tour. Lucky me! I encouraged Phlegm to take lots of pictures of the guests so that I could make a wedding album; painted a picture of us sitting by the fire when we were old and gray, reminiscing about the wedding. Gag! Was worth it; Phlegm agreed. I knew he wouldn't want to disappoint his little lady so close to her big event. Double gag! I also mentioned that the steady stream of guests into my class was disruptive. Why not proclaim a wedding holiday for the students? Phlegm was happy that I was getting into the spirit of the event; gave the girls the week off; also used his pinky computer to take lots of shots of me with my beloved short, pudgy Clem and his perpetual stubble beard and the long strands of hair trying to hide his balding head. Be still, my stomach!

The guests liked my red hair; a few said that I looked like my grandmother; wish they wouldn't do that.

During lunch, Doc asked for another meeting. I told him I was busy tonight, which was true. I'll be breaking into Phlegm's room and hiding my pinky computer.

I had to assume that tonight's plan was going to work – I had no other fallback options. But, if it worked, what then? Knowing that Phlegm was the informant and proving it were two different things. I still couldn't think of any way to confront Phlegm and win. Some creativity was desperately needed! I thought best in the woods.

Wannabee refused to let me leave camp; said the risks were too high. I didn't argue; I just stared at him and said nothing!

Eventually, Wannabee looked away and then said that he might be able to break the rules, but only if I stayed real close to him; emphasized real close; then winked. I didn't want to walk down that path; however, I needed this too much. I promised Wannabee a kiss at the end of an hour in woods; he could pick where we went. The kiss will be on his cheek but he doesn't know that yet.

Will? Where are you Will?

I saw Will in a big, dark room full of filing cabinets. He was totally engrossed in reading some papers from a file folder with the help of his pinky ring light. I called several times but he still didn't hear me.

This was stupid! Why was I inventing this? Will would hear me if I pretended that he could hear me. *Will, I need your help again.*

Will looked up at me. That was better. His whiskers were covering more of his face now. Izzy, you are completely and totally losing it. What does it matter what

Will looks like now? You're only playing this game so that you can try and put yourself in Will's place and imagine what he would do. Concentrate!

I didn't try to picture Will at all; used voice-only pretend. *Will, I need your help again.*

Sure, Izzy.

There, that was better. I told him everything I could think of that might help. *Will, I'm so close but I don't see how I can confront Phlegm and win. What should I do?*

I saw an image of a chessboard in my mind and heard Will's voice. *Which chess piece is Phlegm?*

The black queen. The most powerful piece.

You win when the black KING is captured.

#

From Izzy's journals: Wednesday morning, October 18, 3 days to the wedding.

My plan required me to have access to Phlegm's pinky-ring. I couldn't afford to take the chance that Phlegm wore it to bed, so I invented the farce of the wedding album so that he'd take a ton of pictures. Pictures take lots of juice and that means Phlegm will recharge his battery tonight. I'll keep up the pressure for pictures so that he'll have to recharge every night.

My peephole gave me a good view of Phlegm's bedroom and I watched him place his pinky-ring in the charger before going to bed. Nighty-night, Phlegm.

When I was sure Phlegm was in a deep sleep, I removed the wall panel and slipped into his room. It took only seconds to switch the setting on the battery charger so that it was discharging, activate the audio record function on my pinky computer, and hide it near his charger. I returned to my room, replaced the panel, and resumed the breathing I hadn't known I had stopped. It was too risky for me to sleep – I didn't know when Phlegm might wake up. So, I told Will what I had done and thought about the king.

#

I was waiting at the peephole when Phlegm slipped his computer onto his finger. Hearing him swear, I assumed that he had just tried a mental command to his computer. The command wouldn't have worked with a discharged battery, but he didn't know that yet. I listened intently for Phlegm to give the verbal command to his computer. Success!

Phlegm looked confused. His mental command hadn't worked; now, his oral command hadn't worked either. He leaned over the battery charger and peered at the switch. I heard yet another spewing of curse words and then he reversed the switch, put his ring back in charger, and left the bedroom.

I waited until Phlegm entered the mess tent before nipping into his bedroom and retrieving my pinky-ring. I refastened the panel and then tried to catch some sleep. My early mornings were going to be busy from now until the glorious event.

Getting Phlegm to cancel school for the week was good for camp morale, right? It certainly was good for mine!

Chapter 21

From Izzy's journals: Wednesday evening, October 18, 3 days to the wedding.

Doc sat down with me in the mess hall; insisted on a meeting tonight. I wanted a meeting too; planned to tell him that Phlegm was almost in my trap; plus, I had thought of a way to capture the king. I needed Doc's help to make it all work; hoped he wouldn't get mad at me again.

#

I was stewing in Doc's office chair while he paced in circles around me. He wasn't talking. Just pacing. Not looking at me. Just pacing. Perhaps, not even aware I was there. Just pacing.

I couldn't ask him for help. Obviously he had all the stress he could handle; still enough time to revise the plan?

Doc's pacing was getting him even more agitated so I grabbed an arm and pushed him gently into my chair; kneeled in front of him and held his shaking hands; mimed taking big breaths; waited for him to calm down. It didn't work. Doc wouldn't meet my eyes. "Talk to me Doc," I pleaded. "Please."

"I prepared a speech," he said in a husky voice. He pushed himself out of the chair, took a thick brown envelope from his desk, and put it in my hand. The first page was a shiny colour picture of grandmother. I had never seen this picture before; looked up at him; "Doc?" I asked.

Doc took a big breath and blurted. "Melissa, I knew your grandmother. I killed her." Then, he fled into his private room and shut the door. I heard it lock.

#

The envelope had lots of pictures of grandmother and I looked at them first. She was a beautiful woman; pictures showed her smiling and laughing. I went through the well-worn pictures several times.

In the bottom of the envelope I found a bot containing video clips that were the source of the pictures. I closed my eyes and watched numbly as the image of a tall, slender woman with flaming red hair appeared in my brain and walked towards me. Grandmother was wearing her bright emerald green coat and carrying her protest sign – *Babies should be born, not manufactured*. She was in a Calgary city park in bright sunshine – I could see the skyscrapers in the background. Nobody else was around. I stared as she walked right up to me, lifted her free hand, and I could feel it touching my shoulder. She had freckles just above the tip of her nose. I could see the blueness of her eyes. "Remember your promise," grandmother said to me.

I heard someone say, "Don't go." It was Doc's voice, sort of.

"I have to," Grandmother said. "Please don't make this harder."

The bot was silent for a long time. Grandmother just stared at me and said nothing.

“I could protect you.” Definitely Doc’s voice.

Grandmother said, “You promised,” and she waited. I found myself squirming under her gaze.

“I won’t join the march.” A low voice, struggling to get the words out.

“I’ll be safe. You’ll see.”

Then, grandmother got very close and I could see the side of her face and a tiny sparkle from an earring. I felt her kiss me on my left cheek and I placed my hand there to stop it from slipping away. I heard a snuffle – not sure if it was Doc or me. Then, grandmother did a little five-finger waggle at me, turned around, and walked away, her sign held high in the air defiantly.

Then, I couldn’t see her any more. When I opened my eyes, Doc’s office became very misty; gave up trying to see; gave up trying to hold myself together too.

#

From Izzy's journals: Wednesday evening continued.

Doc had included a handwritten letter to me in the envelope.

I learned that he was seventeen and a second year med student when my grandmother died. She had been his high school literature teacher. He had had a huge crush on her and he could tell that she liked him, but not in the same way. After graduating, he joined the dissident movement to be near her. He knew that nothing would ever come of it. Doc was a skinny aboriginal kid from the slums; she was 8 years older and a beautiful, married white woman. On top of that, she was a single mom – her husband had deserted her and her child when she had joined the dissident movement. Doc never declared his feelings. She was aware how he felt, but both knew that it was impossible. Society was full of violent bigots at the time. Just being on the streets with her was dangerous for both of them.

Grandmother insisted that she had to attend the rally. The protests were getting ugly and the DPS had responded by sending in their uniformed goon squads. She said that protesting peacefully was a guaranteed right; passive resistance would be allowed. Doc tried and tried to persuade her not to go. She told him that she was finding it hard enough to do this and asked him to stop badgering her. Doc refused. They fought. They stayed away from each other for several days.

The night before the rally, Grandmother snuck into Doc’s dorm to ask for his help. She told him that she was frightened. She knew that she might be beaten during the march; perhaps imprisoned; possibly tortured for information. Even if it meant her death, she said she had to protest. Then, she quoted part of a Dylan Thomas poem she had taught him in school. “Do not go gentle into that good night. □ Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

Doc said he would rage with her; she refused, absolutely. She told him that he was a true friend, but she wouldn’t allow him to risk his life because she felt compelled to do something. She asked him to make her a kill-me pill so that she wouldn’t be able to tell the DPS about him if she were tortured. She never

mentioned the other dissidents. She had always thought of them as a bunch of psychotic wackos.

Doc made her a suicide pill disguised as a crown for a back tooth. If she crushed it, the poison would be in her system in seconds. He built it so that it would take a deliberately strong bite to break the crown.

Grandmother asked Doc for two promises. One – that he would not walk in the rally; two – if the worst happened, that he would keep an eye on her daughter. She gave him an antique silver locket to pass on to her when she was older.

Doc watched the protest march from the safety of the side streets. The DPS was in the square in force. When the protestors began to march, the DPS charged into the crowd on horseback, swinging clubs at everyone. Doc saw my grandmother standing still, the only one not running. Her sign was still upright, but with its base on the ground and the post leaning up against the side of her coat. Her hands were in the air. A DPS man trotted by, stood up in his saddle, and brought his club down on her face. It caught her jaw line by the suicide crown. As she went down, Doc saw her grab the sign to hold it upright. She raised her other hand weakly in the direction where he was hiding, perhaps by accident, perhaps not. Then, her hands and the sign fell.

It took Doc several years before he was able to catch up with my mother. He had finished his medical training and was deemed important enough now to be in the dissidents' main camp. By then, my mother was a raging supremacist and beyond hope. He never mentioned grandmother to her. He couldn't. Dear mother would never believe that her mother could have been a friend of a despised aboriginal, whether he showed her the pictures on the bot or not.

Doc stayed in the main camp after that, doing what he could to advance grandmother's moderate philosophy. He thought of leaving several times, but I had come along. He had failed with her daughter, but Doc promised himself that he would keep her granddaughter safe.

Doc wrote that he couldn't tell me when I was younger that he had known my grandmother. Dear mother had planted a lot of bad seeds. If I had learned that a brown boy had killed my grandmother, I might have ignored what he was trying to teach me and join the supremacists. But now, he couldn't bear to see me putting my life at risk for a dissident movement that had long ago rejected grandmother's ideals. It was all right if I hated him. Doc just didn't want me throwing away my life for nothing. He wrote that my grandmother lived on through me. He couldn't watch her die twice.

Grandmother's locket was in the bottom of the envelope inside a little blue box. Doc left a handwritten note inside the box too.

When I was seventeen, I often wished that your grandmother had been fifteen. I knew what she was like at twenty-five; but I had always wanted to know what she had been like when she was closer to my own age. Now, I know.

Chapter 22

From Izzy's journals: Early Thursday morning, 2 days to the wedding.

I had to swear on my grandmother's name that I wasn't mad at Doc before he'd unlock his door. I gave him a long hug, he looked so miserable; was weepy myself. Doc had assumed the blame for grandmother's death because he had made a bad suicide pill. I told him that a storm trooper had killed Grandmother, not him. He blamed himself for being too frightened to insist on being there with her. "What good would that have done?" I asked. "What would have happened to me without you here?" I asked.

He talked for hours about Grandmother and I just sat there drinking it all in. All that I had known about her was that she had died protesting. Listening to Doc, I found out what kind of a person she had been. I wondered how he had survived with all the guilt over her death eating him up for over fifty years. I told him he was right not to tell me. Doc said he had been frightened of losing me.

I told Doc that I had always thought Grandmother was superhuman and was surprised to learn that she had the same fears as I did; confessed that I was always fighting to keep fear out of my mind. I was frightened of mentioning Doc's name under torture; frightened of revealing what really happened on my operation to catch the Z-man; and frightened of letting anything slip that would allow the DPS to catch him. I felt better after getting that out.

We talked about fear; finally agreed that it was normal to be frightened of frightening things; not reacting that way meant that you were probably mad – like the wackos we were living with. Doc said that being brave was forcing yourself to do something frightening in spite of being frightened; told me that I not only looked like grandmother, but I acted like her too. Words felt good; like being in a warm bath of Doc.

I thought of Doc's guilt feelings. He had been frightened but still kept his promise; that made him brave; told him so. I tried to give Doc a warm bath of Melissa; not only from me, but from my grandmother too.

Promised Doc that I would leave camp, but I wanted to try to expose Phlegm first; told him how close I was; needed a partner. He volunteered without knowing what; told him what to do. "Easy," he said.

Doc said I was pinning everything on finding evidence on Phlegm's pinky computer. I agreed. "What if the evidence is not there?" he asked. "Then, I'll leave before the wedding," I promised. Doc said even if I found evidence on Phlegm's computer, I was still a long way from proving him guilty. I agreed. I needed to trap Phlegm at his stash but didn't know how to do that yet. We put our brains together; didn't help.

Doc and I reached an agreement that made both of us happy. If I wasn't able to prove Phlegm guilty one hour before the wedding, I would disappear. Otherwise, I would go through with my plan to expose him. If successful, I would disappear immediately afterwards. If not successful, Doc would create a distraction. I promised to flee without looking back. We didn't discuss what we'd do if that didn't work.

Then, we just sat and talked. I told him about my imagining U-Know-Who and pretending to talk with him. He teased me; asked me if I ever imagined myself

kissing him. I denied it, but got all red. Nothing wrong with that, Doc said; gives you a reason to hope.

We talked about hope for a while and then I left; made it back to Phlegm's cabin far too late to break into his bedroom and steal his computer.

Chapter 23

From Izzy's journals: Thursday afternoon, 2 days to the wedding.

I followed Wannabee into the woods and he let me drift a little distance away on my own. I had gotten what I wanted in that first minute. Wannabee would have to wait another fifty-nine minutes to get his prize – a real kiss this time.

Wannabee would never take me anywhere near Phlegm's hidden treasure; therefore, it wasn't in this direction. Nor was it in the direction he took me the last time. I had one more day to narrow the search with another supervised hike. After that, all I had to do was escape surveillance in the middle of the night, search a huge area of the woods in moonlight without being seen, and find a hiding place that Phlegm had taken great pains to conceal. And for my encore, I'd make all the DPS buildings float into the sky.

Doc said that I have to hope; said one of worst things the IOF does to us is make us live without hope; losing hope means they win. He asked me what I hoped for. I said that I hoped I could see U-Know-Who again. Doc said I should tell him that. "I don't know where he is," I said. Tell him anyway, Doc said. Then, he went into a funny voice – "Use the force, Melissa."

Silly line from a very old flic. Poor man didn't have enough to keep him busy in the evenings; told him so. Doc suggested I shine an outline of a bat on the moon instead. I didn't get that one.

I decided to try contacting Will from the woods; I guess it doesn't hurt to pretend.

Will, are you there?

I saw him in the room with the filing cabinets again and asked him how I could find Phlegm's stash. Will answered without thinking. *Make Phlegm worry that his secret has been uncovered, turn yourself invisible, and follow him to his stash.*

I guess I didn't use enough force. Turn myself invisible? Right! I gave Wannabee a millisecond peck on the lips, wriggled out of his grasp and ran back to camp.

#

From Will's journals: Thursday afternoon, October 19.

I was exploring filing cabinet #26 and, as usual, was finding it difficult to keep focused late in the afternoon. I had finally finished the drawers full of annual economic reports going back fifty-two years. I was glad I had stuck with it since they had given me great insight into how the IOF operated. Alberta received a lot of wealth from trade, something that was not visible to normal citizens. It would be

interesting to track where that wealth went; hopefully, I'd find the information in the remaining cabinets.

I was working my way through the filing cabinets that contained documents describing the early years of the IOF. I found reports on all the early protests, pictures of the leaders, information on where they lived, and much more. Izzy was right – the transition had not been smooth. Filing cabinets #27-#31 contained detailed folders on individual dissidents. I was just browsing through them, mostly looking at the pictures, thinking that I should move on to the next section. A big red No longer a threat was stamped on the cover sheet of each file.

I began wondering if they had anything on Izzy's grandmother. Unfortunately, I had never learned her name. I didn't even know Izzy's last name. So, I started flipping quickly through the files looking for the woman that I remembered from my childhood. I found her in the second drawer of #31. Melissa Stanley. Age twenty-five. She had a husband – a Classified stamp blocked out his name – and a two-year old daughter named Deirdre. The folder bulged with pictures of Izzy's grandmother – some showed her inside a home, others were taken outside. Izzy would probably like to have these pictures. I knew Izzy had red hair and white skin too, but couldn't begin to imagine what she looked like without her brown disguise. I wondered if she looked anything like her grandmother.

I stopped flipping through the pictures when I came to the one I remembered of Izzy's grandmother lying on some pavement, green coat open around her. Her right hand was reaching out for someone. I got the strangest feeling – almost like someone was calling my name, but nobody was around. Then, I knew, just knew that Izzy was in trouble. I stuffed the file folder back into the drawer and looked around to be sure everything looked normal before I flew off to ...

I didn't know where Izzy was.

Chapter 24

From Izzy's journals: Early Friday morning, the day before the wedding.

I slipped into Phlegm's room after he was sound asleep, brought his computer back to my room, hooked it up to a console, and gained access by using my recording of his voice speaking his oral password. First, I gave myself full access to his files with my own thought and oral passwords. The word traitor seemed quite appropriate.

Phlegm had assumed that having his pinky computer tied to his personal thoughts and to his voice was ample protection. He was so confident that he actually used file names that described their contents clearly. That made it easy to find what I needed. Got'cha Phlegm.

I returned the pinky-ring to Phlegm's battery charger, refastened my wall panel, and plopped down on the bed. I had found incriminating evidence that proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that Phlegm was a traitor. However, I didn't have any way to make that information public. Nobody was going to believe that I had just

happened to find Phlegm's computer, and I just happened to guess its password, and guess what? It had a file that proved he was a traitor. A militant's pinky computer is sacred. It was second in importance only to his arsenal of weapons. No mere woman dared touch either. If I confronted Phlegm in public with information from his pinky ring, all he had to do was accuse me of hacking into his computer and I'd die in a hail of bullets before I could say another word. The wedding vows gave me one tiny possibility, but I couldn't think of a way to take advantage of them. I played various scenarios in my mind, and they always ended with Phlegm accusing me of hacking and then starting the carnage.

I simply couldn't confront Phlegm publicly. My only hope was his stash. If I could just find out where it was, I'd be able to stake it out, make him worried enough to dig it up, and record him in that act with my pinky computer camera. There were a lot of holes in the plan – but at least I had a hope. I had to find his hiding place tonight.

#

From Izzy's journals: Friday noon, the day before the wedding.

I was sitting in the bottom of a gully, taking one last look at the woods I had grown up in. Wannabee had led me in a new direction on this hike; by elimination, I knew where to start my search. I'd have no problem slipping into the woods tonight what with all the pre-nuptial celebrations. There was a huge Radical Militant bachelor party for Phlegm and dear mother was hosting a big White Supremacist party. She was kind enough to let me know that it wasn't necessary for me to be at my party. Fine with me. I had better things to do.

Doc said to keep up hope. OK Doc, I'll try.

Where would Phlegm hide his treasure? He wouldn't want it discovered by accident. He would want to bury it but that can be difficult to do in a forest. That meant it couldn't be too close to any tree. It had to be in a place where trees were spread out – something partially in the open? How many places like that could there be? Perhaps, it wasn't as hopeless as it seemed.

"Time for my kiss."

I heard Wannabee crunching through the leaves down the little slope I was hunched on. I ignored him to take one last look. I loved this little section of the woods. So quiet; so peaceful; leaves all down now; crispy air; sunlight filtering through the mist; a light flashing in the distance; squirrels chasing each other up a tree...

A flashing light?

I turned my head back to where I had seen the light. There! Two flashes, then two more. Was I so desperate that I was imagining flashing lights?

Two flashes, then two more. I moved my right hand to my heart and made crossing motions. The response was immediate – two flashes, then two more.

Was it a trick of light? I waited, staring into a very narrow sector of the woods. Leaves and other foliage were gone. I saw no obvious hiding place. A pit? If so, I wouldn't be able to see it from here.

I couldn't wait any longer. I crossed my heart and before I had finished there were two flashes, a pause, then two more. I almost laughed out loud. How?

"This time I get a real kiss." Wannabee yanked me to my feet, turned me around, and mashed his mouth against mine. I struggled to get away but he was using his left hand behind my head to push my face into his open mouth and his right hand was grabbing my butt. I ducked my head, spun away from his clutch, pushed him to the ground and ran. Wannabee called out – "Clem said it was OK."

Up the slope and down the other side; heard Wannabee pounding behind me; slowed down to lure him away from Will; woods too bare for Will to hide well. I splashed through a deep stream; feet got soaked; didn't care. Ran up and over the bank; camp close now; heard Wannabee fall with big splash; grunt of pain; smack of something hitting something; another grunt. Then, no sounds.

Chapter 25

From Will's journals: Friday noon, October 20.

Wisps of flaming red hair crept over the crest of the ridge. Then, Izzy saw me waiting, rose from her belly-crawl, and ran down the ridge to the stream where I had ambushed the goon.

She approached me slowly – not completely sure who it was, I guess because of my beard. Plus, I was in full camouflage gear. I hadn't known what I would find so I had come prepared for anything. "Will?" she asked.

"Izzy!" I replied. Then, we just stared at each other. "Is this guy a friend of yours?" I asked to break the silence, thinking not, but wanting to be sure.

She looked at the goon lying in the stream, head half in the water, cheek pressed against a rock. "Wannabee? You gotta be kidding." She put a finger into her mouth and pretended to gag.

"Thought not." I ground my heel into his right hand until I felt some bones break. He wouldn't be grabbing anything with that hand for a while.

"What happened to him?"

"He tripped on something he couldn't see as he was crossing the stream. He's out cold for now." I lifted his head to show Izzy. The goon's eyes were closed and his lips were all bloodied. "His face bounced hard on the rocks a couple of times. I think some teeth are loose. He won't be kissing anyone for a while."

Izzy smiled and then she saw my sky-sling standing open and upright next to the stream. "What's that?"

"My sky-sling. This guy Wannabee isn't going to be unconscious forever; we should get out of here." I steered Izzy into the sky-sling, closed the lid, and put us into a hover thirty-meters or so in the air.

I was only centimeters away from Izzy's eyes, so I could see them get wide as we rose. Without her contacts, they were blue now. She swiveled her head as much as she could in the tight space. My sky-sling was built for one. It reminded me of the time we were in her earth pit together. Only now, we were standing up. I put the

sky-sling into a slow rotation so that she could see everything – the camp below us and the surrounding forests.

“You invented this?”

“You gave me the idea.”

“Won’t people see us hovering in the air?”

“We’re invisible to anyone outside.”

“Is that what you meant about turning invisible and following Phlegm?”

Same old Izzy. Weird as ever. I just ignored the crazy talk and looked at her. So this was what red hair and white skin looked like. She stared at me too.

“You cut your hair. I like it this way.”

“I like your red hair.”

“You’ve grown a bit.”

I nodded. My nose was just above her nose now. Without the fake skin, I could see that it was much thinner than mine. She even had a cluster of freckles just above the tip. “I’m trying to grow a beard to change the outline of my face. It’s kind of straggly right now.”

She raised her hand to touch it but pulled it back. I think we both had become aware of how close we were to each other. Both of us were standing stiffly, hands by our sides, a sliver of space between us. Both of us were probably pressing back against the sky-sling so that we wouldn’t be touching. I knew I was. I could see Izzy trying to say something, so I just waited.

“Will – why are you here?”

I had rehearsed what I was going to say, but couldn’t remember any of it now. The words all came out in a rush. “I was going through some DPS files and found some pictures of your grandmother. I was thinking that you might like to have them, but then I felt like I should come and see you right away because you were in trouble. And I was right. You are. I had to search the DPS files to see if they knew the location of the dissident camps. They do. The DPS knows where every dissident camp is; they know exactly who is in each camp. That’s how I found out where you were. You’re in danger. They have an informant right in this camp.”

Izzy was just looking at me like she didn’t believe me. Maybe she didn’t want me here? “I thought you should know, so I came to tell you that,” I added. I was going to promise that I wouldn’t stay if she didn’t want me there, but I didn’t want to say that.

“Were you in a room with a lot of filing cabinets?”

“Yeah. The DPS file room on the top floor of its Edmonton building. It used to be a computer room, but now it only has filing cabinets. You helped me get in.”

“I helped you get in?”

I felt kind of silly about this, but decided to tell her anyway. “See, when I didn’t know what to do about something, I’d pretend that you were there, and I would ask you what to do, and you’d tell me. It was just pretend, but I got lots of good ideas from you. You told me not to leave the DPS building by the roof; you also warned me not to turn on the lights in the file room, but I wouldn’t have done that anyway.”

She just stood there, like I was crazy. Or weird anyway. “You think I’m weird, right?”

“No. I used to pretend that I could talk to you too. You told me to set a trap for Phlegm before I married him. You also said I should ignore the queen and concentrate on the king. Yesterday, you told me to turn myself invisible, which I thought was crazy until you showed up in this. I wanted you to come, so Doc said I should ask you to. Did you hear me asking you?”

“No, I just knew that you were in trouble.”

I stared at her for a long time, trying to memorize her before I left. I didn’t know what to say. Everything I had thought about finding Izzy and what we could do afterwards was all ... gone. “You’re getting married to a guy named Phlegm?”

This time she put two fingers in her mouth and pretended to gag. “Definitely not,” she said. “Phlegm’s the informant. I’ve been trying to expose him.”

Izzy must have seen my face relax – it had felt like a concrete slab when I asked her about her marriage. But she had made a mistake. “The informant isn’t Phlegm. It’s a guy named Clem.”

“Clem’s the Phlegm.”

“Huh?”

“Phlegm’s real name is Clem. I called him Phlegm because...”

“He’s all yucky. And Clem the Phlegm rhymes and that makes him sound funny and not dangerous.”

“You’ve been reading my bots.”

“I liked the poem about the singing bird.”

“One of my favorites.”

“You knew that she wasn’t talking about a bird, right?”

“Sure.”

“It took me a while to figure that out,” I admitted and pretended to look all embarrassed.

Izzy giggled. It was not an unpleasant sound.

Chapter 26

From Izzy’s journals: Friday continued.

Will’s face broke into a broad smile when I giggled about the poem. He had changed a lot; understood Clem the Phlegm; understood the poem; obviously had read some of my bots; had even taken off his ear-gear and wasn’t acting self-conscious about it. He had grown a bit too; really quite handsome; except for the beard, but I wouldn’t tell him that.

Realized we had been just standing there, staring at each other; big goofy smile on his face; one on mine too probably; couldn’t help it.

This is really awkward, I thought. Standing stiff as boards; afraid to touch each other; unsure what the other was thinking; afraid to ask; at least I was.

“I suppose we should say hello properly,” I said to relieve the tension; tried to raise my hand for a palm slap but we were too close. “We could try a hug, I suppose,” I said as nonchalantly as I could manage.

Will turned his head as though he was looking for something. I turned my face too. We swiveled our heads in unison for a bit. "What are you looking for?" I asked.

"I wondered if there was a damsel in dis-dress nearby who needed a hug first."

That was funny! "Would a damsel in dis-smock do?"

"Have to, I suppose." He put his arms around my shoulders and I put mine around his waist. We hung there for a while, still hardly touching.

"I won't break, Will."

Then, he pulled me against his chest and I could hardly breathe.

Chapter 27

From Will's journals: Friday continued.

We hugged for the longest time and then we pulled back a bit. It was kind of hot in the sky-sling. Izzy's face was a little pink. Mine felt warm too. *What if my face started to sweat?*

"I really am a damsel in distress, Will. Cross my heart."

Izzy had to take her hands away from my waist to do that. Then, she just rested her hands on my arms. I lowered my own arms so that my hands were touching her waist. I didn't know what else to do. I didn't want to stop touching her, but what if she didn't want my hands on her waist? *Are there rules on how to touch?* "What do you want me to do?" I asked instead.

So, she told me, but first she wanted me to know everything about Phlegm. Then, she told me everything she had done, and what still remained to be done, and what she and Doc were going to do at the wedding. Her hands tightened when she talked about Phlegm, and I realized that she was frightened about what he might do to her. She flapped her hands around when she talked about not being able to figure out what to do. But, she always put them back on my arms. When she described the plan, she numbered each step with a finger on my chest; first we do this; second, we do this. She was changing the plan as she talked – putting me into it, she said. I was concentrating on what she was saying, of course. What she was planning was dangerous for everyone, but I was still aware of her hands; and her face right in front of mine; and her blue eyes looking into mine; and the wisps of red hair hanging over her forehead almost brushing against my eyes. I mind-instructed the filter to let more air into the sling.

"Got all of that?"

"Yeah."

There was an awkward pause.

"The plan will work, Izzy. Phlegm won't see it coming. It's a perfect trap."

"Now that you're here, Will."

Another awkward pause.

"I'm really glad you came, Will."

"I wanted to find you before, but you said ..."

"I know. But, it's different now. They can't see you."

More silence. *What can I say? What can I say?* I latched onto something we could talk about. “What were you going to do after you exposed Phlegm and left the camp?”

“I didn’t know,” she said hesitantly. “Go underground. Try to fit in somewhere where they’d accept an outsider. Try to find a way to fight the DPS.” She was flipping her right hand over and back on my arms as she spoke.

“I was kinda thinking that I’d fight the DPS too,” I said.

“Have you made a strategic plan?”

“No, I’m not very good at that.”

More silence.

“I could help you with the planning part if you didn’t mind me being around.”

I rushed to get the words out. “I wouldn’t mind.”

“Do you have a camp yet?”

“I used to. Then, I was camping in the DPS building. You could pick the campsite, if you wanted. With the sky-sling, it can be anywhere you wanted.”

“You could say if you didn’t like it.”

More silence.

“So, you want to try being a team for a while, Will?”

“I was kinda hoping you’d want to.”

What do I do now? What do I say? I was thinking about lowering my right hand to shake hers, but we were too close for that. She surprised me by changing the subject.

“I’m sorry I scratched your face in our fake fight, Will.”

I was a bit relieved to have something to talk about. “That’s all right. The scratches weren’t deep. I don’t think there are any scars.”

“Let me feel.” She ran her fingers up and down both my cheeks. Light touches. Tickle. “I don’t feel anything,” she said. Turn your head a bit; I’ll take a look.

She put her face right up to mine. I could feel her hair. Then, her nose. Then, her eyelashes. Then, a light kiss on my cheek. “This one’s OK.” She turned my face and inspected the other cheek. It received a tingly kiss of approval too.

We stood there for a while. Cheek touching cheek.

“I could check to see if Wannabee scratched your cheeks when he grabbed you,” I offered.

“I think he might have, Will.”

So I did. It took a long time. I could feel her breath going in and out. When I gave her a kiss of approval, she jumped a little as though I had touched a nerve. Her face wasn’t scratched a bit. I told her so after approving the second cheek.

We hung there together. I had left my cheek touching her cheek after my last inspection. She didn’t seem to mind.

“I think I may have scratched your lips, Will.”

“Do you think Wannabee scratched your lips, Izzy?” We both asked our question at the same time. That made us laugh. But, it wasn’t much of a laugh.

Izzy raised her face, closed her eyes, and said, “You first, Will.”

I was getting up my nerve when I saw a figure running on the ground below us.

“Uh, Izzy?”

“What?” she breathed.

“Wannabee is running into camp. Do you think...”

Izzy snapped her head around so fast that we banged noses. She told Wannabee that she was going to strangle him with her vine and leave him to be mauled and eaten by the nearest lion. That didn't make any sense, but the next part did. I let her out of the sling in the woods closest to the children's dorm like she had said, rose to tree level again, and followed Wannabee and another man into the woods.

Chapter 28

From Izzy's journals: Friday evening.

I was playing the board game Give Donald Trump a New Hairpiece with my students when Phlegm burst into the girls' dorm and pointed his finger at me. "Tell me where you've been?" he demanded.

"Right here," I answered innocently. "I've been keeping Janey company. She's been ill." The girls and I collectively shrugged when he left and we resumed trying to design an uglier hairpiece than the one in the picture. This game always took a long time to finish.

I met Will after dark, snuck over to Doc's cabin, knocked, and peeked in. Doc waved us in, stood up, saw Will, and said, "You must be U-Know-Who." Not hard to guess. I was holding onto his left arm so tightly that Will couldn't have escaped, even if he had wanted to.

Will looked puzzled; turned to me; "Did you not like the name I chose?"

I explained that I didn't want Doc to know his name in case Doc was captured.

"You can call me U-No for short," Will said, and that got a laugh.

Doc took us into his living area, made us comfortable in a big sofa, pulled up a kitchen chair in front of us, and we got down to business. We went through the whole wedding ceremony plan until we had it down perfectly.

Afterwards, Will reported that he had followed Phlegm to the treasure and had determined that it was buried deep in the ground. Phlegm would not be able to get to it quickly. I reminded Will to leave signs tomorrow morning suggesting that someone might have dug it up. We wanted Phlegm to be deep in the hole when he was found.

Doc wanted to know what I was going to do after the wedding; told him U-No-Who and I were going to disappear and fight the DPS together. Doc got a big wide smile. "I'm very happy to hear that," he said and asked if we'd have any trouble getting away safely with all the shooting we were anticipating. Told Doc that he didn't want to know how we were getting away. Doc seemed content with that.

#

We were all relaxing and feeling optimistic about tomorrow. Will was telling us about some of the DPS economic reports he had read. Doc knew not to ask Will how he had found them, but was paying close attention to what he was saying. I was daydreaming – still glommed onto Will's arm. I hadn't let it go since we arrived; wondered if he was getting pins and needles; rubbed it for him. Doc noticed; winked and smiled at me; was glad he approved. I tried to snuggle up

closer. Will was talking to Doc but raised his arm and I scooted in underneath; thank goodness for automatic male reflexes. Will was a little slower off the mark when he had to think about these things.

Doc wanted to talk about other kind of economics; suggested that Will should dig up Phlegm's treasure tonight. I said that we wanted to keep Phlegm at the stash for a while; we couldn't do that if we dug it up for him. Doc said he was thinking that we should dig it up so that Will and I could keep it safe; otherwise, wackos would use the treasure to buy more weapons. It would be better for everyone if the gold and money were kept out of their hands, but we could always return it to the DPS who would undoubtedly reward us for our honesty. Then, he winked again.

It was a good idea. With money, Will and I could acquire things without having to expose ourselves by bartering. I asked Will if he could dig up the stash, take out everything, and re-bury the box deeper? Will said Yes but he was confused by Doc's wink. I had to explain that Doc's wink meant that Doc didn't really want us to return the money to the DPS.

"That's what a wink means?"

Doc and I nodded.

"But, that's not what it meant when he winked at you and you squeezed closer to me."

"Different eye," Doc tried.

"Different eye, definitely." I chimed in.

Will glazed his eyes for a sec. "Right eye both times," he said. "Teasing me?" he asked.

I told Will that when people have been around each other for a long time, they got to know what the other person was thinking; a wink is a silent way of communicating. Doc's second wink was to tell me that he was being sarcastic; his first wink told me... I stopped short; didn't want to put words in Doc's mouth.

"...that I approved of you."

"Are you Izzy's volunteer-father?"

Doc answered *No* at the same time as I said *Yes*. Then, we tried it again, but he said *Yes* and I said *No*. Finally, I looked really hard at Doc and said *YES!* He did a little bow from his chair and said *Yes* too; made me feel really good; today now officially the best day of my life.

Will looked at each of us and proclaimed. "You guys are weird."

Doc started to explain, but I interrupted. "Wrong answer, Doc. You're supposed to say, *Are not.*"

"Are too," Will snapped back.

"I see the two of you are well on your way to developing your own secret communications, so I have just this to say." Doc stepped to the sofa and told us both to stand up. I managed to do it without letting go of Will's arm. Doc put his left hand on Will's shoulder. "Do you promise me that you're going to keep Melissa safe?" Will's face looked like he hadn't been expecting Doc's gruff manner, but still squeezed out a Yes, Sir quickly. Then, Doc put his right hand on my shoulder and asked, "Melissa, do you promise you're going to leave this sick place immediately after the wedding?" I answered Yes Doc, although I knew this would mean leaving him.

"Good, I'm happy." Doc moved close to us so that we were in a tight circle and raised his hands to the back of our heads. I was thinking that a group hug was imminent.

Instead, he puffed up his chest and got all official. "The two of you having exchanged promises, and this agreement having been sealed by a kiss,"... he bumped our two mouths together – "... by the authority vested in me by the state of anarchy, I now pronounce you..."

"Doc," I strangled out!

"...friends." *Got'cha* he mouthed at me. "You may now hug the old guy."

Which we did.

Chapter 29

From Izzy's journals: Saturday, October 21.

The wedding ceremony would start as soon as I appeared, so I was hiding behind a tree, waiting for my grandmother's picture to come on the screen. I put both thumbs on the silver locket around my neck and made a big wish.

The ceremony was being held in the main clearing in the center of camp. Militant guests were on the right side of the aisle; supremacist guests were on the left. At the front of each aisle were the militant and supremacist men who were sitting cross-legged on the ground. Most had two long guns lying on their legs and ammunition belts looped across their chests. Then came the women of each group, sitting on chairs that we had brought out from the cabins. The six supremacist girls from school were sitting on blankets well behind the last row of chairs. Doc was sitting cross-legged in the center aisle between the two groups, about halfway back.

Except for Doc and the girls, everyone was in full-camouflage gear. Oops – forgot dear mother who was in a dress that she had dredged up from somewhere. Her usual fly-away hair was even nicely combed. I didn't count but figured there were about one hundred guests.

Up at the front, dear mother was sitting in a chair off by herself. Phlegm was standing on a temporary wooden stage. Wannabee was there too in his role as marriage maker. His face was all patched up and his right hand was hidden in a cast.

Next to the stage was a table with a large electronic console displaying pictures of the lives of the bride and groom. Phlegm's pictures were currently cycling on the screen. Phlegm with his buddies; Phlegm's first gun; Phlegm's first camouflage uniform; Phlegm's first DPS kill; Phlegm's second DPS kill; Phlegm's third...; happy memories. My turn now. I had contributed only the picture of my grandmother with her picket sign so the official entertainment was quickly over.

I started down the aisle humming to myself Here comes the red hair and white skin. The words didn't fit the music in my head but they were appropriate to this ceremony. One militant put his finger to a nostril and cleaned out the other with a

huff as I walked by. Everyone else just stared at me. I was overwhelmed by the love in the clearing.

I was dressed in full camo gear with a thin belt containing contacts, cosmetics and dyes hidden under my jacket so that I could go to brown quickly. Since we weren't sure how the militants would react to my wedding announcements, my bow was hanging on my shoulder and I had a crowded quiver fastened to my belt. There were three edged weapons under my clothes. Will would be relocating to the table holding the video console soon. If there were any gunplay, I'd tip the table over, fall on the ground behind it, and Will would scoop me into his sky-sling and high into the air without anyone actually seeing me disappear.

Phlegm and Wannabee had abbreviated Doc's old wedding ceremony so I had told Will to be ready as soon as I reached the front. I stood on the left side of the stage, facing Phlegm. Wannabee asked the audience who gave the bride away and dear mother said "Yo."

That completed the preliminaries. Next – the vows. Since all IOF citizens and the dissidents had computers that would respond only to the owner's thought or voice commands, our marriage ceremonies have incorporated the ceremonial exchange of pinky-ring computers as a symbol of the new union. Before the wedding, the groom creates a shared folder on his ring. Then, in the ceremony, he places his pinky computer on the little finger of the bride's left hand and tells her the password to that folder. The bride does the same for him. The next day they return the computers to the rightful owners, but the shared folder on each ring theoretically remains. In practice, this didn't happen – at least not in the dissident community. I took my pinky computer off and put it in the palm of my hand. I watched Phlegm doing the same.

Wannabee nodded at Phlegm who put his ring on the tip of my pinky finger. Following Wannabee's lead, I repeated the sacred supremacist vows. "Clem, I promise ... to obey you, ... pass you ammunition quickly, ... and bear you lots of white children." I congratulated myself for not calling him Phlegm. The mucous in question pushed his ring over my knuckle and whispered the password into my ear. *Clem's little lady*. That was just in case I hadn't known that he was the possessor and I was the possession.

There was a commotion at the end of our clearing and a perimeter sentry burst out of the trees. I saw a beardless face so heavily camouflaged with war paint that it was impossible to determine who he was. The sentry called out, *Commander* and everyone watched while he sprinted up the aisle.

The sentry whispered in Phlegm's ear that his patrol had heard unusual noises in the northeast sector. Someone in civilian clothes and a brain-band was digging a hole in a clearing. The patrol had him under surveillance; what did the commander want them to do? I couldn't actually hear the sentry's words but I had heard Will rehearsing them this morning so I'm sure that's what he said.

Phlegm and Wannabee consulted briefly out of earshot. Then, Phlegm announced that duty called but he'd be back shortly. Both Phlegm and Wannabee sprinted into the woods. Will followed them but I knew that he'd be in his sky-sling near the console table soon.

There was an awkward silence in the clearing.

Doc stood up and announced. "I was waiting for the new marriage maker to give anyone who objected to this marriage an opportunity to speak. I will do that now." Not waiting, Doc continued, "I renew my objection to this marriage on the basis that the couple are too closely related."

Dear mother turned around in her chair and shouted back. "You already objected. You lost. Sit down, you brown-skinned old quack."

The audience murmured; all dissidents liked a fight. Looked like one was brewing.

Doc was not deterred. "I also object to this wedding on the basis that Clem is marrying a young girl twelve years his junior. She is only fifteen, well under the age of consent."

Dear mother didn't even turn around this time. "I own her; I consent for her." Dear mother had a healthy set of lungs; everyone heard. Murmur, murmur, murmur.

"I believe that Melissa has been coerced into this wedding. I believe that if she were given the opportunity, she would say that she doesn't want this marriage."

Everyone was staring at me. Showtime. I started my spiel, which I too had rehearsed this morning. "I don't know how you got that idea, Doc. I have never looked forward to any day more than this one. I am happy. I want to do this." I left the stage to stand by the console where grandmother's picture was shining. "You all know about my grandmother. I believe my grandmother would approve of what I'm doing today. What I do today, I do in her name." I thought I sounded believable; it was certainly the truth.

I heard people saying, "She showed that old buzzard" and other words to that effect. Some of the men even clinked their two gun barrels together – the universal form of applause from gun-crazy wackos. I wished that they'd do that with the safeties on.

Doc was not to be denied. "Be that as it may, I think there are things about Melissa's future husband that he has kept from her. If she knew these secrets, she would refuse this wedding."

"But Doc, my husband has kept nothing back from me," I said in mock confusion. "You are wrong about him. He has hidden nothing. Why he even told me that he would give me access to everything on his pinky computer. Would someone with secrets do that?" This part was all a lie, of course, but to prove that I was telling the truth, I connected Phlegm's computer to the console and thought in the *Traitor* password that I had created for myself. Grandmother's picture was replaced by the words *Clem's Pinky Computer* at the top of the new screen.

Doc was a disbeliever. "Just because you have his computer, that doesn't mean that he hasn't kept secrets from you. Do you actually know what's on that computer?"

"How could I? My loving husband just slipped it on my finger minutes ago. I must object, Doc. You're suggesting that my husband has done something wrong, and he's not here to defend himself. I can't let you do that. I will defend his name, as any good wife would do. Make your accusations and I will prove you wrong."

Wacko bum after wacko bum began scooting closer to the screen.

"I accuse Clem of having plans to marry many more wives after you." Doc's strident voice galvanized the scooting into downright sledding.

“That’s hardly illegal now, is it Doc?”

“But, did he tell you about those plans?”

“No, but we know that a man need not share information with one wife about his dealings with another wife.”

“I say that there’s information on his computer about those wives that Clem would not want anyone to know.”

“Very well. I will prove you wrong. I’m entering the search term new wives; OK, I have a hit.”

Everyone craned their necks to see. My wedding was turning out to be better entertainment than shooting rats in a barrel.

For the benefit of the wives in the back row, I had planned to read out as much as I could of the show. The men were now close enough to read it on their own. “Now, this file is titled My wives. Let’s see. Here’s my name, right at the top: Melissa, and my age, fifteen. Then, there are some more names.”

“Read the names,” Doc instructed. “Don’t you want to know who are going to be your sister-wives?”

“I fully support our leader’s decision to allow multiple wives. Even my dear mother agreed.”

Dear mother lifted a clenched fist into the air.

“Read the list then.”

“Well, I will.” I paused for dramatic effect. “Oh, I think he made a mistake. This isn’t a list of his wives; it’s a list of the orphan girls in the school.” I read out the six names and their ages. “Wait, I was wrong. These next girls aren’t orphans but they’re slated to be Clem’s wives.” I read out two more names, both under twelve. “All eight of these girls come from supremacist families, don’t they?” I asked as though I didn’t already know the answer.

There was a murmur of assent.

“They’re very young, aren’t they?” Doc asked innocently.

“Well, I’m sure he wasn’t planning on marrying all eight of them right away, was he? Really, Doc. There’s nothing wrong with a man making long range plans.”

“You’d think he’d have some discussion with the parents, wouldn’t you?”

“He can hardly talk with parents who are dead, can he?”

A scrawny supremacist with a full-automatic spray gun stood up; nobody would ever say that he was scrawny with that weapon in his arms. “He could talk with me. But, he knows that wouldn’t do him no good. My Tammy ain’t marrying any no-good militant.”

I typed a bit to throw some information about his daughter onto the screen. I read it out loud and then made the logical leap for those in the audience who were still at the logical crawling stage. “Apparently, Tammy is moving here in a couple of weeks. Clem is already having my cabin changed into a small dorm to accommodate her and Joannie, who’s also coming to camp at the same time.”

“Over my dead body,” the scrawny supremacist said, not realizing that was exactly how it was going to happen.

“Mine too,” said Joannie’s father who was also standing. He was a big guy with four large-bore pistols hanging off his belt.

I let them stew for a while. Both Doc and I were waiting for someone to add everything up. We waited in vain as the audience tried to calculate 6 + 6 but kept getting Colt 66's.

Doc tired first. "Six supremacist girls have come to camp for schooling because they're orphans; Clem intends to marry them. Soon two more supremacist girls will be coming here for schooling. Clem's going to marry them too. But, there's no reason why the last two supremacist girls would be coming to camp for their schooling unless..."

"They was orphans," the two mothers stood up and shouted from the back.

Then came trouble. One of the militants stood up. He was holding a big shotgun in the crook of his arm. It was pointing at the ground but I put my left hand under the edge of the table just in case. I felt Will's breath on the back of my neck and relaxed.

"This ain't right," the militant said. "Clem ain't here. This here white girl could have put all that stuff into his computer. Why should we believe her?"

I had my response all ready. "You saw Clem place his computer on my finger a few minutes ago. Do you think that Clem would have given any woman FULL access to his computer? He only gave me *Read access*. Would he have given a woman *Write Access*? Would any militant have done that?"

There was a broad murmur of *Not on your life* and similar expressions, most of them more colourful. The militant sat down.

It was time to redirect the audience's attention back to what they had just learned. In the chess game that I was waging with Phlegm, the black queen had left her home row, leaving the black king alone to fend for himself. It was the black king – the audience – that I had to convince.

"I know what you're thinking, but you're wrong," I told the king. "You're thinking that Clem has some sort of plot to get all these girls into camp so that he can make them his wives. But, they're too young to marry. So, why would he bring them into camp? I'm telling you that he only brought them here to educate them. I'm going to do a combined search using all the names of Clem's future wives – myself included. You'll see that there's no plot."

I made the necessary entries slowly so that the king could see. One document came up. I enlarged the text as much as I could without it running over the edge of the screen. It was a chart with four columns. The columns were labeled *Name*, *Dowry*, *Received from*, and *Date*. The names of the six girls who had already been orphaned were in the top six rows. Their dowry was \$1000 each, it was received from ALGO-432, and the dates were the days that they had been orphaned. I didn't have to make that observation – I heard the murmurs.

My name was next. My dowry was \$20,000, and it also was received from ALGO-432 but the date was wrong. It was two weeks from now. I expressed some confusion. "Who was kind enough to give me a dowry?" Next came doubt. "Why didn't Clem get my dowry on our wedding date?" And finally, bewilderment. "What's so special about two weeks from now?" I left it to the king to figure out that the Clem/Izzy marriage would be over before the icing on the wedding cake had hardened to cement.

The names of the two girls yet to be brought to camp were at the bottom of the chart. Their dowry was the standard \$1,000. Clem was scheduled to receive

payment for them in the first week of November. I pretended to be shocked. The king wasn't pretending.

Dear mother was the first to ask the obvious question. "Who's ALGO-432?"

I entered the search term quickly. This brought up the key file – the one that would seal Phlegm's fate. I had to lead the king to it slowly – there was no way that Doc could have asked a question that would have gotten us here directly. It was a visual file, complete with sound, showing Phlegm and the DPS agent recording a receipt. The king watched in disbelief as the DPS agent confirmed that Clem had given him information that allowed the DPS to capture eight dissidents. The agent listed the parents of the first four orphan girls and the dates they were caught. It was Phlegm's turn next. He described the money and drugs that he had received for that information. Phlegm and the DPS agent obviously didn't trust each other and were using the visual record as a way of protecting themselves from accusations of deal breaking. That wasn't going to work out too well for Phlegm. I could have played other visual receipts, but this one was enough.

I saw supremacist brain cells click into place. It started with angry glances towards the right side of the aisle. Hands slowly arranged barrels so that they were pointing to the right. Supremacist women opened big bulky purses and left their hands inside. The militants sensed the hostility and started to take similar precautions. Doc had used the distraction of the visual receipt to move to the back of the audience and I saw him whispering to the orphans who were crawling back into the trees.

Always the leader, dear mother asked; "Daughter, what did that sentry say to Clem? You were close enough to hear."

Doc had been scheduled to ask that question once the orphans were safely concealed. I delivered my last speech. "Well, I certainly wasn't eavesdropping. But I happened to hear him say something about a man with a brain-band digging holes in the ground in the northeast quadrant. I guess Clem didn't like him doing that."

Dear mother pulled two big honking guns out of holsters strapped around her thighs and with her nice dress flapping around her knees, she charged northeast, chicken-wing flab under her arms keeping beat to the dress flaps. Supremacists followed en-masse. The militants took a few seconds longer. Phlegm may have been a backstabbing, traitorous pervert, but he was THEIR backstabbing, traitorous pervert. They headed for the woods too, cocking their weapons as they went. The two women shouldering the bazooka trailed in their wake.

Doc gave me a little wave goodbye and I blew him a kiss. Then, he herded the children towards the root cellar. "Come along girls. I'll show you how to play the board game *Paris and Nicole learn to be dissidents*. Janey, that gun isn't loaded, is it?"

Chapter 30

From Izzy's journals: Monday, October 30.

From Will's journals: Monday, October 30.

I had bundled Izzy into the sling shortly after Doc disappeared with the girls. We could hear gunfire in the distance. I didn't think we could count on angry dissidents being able to shoot straight so we flew off in the opposite direction. Izzy was happy and sad at the same time, if that's possible.

I was happy about revealing what Phlegm had been doing; happy being with Will. It was what I had wished for on my grandmother's locket. Still, I was sad about leaving Doc.

So, Izzy was snuffling away as we floated through the sky towards the Rockies. I was trying to ignore the fact that she was smearing my camouflage paint.

You're getting quite the mouth on you, you know that Z-man?

Thank you. It's a pleasure to accept this honour. I'd like...

...to thank the members of the Academy. Get your own lines. Hey, hands off, brute!

[Long silence]

You're getting better at that, too.

So, we mostly just hung in the sky, looking at the sun setting on the mountains.

Will let me wallow in my happy sadness.

It turns out the sky-sling is big enough for two if you cuddle a little.

Will was the perfect gentleman the whole time, the brute! [Sound of fist hitting arm muscle]

I was sad too. Doc is a nice man.

So, Will suggested that we go back; ask Doc if he wanted to fight the DPS with us.

When we got back, Doc and the girls were the only ones left in the camp and they were getting ready to leave. Izzy invited Doc to come with us.

Doc liked the idea but wanted to give Will and me some time alone first; said that he had to take care of the girls. We arranged to meet in about a month.

The flight back to the Rockies was happier this time. Izzy said she wanted to fly a slow circle around a snow-topped mountain – you don't get to see many glaciers nowadays.

It was lucky that you had it on automatic pilot.

The sling misted up so we couldn't see out. I wasn't looking anyway. After a while, Izzy wanted to walk on the glacier, so we landed and Izzy gave me another name. Tarzan. I don't know what that means.

Nor will you, Tarzan.

[Long silence]

We were both all clingy, so we went for a walk on the glacier.

It began snowing gently.

Yes, flakes coming down and making little wet marks like tiny mice feet on Izzy's face.

Not bad, poet Will. Not bad.

Izzy said we should do our act.

Sonny and Cher's "I Got You, Babe."

So we did. At the end of the first verse, Izzy and I did our moves to the chorus and we had just started to walk again before beginning the second verse...

...when I tripped Will into a snow bank.

I fell flat on my face. I lay still for a bit, wondering what had happened. I rolled over and Izzy was there, pointing her finger at me.

*I asked Will if he remembered when he had accidentally tripped me and didn't hold me up? Then, I told him. "Well, **I got'cha!** I told you I'd get'cha back and I got'cha back when you least expected it. Now, we're even."*

So, that's how I found out that the got'cha game never actually ends. I also found out that there's another part to the game.

The part where if you hurt somebody by accident, ...

...you have to kiss it better.

[Long silence]

