

# **The Get Even Bird**

**Wilizy, #2**

**November 2081 to April 2082**

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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

**From Will's journals: November 5, 2081.**

"I'll drive," Izzy said from her snuggled up position against my chest in the sky-sling.

"Huh?" I replied. Not one of my brighter moments, I suppose. We were cruising through the clear blue Alberta skies on the southwest heading we had been on since leaving our camp west of Rocky Mountain House. I hadn't been watching our progress – too busy thinking. Two weeks ago, Izzy and I would have spent most of the trip necking, but we didn't do that any more. The sky-sling was too small for two people to relax in comfort, so we had to cuddle to squeeze in. We didn't do much of that any more either.

"I'll drive," Izzy repeated in case I hadn't heard her. She knew that I often became oblivious to everything around me when I was concentrating. I could have pretended not to know what she meant. After all, the sky-sling didn't have the steering wheel or pedals that were used to drive the modern automobiles before oil disappeared from the world. The It's Only Fair Society had solar powered mini-mobilizers now, but they didn't work too well on the bumpy mud ruts that now formed the highway networks in Alberta. People generally used one-person solar-powered copters if they had to travel any distance. The sky-sling Izzy and I were relaxing in wasn't a car; nor was it a copter. It was an invisible flying machine that obeyed whatever thoughts I sent to it. Go up, go down, go faster, go slower, and so on. The sky-sling wasn't something a person could drive. So, I could have pretended not to know what Izzy was saying.

I could feel Izzy's jaw against my chest – methodically chewing on the little piece of gum that she had found in her backpack. She had pronounced it *old and a little bit fuzzy* before popping it into her mouth. Chewing a stale, non-food substance that you'd never swallow didn't seem sensible to me, but I wasn't going to say anything. Izzy often did weird things. That's why it was never boring when she was around.

Izzy waited patiently for me to think about her offer to drive. She knew that I didn't like to make decisions quickly, even for something as straightforward as her controlling the sky-sling. I had no real reason to say No. After all, Izzy was fully trained on the sky-sling even to the point of having all of its primary functions cryptic-coded onto her own pinky-ring computer. I was still the better pilot because I had been flying the sky-sling ever since I had invented it several months ago. I also knew its capabilities better – at least from a theoretical perspective. But, Izzy was more daring than I was, and soon, she'd have the sky-sling doing things that I had never dreamed of. I was OK with that. It was just that I had wanted to collect my thoughts on this trip and I wouldn't be able to do that with Izzy corkscrewing us upside down through the atmosphere.

We were on the way to meet Doc – Izzy's volunteer-father. She hadn't said it out loud, and neither had I – but we really needed to talk to Doc. Izzy and I had spent all last week discussing how we would fight the IOF's Department of Public Safety, reveal it for what is was, and make Alberta a better place to live. I had thought that would mean the end to brain-bands controlling everyone's behaviour and emotions. I had thought that would mean a month of battles and then the war would be over. But Izzy saw things differently. Very differently.

We didn't have any big yelling matches, angry exchanges, or physical fights like we did before we became a team. We just had lots of intense discussions. I was sure I could defeat the DPS with some unstoppable weapons that would catch them by surprise. But, Izzy wouldn't agree to any of my proposals and I didn't see why she was being so difficult. I couldn't agree to any of her proposals either – their probability of success didn't fall within the necessary parameters. In the end, we couldn't make a single important strategic decision. We were hoping Doc could help us out with that.

Part of our problem was that Izzy and I were only fifteen-years old. We didn't know anything about life. Say that we finally did agree on how to fight the DPS and say that we did beat them. The It's Only Fair Society would disappear, but what would take its place? We didn't have a clue about governments, or justice, or basic human rights, or any of the other things that Izzy said we would have to introduce so that people could live together in peace after the IOF fell. We were hoping that Doc could take care of that end of things for us.

I had another, much more personal reason for wanting to see Doc. He knew Izzy better than anyone. He was her teacher, doctor, and volunteer-father. I was hoping that he could explain why she always ended up crying and running away from me whenever I kissed her.

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“Uh, I was hoping we could spend the trip quietly,” I said to Izzy. “I'd like to think.”

“OK,” Izzy replied and snuggled deeper against my chest, her right arm resting on my body. I was sprawled on my back in the sky-sling as though I were sitting in a recliner chair with the footrests extended. Izzy was scrunched down and was using my chest as her headrest. It would have been more comfortable for her sit up straighter, but she scrunched low into the sky-sling every time we flew now. I assumed that was so the only thing I had available to kiss was the top of her head.

She had started avoiding my kisses after we couldn't agree on a strategy to fight the Department of Public Safety. All of our discussions had taken the same form. She'd say something like: If the DPS tries to lure us into meeting them, I think we should do such and such. After explaining her strategy, she'd ask, "What do you think?"

Izzy would go off fishing while I thought about it. I have to admit that it takes me a long time to make a decision about important things. Izzy says that Alberta's mountain glaciers disappeared faster. It's not because I'm a slow thinker – it's just that I have a lot to consider before I can make a decision. For example, when Izzy proposed that we meet with the DPS to discuss citizens becoming free of their brain-bands, I'd think of all the possible dirty tricks that the DPS might use to capture us. For each dirty trick, I'd calculate its probability of success, plus or minus a reasonable margin of error. I'd store the results in a mental spreadsheet and go on to the next DPS dirty trick. Then, I'd calculate the probability of our own success in getting the brain-bands removed. When the entire spreadsheet was complete, I'd compare the DPS' probability of capturing us to our probability of getting the brain-bands removed. If our probability of success didn't exceed 70%, I'd tell her that I didn't think it would work and assume that would be the end of it.

But, Izzy didn't accept the decision. She'd ask "Why?" Then, she'd poke holes in my results by posing What if questions. Or, she'd come up with an entirely different scenario that wasn't part of my logic chain. I don't know why she didn't accept the probability scores. I mean, math is math, right? I'd offer to print out the spreadsheets for her, but she'd say something outrageous like, "Not everything should be decided by a probability analysis," and I'd have to bite my tongue to avoid a long argument. So now, we don't discuss strategy and she always hunches down low against my chest when we travel in the sling. She says that she isn't mad, but why else would she be scrunching down?

Thinking about her scrunching down brought me back to the present. Izzy was still chewing methodically on her gum. There was a faint aroma of peppermint, but mostly I smelled Izzy's brown hair. Izzy was back to her IOF browns again – brown hair, brown skin, brown eyes. I liked her best when she was showing the real Izzy – her white skin, red hair and blue eyes, but that was too dangerous when we were away from camp. Thanks to the IOF geneticists, everyone in Alberta looked the same. That meant they were brown. Like me. However, Izzy's body hadn't been manufactured by an IOF geneticist, so she didn't look like everyone else. If people might see her, she had to be in her browns or else the DPS might catch us, force a brain-band around our skulls, and we'd become emotionless zombies. At least Izzy and I agreed about her wearing her browns whenever we were in public.

Izzy wanted to go brown yesterday, so I offered to help her with the dyes. She said that I could dye her hair and her face. I enjoyed doing this so I took a long time gently massaging the dye into her hair to ensure I got it right. Then, I started dabbing the dye on her face. I wanted to make sure that she had the same uniform tan colour everywhere, so I used the lightest possible touch. She had her eyes closed and didn't seem to mind how I was doing it. At least, that's what I interpreted from the smile on her face.

When I was finished, she offered to trim my hair as a way of thanking me. So, it was my turn to sit on the stump while she ran her fingers through my hair to comb out the tangles, although I didn't think that I had any. Then, she announced that my hair didn't need a trim, so she'd shave my whiskers instead. She made up a plate of soap foam and started dabbing it onto my cheeks, on my chin, and then under my chin. She was kneeling in front of me, and I guess she was wanting to spread the soap evenly because she had her face really close to mine to see better. She pulled out her small blade and began scraping my left cheek. I must have been moving too much, because she had to put her left hand behind my head to steady it, and then she began combing my hair with her fingers again. More tangles to remove, I suppose. I wasn't paying too much attention. Her soft gentle touch felt good and I had closed my eyes. The next thing I knew, she was putting her blade in my hand and saying that she had to dye the rest of her body now or else the colour wouldn't match her face. I would have said that the colour would depend on how much dye was used, not when it was applied, but she wasn't there. I heard her crying as she left. She wouldn't cry about the possibility of her dyes not matching – that didn't make any sense! So, it must have been something that I had done. But, I hadn't done anything except sit on the stump! But, I had been thinking about kissing her. Crying when I kissed her was bad enough; now, she began crying when I even **thought** about kissing her?

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Izzy shifted slightly in the sling and I felt her touch on my left hand. “Will, altitude adjustment?” she asked.

I saw that we were approaching the mountains and thought-instructed my pinky-ring computer to increase the power in the sky-sling's force field. The stronger force field would push against the Earth's gravitational field and lift us higher. I'd also have to reduce the amount of air flowing into the enclosed sling – higher altitudes meant colder air outside the sling. I thought that instruction too. As soon as we were at the new altitude, I'd go back to my musings.

The sky-sling soared on as though I hadn't thought a thing. I spoke the necessary instruction to lift us higher. My pinky-ring computer that powered the force field would respond to both thought and verbal commands. The verbal command didn't work either. I looked down at the pinky-ring on my left hand. It had a small gob of Izzy's gum stuck over the input port.

“Guess I'll have to drive after all,” Izzy said innocently, and gave me her eyebrow waggle that told me she had successfully completed another Got'cha. “I think you're really going to enjoy this.” The sky-sling came to a complete stop and hovered horizontally in the air for a second or two. Then, the sling tilted until I was looking through my feet almost straight down at the forest-covered hills. I had a two second glimpse before the forests started to recede from view. She must have put the power acceleration on max because I could feel the sling vibrate as it tried to push itself away from the Earth. At least we wouldn't be diving headfirst this time.

The sling rose until both of us began having difficulty breathing. The sling paused in its ascent, its force field holding our bodies vertically upright in the air. Being in the sling wasn't like being in a copter where you had the illusion of

something solid around you that you could hang onto. When charged, the filaments forming the sling became invisible – not that the thin little filaments would provide any kind of support whatsoever. So, Izzy and I were hovering upright in the air with nothing visibly supporting us. We had nothing to hold onto except each other. Izzy shifted so that the length of her body was pressed against mine. I felt her arms tightening around my shoulders and I tightened my grip around her waist. The sling slowly began to tilt until our heads were pointed straight down at the distant green Earth. It was going to be a head first plunge after all.

Izzy pulled her cheek away from mine and asked “Ready?”

I could see this huge grin on her face and I felt my face break into one too. We locked ourselves together in a death grip. “Ready,” I said.

“Don’t forget to scream on the way down.”

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We screamed so loud on the way down that anyone within a hundred clicks could have heard us, but I knew that Izzy would not have allowed that to happen. We had developed three very important rules about operating the sky-sling and both of us were very careful about observing security.

You see, the sky-sling was our secret weapon against the DPS. When we closed the sling’s cover, we could still see out, but nobody could see in. This gave us a tremendous advantage. For example, Izzy and I had spent our first week together hiding inside the DPS building in Edmonton, reading all their files, and photographing the important ones. We still had to be careful moving around inside the DPS building because any person accidentally bumping up against our sling would feel it. Being invisible didn’t mean that we still weren’t there.

The first thing we did when we got back to our camp was brainstorm all the possible ways the sky-sling could be discovered. That led to the following three rules:

**Rule #1:** Never do anything with the help of the sky-sling that would lead the DPS to wonder why something strange had just happened. For example, we couldn’t just take a file folder out of a room. There had to be an obvious, logical explanation for it disappearing. Zzyk would know how I thought – partly because he and I were both Zs, and partly because he had been pretending to be my volunteer-father ever since I had been tilted out of the gestation incubator. Izzy and I, on the other hand, didn’t know much about Zzyk. Only that he was evil, ruthless, and as smart as I was. If Zzyk ever began to think that we could fly invisibly through the sky, he’d find a way to stop us. Our entire hope for defeating the DPS rested on keeping our secret weapon secret.

**Rule #2:** Fly very slowly whenever anyone was around. Even though the sky-sling was invisible, it was still a solid object. When we flew through the air, we created a breeze. At high speed, we also created a high-pitched whine. Theoretically, I thought we could generate speeds well above the speed of sound but I hadn’t tested the theory yet. There was always a chance that someone would hear the sonic boom.

**Rule #3:** Never let noise, heat, or moisture reveal the location of the sling. The filament force field was like a porous wall. Just about anything small could

penetrate through the gaps in the force field and into the sling. Oxygen, obviously. A sharp-tipped arrow. A bullet, for sure. The wall was porous both ways – from outside to inside, or from inside to outside. That meant that with a small amount of pressure, we could push a finger or an elbow through the filament force field. That meant that we had to be careful not to make wild movements that would result in an elbow suddenly appearing all by itself in the sky. Also, eating food in the sling was a bad idea in a crowd. Crumbs could fall out. The porous wall didn't stop sound either. We could hear what people were saying around us; similarly, they'd hear us if we made a noise. A sudden cough could be disastrous.

In order to fly comfortably, I had created some force-field baffles that would deflect the outside air. Otherwise, it would become extremely breezy and cold in the sling. When hovering, or at low speed, we left the baffles open and air flowed through the sling. Sound, water, and dust could also get in. As we built up speed, we closed the baffles tighter and tighter until only a small amount of air could enter. Otherwise, the interior of the sling would become very cold. It was impossible to poke a finger through the sling with the baffles closed. Sound could not get in or out either.

Whenever anyone was around that might be able to see us, we had to be very careful not to let the outside weather reveal us. If it were raining or snowing, for example, we couldn't be a bubble of dryness hovering in the air with raindrops bouncing off us.

Bottom line: it was very dangerous operating the sky-sling anywhere people might be around to see or hear us. We always flew it with extreme caution in those situations. We even extended that caution to operating in the wilderness. Izzy would have put the baffles on maximum when we were diving so that the sound of our screams could not escape. That made our screams sound even louder inside the sling though, which was half of the fun.

Our headfirst dive ended and I noticed that we were rising again but in a gradual arc this time. As we reached the top and started to descend, my stomach tried to float out of my body. Fortunately, my body kept pace with it or the inside of the sling could have become very yucky.

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Weightless. Izzy had made us weightless! I couldn't believe it! We were still clutching each other in our death grip, so I pulled my cheek away from hers and stared at her.

"Surprise," she smiled.

"How'd you do it?"

"Later. Here comes another."

The sling was reaching the top of another large vertical arc and I could feel the gravity decreasing. I shut up, pulled her tight, and we were floating again.

We did two more weightless arcs and then the sling leveled off. Both of us relaxed our grips and we pulled back a bit from our embrace. "Again?" she asked.

Izzy had this great big grin on her face, her eyes were shining, and I knew an infectious giggle was waiting to erupt. "Oh yes, again!" I said.

I felt the sling accelerate into a steep incline, but I couldn't help staring at her, and she giggled at what must have been on my face, and then she ducked her

head against my chest just as I was about to kiss her. I grabbed her around her waist instead and lifted her off her feet and squeezed and squeezed. I felt her kiss the top of my head. Then it became difficult to breathe so I put her down so that we'd be ready.

"It's not necessary to do the death-plunge to become weightless, but I think it's more fun this way," she said.

Then, we were screaming again.

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We did four more dives, each with four arcs of weightlessness afterwards and then thought it best to stop. Both of us were beginning to feel queasy, either from the plunges or perhaps from the weightlessness. Izzy explained how she had read somewhere that it was possible to generate short periods of weightlessness, but couldn't remember how. So, she had experimented with different types of movements until she found the right ones. Since the IOF had kept me away from any knowledge remotely related to space travel, she knew that it would be a surprise for me. I thanked her, gave her a hug, and got to kiss the top of her head again.

"I know you're bursting with ideas, so I'll fly us slowly and gently to Doc's camp and you can disappear inside your brain."

So, I did.

The sky-sling had been too confining for us to really experience weightlessness. I could feel that we were floating, but we weren't actually floating free. But, if I could make a much bigger sky-sling, there'd be enough interior space that we could float from bottom to top and from side to side. That prompted the idea that Izzy and I could not only have our individual sky-slings, but I could make a much bigger version of the sky-sling that had enough room for three people. Doc could travel with us. In fact, each of us could wear individual sky-slings inside a larger sky-sling. I wondered what effect the smaller force fields would have on the larger force field. Would they cancel each other out? Reinforce? Would we have to worry about sound escaping? Would it be necessary to have different sky-slings, or could we each have one that was expandable? Would...

I had to stop in mid-thought. Something was pressing my nostrils together and I opened my mouth to breathe, half choking, half-gasping. The pressure on my nostrils disappeared.

"Will, I need you."

Izzy's voice didn't sound normal.

## Chapter 2

**From Will's journals: November 5, 2081 continued.**

"Will, I need you," Izzy repeated.

"What?" I said as soon as I got my breath back.

"Trouble," she said. "Tell me when you're focused. Be quick."



I tried shaking my head several times, as though I could just shake all my ideas out of my brain. I sensed her impatience and forgot about the filaments and what I could do with them. We were hovering over some spot in the foothills with a small, stringy turquoise lake directly in front of us. It was surrounded on three sides by steeply falling, forested hillsides. I checked behind me. Make that surrounded on four sides. The lake was a little pocket of shiny water at the bottom of a hole in a mountain range. "Where are we?" I asked.

"We're about one klick south of where Doc said he would be. Can you see the stream entering the lake at the northern edge?" and she pointed.

"Got it."

"Doc said that's where he'd be."

"Where the little wisps of smoke are? Surely he wouldn't do that?"

"No, he wouldn't. What colour is the smoke?"

"Pink?"

"I was afraid you'd say that." Izzy put the sling into a crawl towards the smoke. We were several hundred meters in the air. "Doc is the best woodsman I've ever seen," she continued. "I knew everything he knew, but I still couldn't find him if he didn't want to be found. Doc gave me a special kit in case the DPS caught me – I'll show you in a minute. He kept a second kit for himself; said that if I ever approached his camp and there was pink smoke in the air, I should run away. It meant that the DPS had found him."

We both scanned the terrain below us. The lake was at a reasonably high altitude but not high enough for there to be snow. It hardly ever snowed enough to cover the ground in Alberta nowadays except at very high altitudes. That meant that even though it was winter, the ground was bare and dry. "Doc wouldn't have left any tracks on that ground for anyone to follow," Izzy said. "They couldn't have caught him with normal woodcraft."

"How's the smoke work?" I asked.

"From a chemical plug that Doc inserts into a dry log. The chemical burns clear near the fire, but the smoke gradually turns pink as it rises. People at the camp wouldn't notice it but you'd see the pink from a distance. It lasts only as long as the log."

"Half an hour to an hour?"

"Probably. No way of knowing what size log he used. I'm being very careful approaching the camp because the DPS may have left a watcher behind. We don't dare get out of the sling." Izzy started us on a slow facedown crawl around the circumference of a smallish-size circle of level ground that would have been his campsite. "If they took him overland, he'd put up some sort of struggle and leave a trail of some kind."

Neither of us could see any trail leading out of the campsite other than the creek to the lake.

I spotted the spike marks on the tree first. "Doc's hammock would have been at least halfway up," and I pointed to the likely spot.

"Doc doesn't use spikes. He wears only moccasins when he's in the woods. Those gouges were made by the DPS agents cleaning up the camp."

We had completed our circle and Izzy hovered over the creek. This was the easiest way in and out of the camp.

“Follow the creek to the lake?” I suggested and she did.

We both saw the wet boot mark on the boulder by the creek edge at the same time. “They probably immobilized him and carried his body down the creek bed. They had to step out of the water at some point.”

“Canoe?”

“They’re too lazy. Look for rotor wash instead.”

We found a semi-circle of wet vegetation by the lakeside that shouldn’t have been wet. The landing spot. Izzy said that the copter would be at least a four-seater. I added that solar power couldn’t fly a copter that size. “South to Calgary?” I asked.

“It’s closer than Edmonton,” Izzy confirmed. She opened up the baffles and took us gradually southward, changing the elevation, and smelling the air. Nothing.

She returned to the campsite and took us north. Both of us smelled a faint odor of something. I didn’t know what it was but Izzy said that it was the smell of copter fuel. She had smelled it often enough as a child when the DPS was still actively hunting them. Izzy took us well away from the campsite before maxing the sky-sling into a steep climb north. We needed to see over the horizon.

“Clean the gum out of your pinky-ring,” she told me once we leveled off.

I had forgotten about that. I removed the big gob easily enough but the computer still wouldn’t respond. She pulled a very thin screwdriver out of the cuff of her sleeve and handed it to me. “I’m sorry I fouled up your ring. You can use this to scrape off the residue.”

“Where’d that come from?”

“Part of a kit that Doc gave me. Take over flying the sling as soon as your ring is working properly.” She pulled her collapsible scope out of her jacket pocket and began searching for a glint of reflected sunlight ahead of us.

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We both reached the same conclusions. They’d probably fly north and stay over the mountains for as long as possible to avoid being seen by people on the ground. The DPS tries to keep their military helicopters secret because, supposedly, the IOF doesn’t have an army. If they stayed on a northerly heading, we’d catch them easily enough because Edmonton was a long way off and we could fly much faster than they could. But, if they had a different destination, we needed as much time as the sling could give us to check the alternate routes. I took us as close to the speed of sound as I dared.

We found them without difficulty soon afterwards. The copter was a four seat military version. Green and black camouflage, large top rotor, machine gun sticking out the front fuselage, another two machine guns positioned at each side. The pilot and co-pilot had doors but there was open space beside the passenger seats. I brought us to within three hundred meters below and behind them, and turned to Izzy. “Now what?”

“Can you bring us close enough so that we can see inside?”

I eased into a course parallel to them on their right side that turned out to be Doc’s side. He was in the rear passenger seat, obviously awake and alert. He was gazing around him – even looked right at us at one point. I could see his big black bushy eyebrows clear as day - the black contrasting with his shock of white hair.

The left passenger seat was empty. Izzy reported that she could see no visible marks on Doc's face and he didn't appear to be in pain. We both knew that would come later. She saw a glint of something by Doc's feet and asked me to get as close as I could without risking discovery.

I took us within twenty-meters of the copter before the air turbulence made the sling shake and buck. I was making mental adjustments in course and altitude almost every other second and told Izzy that. "This should be close enough," she said and leaned across my body to get a better view with her scope. The glint turned out to be chains. A metal chain encircled one of Doc's ankles, threaded through a bracket of some kind that was attached to the floor of the helicopter, and then looped onto the other ankle. Doc's hands were fastened behind him. Possibly plastic restraints, possibly not. Possibly looped through another bracket behind Doc's back, possibly not. I took a quick peek to my left and saw Doc tilt his head back against the seat and close his eyes.

Izzy continued her status report. The co-pilot was sitting in a high backed seat that gave him no view whatsoever of the passenger behind him. He'd have to unfasten his seat belt and swivel in his seat before he'd know what was going on behind him. The pilot was another matter. All he had to do was turn his head to the right to see Doc. Right now, both pilots were staring straight ahead. Possibly talking together through the headphones. On this kind of flight, boredom would set in quickly. Would that mean they'd be continually looking around trying to stay alert? Or, would they just daydream?

Izzy asked if we should stay in the prop wash so that I could learn how to control the sling better, or was it dangerous to stay there too long? I said that the sling wouldn't rattle apart and I needed all the practice that I could get in the prop wash. I knew that at some point, Izzy would want us even closer. Izzy said that she was going to think now, which was a polite way of asking me not to disturb her, so I didn't say anything when I got my bright idea. I eased us away from the DPS copter so that she could think without being jolted all over the sky.

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I dropped us away from the copter while Izzy described her rescue plan. Step one, step two, step three, all the way to the end. It was so detailed that you would have thought that she had spent a week on it. At least, that's how long I would have needed. The biggest problem she saw was keeping the sky-sling close enough to the copter so that she could free Doc, but without the sky-sling nudging the copter and causing the pilot to turn around to see what had happened.

I told her I could solve that, but I'd need to use her ring. She put her right hand directly in front of her mouth and said: "Master command level: Password is: Jane \*\*\*\*\* Tarzan!!! Direct instruction: Give full access to the voice that follows." Then, she put her hand in front of my mouth and motioned me to talk. A few seconds later, her ring was on the end of my pinky finger. Strange password, I thought. I like to include at least two numbers in my passwords. I would have asked why she used asterisks instead but she was busy looking for something by her feet.

I told Izzy what I intended to do and that brought her face back up. It was kind of red, so I realized that I had shut the baffles down too much. We needed as

much oxygen as we could get right now so I opened them. When we got close to the copter, I'd have to shut them down again to keep out the noxious fumes.

Izzy ran through the plan again – changing it on the fly after I had guaranteed the prop wash would not affect us. When she paused, I thought that was it. Doc would be safe, although wet. Then, she started on the contingency plans. What to do if the pilot turned around; what to do if Doc lost control of his body; what to do if we couldn't find the landing spot we wanted; what to do if the pilot decided to make sure that Doc was dead. Izzy wanted the DPS to think that Doc was dead so that they wouldn't keep searching for him.

"I'm sorry if I'm being bossy" she said when she was finished.

"You're not being bossy. You're being amazing," I said.

Izzy had to fix something with her shoe and then looked up. "Ready?"

I swallowed and nodded.

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I positioned the sling well away from the copter while I integrated Izzy's ring power into the control functions. I used my own ring to maintain the gravitational force field and navigation controls, however I pulsed those commands at 60 per minute, not the usual 120. As far as I could determine, the sling was not affected by the slower cycle – meaning we were still invisible. I opened the baffles completely and Izzy confirmed that she could get her hand through the force field. It gave her a tingling feeling but no pain, so we figured she'd be all right. I used Izzy's ring to send an entirely different set of instructions to the sling's filaments. Those commands were also pulsing at 60 per minute. The sling shook a bit until I got the pulses synchronized so that the Izzy's pulses slipped in between my pulses. The shaking stopped. Once again, we tested navigation controls and the baffles. "We're good," I said.

"Go," she replied.

I stationed the sling on a parallel course and on the side of the copter where Doc was sitting. Still using the gravitational force field power from my ring, I tipped the sling into a full vertical position with Izzy essentially standing to my right. I lined the sling up so that Izzy was staring directly at Doc whereas I was looking at the fuselage to Doc's right. "Increasing your ring's power, now" I told Izzy.

The magnetic field controlled by Izzy's computer began to draw the sling towards the copter's metal fuselage while my ring's gravitational field kept us hovering at the same altitude. The synchronization of the pulses meant that for a split second, the filaments were magnetic, then they were gravitational, then they were magnetic, and so on.

We slowly entered the prop wash and I fiddled with the navigational controls to stabilize us as best as I could. I had to be very cautious now. When the sling magnetized itself to the fuselage, the copter would experience a sudden increase in weight from our two bodies. The pilot would wonder why he had to suddenly increase power to maintain altitude. To avoid that, I was going to increase the power of the sling's gravitational field to help support the copter. I had to do that the second the sling bonded with the copter and the amount of power increase had to be just about perfect. A slight drop or rise would be interpreted as a little air pocket. A lurch would not be ignored. It worked out all right. We didn't lurch.

The sling was now bonded to the copter's fuselage and aligned so that Izzy had full access to the rear cabin; but first, we had to let Doc know that we were there. The rotors would mask any small noises he might make. I was more worried about giving him heart failure if a hand suddenly appeared in the middle of the air and tapped him on his knee. Izzy wasn't as worried. "It takes a lot to surprise Doc. I'll have the note, plus he'll see the embroidery on the cuff of my sleeve. He'll remember the escape tools."

The escape tools were the special kit that Doc had given her. He had made two virtually undetectable escape kits back in the early days of the dissident movement – one for himself and one for Izzy's grandmother. Each set consisted of a sawing tool that would cut through plastic or metal restraints; a sharp narrow probe that could be used to open handcuffs, and several miniature screw drivers with different sized blades. Her grandmother's set was lost when she was murdered by the DPS. Doc gave his set to Izzy when she became old enough to become one of the DPS' primary targets. They were especially valuable now since he had made them out of hard plastic so that they would not set off a metal detector. When plastic disappeared soon after the oil panics, Doc wasn't able to make another set.

I watched as Izzy poked her hand through the force field. She maneuvered a piece of paper out of her fist and shook it in the air so that it was fully open. Then, she tapped Doc on his knee and waved the note. The note said, "Are you up for some sky-diving?"

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The leg chain was now unfastened – although Doc hadn't moved his feet; if the pilot looked back, it would appear that Doc was still cuffed to the copter. His hands were still behind his back but the plastic restraints had yielded quickly to the saw. Izzy had shown Doc several hand-written signs that outlined her plan. Then, she had flashed him the "Wait" sign and withdrawn her hand.

That had been half an hour ago. Periodically, Izzy reinserted her "Wait" sign to let Doc know that we hadn't deserted him. In the picture that Izzy was going to paint, the DPS would conclude that a desperate dissident doctor had used a concealed sawing tool to free himself and then had tried to skydive to safety, fortunately killing himself in the process. The copter's film of Doc falling to his death would give him a measure of safety from any further pursuits by the DPS and Izzy had built that into the plan deliberately. We could have snatched him out of the copter quite easily, but not without raising questions of where he had gone. All we had to do was land Doc safely on the ground while making it appear that he had died on impact. Oh, and before that, we had to prevent the copter pilot from shooting Doc while he was plummeting to the ground. Surprisingly, given the challenges, I thought Izzy would actually pull it off.

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After forty-five minutes of peering at the ground rolling towards us, Izzy finally saw what she wanted. Her *Free your feet* sign alerted Doc and made sure that the foot chain would stay in the cabin. The *Count to twenty and jump* sign gave me enough time to move the sling out of Doc's way.

We slid below Doc's spread-eagled body while the pilot was turning the copter around. I timed the speed of our descent so that it was a little slower than Doc's descent. The sling was in a horizontal position with both of us lying on our backs and looking up at Doc. With the baffles open, Izzy was able to reassure Doc that we were below him. She told him the rest of the plan right then and there.

When Doc's body touched the sling, Izzy put her hands through the force field, undid Doc's belt, and pulled both loose ends into the sling and then redid the ends of the belt so that she had a loop to hang onto. I closed the baffles tightly enough that Doc was temporarily anchored to the sling and cut all power to the sling's vertical lift so that we would fall at exactly the speed of a sky-diving body. I maintained some sideways power so that Doc's body would fall towards the lake Izzy had chosen for him to die in.

We left Doc in a skydiving posture long enough for the copter to catch up to us. As expected, they stayed above him so that the camera in the belly of the fuselage could record his fall. We let them film for a while, but knew that they would be getting worried when they saw the lake that Doc was apparently aiming for. Izzy said, "Wobble," so I started dipping the sling from side to side, while Izzy was hanging onto the ends of Doc's belt so that he wouldn't slip off. Izzy told Doc to flail his hands and legs around like he was frightened and I made the dips even more extreme so that it would appear that Doc was close to losing control. The copter backed off a bit – they were still filming but if they were going to make a strafing run, they'd have to do it soon. I knew Izzy was watching and wouldn't give them the chance.

The copter banked to the left and I heard Izzy yell, "Dive, Will!" She reached through the force field, grabbed Doc's left knee and pulled it into the sling, all the time maintaining a tight grip on his belt. I pulled Doc's right elbow through the force field and then spun and flipped the sling towards the ground in a death plunge that was too quick for the copter to catch us.

At ten-seconds before impact, I ensured that the sling was underneath Doc. At eight-seconds before impact, I cut all spin so that Doc was falling face first. At seven-seconds, both Izzy and I pushed Doc's knee and elbow out of the sling. At five-seconds, I closed the baffles completely – no water could get in and no belt could get out. At four-seconds, I activated the sling's lift function to significantly slow our entry. Just before we hit the water, I drove the sling to the bottom of the lake making a huge splash in the process.

As the lake bubbled up around us, I kept the sling pressed down against the lake bed, opened the baffles, and waited for water to fill about half the sling before closing the baffles again and letting us drift slowly and naturally to the surface. Full of air, we could have popped completely out of the water – something that a human body would never do. Doc's face was pressed against the surface of the sling. He had air bulges in both cheeks and was making little hand waves at us to tell us that he was all right. We felt Doc's body broach the surface and I put enough downward power onto the sling to hold it under water. Doc could turn his head enough to get a few good breaths. Meanwhile, both Izzy and I had our faces pressed against the top of the sling and we were taking deep breaths in the little pocket of air that remained there. We felt the current take us towards the falls at the outlet of the lake.

Since we were under water, visibility was almost nil in the sling, however we could hear the roar of the falls approaching. Once again, Izzy and I pulled a knee and an elbow into the sling and I waited until we were falling before pushing Doc's body to the outside edge of the cascade of water so that the copter could see him falling. Then, I re-immersed us into the heavy deluge and made a slow, controlled descent to the boulders marking the base of the falls. As expected, a small cave had been carved out of the cliff face by the surging water. Izzy and I released our hold on Doc's clothes and body and he slid off the sling and into wet safety.

Izzy had planned one last piece of disinformation. She stepped out of the sling into the cave and helped Doc remove his shirt. She placed Doc's shirt on the outside of the sling and I pulled the sleeves and the tail through the force field. I closed the baffles down tight, and flew into the turmoil at the bottom of the falls where I lodged Doc's upper body next to a large boulder that could be seen only occasionally in the spray and mist of the falls. From time to time, I could see the copter circling but knew that they couldn't come too close because of the buffeting air around the falls. I waited a full fifteen-minutes after they left before returning to the cave with the shirt. Both Doc and Izzy were shivering so we couldn't stay long. However, Doc gave me an exuberant manly hug as well as a heartfelt thank you. I also received a hug from Izzy and a whole bunch of whispers – "Thank you, Will." Her teary smile told me that she was already close to the edge. So, when she put her lips against mine in a soft, tingly touch, I made sure that my kiss wouldn't cause her to cry and run away.

## Chapter 3

### **From Izzy's journals: November 5, 2081.**

It was strange. Doc's rescue, that is. Right from the beginning, I had myself under control. I knew that if we failed, Doc would be tortured; knew that we might accidentally reveal our secret weapon; knew that I hardly any time to make a plan. Still, I never thought about that. I saw the plan clear in my head; told Will everything. Thank goodness, he didn't argue. I really appreciated that; couldn't have handled an argument with Will while Doc's life was on the line.

The operation went perfectly. I wasn't even scared when the water in the sling reached my nose; knew Will was watching everything and he wouldn't let us drown. Even when I was helping Doc off with his shirt in the tiny hole behind the falls, and he was shaking and had that look of being old and vulnerable, – I still was in control of myself. Why was it then that I turned into a blubbering idiot ages after the danger was over and Will was disappearing into the mists of the falls? I mean, one minute I'm the calm, cool strategist and the next minute I'm bawling my eyes out into Doc's bare chest.

Doc said something about post stress reaction; said he had it too; said his legs were still shaking; said it didn't mean anything. It was just a biological reaction to stress.

I agreed it might be that partly, but there was more; knew that I wouldn't have much time alone with Doc; snuffled my way through everything that was wrong.

I told Doc how Will and I couldn't agree on strategy; how Will would always take forever to make up his mind – which I didn't mind. Sometimes I make up my mind too quickly; good to have a more reasoned approach too. But, after Will makes up his mind, he won't change it. And, because all of his deliberations are done inside his head, I can't convince him to change his mind because I don't know why he decided the way he did. He offers to print out his mental spreadsheet, but all he has on it is numbers! I ask him for his reasons. Will says that *Math is math*, as though that makes his decision automatically right. I tell him that you can't make decisions solely based on probability analysis and he looks at me like I've lost my mind. So, I end up being argumentative, and he becomes stubborn, and we just walk away and find something to do by ourselves because neither of us wants to fight.

I also told Doc that I was worried about Will's anger. He's been without his brain-band for months now. Wouldn't he be able to control his emotions by now? But, he's not! Will used to kiss me gently. Then, we had our arguments; now he kisses me so hard that it hurts. He denies that he's angry with me; but why is he using kisses to hurt me? Now, I try to avoid his kisses whenever I can. Wouldn't that tell him that I don't like him mangling my lips?

Doc listened, but we didn't have any chance to talk about it. When Will came back to the cave, I wanted to thank him properly for saving my volunteer-father; raised my lips to his; found out that he's still angry at me.

# # # # # # # #

One sling wasn't big enough to transport three people invisibly, so I said that I would shuttle each of them back to our base camp separately. Will said that he didn't mind staying in the cave; said that Doc and I should go first because we were shivering. Doc suggested that we camp in British Columbia tonight because it was closer and safer. I retrieved my pinky-computer from Will, bundled Doc into the sling, and headed west.

Airborne, the sling heated up quickly and we both felt better. Doc told me that three agents had been waiting for him at the lake and jumped him after he had built the fire. Doc saw them coming in time to drop the special log onto the flames. The agents hadn't known who Doc was – just that he was an aboriginal dissident without a brain-band walking through Alberta's woods. Doc had no idea how they had found him.

I was digesting that information when the trees beneath our flight path abruptly ended. I flipped the sling into a U-turn and stopped. At least fifty-meters of forest in front of us had been clear-cut, and I mean entirely clear-cut. The line of trees I was hovering over ended in a perfectly straight north-south line. Part way into the cleared zone, a solid-looking wire barrier attached to high metal towers extended as far north and south as I could see. A second set of towers and a wire fence ran parallel to the first but about twenty-meters away.

I hovered and scanned for traps. We agreed the fences were made of barbed wire with razor wire on top and motion detection cameras were bound to be in the nearby trees. Large wooden signs warned of land mines in the soil between the two



fences. Doc knew from dissident arms smugglers that the IOF had installed a big fence blocking access into British Columbia a long time ago; the smugglers hadn't said anything about a parallel set of fences with landmines buried in between.

Manufacturing metal towers would take a tremendous amount of electricity. Alberta has some hydro-electricity plants; however, the IOF relies almost exclusively on solar power because our winters are so mild and the summers positively boiling. Producing enough metal to install a fence along the IOF's entire western border would have meant power shortages for everyone. Doc asked why I thought Zzyk would have installed fences on only the western border.

The reason for my U-turn was because I didn't know if the DPS had installed any exotic electronic devices on the border. Will had identified several ways that the sling could be detected – thermal imaging being one of them. So, I lifted the sling as high as it could manage before tiptoeing slowly across the border. Two valleys later, I set Doc down next to a small lake surrounded by dense vegetation. All of the Aboriginal Nation land appeared like that. A solid cover of trees everywhere with no signs of habitation anywhere.

When I returned with Will, it was dusk and Doc had lit a small fire. Will and I had no food or supplies of any kind with us – everything was back at our base camp. Doc had lost his pack when he was captured. We figured one night without food wouldn't hurt us. Alberta winters did tend to be cool in the mountains. The Aboriginal Nation would be no different. At least we'd be safe.

# # # # #

We were lounging against a big fallen tree in front of the fire – Doc on my left side, Will on my right. I was snuggled into Will's chest, half-doing, while Doc told Will about the cameras and the fences. Will started to talk about how the new tactics wouldn't be effective against us, but Doc shushed him right away. "Don't tell me anything I don't need to know," he said. Will nodded and there was an awkward silence. I was half expecting – dreading actually – that Doc would launch into one of his corny campfire songs when he surprised me.

"Looking at the two of you cuddled up like that has made me realize that I haven't done my fatherly duty. The two of you left so quickly after the wedding ceremony and I never thought about it until now."

I didn't have the foggiest idea what Doc was up to; partly a function of being hypnotized half-asleep by the soothing sound of Will's heartbeat.

"Will, has anyone ever told you how babies are created?"

If I could have burrowed under the tree... *Not now, Doc*, I thought. *Not with me here!*

Will said he had done the required reading and told Doc about the geneticist, the Petri dish, the gestation incubator and was warming up to the topic when Doc interrupted.

"Will, I didn't mean how the IOF manufactures babies, I meant how real people create real babies."

There was a long silence. I was going to wait for somebody to start talking and then I'd crawl on my belly into the darkness.

"You do know that Melissa is a fertile woman, right? You know that she's different from IOF women and can have babies."

*Now they're going to talk about my fertility?*

"Yeah, I guess I knew that. Izzy never told me that, but I figured it out when she wouldn't take her shirt off in front of me. IOF girls don't worry about that because IOF girl chests are exactly like IOF boy chests; but Izzy did worry about taking off her shirt. So that meant she had something to hide, but I still don't know exactly what. One time she took off all of her clothes in front of me, but... Ow! Ow! Izzy! Ow!"

I was pounding Will's ribs as hard as I could. "I did not take off all my clothes in front of you, and you couldn't see anything anyway because your eyes were shut, and you knew that if you had peeked, I would have blinded you for life. Be sure you tell Doc that."

Doc ignored me. "So, you know Melissa is different from IOF girls, but not how?"

"Well, she has, you know, two bulges under her shirt."

I gave Will two more blows to the ribs. "How would you know? You have never seen anything and you have never touched anything. Tell Doc that! Repeat after me! I have never..."

"But Izzy, I can feel them when you hug me."

"Doc, not one finger, I swear. Not one finger. Not one fingernail. Not one fingernail molecule!"

They both stared at me in curiosity until I wound down.

"So, what do you think has to happen for Melissa to have babies, Will?"

"Uhh, she'd probably go to a geneticist who would..."

"Melissa, you've had some instruction in how babies are created. Why don't you tell Will what he needs to know."

"DOC!!!" I was speechless. I stammered and stuttered some gibberish and got up to leave. A girl doesn't explain the facts of life to her... to her boyfriend. There, I admit it. To her boyfriend. Doc grabbed my arm as I walked by, pulled himself up, put an arm around my shoulder and walked me away from the fire.

"Melissa," he said into my ear. "You and Will have to find a way to discuss things so that you can resolve your problems. The only way that you can sort out the difficulties you're having is by learning how to talk together about serious issues. This is a perfect topic to practice on because it is so important to both of you. Keep it simple and keep it scientific. That's all Will is interested in. He won't think it's unusual for you to explain this to him. After all, you explain all sorts of other things to him, don't you?"

I hesitated. I did explain a lot of things to Will. Plus, I had given the girls in the dissidents' school a sort of sex talk. They had mostly blushed and giggled which made me feel really awkward. Will wouldn't do that.

Doc interrupted my thoughts. "Or, you can let Will find out by accident – after it's too late."

I turned around and walked back to the fire. Doc sat by himself in the shadows, and after a bit, I forgot he was there. Science. That's all it was.

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It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. Will had taken a little biology but the IOF had left out any topics about human sexuality. I just filled in some gaps.

Afterwards, Doc sauntered over and sat down in his spot next to me. I squeezed his hand and went back to cuddling with Will, glad that the ordeal was over.

“So Melissa. How would you feel about becoming pregnant?” Doc’s voice stomped all over my peace of mind.

I wanted to roll over and pound him. I actually did turn towards him and then saw his Cheshire cat grin and the wink. I rolled back into Will’s arms and thought about it. Why shouldn’t I tell Will how I felt? So, I did.

“I’d hate it. Right now, I’d absolutely hate it.” Then I listed all the reasons, and because I knew how Will thought, I numbered them from 1 to 10. Then, because Will is Will, he started asking me questions, starting in order with #1. Doc disappeared back to the other side of the fire at some point, but I didn’t notice that until we were on reason #6 – *Being too big to escape a trap*. I had assumed that Will knew what a pregnant woman looked like – I had been around them all my life. But, Will had never seen one. Doc got up, grabbed two short chunks of firewood, stuffed them under his shirt, and showed Will how a pregnant woman walks when she’s in her final trimester.

Will was surprised a second time when I gave him reason #9. *A newborn baby cries a lot, loudly, and cannot be left alone*. Will was quite subdued after I asked him how we would ever be able to fight the DPS if the two of us had a baby that we had to care for.

I had thought of an extra reason by the time we finished discussing the first ten. “Will, pretend that you’re away on some operation against the DPS. While you’re gone, they find our camp, ambush me, and steal our baby. They leave a note for you in the camp. *Zurt! Turn yourself in or your baby dies*. What would you do?”

Will got all white and didn’t answer.

“You know this is something Zzyk would try to do if he ever found out we had a baby.”

Will nodded. “What happened to you when they took the baby?”

“They took him over my dead body.”

Will didn’t say anything.

“Zzyk promises you that he won’t harm the baby if you co-operate. All you have to do is put on a brain-band and work for him.”

“He’d probably be lying, right?”

“He’d probably keep the baby hostage in case you got out of line. But, he’d only let you see your baby once or twice a year.”

“He really would kill the baby if I didn’t come in, right?”

“You know the answer to that. What are you going to do, Will. Save yourself or save your baby?”

“I’d turn myself in.”

“So would I,” I said.

## Chapter 4

**From Will's journals: November 6, 2081.**

I woke to the sound of distant scraping sounds. Izzy was lying on her side, an arm cushioning her head, and still sleeping. All three of us had curled up close to the fire last night and we had taken turns feeding it. It was dead now, but with the sun up, we'd be warm enough soon. Doc was gone. I looked around and saw him down by the lake. The scraping sounds were coming from there.

When I reached the lake, Doc stopped scraping and held up a stick with a sharpened end. "You know how to fish with this, Will?" I nodded and he handed the spear to me. Doc picked up another sharpened spear and we both waded into the lake, stopping only when the cold water was up to our knees. I had noticed the rock that he used to sharpen the sticks and that made me realize that he had no gear whatsoever. Not even a knife. Which means that the roaring fire that he started last night had been done the ancient way as well.

We stood motionless for a while. There didn't seem to be any fish in this part of the lake – I certainly wasn't seeing any.

"Did you get all your questions answered last night, Will?" Doc asked. "I have a bot back at my cache that has lots of information. I could lend it to you, if you wanted."

"I'd like that, Doc" I said. "I didn't want to ask Izzy a lot of questions."

He nodded and we went back to staring at the clear blue water.

After a while, I glanced over at Doc. He had his arms crossed against his chest with the spear nestled between his two forearms. His eyes were closed! I think he may have been whistling. "Aren't you looking for fish, Doc?" I asked.

"I prefer to fish with my eyes closed," he said cryptically. "Gives the fish more of a chance."

Well, that gave me a chance to ask some questions that I knew I shouldn't be asking, but thought it would be OK because Doc had volunteered to give me information without me opening up the subject. I opened with, "Are you supposed to kiss with your eyes shut or open, Doc?"

He did a little double tweet-tweet whistle, and said, "Don't expect it matters one way or the other."

"Izzy closes her eyes," I said, hoping that would prompt him to talk some more about closing or not closing eyes.

"Mmmm," was all he said.

"I've tried it both ways but I don't know which is the right way to do it."

"Don't think there are any actual written rules."

"Oh," I said. That was disappointing. "Your bot doesn't have any rules about kissing?"

"No. I'm quite sure that it doesn't."

"Not even about holding hands, or hugging, or when it's alright to put an arm around a girl. Nothing like that either?"

"Nope. Not a single rule. Is that what you were expecting?"

"Sure. When we were growing up, we were given printed rules all the time. How to hold your fork; how to make your bed; how to brush your teeth. Why wouldn't there be a set of rules on kissing?"

"Never thought much about that. Wouldn't kissing be just like breathing?"

"But, there's a rule on breathing." He looked doubtful, so I quoted it. "Always breath with your mouth closed unless you've been exercising in which case it's alright to breathe through your mouth until you've caught your breath."

"I guess kissing isn't like breathing."

"No. It's way harder," I said. So, I told Doc about my research study. How I had established at least nine different variables that impacted on the action of kissing, starting with whether the girl was on your left side, your right side, or directly in front of you; how you tilted your head; how hard you pressed; where you put your nose; how long you held the kiss; what you do about breathing; and so on.

"Nine different variables. My goodness. I never realized."

"That's only if you're standing still. There'd be more variables if you were walking and kissing at the same time. I don't think I could walk and kiss at the same time. It's too hard to remember what to do."

"So, when you're getting ready to kiss Melissa, you're actually thinking about these nine variables and doing it sort of like step 1 – do this, step 2 – do this, step 3 – do this and so on?"

"**Now** I do that, yes. But I didn't before. When I kissed her the first time, it all happened too fast to think. One second I was looking at her, the next second I was kissing her. But then, I found out I was doing it wrong. And, I couldn't find any rules about kissing, and I certainly couldn't let Izzy know that I was looking for information about kissing, so I decided to solve it like I solve all my research. Create a mental spreadsheet of all the options, test each variable individually, map out the results, and analyze the data until I can see the solution."

"You're actually kissing Melissa, recording the results in your head, changing a variable, trying it again, over and over and over?"

"I have to! How else can I find out how to do it properly? If there were rules, I'd follow them, but I can't find any rules!"

"How did you learn that you were kissing badly?"

"Izzy ran away crying."

"How will you know when you've learned to kiss correctly?"

"Izzy won't run away crying. I've made the criteria for success quite observable."

"Yes, I see that. Tell me more about Melissa running away crying."

So, I did. I remembered each time very clearly. I mean, no one would forget making his girl friend run away crying. Strange. I had never thought of Izzy as *my girlfriend*, but I guess she was. I also told Doc everything I had learned from my research, and how I had finally found a variable that seemed to be working.

"What's variable six again?" Doc asked.

"Lip pressure. If I press hard enough on Izzy's lips, she won't cry. But, if I press lightly, it doesn't seem to matter if I tilt my head to the left or to the right, or if I have my arms around her waist or her shoulders, or if I do anything else differently. Eventually, she'll push me away, and she'll be in tears, and then she'll run away."

"And you like kissing her hard on the lips?"

"No, but, at least she doesn't cry."

"And the reason you don't talk to Melissa about this is..."

"That would make me a pervert, Doc." I was surprised. I shouldn't have had to explain becoming a pervert to a medical person. "Only perverts talk to girls about

sex. It's even risky reading information about sex, but since I'm researching without doing any actual reading, I think I'll be OK."

"Too late now, I think."

"What do you mean?"

"You've already talked to a girl about sex. So, you must already be a pervert."

I must have looked blank.

"Last night. With Melissa. You talked about how babies are made. You talked about sex. According to what you just said, that makes you a pervert. Makes her one too."

I didn't know what to say.

"Do you feel any different now that you're a pervert?"

I shook my head No.

"Perhaps, it's a delayed reaction."

I watched the water. Looking for fish, but wondering when I would change into a pervert. How would I change? How would Izzy change? How long would it take?

"Are you a pervert yet?"

I looked up to find Doc holding three small dead fish. "Caught these before you got up," he said.

"No, not yet. At least I don't think so."

"You should have changed into one by now. The two of you certainly talked enough about it."

Doc started walking back up to the camp with the fish. I ran to catch up.

"Tell me, Will. What would you do if you were testing a scientific theory and the results didn't match with the theory in spite of repeated tests? What would you think?"

"The theory might be wrong?"

"Uh huh." Doc switched the fish to his left hand, and clapped me on the shoulder with his right. "Melissa ever tell you that I used to play a lot of hockey when I was a kid?"

"No, why?"

"I have an old hockey injury." Doc gave me a hip check into a bush. "Oops. Never know when this old hip is going to act up. Hard to control it some times."

I grabbed his offered hand and pulled myself up. He smiled at me and said, "Got'cha." I had played that game with Izzy. So, I waited a few seconds and tried to give him a hip check back. It was like hitting a cliff.

"Mosquitoes must be hatching early this year. I could have sworn I felt one bite me."

Doc talked about hockey all breakfast long. It's a game where people skate around on ice and try to shoot a hard rubber pellet called a puck into a mesh net. Said that he used to play it on outdoor rinks in Calgary. Told us all about the rules - like hip checking, off-sides, and icing the puck which doesn't actually involve freezing it. I've learned to recognize when I'm being teased. People skating on ice! In Calgary! On an outdoor rink! Doc has quite the imagination.

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I watched as Doc and Izzy headed up the mountainside for a couple of hours of father-daughter time. Doc hip-checked Izzy into the bushes partway up the hill.

Then, she took a running start and tried to shove him off the trail but couldn't budge him at all, which made me feel better. She resorted to trying to trip him, but he wasn't falling for that either. Finally, she jumped onto his back, wrapped her legs around his waist, and he carried her out of sight. I heard her yelling "Gidy'up" as they turned the corner. I went down to the lake to try out Doc's spear in a different spot.

Izzy and Doc returned after a couple of hours, but they didn't have a lot to say about what they had seen. "Just a bunch of trees," Izzy said which wasn't like her. I showed them the fish that I had cleaned. Doc wasn't hungry – "still working on the big breakfast" – but he did want to pick up the pack he had cached. Izzy gave him her pinky-ring so that he could use the sky-sling. I guess she had already told him about the commands because he flew it with its top open around the camp just fine. I agreed that it would make sense for Doc to swing around and pick up some gear from our camp too, although I told him that it would take him most of the afternoon to do all of this because he'd have to make a number of trips. Doc said he didn't mind and he did appear to like flying because he looped up into the air and did a high speed pass through the camp just above our heads, yelling "Yahoooooooooooo" the whole time. We watched him lower the lid and wink out of sight. Then, we strolled back to the campfire and I began preparing our lunch.

After lunch, Izzy said that she'd shave some wood so that we'd have it ready when we needed it. I was leaning against a tree, while she was sitting on a fallen tree peeling a dead branch. I offered to help but she wanted to do this by herself since I had made lunch. I don't know how we got onto the topic, but she started explaining why she had been acting so strange lately about us kissing. She said that she had been terrified about becoming pregnant and had worried that we might make that mistake if we did too much kissing. But that was only part of it. She stopped at that point to work around a tough knothole. Izzy had her head down and was concentrating on shaving her branch the whole time we talked about this, not just when she was digging out that knothole. Probably so that her knife wouldn't slip which was a good idea because she has a sharp knife.

Then, she told me how she ending up crying and running away because I was such a good kisser, and how she wanted to never stop kissing me, but she thought that it was wrong for her to have these feelings because only bad women liked ... *fooling around* she called it. She had grown up knowing that dissident men beat their wives and forced them to have sex with them. Any dissident woman who actually liked sex was considered to be a... *very bad woman*, she finally said. She had thought that she was turning into one of those women but couldn't stop herself from wanting to kiss me back. At about that point, Izzy started to attack her branch and I didn't want to distract her, so didn't say anything.

In a bit, she started talking again. Doc had asked her a question this morning that had made her think. He had said: "How long do you think the human race would have lasted if **both** men and women didn't enjoy sex?" Then, he told her that she knew the dissident movement was full of a bunch of wackos, so wouldn't it make sense that they would be nut-jobs about their attitudes towards sex too? She and Doc spent most of their hike just walking and talking about what was normal. That was why she couldn't describe where they had gone.

I started to say something, but she held up her hand and I waited. She put her knife down, but still didn't look up at me. "I still feel terribly awkward talking to you about this Will, but now I know that it's normal for me to feel the way I do. I know that I weirded out on you and I'll try not to do that again. I'm sorry if I made you mad at me."

So, I told her about my research project on kissing and the nine variables, which made her smile and she actually looked at me. I also told her how I thought I would become a pervert if I asked her any questions about it. Also said that Doc had helped me realize that the IOF had lied about people becoming perverts if they thought about sex. She seemed surprised to hear that Doc and I had talked. I said that I knew now that I should have just asked her. She said that she probably would have made an excuse not to answer me. She didn't want to talk about it before either.

"But, you'd answer now?"

"I'll try," she said.

So, I thought about how to make it as scientific as possible. Just like Izzy had done last night. I chose to ask about variable #6 – lip pressure – because that seemed to be the most crucial one. "Do you like it when I kiss you hard?" I asked.

"No," she said. "It hurts my lips."

I wanted to ask her how hard I should press, but wasn't sure what measurement scale to use. I finally resorted to using the unreliable *on a scale of 1 to 10 approach*.

She looked down at her branch again and I thought she was going to begin shaving it again, which was absolutely the last thing I wanted. She surprised me instead. "Perhaps, you could show me what a 3 is?"

So, I did. She couldn't make up her mind between a 2 and a 3, so I had to repeat them a number of times. At one point, she caught me with my eyes opened, and she said that she liked it better when I wasn't watching her. I found it better with my eyes closed too, which was good because now I had defined two of my variables. After a while, I forgot about the variables. At one point, she became all agitated and she pulled away and scrunched her head under my chin while she fluttered both her hands on my chest really fast. But she didn't run away. And, she didn't cry. In a few minutes she muttered, "End of the first period," which she said she must have thought about because of Doc's ramblings about hockey. She explained that hockey players would play a game of three 20-minute periods but would take breaks between the periods so that they could rest. "Perhaps it would be a good idea if we did the same?"

I hadn't realized that hockey involved kissing, but didn't say that. Now I knew why Doc loved the game so much. I wasn't sure where the hip-checking fit in though.

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Izzy and I were in the middle of an overtime period when she suddenly pulled her lips away from mine. An overtime period is something that the hockey players would have if the game were tied at the end of the regulation three periods. I heard it too. Doc clumping noisily down the hillside, wheezing and coughing the whole way down. "Game called on account of spectator interference," she said. Then, she



rushed down to the lake to get some water. Since we didn't have any containers to carry the water back to the camp, I wondered what she was going to use.

I helped Doc haul all the packs down the hill. Apparently, he had made three round trips and had dumped the packs away from the camp because he wanted to practice his hovering skills in tight quarters. I think it was because he wanted to give Izzy and me some time alone but I pretended to believe his excuse as well as the sudden attack of asthma he confessed to having experienced a few minutes ago.

Izzy arrived after we had carried everything down the hill. She was shaking her wet hands in the air and drying them on her shirt. "Oh hi, Doc." Then she asked, "When did you arrive?" which surprised me because she already knew the answer. Doc and Izzy have always teased each other a lot, so I figured it was one of the games they played. I started to ask Doc a question about hockey, but Izzy asked me to stock up on some firewood and so that took me away from camp. By the time I had enough for what we'd need tonight, Doc had finished cooking some of his powdered food and we were ready to eat. Izzy said that she didn't want a repeat of breakfast – all that male sports talk – so that eliminated everything I had planned to ask him.

Doc told us that he had found a DPS work crew installing cameras inside trees and had stolen one of their cameras out of a partially emptied crate and didn't expect it to be missed. He had disconnected all the internal wires in case it was already partially activated. I wanted to take it apart right away but Izzy shook her head at me when I looked at her, so I put that thought aside and kept eating and listening to Doc instead.

Doc learned that the DPS had installed motion detection cameras around the lakes and rivers of southwestern Alberta. These cameras were inserted inside trees and that made them virtually undetectable unless you knew what to look for. Doc said that this was an attempt to capture Will but at an enormous cost of money and personnel. Doc learned also that their installation crews were gradually moving north. "By the way, they'll discover your old campsite in about a week," he told us.

Well, that prompted a discussion about where we would be able to camp. Izzy said we'd just have to bathe and wash clothes in hillside streams. Doc thought that the lakes and rivers were probably the first stage of the project and both of them looked at me. I said that that's the way I would do it; the streams would be done next. That made us kind of discouraged. Doc asked if I would be able to deactivate a camera from a distance and I said that I'd need to look at the stolen camera, but it was possible. However, if I were running the project, I would place a trip-wire on the camera to alert me if it was ever deactivated, and Zzyk would do that also. Disabling it would bring the DPS in faster.

For the next hour, we threw a bunch of ideas around on how we could avoid being discovered, but kept only one good one. Doc suggested that having a very strong telescope of some kind inside the sling would be useful when we were approaching a potentially dangerous location. I was sure I could do something like that with the filaments and told them so.

By this time, it was dark and we were just relaxing around the fire. Izzy wanted to talk about what kind of society Alberta should have after we had defeated the

DPS and so she opened up that discussion. Both of us expected Doc to tell us about some form of government that always worked, give us a little history lesson about it, and pretty much lay out a plan. We were both surprised when he said that he didn't know the answer to Izzy's question. He said that the world had changed so much since the chaos of the oil shock that it's possible that all of the old forms of government would fail. The world now existed as tiny self-supporting communities that had very little interaction with other communities. International trade didn't exist anymore – how could it with no airplanes, trains, trucks, or ships? There was hardly any trade even within Alberta. People around the world were probably living in poverty and scraping the ground for every morsel of food they could produce. Why would they want a big government? How would they pay for it? What would it do? “The one thing I do know,” Doc said. “You can't suddenly force a form of government on people who are not prepared for it. Not unless you're willing to be like the IOF.”

That was when we heard the first owl. I didn't recognize the call, but I wasn't paying attention to the sounds from the surrounding woods. Then, we heard another call – from a different quadrant this time. Izzy whispered into my ear “What is that?” She and I were cuddling together at the time. We were all listening intently when the third call came – again from a different sector of the woods.

“That's a burrowing owl,” Doc said quietly.

“I've never heard of a burrowing owl,” I admitted.

“Not surprising,” Doc whispered. “It's been extinct for over fifty-years. Besides, its habitat was open prairie, not thick woods. What's the smallest owl you know that lives in this area, Melissa?”

“Northern Pigmy,” she whispered after thinking about it.

“That'll do. The two of you know the call?”

We both nodded. “One at a time,” Doc instructed. “Melissa first, Will, then me.”

All three of us made the call of a Northern Pigmy Owl, which is a sort of *too-too-too-too-too* sound lasting about two seconds.

“We are little, non-threatening owls. Don't make any sudden movements.” Doc stood up slowly, put two pieces of kindling on the fire to build it up, removed his shirt, grabbed a dead coal, spread some charcoal over his chest, and then waited with his arms spread wide in the bright flare of the flames.

## Chapter 5

### **From Will's journals: November 6, 2081.**

A man stepped out of the gloom and into the firelight, stopping in front of Doc. Like Doc, his hands were open and away from his body to show that he was unarmed. “You're a long way from home, Uncle.”

The man was clad in a vest, trousers, and moccasins – all made of deerskin. His vest had some markings on it, similar in type to what Doc had put on his chest. One thick black braid of hair hung to his broad shoulders, a mottled feather of

some sort intertwined within it. He was Doc's height, but much younger and more muscular. In the ancient measures that were making their way back into common use, Doc would have been about 6 feet tall – well above my 5'9" and Izzy's 5'8." Izzy could masquerade as an IOF boy, but Doc was instantly recognizable as a non-IOF male, one of the reasons he had stayed in the dissidents' main camp most of his life. There was no way he could mingle with IOF citizens because of his height. The man facing him was about forty whereas Doc had to be seventy. I couldn't see the man's skin colour in the firelight, but his clothes told me that he was of aboriginal descent.

"Yes, nephew. I am."

"I recognize the pattern, but not the family name," he said looking more closely at the pattern on Doc's chest. "We don't receive many visitors from Haida Gwaii."

"My family has been away from the ancestral home for some time now," Doc said. "When my family departed, we were known as..." and he said something that sounded more like a cough than a word.

The man sort-of coughed back – giving his own name, I assumed. They stared at each other before the man glanced at Izzy and me. "You act as guide for IOF fugitives?"

"Guide and protector. They are family, although as you can tell – not by blood. My daughter and her friend."

"Young to be your daughter."

"Not for you to say, Nephew."

"True, Uncle. I meant no disrespect, but your presence on our land is a threat to my family's safety. Others have entered our land, professing to be something they weren't. When one lives next to the IOF, one must be careful not to arouse their anger unnecessarily. How long ago did you leave the land of the shiny heads?"

I figured he was referring to the IOF brain-bands that were indeed shiny. Doc must have known what he was talking about because he answered without hesitation. "This is our second day in your territory. I saw no signs announcing your wish for no visitors in your lands."

"There were ample signs for those who could read them. You can read them, Uncle."

"We traveled quickly and under some duress. I saw them not. I regret that we have caused you potential harm. We will leave if that is your wish."

"Your camp tells me that you have been here for two days, yet you say that you entered our territory two days ago. How did you make it to this distant valley from the towers of steel so quickly?"

"Rabbits flee quickly."

"Yet, our watchers by the fences did not report your escape. How is it that you managed to get through the fences, Uncle?"

"I am not without skill, Nephew."

"How is it that you trekked so far into our lands without a single one of our watchers seeing your passage, Uncle?"

"As I said, I am not without skill."

"Please tell me the route that you took so that I can speak with the watchers and inform them that they have neglected their duties. Our lives depend on receiving warning if the IOF spreads its metallic wings – surely you would not

deprive us of information that will help us to protect our wives and children from the evil gnome.”

“I am not able to give you that information, Nephew. Ask me something I am free to answer, and I will do so willingly.”

“As a gesture of friendship, Uncle.”

“Doing so would bring danger to my family, Nephew. I cannot break the code of silence that I have sworn.”

“We are not without power.”

Doc crossed his arms over his chest. I guess that meant something like "My end of this conversation is over," because the man turned and looked to the woods. Then, he turned back to Doc.

“I will show you our power so that you will understand the depth of our need to protect ourselves. He coughed again – something different sounding this time, but nothing that I could catch. Our strength is that of the great god Sam. Behold.”

Another figure entered into glare of the fire. I saw a deerskin dress. Not a man, a woman. Young – perhaps a little older than Izzy, but a giant compared to her. Izzy’s head would have only reached to her shoulders – which I noticed supported what appeared to be a big, heavy box. “Behold the power of Sam,” she said in a bored, monotone voice. She lifted the box off her shoulder so that we could see it. I was straining to make out what it was when Izzy breathed into my ear, “SAM – a surface to air missile for shooting down helicopters and airplanes.”

“Do I really have to do this?” the giant asked in a petulant voice to the man who now stood, arms crossed, chin-to-chin with Doc. The man coughed again, but in a commanding tone.

Again, we heard a bored, monotone voice – reciting a prepared speech, I expect. “The power of Sam allows us to destroy the metallic beasts of the evil gnome. He quakes in fear when we show him the great Sam and he retreats behind his shiny towers. And so, should you quake. If you have any firearms or explosives, you should reveal them now. We will do you no harm, but warn you that you must reveal your weapons. Sam knows all.”

Nobody said anything. Doc stared at the man; the man stared back.

The female giant put her SAM box onto the ground carefully. “Dad, this thing weighs a ton. Why do we always have to go through this aboriginal shtick of shiny heads, towers of steel, metallic winged beasts, and Sam the know-it-all god? Why don’t you just tell them that they’re surrounded, we have rapid-fire automatic weapons, and we’ll shoot their asses off if they don’t tell us what we want to know?”

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“Daughters!” the man grimaced.

Doc cracked a quick smile, and unfolded his arms. “Yes, it’s a shtick – one I rather like, by the way, but it’s not something they would understand,” and he twitched his head in Izzy’s and my direction. That part was certainly true.

“See, here’s our situation, Uncle. You are obviously fugitives of the IOF. When the DPS finds out that you’re here, they’re going to come into our territory, demanding that we capture you. They know that nobody can pass through our lands without us knowing about it. They’ll think that we are defying them if we

don't turn you over. I don't mind defying them when there's a good reason, but I don't have all that many SAMs and the platoon I have in the woods contains four youngsters. If we're going to face some DPS copters, I want my under-tens in their hiding places. My older kids can handle themselves. Just tell us where you snuck through the fences so that I can tell the DPS and they can go back and plug the holes. No skin off your nose, no skin off mine."

"Your children are 9, 8, 7 and 6 years old?"

"9, 8, 7 and 5. My wife wanted a year off."

"I'd like to shake her hand."

"She's too tired to lift it. What about it?"

Doc shrugged in helplessness. "I can assure you that the DPS does not know that we are here, but I cannot give you the information you wish."

"The DPS has cameras the whole length of the border. They know that you are in our territory. If you won't tell us willingly, we'll have to learn it in our own way." He turned back to the giant and said, "You're up, Yollie."

The giant girl undid the black hair that she had fastened into some great beehive of a tangle on top of her head. She shook her head and a single braid fell to her waist. Then, she began swinging her arms – loosening up. She massaged her hands, alternately making fists and stretching out her fingers.

"Start with the boy."

I jumped a bit to the sound of the giant cracking her knuckles and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Izzy pulling at the cuff of her right sleeve.

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Izzy and I had taken to storing the sky-sling when it wasn't in use by wearing it as a sort of invisible cape. It was Izzy's turn to have the cape tonight. The sling is next to weightless, but it is a pain to carry around loosely since it can snag on twigs and branches. Under the pretext of scratching an itch, I knew that Izzy was sliding the cape so that it was hanging in front of her. It was going to be very awkward to open the sling and get into it from our cross-legged sitting position on the ground. I guessed that Izzy was going to try to open it and throw me into the sling all in one motion. I tried to shake off her hand that was now clutching my sleeve. There was no way we could squeeze three people into the sling.

The giant walked over and stood in front of me. Izzy grabbed my elbow and yanked me up off the ground with her so that we would be standing. The sling would now be hanging in front of Izzy. Still hard to open and get in, but easier than before. I moved away from Izzy. I just didn't see this giant doing violent things to me in front of four little kids. In a dramatic sweeping gesture, the giant extended both arms chest high and with her palms pointed at me. Then, she collapsed her chin onto her chest and closed her eyes. I studied the design on her dress – it was the same as her father's. I wondered what the coding was.

Yollie's father began to talk. "For five generations now, the women of my wife's clan have shared a special talent – the ability to read people's inner self. Yollie is now assessing the threat that you pose to us. If she finds you to be no threat, you will be allowed to leave."

The giant waved her hands around in the air – still with her head down and her eyes closed. I felt like snickering.

“Does Yollie catch many threats?” Doc asked.

“She can read only people near her own age. My wife handles the adults. And yes, we do catch many threats. Most fugitives come with hidden weapons and the inclination to use them at the first provocation. The three of you have no firearms.”

“Yollie told you that?”

“No – the long range metal detector that my eight-year old pointed at you told us that. The IOF jewelry you wear around your ankles causes us much distress, Uncle. The various knives the three of you have hidden away do not. The purpose of the shtick, as Yollie called it, is to give escaping dissidents the chance to reveal their weapons without consequence. When they don’t, we take extra precautions. What Yollie is doing now is reading character. Knowing about the kind of person you are helps us defend ourselves. We have tried to hide fugitives in the past but it has always ended badly. Even though we tell them the codes of conduct we expect of them, within weeks or even days, they disappoint us. We watch them and allow them to make their mistake.”

“And then?”

“And then, the IOF finds out that we are serious about honouring the agreement.”

“And if your guests’ conduct didn't disappoint?”

“If such a thing ever came to pass, we would hide them or pass them on to other friends. Sadly, we've always been disappointed.”

The giant straightened up and opened her eyes. “He has had his brain-band off for some months now, but is still extremely confused in his emotions. I sense much turmoil, although that has diminished recently. He sees himself as a rabbit, which is probably why his guide described them as such. He is attracted to the girl which confirms what we thought when we saw them sitting so closely together. I sense nothing else from him other than emotional turmoil and confusion. He is a nothing. He is no threat to us. A puny little boy who probably lost his brain-band accidentally and fled into the woods in fear.”

The giant moved to stand in front of Izzy and did another, entirely different sweeping movement with her hands – this time holding her arms in front of her legs, all fingers pointing upward towards Izzy’s head. She dropped her head again and closed her eyes.

I didn’t know what to think about the giant’s dismissal of me. I guess she was right that I was in emotional turmoil. And, it was true that I was no threat to them. And, I had been hiding a lot. Still, I didn’t like being called a *nothing*. The giant straightened and relaxed her arms.

“This one has fire in her belly. She feels passionately about many things. She cannot control her emotions at times, but that is not because of losing her brain-band. She has never had a brain-band. She is brown, but her complexion is too perfect to be real. She has coloured her skin, which means that she is white. I sense hostility towards me – perhaps because I insulted her boy friend. I saw her trying to protect him earlier and she is still trying to do that. She feels a great attraction to him, which shows poor taste because he is a nothing. Now I sense her reaction to my words. She would be an enemy of mine – it would be an interesting battle, but she lacks something. She is used to hiding; she is soft; there

is no iron in her spine. She also is not a threat to us – a firebrand who angers quickly, but who is a coward nonetheless. Wait. I sense ...”

The giant reached out a hand towards Izzy’s clothes. Izzy’s hand snapped out and caught the giant’s hand before it could touch the sling. The giant tried to continue the gesture and then froze.

“She has a weapon hidden in her hand. The blade is touching my wrist. It is poised above my artery. I had no sense of her planning this. Now the blade is over my tendon. She is saying that she can kill or maim me and it is my choice. The weapon’s point has now pierced my skin – she is asking me what do I choose? I choose to apologize for an unthinking intrusion into her personal space. It was unwarranted and will not be repeated.”

Izzy maintained the stare for a second and then released the hand. The giant stepped back and nodded her head slightly at Izzy. She saw me standing in behind Izzy, my hand on her shoulder. What she couldn’t see was the invisible sky-sling ready for use.

“Wait.” This time there was no grand gesture with her arms – just two eyes flickering back and forth between Izzy and me. She turned and walked to where her father was standing. “Mother, I need you,” she called and a shadow emerged from the woods and entered the clearing. The resemblance was obvious. Same face, same carriage, same apparel – they could have been twins except for their ages. But, where her daughter was agitated, the mother was serene.

The giant pulled her parents into a huddle and whispered to them. Both adults turned and faced us while their daughter began to whisper more urgently. I heard the mother say, “Yollie, you’re the field commander. It’s up to you to make these kinds of decisions.”

The giant broke the huddle. “I need a runner,” she bellowed. A young boy – perhaps ten-years old ran into the clearing with what appeared to be a hand-generated walkie-talkie unit on his back and received his instructions. “Top of the mountain, quick. Message to the regional headquarters. Code three alert all the way along the IOF’s southwestern border. All SAM teams to the line. Have them ask the watchers shadowing the DPS camera installation crews if they’ve seen anything unusual. Those copters may be there for other purposes. Go, go, go.” And the little boy disappeared. The giant shouldered the SAM, kissed both parents on the cheek, turned and loped out of the clearing. She showed considerable speed and agility for someone her size. “I’ll be with Wolf,” she yelled and then became invisible in the darkness.

The words “They’re the reason for the unusual activity on the border,” echoed from the hillside a few seconds later in afterthought.

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The giant’s mother stepped towards Izzy and me. We had both been a little unnerved by the sudden actions of her daughter, so we were still standing close together. As the mother approached us, I charged up the sling but she stopped well short of us.

“My daughter likes to make dramatic gestures with the big arm swoops – performing on stage, I guess. I remember doing the same when I was her age.”

The words “Darn tooting, you did,” came from another sector of the dark woods.

"I think she may be over-reacting to the threat you pose but that is her call, and we would rather be over-protected than under-protected. I must amend a few things my daughter said. You were never surrounded – that could result in us shooting our own family members. We brought no firearms with us – they were not needed and we hoard our ammunition. Two bows were on you at all times, but they were handled by adults. Those bows have been put away. We mean you no harm. My husband and I act only to protect our children."

She turned to face me and placed her hands a little ways from her waist – palms up. "My name is Yolanda, and your name is?"

Izzy pinched my waist, but I wouldn't have answered. I just returned her glance.

"And yours?" she looked at Izzy.

Izzy shook her head.

"I cannot read either of you – you are too young. But, I feel the power. Yollie was right about that."

"Uncle," Yolanda acknowledged Doc as she approached him and did the palm thing with him too. "My pardon, Uncle, but I am too young to read you."

The mother went and stood beside her husband; their arms fell into long-accustomed habits and they merged into one – arm in arm like Izzy and me. I felt their eyes on us – Doc's were too. It was becoming uncomfortable. Izzy's chin was up – she was annoyed and becoming more so by the minute.

"Mother – would you mind?" Yolanda asked.

The darn-tooting voice from the shadows moved into the firelight. Hobbled was probably the better description. She limped noticeably, favouring her left leg or perhaps her hip. She held her gray-haired head erect – like her daughter a single, long braid fell to her waist. In her youth, she would have been like Yollie. Now, her posture was strained, but she was still a giant. I could not guess at her age. She carried a giant bow, but used it now as a walking stick. She stopped in front of us, and rested her weight on the bow.

She ignored me completely, choosing to focus entirely on Izzy. The head-to-toe scan was slow. Izzy was now really peeved.

"Strong emotions – fire in her belly. I imagine you would be quite striking without the dye. Pure white skin... red hair, perhaps?"

Izzy said nothing, but I felt her shrink into me. The grandmother was a little scary picking out her hair colour like that.

"Will you share your name with an old woman?"

Izzy shook her head.

"No matter. I sense the name. You go by ... Missy, perhaps." Then, she turned and limped to Doc.

"Cousin," she said.

"Cousin," Doc acknowledged.

"May I read you?"

"It would be my pleasure," Doc said.

"I may use unconventional methods."

Doc shrugged.

"Winnie, bring Granny her chair."

A little waif ran into the clearing lugging a campstool. It was almost as big as her. The five-year old, I assumed. She opened it and her granny sank into its seat



with visible relief. "In my youth, I was Yollie, then I married and became Yolanda. Now, I'm Granny and I need a chair near me at all times," she sighed. "Bring your father's chair too, Winnie." Soon, Doc was sitting comfortably next to Granny, although somewhat lower than her. She saw the discrepancy and instructed little Winnie to bring in her sleeping bag that formed a pad that brought Doc's head even with hers. "Better," she said. Then, she did something that surprised everyone in the clearing. She took Doc's hand in hers, felt it for a second or two, and then lifted Doc's arm and draped it over her shoulders. Her inside arm snuck around Doc's waist.

"Mother," Yolanda hissed.

"Are you comfortable?" Granny asked Doc.

"Entirely," Doc responded and there was a little flash of ice from the mother to her daughter.

"I've never seen a reading done in this fashion," Yolanda chided.

Granny turned to Doc and said loudly enough for all to hear. "Just because you teach your daughter everything **she** knows, that doesn't mean you have taught her everything **you** know." Then, she wriggled a little and snuggled even closer to Doc. He smiled.

"Have we forgotten our manners? Is this how this family treats guests? Everyone into the clearing!"

I counted five as the children streamed out of the woods. The runner would make #6, Yollie #7, and the unseen Wolf #8. The entire family lined up for introductions starting with Hank, Yolanda's husband and proceeding all the way to Winnie, the youngest. Then, four of the children formed a line in front of Doc while the others found a seat around the fire.

"Great uncle, may we use your water?" the first said.

Doc nodded. Three other requests were similarly granted.

"Great uncle, may we use your fire?"

"Great uncle, may we use your fire wood?"

"Great uncle, may we use your willow branches?"

The *kitchen crew* was a well-oiled machine. Soon, we were all sipping hot chocolate with roasted marshmallows on sticks as a separate treat.

Granny had given up her arm-in-arm reading of Doc to enjoy the refreshments, but she had stayed in contact with him by holding his hand. We all sat, our insides pleasantly warm, waiting for the reading. Granny seemed content to just sit.

"Mother, perhaps now would be a good time?"

"He's a little small, Yolanda, but I'd hate to throw him back in. Let's wrap him up and I'll take him home with me. Winnie – bring me the duct tape!"

Winnie stood up, her little voice quivering a bit. "Granny, I don't know how to make ducks into tape."

"Mother!"

"Yolanda, we haven't captured a single man my age in all the time we've been guarding this stretch of the border. Now, I'm expected to ignore this opportunity because... because why?"

"Motherrrrrrr!"

"I like to tease my children. Do you tease yours, cousin?"

“As often as I can.”

“Winnie, come here.” She whispered something into the child’s ear while she was lifting her onto her lap.

Winnie settled in with a big smile on her face. “Granny was teasing me,” she announced to anyone who might not have realized that already.

“OK, here’s the reading. From his hands, I have learned that the man sitting next to me is skilled in the woods, but he also has a gentle touch. I suspect a lifetime of caring for others – perhaps as a doctor. He is not entirely comfortable with his arm around a woman – I suspect that he has been alone for many years. However, passion did burn in his heart many years ago – a passion that was unfilled. He has great sorrow deep inside him – the love of his life was forcibly removed from him. He has never forgotten her.”

Izzy and I looked at each other. This woman was scary.

“The girl is not his daughter, as he has said. However, his eyes consider her as such. Their ages make that kind of relationship impossible. Granddaughter is more likely. The only way that this lonely man could project that love is if the girl were the granddaughter of his lost love. He has adopted her as his own because of some terrible event in the past.”

She paused to turn sideways and face Doc. “May I touch your head?”

Doc bent his head toward her in assent.

She began massaging his scalp. “I am now manually stimulating the temporal lobes of his brain to release information that he has been concealing from us.” She closed her eyes and kneaded away for a minute. “OK, I’ve found a few names.”

We all leaned forward as one.

“The girl is the grand-daughter of Melissa Stanley who was a dissident leader some fifty-years ago. Melissa Stanley was this man’s secret love. She was... Don’t fight me, now Cousin. If you try and hold it back, I could damage some important memory pulling it out.”

Doc relaxed visibly.

“Melissa Stanley was his ... high school literature teacher. He had a great crush on her. He joined the dissident movement to be near her. He was in medical training when she was murdered. Now, I’m looking for his name... He’s being sneaky – concentrating on something else to stop me. I see hockey players. He was a hockey player and ... aha! I heard your teammates calling your name when you scored. You were a good hockey player – that did you in, Cousin. Your name is Billy. Billy Bedard.”

I looked at Izzy – she shrugged her shoulders. I didn’t know Doc’s first name and apparently neither did she. Everything else was dead on, though.

“I go by Doc now,” Doc said. “Everything you have said is true.”

There was a stunned silence in the clearing.

“Mother, you can actually pull people’s names out of their temporal lobes?”

“You saw me do it, didn’t you? The trick is in using the pads of the fingers – don’t let your fingernails touch the scalp or that will disrupt the electro-kinetic emanations.”

Yolanda stared at her mother for a bit and then announced, “We’ve been had.”

“No, really. Electro-kinetic emanations. Temporal lobes. Just a matter of knowing how to press the right way.” She said this with a completely straight face.

“How’d you actually do it?”

“Billy and I were in the same school class. He was Mr. Hockey, I was Miss Basketball. We’re old friends.” Then, she leaned over and gave Doc a quick kiss on the lips. “Hi-ya, Billy.”

“Long time, Yollie” and Doc kissed her back.

## Chapter 6

### From Will's journals: November 7, 2081.

“Doc and Yollie, sitting in a tree, K I S S I N G.” Izzy was trying to tease Doc, but wasn’t getting any reaction.

All but one of our visitors had departed last night soon after the fake mind-reading demonstration. The grandmother had stayed behind. She and Doc had walked hand-in-hand to the lake and were still there in the morning when Izzy and I woke. Shortly afterwards, she struggled into a canoe that her family had left for her and disappeared. Izzy and I had the porridge ready when Doc returned to the camp and we were swallowing contentedly with the occasional jibe from Izzy.

“How close were the two of you really?” Izzy was still digging away.

“We were in the same class for eleven years. Sat beside each other in every bus to every sports tournament we ever went to. Almost boy friend and girl friend when we were in the middle grades, but both of us were too shy. In high school, she knew I had been smitten by your grandmother. We lost touch when the killing started. I knew she had left Alberta to live with her cousins in B.C. and had thought that I’d never see her again.”

“When did you catch on last night?” I asked.

“That it was her family? I didn’t know she was there until I heard her say *Darn tooting*. But, I recognized the granddaughter as soon as she came into the clearing. She looks exactly like Granny did in high school. She used to do the same grand arm sweeps too, except she’d lick her two pinky-fingers and put them in my ears after she was done swooping. Gross! Then, she’d read my mind. Dead on, most of the time. She revealed her powers only to me and I was sworn to secrecy. Don’t be fooled by the little charade at the end. Granny was, and is, very good at knowing what you’re thinking. I would guess that her daughter and grand-daughter are just as perceptive.”

“How much did you tell her about us?” Izzy asked.

“Not a thing. But, she realizes that her family is in a lot of danger while we’re here. I told her that she was right, but not why. The Aboriginal Nation’s forces are spread very thin. They can stop the occasional DPS sortie, but they wouldn’t be able to stop a full-scale assault into a single valley. And, the three of us know that the DPS will come over that border with everything they have if they suspect that Will is here. In the south, the Aboriginal Nation’s territory extends from the continental divide westward up to, but not including the Okanagan Valley. It’s a huge area to defend without sophisticated weapons. They know that they’d be

helpless against the DPS. The government of B.C. sells arms to the Aboriginal Nation to pen up the IOF in Alberta. And, by treaty, B.C. land and the A.N. land is considered one and the same in case of invasion. Zzyk used to have territorial ambitions, but the SAMs have kept him at bay. They think he's been building up his air power recently but they can't prove it. That's why they're so nervous. Zzyk is not a man who likes to be denied."

"What's the verdict about us?" Izzy asked.

"I can stay with them. They'll take off my leg irons and hide me. They think they're taking a big risk, even doing that. I couldn't tell them that the DSP thinks I'm dead. In exchange for their protection, I'll visit their communities, do some medical work, and train some of their people. The same as I did with the dissidents, except that these are honourable people."

"And us?"

"You have to leave the Aboriginal Nation. Today."

Both Izzy and I were stunned. We had thought that Doc would be able to convince them to hide us. Doc would help us figure out what to do against the DPS. The three of us would fight Zzyk together. All of a sudden, Izzy and I were alone again.

"It's not right to jeopardize their children in a fight that they don't want to have," Doc said quietly.

"But Doc," Izzy was clutching my sleeve, her voice breaking up. "We can't hide in Alberta's woods. The plains are even more dangerous. How are we supposed to survive?"

## Chapter 7

**From Will's journals: December 21, 2081.**

Doc had suggested that Izzy and I should disappear for a while. With the sky-sling, we could go anywhere we wanted, so why not spend some time learning how other jurisdictions were being governed. In a few months, tensions might not be so high. So, we flew east as far and as fast as we could. We stopped when we reached a very large city with tons of buildings sticking their noses out of what had to be the Atlantic Ocean. We saw signs that said it was a place called New York.

We mostly explored the city the first week we were there. New York had been a city of skyscrapers – every building in the city had been multi-storied. When the ocean water started to run down the city's streets, everybody just moved their businesses and living quarters up one floor in their building and traded in their cars for boats.

That worked for a while. We saw pictures of the city after the world's glaciers had melted – it was still full of people. The city had a system of lights that controlled the boat traffic. We found the lights still in place and working when we visited. It was a waste of solar power because the only people using the water-

streets were the soldiers in their speedboats. We didn't see any danger and we never heard any gunfire, so we thought it would be safe to explore.

We found lots and lots of buildings intended for people to live in; but never saw anyone living in one. The people had deserted the city leaving most of their possessions behind. We chose a building close to the very tall buildings and moved in. By the second week, we were tired of exploring the huge ghost city and so I decided that this would be a good place to make some more filaments. Fortunately, the home that we had occupied contained a directory of businesses – something called *The Yellow Pages*. It also had a map of the city. That made our search much easier. I found some businesses in the directory that would probably have what I needed and we started visiting them. We had some gold coins to use as money but didn't actually need them. The materials I needed were there, but the owners weren't. They had left in such a hurry that they hadn't even locked their doors.

Since Izzy had no reason to disguise herself so far away from the IOF, she was back in her whites. While I was exploring a particularly useful store, she waited outside for one of the soldiers to come by in his boat and then she asked him if he knew when the owner was coming back. The man said "Never" and asked Izzy what she was doing in New York. She said she was a tourist, which is what Doc told us to say if anyone was curious about us. The soldier said she was nuts, but it was her life. Izzy asked him what she should do if she wanted something in the store. He looked at her as though she were crazy and said, "Take it." Then, he putt-putted away. So, we did.

We found a university lab where I could manufacture the filament and I worked there during the day. Each morning, Izzy would use the sky-sling to ferry in enough raw materials to keep me going all day and she would visit the central library. Later, she would pick me up. We'd find a store with dried food and safe water and head home for supper.

By week #3, I had a huge amount of filament and I was impatient to try out my ideas for personalized and much larger sky-slings – one for Izzy and another for me. I used a three-dimensional grid inside each filament; the first dimension produced a gravitational field, the second – a magnetic field. I didn't know what I'd do with the third dimension yet, but wanted to have a dimension ready just in case. Each sling was big enough to hold three people comfortably but could collapse down to a single user. The two slings hardly put a dent in my stockpile, so I put a layer of active filament around the huge stack, turned it invisible, and flew it back to the roof of our apartment building.

Izzy and I spent weeks four and five together in the library. I buried myself in the bots that contained everything Shakespeare had ever written plus live performances of his plays by different artists and groups. Izzy had discovered the library shelves on dance and spent several days watching the live performances. She liked a particularly beautiful dance – something by a musician who was famous for cracking nuts, I think. She tried to do some of the dance herself, but said that she needed shoes that would give her flat toes. I didn't understand what she meant until I watched the performance. So, we let our fingers do the walking (a strange slogan printed on the city directory) and found a dance store where we stocked up on everything she would need.

The library was full of music bots from as far back as the early 20th century, so we watched a lot of them. We both enjoyed the live performances – especially the ones by Sonny and Cher. We also saw people dancing to a lot of different kinds of music – not just the ones where they had to use special shoes. That looked like a lot of fun, so we tried to imitate them. Izzy and I did a lot of dancing in the library; laughed a lot and ignored the sign demanding *Silence*.

I found some bots showing guys swinging themselves around a horizontal steel rod high in the air. They were doing intricate stuff with their legs and arms, twisting around, and flying in the air. I liked doing that kind of thing on tree branches so we found a gymnastics store with everything I'd need – even the steel rod.

We found out why the soldiers were patrolling the water-streets at the end of the fifth week.

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The warning signs had been there the whole time – we just didn't recognize them for what they were. New York was full of signs like: *buy this, buy that; going out of business sale; one way traffic; yield for non-motorized traffic; no mooring on even numbered days during business hours; no swimming*. Other than signs that named the water-streets, Izzy and I ignored them all. Afterwards, we understood the meaning of some of the special signs.

*Stay the course.*

*Ever vigilant.*

*52 days without a terrorist attack!*

That last sign changed daily. It had been 15-days without a terrorist attack when we arrived. Each day, the number increased by one. We saw the number going up, but didn't understand why.

We hadn't understood this sign either. *Possession of diving/scuba gear is an offense punishable by death*. It was posted all over the city. We hadn't realized that the hand-held scopes the soldiers were pointing at the water were sonar devices. They were searching for terrorist swimmers.

Apparently, New York was in a big war with these terrorist swimmers who were intent on destroying the city by blowing up all the important buildings. We had seen dozens of rubble piles but had thought those buildings had collapsed from water damage. We were in the library when the building next door to us blew up. I asked the soldiers a few questions and we realized it was too dangerous to stay. New York's citizens had come to that conclusion a long time ago.

We figured it would be all right to take some of the library's bots with us when we left. Other people must have borrowed bots too. There were large gaps in the collection, but no one had touched the literature bots, the science bots, or any of the other non-fiction sections. I hadn't even begun to look through the physics shelves and Izzy had been leaving the poetry bots to the end. We didn't want to leave those behind, but we didn't know how to choose the ones to take. We wanted too many.

So, Izzy read the library's rules. The rules said that library patrons were allowed to borrow bots but they would have to be returned by their due date or a fee would be charged. She filled out the application forms for two library cards and placed

them on the circulation desk, in case anyone from the library came by. There were no rules about how many bots could be borrowed at one time, nor was there any indication when the due date was – so we decided to borrow quite a lot of the collection. Izzy left a note saying that we'd check back from time to time and return the bots we had taken if the library wanted us to. We weren't intending to keep them. If anything, we thought we were helping the library by keeping their bots safe from being blown into the water.

It was obvious that even our new slings weren't big enough to store all the bots we wanted. I knew that I could make a huge container – sort of like what I had used to store the extra filament, but I had already experienced how difficult it was to fly what was essentially big square invisible box. Great for storage, but hard to fly. There was no point in taking the bots if we didn't have a place to store them safely, so we left them where they were for the time being.

We decided to visit New York's museums – hoping to get some ideas. They were open but mostly empty. The signs said the collections had been transferred to Washington's Smithsonian Museum. So, we consulted a map, found Washington nearby, and decided to take a side trip.

Washington was quite small – at least the part protected behind the huge dykes. We had a good look at the dry part of the city – big impressive buildings, statues, couple of domes, and something called the White House that wasn't white and appeared to be empty. It was under heavy guard though. In fact, everything inside Washington's dikes was guarded. Lots of solar-powered copters were in the air and I could see weapons suspended from their undercarriage. I wasn't sure what they were protecting or why.

The Smithsonian was a big museum but it was mostly empty – just like the city. Signs said that the collection had been relocated to Denver – the new capital of the country. But, there were still bits and pieces that had been too big to be easily moved. Like the space collection. Izzy gave me an hour to explore that section and still had to physically pull me out of the rooms containing the rockets and space capsules.

They had a whole section on *Transportation through the Ages* that we both enjoyed. Some signs and pictures were still there, so we read about the history of planes, of trains, and of automobiles and clambered into each of the full-sized replicas that had been left behind.

The next room had a big surprise! A full sized replica of a sailing vessel. It reminded me of the toy sailing ship that I had when I was little. Izzy had seen me with it once and I had tried to get her to play with me but she was trying to poison me at the time, so she didn't. "This is what we should live in," I said.

Izzy thought it was very beautiful, but had some reservations. "The DPS has cameras on all the lakes," she said. "Even if the ship were invisible, they might find us with thermal imagery."

"I wasn't thinking of putting the ship in water," I said. "I was going to sail it through the air instead. Like the make-believe picture in the book that you wanted to show me when we were both four-years old."

That's when Izzy got excited too. We talked about it and agreed that we both would like to live in a ship sailing invisibly in the air. It was way better than being

cooped up in a tiny sky-sling, or hiding in the woods afraid of being seen by a camera. Plus, we could use the ship's hold to store the bots and extra filament.

Izzy asked if I was thinking of making a ship out of filament. I said it would be impossible to do because the filament flops when it's in long lines. I was thinking of getting a real ship and attaching enough filaments around it to make it invisible and to make it fly. We had more than enough filament to do that and I could always make more in the New York lab before we left.

So, Izzy and I went looking for a sailing ship. We cruised leisurely in our sky-slings down the mud flats, swamps and island-filled ocean that formed much of the eastern coastline extending eastwards from what we learned were the Appalachian mountains. Saw lots of places that had been cities but were now just islands of building tops sticking out of the water. Even saw a big government dome – looked like it was floating in the water. We saw lots of sailboats in the ocean too and we hovered over them to watch what the crew was doing. They weren't doing anything that Izzy and I couldn't.

We found a perfect ship with a big *For Sale* sign in a port city called Charlotte. I asked the owner to take us out on the water so that we could see how it worked. He showed us how to set sail – everything was operated by winches. “This is now the top speed,” he told us as we slid through the waves. “Everything you'll ever meet on the water is faster than you! Coasties have sniffers that will tell them exactly what cargo you're carrying” the man said. “Don't blame me if you get caught.” I said that we weren't going to get caught and the guy snorted. I never did find out what coasties were, but figured they couldn't bother us if we weren't near a coast.

## Chapter 8

### **From Izzy's journals: January 1, 2082.**

Will and I headed north in our new sailing ship and anchored well off New York City. Will's *self-seeking find yourself* devices on the ends of each filament line meant that the ship was enclosed within a filament grid within an hour. Will's biggest concern about the ship was sailing power and we had talked about that a lot on our trip north. He was right about our two rings not having enough juice; together they could easily make the ship invisible, but they couldn't lift it out of the water.

Off we went into New York – each with different shopping lists. I discovered a large supply of brand new pinky rings; also, discovered a warehouse full of pinky-ring computer batteries. Getting them back to the ship was easy. I enveloped whatever crate I wanted inside a filament net and flew it back to the ship. I had everything on my list stored in the hold before Will returned.

Will brought his own collection of filament-covered crates. We had decided that we didn't want to use canvas sails; too much danger from them splitting in a gale-



force wind. Also, with just the two of us, it took time to reel them in quickly, even with winches.

We explored a number of options before agreeing on one. Will and I had become much better at discussing things now. He wasn't spending hours alone in internal deliberations and I wasn't being argumentative any more. Since Will was better than I was at analysis, he was the one who'd make a list of all the possible options. He would briefly describe each one to me and I would put them in priority order – the ones that were most likely to work coming first. Will considered every option a possibility but I was better at confining our thinking to the real world, not the theoretical one.

Then, we would consider the first option in some depth, then the second, the third, etc. Again, Will took the lead. I listened to his analysis and offered feedback, but most of the time, Will had the advantages and disadvantages nailed. Occasionally, I'd contribute some *What if* questions. These were usually thoughts that struck me unexpectedly. Will would get those kinds of inspirations too, but usually he thought in a very logical, lock-step manner. I would just let my brain float until something struck me. It was my question – *What if we had rollable solar panel sails?* – that had led to Will's excursion. We had been talking about batteries at the time – I don't know what made me think of making sails out of solar panels. I blurted out the question and we both knew immediately that this was worth pursuing. Solar panels that looked like sails, but weren't. We wouldn't use wind power to fly through the air; our movements would be controlled by the filaments enclosing the ship and these would be powered by the solar panels.

Will had tracked down some flexible solar panels that we could roll out, tilt, rotate, and roll in – all on electronic command and all operations completed within seconds. Back at the ship, it took only minutes to put filaments around each panel so that all the sail-panels would be invisible and easily adjustable to catch the most solar energy possible.

When we were finished, our still unnamed invisible ship could be entirely powered by its solar sails. Since we would likely spend most of our time above the clouds, we would have more than enough sunlight to keep all batteries charged. The solar sails themselves had enough stored charges to operate for forty-eight hours without sun. In case of bad weather, we could furl the sails and operate the filaments entirely on battery power. We had crates of rechargeable batteries – years and years of sailing power. On top of that, we had a crate of rechargeable pinky-ring computers – only one of which was necessary to run the ship automatically now that we had solar power to do all the heavy work.

It took us a couple of days to transfer the bots we wanted out of the library and store them in the cargo hold, provision the ship with ample food and water, and replenish Will's supply of filament. The Wilizy (emphasis on the first syllable) rose into the sky on January 1, 2082 and set sail from New York with its destination – the Pacific Ocean.

## Chapter 9

## **From Izzy's journals: January 31, 2082.**

By the end of January, we were approaching Detroit. This city wasn't all that far from New York, but we didn't travel there in a straight line. We were flying westward in giant north-south zigzags instead.

Our typical day would go like this: After breakfast, each of us would practice – me with my dancing and Will with his gymnastics. I'd be on one side of the ship trying to learn ballet movements; on the other side, Will would be whirling himself around his iron bar which was encased in filament so that it could hover in the middle of the air. Every now and then, I'd look up and he'd be resting on the bar, looking at me. I'd sneak peaks at him too – especially when he was doing his chin-ups. Occasionally, for something different, Will would swing from two rings. These dangled from two long straps that he attached to a metal bar that he hung anywhere in the sky that he felt like.

After a rest break, we'd practice together. We might do something like see who could fly through the air the furthest by swinging on the rings and letting go. Will was heavier so he could get the rings going faster, but I was more aerodynamic plus I gave myself an extra nudge with my sky-sling if he beat me too often. He knew I was doing that, but let me cheat a little without saying anything.

Both of us always practiced with a sky-sling over our clothes. If we fell off the ship, the sling could be fully deployed with a quick thought. Sometimes, Will would hang two sets of rings way above the ship and a little distance apart from each other. We would each hang from a set of rings, get ourselves flying in giant circles, and let go at the same time and try and catch each other without using the sky-slings. Sometimes it worked.

Or, Will might dance with me. I'd do some fancy dance step, then run and jump at him. He'd have to catch me and twirl me into the air. I found it hard to rotate the right number of times and land so that I was balanced and ready to continue dancing. I hardly ever did it right, but we kept trying. Sometimes, we put on some 50s music and jived. After a couple of hours of this, we'd find a cloud and have the ship hover inside of it so we could use the mist to rinse off our sweat.

We were meandering around the countryside because we wanted to see how each population center was governed: What laws did they have? How were they enforced? So, after lunch, we'd pick out some communities below us and go visiting.

After supper, we would do quiet things. Each of us had brought shelves and shelves of bots from the New York library that interested us, so we could easily spend a couple of hours totally engrossed – for example, Will in a physics text book and me in a poetry collection. Later, we'd find an old movie and watch it together. Will usually picked westerns; I preferred movies where any kissing that took place wasn't between the cowboy and his horse.

Speaking of kissing, Will and I had been getting along great. The intermission announcement that we had lucked onto was working. We restricted ourselves to three periods of hockey a day – no more than twenty-minutes each.

We also had a penalty system in our hockey games so that both of us would keep control of ourselves. So far, we had created only one penalty – illegal use of

the hands. This wasn't really a hockey rule, but we borrowed it. Any violation of that rule meant that the offending person would have to leave the game and sit alone for ten-minutes. Since we only played twenty-minute periods, a ten-minute misconduct meant we would lose half of the period. Of course, both of us would be punished but there'd be a burden of guilt on the one who had strayed from the rules. If the illegal use of the hands lasted for more than a touch, it was an automatic game misconduct. A game misconduct meant no game the next day. Two game misconducts in a week meant no games the entire next week. The system was very successful. So far, neither of us had received a single penalty.

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### **From Izzy's journals: February 10.**

Will and I almost got into deep trouble last night. Will didn't know it – he was asleep at the time. But, I knew it. It had been my turn to pick a movie, so I had found an old romantic flic and had climbed into Will's hammock to watch it with him. Both of us were sharing the large empty stateroom below although the ship had plenty of space for either of us to set up a hammock in a private area. We had slept in neighbouring trees in the forest; why wouldn't we sleep in the same cabin? We never dressed or undressed together in the cabin, and our hammocks were on opposite sides of the cabin, so what was the harm?

Both of us had enjoyed the movie – a real oldie called *Casablanca*. Afterwards, we had a game of hockey that went into overtime until we both agreed simultaneously that we should stop. Will had found a way to make the ship rock gently from side to side like it was in the ocean – even though we were hovering in the sky. So, he started the ship rocking and we both eventually dozed off. **But, I didn't leave his hammock!** I just couldn't. The movie had been soooo romantic, and the hockey game had me melting. I couldn't find the will power to leave. So, I cuddled up behind Will, thinking that would be a safe way to sleep together in the same hammock.

I remember having a very unsettled sleep, and I woke up at some point in the night finding that I had rolled over. So had Will. He was now cuddling behind me and I discovered that he had a hand on a part of my body that would have resulted in an automatic game misconduct if he had done that in the hockey game.

I don't know about Will, but I had been finding it increasingly difficult to declare an *Intermission* in our hockey games. That was one of the reasons that I worked so hard on my dance routines. If I was exhausted, I hoped that I wouldn't have the tempting thoughts. But, I got them when I was exhausted anyway, especially during our cloud showers. We never took off all of our clothes, but we did strip down some. And, the mists really did obscure the view. But, there was a bit of a view.

Will had grown so that he was now clearly taller than I was; plus, all of his gymnastics had made his upper body much thicker than it had been. I knew that my dancing was burning off the baby fat that Doc had assured me would disappear; but Will's exercises were having the opposite effect – he was putting on

muscle. I found myself liking the view, however obscure it was. I went from sneaking the occasional peek to actually nudging my shower location closer and closer to Will's so that I could get a better look.

When I realized how stupid I was being, I tried to stop. And, I tried to stop having the thoughts that sometimes made me blush they were so ... wrong. But, this was very difficult to do when we were with each other all day long and there was so much time available to fit in a period of hockey whenever either of us felt like it.

So, when I found Will's hand on my breast, I didn't do anything. I had been wondering when this might happen, and he was asleep so he'd never know, and I'd remove it soon, and I fell back asleep. I woke again – didn't know how much time had passed – and Will's hand was still there.

I freaked and flung his hand off me. I felt so guilty because I should have removed his hand earlier. No, what I **should** have done was get out of the hammock when I woke up the first time! No, what I **really should** have done was get out of the hammock after the movie. But, I hadn't done either of those things. What had happened wasn't Will's fault, it was mine. And I knew, now that I had found that I had liked this, it would be harder for me to stop it the next time. If I couldn't control something this simple, how could I stop from becoming pregnant? I tumbled out of the hammock in a rush.

Will began to wake up – “Wha?”

So, I asked him if he was all right? Was he having a nightmare? Pretended that I had been in my hammock sleeping and heard him making noises. He mumbled something and went back to sleep. I went on deck and thought.

I decided to stop having my cloud shower at the same time as Will had his shower. And, I'd learn how to draw.

## Chapter 10

### **From Will's journals: February 26.**

Izzy and I returned to the Wilizy after spending another useless afternoon visiting communities. We were both getting discouraged. After nine-weeks of traveling all over the eastern side of the old United States, we hadn't found a single government system that we could adapt for the IOF. All of the communities were set up in the same way and the lives of the citizens were even worse than they were in the IOF which we had thought impossible before our visits.

Every community that we visited had posted a set of rules limiting the people who were allowed to live there. Some towns were reserved only for black people, others only for browns, others only for whites; we even saw a place for *pinko commies*, but I didn't see many people and they certainly weren't pink. Every town made their citizens carry around a card proving what colour they were. If the guards on the entry gates didn't believe the card, you couldn't enter.

It was like what the IOF had tried to do, but in an entirely different way. The IOF had argued that the world's problems were caused by different people being forced to live together and get along. To resolve this, the IOF had manufactured babies that were all the same. Nobody in Alberta was different any more. End of problem.

The communities we had visited were also trying to solve the same problem. But instead of changing peoples' genes, they made different people live in different communities. They didn't stop with skin colour, either. Some places only allowed elephant people in; other places only let donkey people in. I think it was some sort of tribe thing because the people in those communities all had the same outward appearance. To make it more complicated, some towns had rules that you had to be a certain colour and be in the right tribe to get in. A black donkey or a white elephant, for example.

A third category they used to sort people into groups was religion. Generally, only one religion was allowed in any town. The guards on the entry gates would test all visitors from a book called a Bible that they had handy right at the gate. They'd open the book to a random page, read out a passage or two and you had to explain what it meant according to your religion. If you failed the test, they'd chase you off with a gun or four.

Izzy and I always checked the signs outside a town before entering. If anyone was likely to ask us any questions about religion, or about where our ancestors had come from, we'd remain invisible and just fly aimlessly around. After a while, all the towns began to look the same and we started skipping visits, like we had done today.

I wandered down to our bedroom to see what Izzy was doing. We had already played our three periods of hockey for the day, but I thought I might talk her into a double-header. That's when a hockey team decides to play two games in one day. She was busy drawing. She had started drawing a week or so ago and was churning out a lot of pictures. She always drew a picture of Winnie, so that she could measure whether or not her drawing was improving. She couldn't tell me what criteria she was using to measure herself. She just said that she'd know if it was better.

Pictures of Winnie were everywhere in our bedroom. She had even strung a line down the middle of the cabin and had pictures of Winnie hanging from it. I had suggested to her that the line was a little dangerous because she could run into it in the dark if she had to leave her sling for some reason. She had said, "There are more dangerous things to worry about than running into a rope in the middle of the night," which I didn't quite understand, but let it go. Have I said that Izzy can be confusing at times?

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Chicago was a small city that was next to a huge mud flat. When we flew over it, we saw people trying to drill wells in the goo of an old lakebed and assumed from the lack of people still living there that the wells were coming up dry. The city was big enough to allow all skin colours to enter so Izzy and I were walking together along the dirt paths of the city. We had left the city center and were in what appeared to be an abandoned section. Most of the big buildings had boards over

where their windows would have been. Izzy and I were admiring the coloured artwork on these boards and didn't notice that we hadn't seen any people for some time.

We heard the noise of the solar car's tires in plenty of time to step out of the ruts and let it have the road. I hadn't seen too many cars on our trip so I was curious to see what type it was. It looked like a larger version of our mobilizers – definitely solar powered though. A young male with a green jacket passed us, accelerated and turned left down a side street. The sound of the engine dwindled away and I thought it was out of hearing range. When we reached the corner, we could see it stopped about one-hundred meters in front of us. As we continued walking, the driver got out of the vehicle, crouched behind it and set four long-range guns on the hood. He also had two pistols in his hand. We saw him aim, shoot, and duck down behind his car. With so many tall buildings around us, the bang of the shot echoed in the cavernous street. We couldn't see what he had been shooting at – no one else was on the street except Izzy and me.

In the quiet of the street, the rattle of some pebbles hitting the ground around us sounded quite loud. They bounced once or twice and then lay there. We heard other pebbles bouncing further away from us. We looked around – we were in the center of a giant circle of pebbles. I was going to pick one up to examine it, but Izzy stopped me.

"I don't like this," she said. "Let's get out of here."

Just then, I felt the sting of a rock hitting my hand – definitely not one of the rounded pebbles. It wasn't tossed either – it was a powered shot. Up ahead, we caught glimpses of bodies ducking in and out of cover in the buildings around the solar car – hands poised in slingshot shooting positions. The driver was shooting his guns again. I looked around us – couldn't see anybody yet, but soon they'd come out of their buildings.

"It doesn't matter if we disappear in front of these people," I said and I heard Izzy say, "Right" and then we both stood looking at our pinky-rings. Both were dead.

Izzy pulled out her collapsible bow, assembled it, and had the ten arrows out of the disguised quiver in her pant legs before the rocks started to bounce around us again. "Where's your bow?" she asked.

"I didn't think we'd need weapons with the slings," I confessed. It was a very bad mistake. I had become lazy. With a weapon in her hand, Izzy started taking heavier fire. I took my jacket off and held it loosely in front of her. That just meant that whoever was behind us had easier shots. We were both trying to duck, but there was no safe place in the middle of the empty street.

Twice Izzy drew an arrow back, but she had nothing to shoot at. Our ambushers would have to be a lot closer to us to do real damage and for that, they'd have to expose themselves. But, with only ten arrows...

We spent a few minutes crouching behind the screen of my coat – trying to ignore the rocks bouncing off us. The pebbles must be why our rings weren't working. They were probably the reason that the car stopped too. I told Izzy this.

"That's not going to help us right now, Will," Izzy said crossly.

She had the right to be angry with me. "If we can get away from the pebbles, our rings will come back to life," I explained.

We looked at the pattern of pebbles and identified the shortest path out of the circle. “Now,” Izzy said and we both dashed forward – huddling under my coat as much as we could. However, the pebble shooters had anticipated that and the circle of pebbles kept pace with us. The closer we approached a building, the more withering was the slingshot rock fire and the harder they struck us. We retreated to the center of the street.

“A straight dash down the center of the street?” Izzy suggested.

“I looked left towards the solar car. The gunshots had stopped and we could see figures behind the vehicle where the driver had been crouched. Young children were going through the pockets of his limp body. As we watched, they started stripping off his clothes.”

“They’re children!” Izzy exclaimed.

I looked to the right. The street was now barricaded with two decrepit solar cars – young teenagers behind them were brandishing sticks with knives attached to the ends. Younger children with slingshots. All of them wearing something with red on it.

“They think that they’re blocking off the two most obvious escape routes. They think that if we go into a building, we’ll be trapped,” I said. “However, a building will allow us to get some distance from the pebbles.”

“Some of the children shooting the pebbles are in those buildings,” Izzy said.

“I know,” I said. “We’ll have to prevent them from following us up the stairs. Your bow will slow them down.”

“They’re children, Will!” Izzy said. I looked at her. Izzy had a horrified look on her face. “I can’t...”

I took Izzy’s bow and stored the arrows inside my shirt. “We’ll run into the building behind us. Two teenagers with clubs are guarding it. I’ll take care of them. Find the stairs. I’ll be right behind you and will slow any pursuit. Be as quiet as you can climbing the stairs in case they have pebble-throwers on the upper floors. Do you have your knife?”

“I can’t...”

I took her knife, opened it, and held it flush against the bow in my left hand. “We’ll go up the stairs together. Keep looking at your ring. Let me know as soon as you have power.”

“They’re children, Will. I can’t...”

“I can.”

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Izzy had the Wilizy moving even as I was stepping on board. We didn’t look at each other – she just went to the stateroom. I went down to my workspace in the hold. I had wanted to study one of those pebbles but couldn't bring one up to the Wilizy without the ring losing power. If I didn't know how the pebbles worked, I couldn’t invent anything to defend ourselves if they were used against us in the future. I knew something that I could invent though. A weapon for the Wilizy. Something that could be used in case one of us was stuck on the ground and needed protection.

I didn't get anywhere on the weapon. I couldn't stop dwelling on what had happened. I knew that Izzy was mad at me for going into Chicago unarmed. I

deserved that. I had been overconfident from being away from the DPS; overconfident in thinking that the sky-sling could handle any emergency. But, even if I had brought my bow, one of us would still have had to put some arrows into the children. I didn't understand why she couldn't. It was a side to Izzy that I had never seen before. That, and her mad dash away from Chicago as soon as we were on board. We were safe. Why the rush?

I skipped supper and spent most of the evening trying to figure out why she was mad at me. Hadn't I found a way to escape? Weren't the children I shot trying to kill us? Didn't that give me the right to shoot at them? Newton's Law said that I did. Besides, I didn't actually kill any of them; I just disabled them.

When, I finally decided to go to bed, I saw that Izzy was already asleep in her hammock. She hadn't even said Good night. She had been mad at me often enough that I knew what was coming next. Total silence. For at least a day. Perhaps more. But, didn't I have a reason to be mad at her too because she couldn't shoot an arrow at some kid trying to kill us? Figured out that, yes, I had the right to be mad at her too.

# # # # #

### **From Izzy's journals: February 26.**

I had the Wilzy moving as soon as Will stepped on board. I chose a direction at random and then went below. Didn't want to look at him; didn't want to talk with him. Wasn't just because he had ignored security. I had been at fault too for not paying attention to where we were walking. What really upset me was how shooting those children hadn't bothered him.

I had tried not to look at the two guarding the door – the arrows through their shoulders made that difficult. Then, as we were running up the stairs, each time Will paused, I knew that I'd hear a cry of pain from below. Children's cries. We had a close call on one of the floors – again, he shot quickly and without emotion. Two little children went down before they could scatter their pebbles. The rings came to life on the next floor.

I stayed in my cabin the whole evening. Stewing. Trying to find a reason that could excuse his behaviour. I heard Will slip into his hammock, but pretended to be asleep. I had always known that Will could be emotionless. I had never seen that brutally cold side of him so clearly.

## **Chapter 11**

### **From Will's journals: February 27.**

We reached the eastern edge of the continental desert the day after the Chicago ambush. One of the maps that we had found in the New York library had shown a huge desert in the middle of the continent, so we had known it was coming.



We flew a couple of hours into the desert and hovered the ship. It was time for some experiments. I had always wanted to see what it would be like to break the sound barrier in a sky-sling. Izzy had shrugged her shoulders when I asked if she wanted to try it, so I guess she was sort of interested. Doing that over a desert was the safest place I could think of. We were hovering the Wilizy where two large, dry riverbeds joined. Technically, neither was completely dry right now, but this was only February. They'd probably be dry as dust in a month or two. We found a ghost city nearby – something called St. Louis and it was on our map. I'd be able to calculate our speed if I could end the speed run at another old city on the map.

We each got into our own sky-sling, positioned ourselves so that we were lying as flat as possible, shut the baffles as much as we dared so that the air would stream over the sky-sling, pointed ourselves south, and accelerated until we were at full power.

Actually, I was kind of disappointed. The sling shuddered a bit at one point, but not for long. After that, it was just a boring flight over empty sand until we reached the marshlands of the south coast. I had aimed the slings at a famous old city called New Orleans that had sunk under the waters early in the global warming decades. A huge oil derrick was supposed to be anchored over the sunken city as a memorial. We found the derrick easily and hovered the slings. I opened my lid and nudged my sling next to Izzy's. "Forty-five minutes," I yelled. "About 1000 miles per hour or 1600 kilometers per hour."

As agreed beforehand, we lifted the slings into the upper atmosphere, went to full power and made the return trip. This time we reached 1200 miles per hour. I wanted to test the sling's speed with more than one pinky-ring computer powering the gravity fields, but Izzy said that flying over sand was boring. So instead, I did a high-speed pass over her so that she could hear what a sonic boom sounded like, and she did the same for me. That was interesting. I heard the whine of Izzy's sling after she had already passed by. I asked her to do several booms over me at different altitudes to investigate the whine. She did five at increasing heights and then came back, rolled her eyes at me a couple of times and I got the hint. She was so high on the last two flights that I couldn't hear the noise of her passing – just the boom.

I spent the afternoon doing round trip runs to New Orleans with an increasing number of pinky-rings each trip. I gave Izzy the results over supper: every additional pinky-ring I used added another approximate 1,000 miles per hour to the sling's speed. I had taken only four additional rings with me, but theoretically, I could keep adding rings for as long as I wanted.

"Why would you want to do that?" she asked. "Fast is fast."

"Just curious. Wondering what would happen as I approached the speed of light."

We didn't have anything else to talk about, so we finished supper in silence.

I spent some more time in my workroom – got nowhere on the weaponry. I don't know what Izzy did with her time. I knew she hadn't been drawing because there weren't any new sketches of Winnie in the cabin. She was in her hammock watching some bot but didn't look up when I approached, so I went to my side of the cabin and watched another western and fell asleep partway through.

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### **From Izzy's journals: February 28.**

We were into the second day over the desert and I was bored out of my skull. With no clouds in the sky to rinse ourselves off, we couldn't do any exercises. Will was into a marathon of western movies and I was already sick of them; not that he asked me to watch them with him anyway.

I had had enough cruising at a gentle speed so I went to the navigational post and put the ring on maximum. Will must have felt the increase in speed because he came up and asked me what I was doing. Told him I was tired of baking myself. He looked disappointed – said that he thought I might have been experimenting to find the Wilizy's top speed. *Yeah. That's exactly what I would be doing if I were bored.* Told him instead that I just wanted to get away from the desert.

Will put some additional batteries onto the power grid – said that it would be good to know the safe cruising speed of the Wilizy if we were in a hurry. The Wilizy was much bulkier than the sky-slings of course, hardly aerodynamic at all, even with the sails furled. But, we did push it up to about 300 kph before we felt some rattles and vibrations. Will dialed it back immediately after that to 275. "Interesting," he said.

On the theory that when you feel like crap, you might as well deal with crap, I suggested that flying over the desert would allow us to take care of a problem that neither Will nor I wanted to talk about; namely the smell that was wafting up from the sanitary units in the hold that were connected to the ship's heads.

We had two heads – one for Will and one for me. Traditionally, sailing ships just open the bottom hatch of the sanitation units and empty the contents into the ocean which, when done in moderation, adds nutrients to the ocean bed, promotes vegetation growth, provides food for fish, and so on. I didn't see that same benefit from emptying our sanitation units over land. Actually, thinking of that grossed me out. Someone could be walking along, minding his business, when he'd receive a little surprise shower? Who would do that to another human being? So, when the smell had started to become nasty, I had put my foot down. Absolutely, no cleaning of the units over land. Will said that if we did it at high altitudes, nothing actually would land, but I wasn't buying it. Told Will we could test it out on him. He had backed off after that; said he had been speaking only theoretically.

But the ship was beginning to stink. We were still over desert; perhaps some nutrients might help; if not, Nobody was underneath. So, with the ship cruising at a good speed, we opened the hatches. Will rigged up some filaments to suck in some air and then push it out in a narrow stream at high velocity. An air hose, if you like. Neither of us wanted to hose the sanitation units out, but we each finally agreed to do our own. Didn't take long, but I wouldn't want to do it every day.

Will was curious about whether or not his *Nothing would land on the ground* theory was correct, so he offered to take a little trip in his sky-sling to see if he could see or smell anything under our flight path. I rolled my eyes at him and said something like "Yeesh, Will. What's the matter with you? You enjoy studying - - - ?" I finished the question with a crude word that I don't normally use.

I smelled so bad that I didn't even want to touch myself. High velocity air spray is not easy to control. So I told Will I'd meet him back at the ship, pointed my sling west and let her rip. Found a lake in about ten-minutes at 1200 kph – speed is useful when you really need to be somewhere else fast. I set the air baffles at wide-open and drove the sling through the water about ten feet below the surface; bubbles and water current felt great – like being inside an agitator-based washing machine. Washed me, my clothes, and the sling too. Decided to try the second step too; raised the sling into the air and rotated it at high speed – baffles still wide open. Got me dizzy but dry. Who says clothes washing had to be boring?

I returned to the ship to find Will waiting for me with all of his dirty clothes in a bundle. Told him of my invention of the high-speed sling-based washing machine and dryer. We agreed that he could wash his clothes and sunbathe naked without me being anywhere around. Then it would be my turn. Except, I would be sunbathing nude. He didn't understand the difference and even up wind of him, I didn't want to take the time to explain it.

I bundled up all my clothes, along with anything else made of fabric that might need cleaning and waited for Will to return. It wasn't that any of these things stunk – it was only the bottom of the hold that was the problem, and that no longer. I just wanted to feel clean again. So, when Will arrived, I said I was taking two hours of sunbathing time because I had to do the towels and other ship linens. He felt kind of guilty about not thinking of that, so I told him he could pay me back by inventing some way that both of us could leave the ship, let it proceed on its course, and still be able to find our way back to it.

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### **From Will's journals: February 28.**

Up to now, if both of us wanted to be away from the ship at the same time, we'd anchor the ship in an obvious place – like above the junction of two rivers. But, being invisible, it was still hard to find. When we returned, we would have to fly around in our slings at slow speed – hands stretched through the sling's force field, feeling for the ship. We needed a homing beacon of some kind – but not one that Zzyk could ever discover.

We also needed a way to get in and out of the ship without having to turn off the invisibility force-field first. There was no way to push an entire body through the ship's force field even if the baffles were wide open. So, whenever we wanted to exit or enter the ship, the force field had to be off. The ship was visible for only a few seconds, but it was risky. I thought that I would work on that too.

By the time Izzy returned to the ship from her sunbathing, I had created a special field around our top-most solar-sail. It operated like an air lock. We would position a sky-sling so that it was touching the edge of the invisibility lock and, on command, a magnetic field would immediately inhale the sling into the ship. The invisibility lock was wide enough that both of us could enter at the same time and deep enough that we wouldn't damage the sail by accident. Leaving the ship was done in exactly the same way except that we would be exhaled from the ship.

I had made the magnetic inhalation/exhalation so strong that there would be only a millisecond or two of visibility – and then, only the solar-sail would be visible. Since the sail would be reflecting sunlight, nobody would think anything of seeing a brief flash in a sunny sky.

I had also inserted a homing beacon into the invisibility lock so that we could find our way back to the ship. The beacon emitted a beam of magnetic force UPWARDS. That meant the beam couldn't be detected by anyone below it, and since the Wilizy could fly higher than anything Zzyk could put into the sky, it would be undetectable. All we had to do was fly our sky-sling higher than the Wilizy, and when we got close, the sling would respond when it felt the magnetic force and we'd just follow the beam into the ship. The beacon would work well enough that we could leave the Wilizy sailing on a steady course and still be able to find our way back to her.

All I needed to do now was install altimeters in both the Wilizy and the sky-slings so that we would know roughly how high the Wilizy was when we left her. I had a filament-device ready to test but was stumped on how I could calibrate it in meters. There was nothing big enough nearby to use as a baseline reference. Izzy solved the problem by suggesting that I set the device to record height as a certain amount of gravitational force. "Why do we care how high it is so long as we can find the ship?" she asked.

I had the system set and tested within the hour. Izzy said that she was impressed that I had managed two inventions so quickly and without going into a zombie trance. I told her that I had been thinking about using a gravitational device as a weapon for the Wilizy in case we had another situation like Chicago. I guess I shouldn't have said that. She gave me a long stare.

Later that night, I was telling her about a movie called Zorro that I had watched. I was using a pretend sword to demonstrate how Zorro could slash Zs into everything when Izzy said that she had a pretend magnetic shield. Then, she pretended to turn her shield on high, snatched my pretend sword out of my hand, and snapped it in half over her pretend knee. Well, the knee wasn't pretend.

## Chapter 12

### **From Izzy's journals: March 15.**

We spent a week at the lake where we washed our clothes, cleaned the ship inside and out, replenished the water supply, and caught a lot of fish. Will thought we could freeze dry the fish if we took them up to high altitude, but he was stuck on how to attach the fish to the sky-sling. I suggested just putting a filament through the dead fish and magnetizing the filament to the sling. Worked like a charm. Sometimes, Will thinks of elaborate solutions when the simple solution works better. We added some freeze-dried venison too. Living in the woods again made me a little homesick; more like Doc-sick. Wondered how he was doing.

Will and I headed west from the lake, and like we did when we were on the eastern side of the desert, we continued to visit communities; new security provisions were in place, though. We had no arguments about it; Will even added a few that I hadn't thought about.

The towns on this side of the desert seemed to be organized in the same way – by colour, tribe, religion; separately or in different combinations. Only the religions had changed from what we had found back east.

Weapons were everywhere. Usually two guns in holsters like in the western movies Will watched. I think part of that was because there was no order to how closely they placed their communities. You could have a *white, elephant, Baptist* community within a kilometer of a *black, donkey, Southern-Methodist* community. Almost every community we visited hated its neighbours – sometimes because they were the wrong colour, tribe, or religion. But often, the downstream community hated its upstream neighbour because it hogged too much water. Inevitably, the downstream community would launch a raid in the middle of the night that usually ended in bloodshed. Over time, communities would become smaller and smaller. Starvation from inadequate crops was a big reason for the declining population; but also, these people were busy killing each other out of hatred instead of repairing the pipes that were supposed to carry the water for their crops.

The worst violence I ever saw was today. We floated over a little village of only five houses in southern Nevada. Seemed deserted, but we could see clothes drying on lines and children's toys in yards. So, we dropped down and went looking for the admission signs. Found them easily; only a single rut ran through the village.

We read the sign. *We are a town of pacifists. We do not believe in violence. We have no possessions that will interest you. We are no threat to you. Anyone who believes the same way that we do is welcome to join us. Others are welcome to walk through the village and continue with your journey. All we ask is that you leave us alone.*

Will and I stepped out of our slings and started to walk. I thought it would be interesting to talk with some pacifists because I was anti-violence myself. Peeked into the first house; the entire family was dead; a single bullet hole in each forehead. Nothing in the hovel had been touched; nothing had been removed from the barn; cows were still in their stalls; chickens were still in the yard.

Every house was the same. The last house was the worst. Mother, father and eight children – each lying in a row on the kitchen floor from oldest to youngest. The youngest looked like Winnie.

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I woke up the next morning, alone in the ship's stateroom, and with a foul taste still in my mouth. Both Will and I had been violently ill several times before we could bury all the bodies yesterday. Will had found a solar powered digger and excavated a mass grave. Said he didn't know what to do about the bodies; we could carry them in the digger, use a filament pallet, or carry them ourselves. Told him we had to carry them to their grave in our arms. We had to remember this day for the rest of our lives.

So we did, even though both of us kept finding ourselves bawling or puking – usually at the same time. Didn't know what to say at the grave; their village sign didn't say what religion they were; not that we would have known what to say anyway. In the end, Will left a marker over the grave. *Victims of mindless anarchy.*

Returned to the ship; asked Will to please, please, please take me away from this place as quickly as he could. I went to the cabin, threw off all my bloody clothes, wiped the blood stains off my body as best as I could with a towel, crawled under a blanket, and eventually cried myself to sleep. Will tried to comfort me but I just slapped and pushed him away until he left. Couldn't help it; couldn't stand to be touched.

First thing I did after waking was to look for Will. His hammock was gone. Dressed and went on deck; saw his hammock slung under a spar; big weight in it; climbed the mast and peeked in. "Sorry about last night," I said. He was awake; just staring at the sky.

"S'alright."

"Where are we?" I had been so intent on finding Will that I hadn't even thought to look over the rails.

"Hovering over a lake. You can have a swim; then, we'll leave. I've already had mine."

"My clothes and the towel?"

"Buried. Like mine."

I cleaned myself up quickly – didn't want to stay a minute longer than I had to. Will pointed us west; I climbed the mast and tumbled into his empty hammock. I felt him climbing the mast a few minutes later.

"OK if I get in?"

"Please."

So, we held each other; both of us awake the whole time; alone with our thoughts; wondering why life was so horrible, at least that's what I was thinking.

## Chapter 13

### From Will's journals: March 17.

Izzy was sitting in a canvas chair on the deck, ignoring her cup of hot chocolate. It was the third cup I had given her this afternoon – trying to cheer her up. It wasn't working.

"Do you mind if I use your hammock?" she asked.

"Go ahead," I said.

Izzy climbed the mast and disappeared. I didn't see her again until the next morning. I kept the ship on a westerly heading until we reached the Pacific Ocean, settled the Wilizy into the waves, anchored her, and then slept in Izzy's hammock in the stateroom – surrounded by pictures of Winnie. I figured that she was sleeping in my hammock because she didn't want to be reminded of little children.

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We were slipping comfortably through the Pacific Ocean waves on a northward heading when Izzy slid down the mast for breakfast. She ate it without uttering a word. Then, she grabbed some food bars and water, wrapped herself in a sleeping bag, and threw herself over the side of the ship. I rushed to the railing and saw her adjusting the controls of her sky-sling so that she was making just enough headway to bob comfortably through the waves. She saw me looking, gave me a little wave, and settled back in her little sling-raft. I slowed the speed of the ship so that she was keeping even with the ship, and did some gymnastics in the warm breeze.

Later in the morning, we drifted close to a hilly island that had a large structure near its top. I thought that I'd go exploring. Izzy didn't want to come so I anchored the ship and left Izzy bobbing in the waves.

I returned an hour later with what I thought was exciting news. The building had been part of something called Stanford University. When they realized that the main campus of the university was going to be underwater, they had moved all of their scientific resources to the top of a nearby mountain – now this island. It was heavily fortified against looters, but they had arranged the security system so that people could gain entry by answering some challenging physics and chemistry questions. That piqued my interest so I answered their questions and started browsing. I found libraries full of scientific bots – way more than had been available in the New York library. I also found fully equipped, functional labs operating off solar power. Plenty of supplies. I saw no evidence of anyone else having been here – in recent years, at least.

I hovered over Izzy's raft and told her what I had found. Did she want to go back with me? "Not really," she replied. Told her that the locations where the other parts of Stanford's resources had been moved. Did she want to explore those? "Not really," she replied. Asked her if she would mind if I spent the rest of the afternoon on the island? "No," she replied. Asked if she was mad at me? "No, just sad," she replied. Asked her how sad? "Very," she said.

I came back to the ship at dusk. Izzy was still bobbing in the waves, hands trailing over the side of her raft, her head lying back, eyes open, unfocused. She smiled, sort of, when she saw me hovering over her. Asked her if she wanted to come back aboard. "Not really," she replied. Asked her if she was warm enough in the sling – pointed out that a cool wind was starting to blow. "I'll close the sling's cover if I get cold," she said. Asked her if she wanted food or water? "Still have plenty," she replied. I pointed out that the tide would be changing and could push her further out to sea. She shrugged. "Tie a rope to me if you're worried," she said. So I did.

I heard the water dripping off Izzy's sling and onto the deck around midnight, I guess. Moon was high. I heard her go below and return a few minutes later. Heard her soft whisper, "Will? You awake?" I said I was and she joined me in my hammock in the mast. We watched the moon together for a while. I would have said something, but she had put her finger to my lips when she climbed in, so I didn't. We watched the moon some more. Then, she gave me a quick peck on the lips. "Go enjoy yourself in Stanford's labs for a couple of days," she said. "I have some things to do. Don't worry, I'll be safe." She closed the cover of her sling, blinked into invisibility, and I felt her accelerate into the air and she was gone.

## Chapter 14

### From Izzy's journals: March 19.

I spent all of yesterday bobbing in the ocean; couldn't erase the image of the slaughtered young children lying on the floor with bullet holes in the middle of their foreheads. What freak could do such a thing?

I realized that I was as angry with the parents as I was with their murderers. No pacifist parent had a single mark that showed that they had struggled. They had flopped down on their backs and waited for somebody to walk down the line and blow a hole through their children's heads while they listened in silence! I could understand their hatred of violence; felt it myself. But, wouldn't there have been some point at which these people would have stood up and said – "I will defend myself and my children even if I have to use violence?"

I cursed those parents in my mind for hours. How could they not have defended their children? I kept visualizing the scene in my mind; a gang of men coming into the village; parents fighting them; children getting away in the confusion.

Then, the gang of men became a gang of children, and this time, they were attacking **my** village and **my** children. I knew that Will would defend me and his children with violence if necessary. He had done that in Chicago. But, would I? Months ago, I had told Will that Zzyk's men would have to take our pretend baby *over my dead body*, but I realized now that those had been empty words. I hadn't been able to use my bow or my knife in Chicago to defend Will or even myself. I couldn't act against children. But, what was the difference if our murderers were young or old? Will and I would still be dead. We were alive today only because he had acted when I was frozen.

I remembered what I had said to Will much earlier when we had discussed what strategy we would use if the DPS became outrageously violent. Will had argued that if we saw a DPS person murdering or torturing somebody, why shouldn't he be murdered or tortured in return? Newton's Third Law of Physics said that *for every action, there's an equal and opposite reaction*. So, therefore, according to Will, it was only logical that a DPS murderer or torturer should receive the same treatment in return.

I had argued that if we did that, we would be murderers and torturers too. Then, it would be fair for somebody to murder and torture us in return. Will didn't have an answer to that. He said, "That seemed logical too."

Bobbing in the ocean, I realized that the pacifist families would not have been slaughtered if somebody had brought the murderers to justice the first time that they had killed people. This obviously was not the first time they had slaughtered people wantonly; not being stopped the first time just meant that they could continue to murder for as long as people allowed them to.

Eventually, Will and I were going to face this dilemma with the DPS. They weren't going to stop making IOF citizens disappear just because Will and I



thought that it was wrong. At some point, we would have to fight violence with violence. In my head, I realized that it would have to be done. In my heart, I realized that I couldn't do it. I hadn't been able to do it in Chicago even when our own lives were at stake. That's why I told Will that I was very sad yesterday. I had realized that I was a coward like Yollie had said I was. Anger in my belly, but a coward nonetheless.

# # # # # # # #

Being a coward is a hard thing to admit. I tried to deny it. But, when I thought about my life with the dissidents, there was no escaping the truth. I was a coward.

When I was growing up in the dissident camps, the other kids had teased me unmercifully because I hadn't been able to poison Will when I was four. I would run away and hide under a chair. When I was older, I would hide behind a smart mouth. I never stood up to them. Nor did I stand up to my mother for shunning me. She had beaten me when I was four and I remained scared of her even when I was bigger and stronger.

Then, there was Clem the Phlegm. I fought back against Phlegm; revealed him for what he was; stayed in camp to do this even though I wanted to run away and hide. But, I was still a coward because I had never faced him. I had beaten him by attacking him when he wasn't there to defend himself; his own people brought him to justice, not I.

I remembered the time that Will had said that he could invent something that would allow him to identify all the DPS men from a distance. Then, we could just shoot them from our invisible slings. Said that it was the most effective way of ending the war.

I was horrified; told him so. We couldn't murder people from an invisible sling! What if there were people in the DPS who hadn't done anything wrong? What if there were people in the DPS who had murdered, but only because they had been forced to? We might be killing innocent people. He finally agreed and we wrote an agreement that we wouldn't take *indiscriminant actions against presumed murderers without proof*. It was the only thing we had agreed on.

Then, Will developed his love affair with cowboy movies and learned about bushwhackers. He said that bushwhackers were even worse than the usual bad guys. They were cowardly bad guys who shot people in the back. Heroes faced their enemy; cowards bushwhacked them. Will changed our first rule to No bushwhacking.

Today I realized that my wonderful operation against Phlegm had succeeded because I had bushwhacked him. Perhaps there was no other way that I could have succeeded – he had all the power and I had none. Plus, I knew he was going to turn me over to the DPS, so I was really fighting for my life. I thought about it a lot yesterday, and I still don't know how I could have done it any other way. But, the truth is – I had bushwhacked Phlegm. I had been horrified when Will suggested bushwhacking as a theoretical solution, but I had been the one to actually do it.

In Chicago, I had been horrified that cold and emotionless Will could hurt or kill children without a second thought; didn't want to be around him after that. But, Will wasn't cold and emotionless – he had felt as much pain burying the pacifist

villagers as I had. In Chicago, he did what was necessary to save us while I was frozen in fear of using violence.

Yesterday, I realized that if I couldn't find a healthy way to stand up to the DPS and its violence, I could become the person burying Winnie and asking, "Why didn't people do something when they had the chance?"

# # # # # # # #

### **From Will's journals: March 22.**

Two days after Izzy left, I returned from the Stanford lab to find her back on the ship – practicing some strange dance routine. She had even brought gifts wrapped up in shiny paper.

"Twenty-five different kinds of chocolate! Where'd you get this?" I asked and put my nose next to each carton. They did actually smell slightly different.

"I went back to New York. Found something called a *Chocoholic Shop* that had a huge inventory on their shelves. I didn't know if chocolate could go bad, so I found the most recent shipment and loaded it into the sling. You're lucky I have will-power, otherwise your gift could have been just the wrappings."

So, we shared a bit of chocolate. It was way, way better than the chocolate-covered food bars. These bars were made **entirely** of chocolate. We agreed that we would have to ration it or it could disappear in a day. Izzy had also bought me another gift from New York – a proper blade for shaving. She even offered to test the blade for me, so I sat down on a chair. A whole bunch of different soaps appeared out of one of her bags too – some for her, some for me. But first, she had to make sure my hair was all combed out – not sure why that was – but I didn't mind her running her fingers through my hair. This took her a long time. Then, she lathered me up, and gave me a slow shave – all the time she was humming something to herself. It was not an unpleasant sound.

After the shave, we had to make sure that it had been close enough. So, we played three periods of hockey, one almost immediately after the other. Purely to check out if the razor was any good. Not sure if it was between the first and second periods, or between the second and third when she said that she had missed me – I kinda lost track. I told her I missed her too. "Ship wasn't the same without someone around to cook and clean," I said. Tried to do a Got'cha real quick after that. Didn't do me any good. She stuck her two pinky fingers in her mouth and stuck them in my ears. Doc was right. It feels gross.

After the hockey game, Izzy said that she was going below to paint another picture of Winnie. I offered to go down with her, but she said that she didn't like painting with someone watching, so I continued working on my new invention in the hold.

Over supper, Izzy told me that she was feeling better now. She had gone back to New York because she wanted to borrow some bots on yoga, meditation, and martial arts. She said that she thought the first two would be good for helping her to control her emotions; the third was to help her learn how to fight violence without becoming violent herself.

We talked about that for a while and, in the end, she said that I should write a second agreement. "Write Rule #2 anyway you like," she said. "Put in something about equal and opposite reaction. Put in something that says we will use violence to combat violence, when innocent lives are in danger and when we have no other choice. You can even phrase it in cowboy language if you want."

I offered to do the emotion-controlling exercises with her if she wanted. She laughed and said that I needed to control my emotions like she needed to dye her hair red. I said that I didn't think she needed to dye her hair red because it was already red. I liked her the way she was. Izzy said that she did too and from now on, she would be wearing her whites in Alberta. She wasn't going to hide her real self behind dyes unless it was necessary for an undercover operation. Later I realized that she had been saying that I had my emotions under control. I sensed that perhaps she thought they were too much under control, but by then, we were practicing some of her martial arts exercises together, so I didn't ask her if that's what she intended to say. These new dances were very much like her ballet, but dangerous for the person dancing with her. Namely me.

We set off for British Columbia on a slow, meandering course. Izzy wanted lots of time to practice her new martial arts dances. I slipped into the hold every day and worked on my inventions but didn't tell her because I wanted to surprise her like she had surprised me with the chocolate.

## Chapter 15

### **From Will's journals: April 18.**

Arriving in B.C. in mid-April, we had to cross over the submerged ruins of Richmond to reach the mouth of the Fraser River. From there, it was a short trip up the river to the broad harbour of Surrey, British Columbia. We could see people of all skin colours walking on the streets, so we figured that it would be safe for both of us to play tourist. We anchored and used our little dinghy to take us to shore. Then, we walked side by side through the streets of the city, Izzy in her white skin and me in my brown, and when nobody paid us any attention, we began to relax.

The people seemed open to tourists, so we asked some questions and learned a little about what was shaping up to be the best place we had visited so far. Apparently, British Columbia had some gas wells still operating near Haida Gwaii, Doc's ancestral home. Those gas fields provided enough income to drive a flourishing economy that gave the 150,000 people who were living in the Surrey area a comfortable life. The farmlands from Surrey eastward to the mountains gave them their food.

Everywhere we looked, people were going into stores and buying things. The stores were full of merchandise, customers and even owners. Izzy wanted to see what life was like in a city without terrorist swimmers, whereas I wanted to visit Haida Gwaii and the gas wells. So, we agreed to split up and meet back at the ship

the next night. It was clear that living in this city required money, so we went into a restaurant – a place that sold you food that had been already cooked – to see if they would take a gold coin. They wouldn't but said that we could change it at a bank down the street. Izzy said that she would do that if I wanted to leave now. We weren't sure if we should kiss goodbye or not in front of everyone, so I just hip checked Izzy into the street instead. This seemed to be the way that the people in the city said goodbye when they were on their crowded cement paths.

# # # # # # # # #

I found Izzy in the galley cooking supper when I returned from Haida Gwaii. She was wearing an old pair of sweat pants and a sweatshirt with its hood all tied up under her chin. "Feeling cold?" I asked as I came in.

"Will," she squealed. She really did. It was a squeal! Plus she jumped up and down a bit. "I have the most wonderful news. We have tickets to a dance tonight – one where people will be wearing costumes. We're going dancing! Isn't that exciting?"

I was going to... well, I don't know what I was going to say or do, because I didn't have a chance.

"I was worried that you might not want to go, but I had to make a decision right away because the man at the bank said they were his last two tickets. I bought a costume for you and one for me. Your costume is in the cabin – I hope it's the right size. Go and try it on – I can't wait to see you in it. You're going to love it, I'm sure." Then, she pushed me out of the galley.

# # # # # # # # #

### **From Izzy's journals: April 19.**

I had been worried about the boots to Will's costume. I had taken an old pair of his shoes to the rental store so that they could give me the right size, but I wasn't sure that he'd agree to wear them. The black leather rose to his knees before flaring out. He didn't say anything about them, so I assumed he was happy. I left Will in his costume and making Zs in the galley's air with his fake sword while I scooted down to the cabin to get ready. I warned him that it might take some time.

The hardest thing about the costume was climbing the stairs with the new shoes that the sales clerk at the store said everybody would be wearing. I found it hard to stand in the shoes, let alone walk; had to hold both railings on the stairs to make it up to the galley. The heels to the shoes were very narrow and high so that I felt like was falling downhill when I had them on. I had been practicing with them all afternoon but couldn't get comfortable in them; decided that I would wear them into the dance and then switch to my ballet shoes.

I told Will to close his eyes and I tottered into the galley and took a deep breath. When I had made the decision to become a different person, I hadn't imagined doing this. But then, I saw the dress and the half cape and I realized that it was perfect for me. I had told myself – *No hiding, remember?*

"OK Will, you can open your eyes, but if you make a wise crack, I'll break Zorro's sword over my knee for real." I was really anxious about what he was going

to say – I was not the Izzy he was used to seeing. Actually, tonight I was going to have him call me Melissa. This was a Melissa night.

Will didn't say anything for the longest time. I could see his Adam's apple working, like he was trying to swallow but couldn't. "Oh, wow!" he finally said.

I saw him looking at my hair, so explained. "B.C. has these places where they'll wash your hair and then you can describe what you want your hair to look like and they'll make it that way. What do you think?"

"Oh, wow!"

My hair is normally quite straight, but I had asked them to make it curly. Then they took some pieces, curled them extremely tight, and had those hanging around my ears. It was just like I had described to them. I saw Will's eyes shifting down, so I did a little twirl.

"Oh, wow!"

The dress was pure white with little pieces of emerald green sparkles sewn into the fabric. The top part was kind of skimpy – my arms and shoulders were bare but I had gotten a tan the last couple of weeks so the white of the dress really stood out. This dress was different from the comfy clothes that I usually wear. Let's just say that I wouldn't be hiding any weapons underneath this top. A thin strap around my neck held the dress up. The back of the dress was – well, it wasn't there. At least not above my waist.

"Aren't you going to be cold?" Will asked.

"I have a half-cape," I said and held it around my shoulders without fastening it. The cape was emerald green like my shoes. "If I do get cold, I will expect my gallant Zorro to lend me his cape."

The skirt part of the dress was much looser than the top. Thank goodness. I wouldn't be able to walk let alone dance, otherwise. The front of the dress hung around my knees, but the back part fell to my calves. I saw Will looking at my shoes.

"You've spilled something on your toes, Izzy."

"It's called toe-nail polish and I have some on my fingernails too." I held out my hands so that he could see. "The girl at the hair salon said that every woman uses this kind of polish when they go to a dance. We picked the colour to match my shoes and my cape. She said I should wear green on my lips and eyelids too, but I didn't want to do that. I have a handbag in the same colour too," and I held it up so he could see.

Will came closer and fingered the metal strands hanging from my ears. "Antennae for your pinky ring?"

"Earrings. Decorative only. They have little pieces of emerald in them too. I have to be careful when I put on my mask." My mask was a band of emerald green cloth like my cape. When it was around my neck like it was right now, it was like the cuff to a sleeve. However, when I pulled it up over my face, taking care not to catch it in the earrings, it stretched. I pulled it over my face and the eyeholes became apparent.

"You know why I chose this dress, right Will?"

"White and emerald green, like your grandmother liked to wear."

"Plus, I had the salon do my hair just like my grandmother wore hers. Tonight I'm Melissa, not Izzy. Do you mind?"

“Melissa,” Will smiled, and did a sort of bow.

“Zorro,” and I did my best at making a curtsy. “I’ve hired a pumpkin and six mice to meet us at the pier and take us to the ball.”

“Huh?”

# # # # #

Will and I were back on the dance floor – we hadn’t been able to dance as much as I had thought we would. A lot of the time, people were dancing in ways we had never seen before and to music we had never heard before. We joined in when it was something we knew; otherwise, we sat at our table and gazed at the sea of costumes – just like all the other spectators were doing.

People watched us as well – mostly when we were dancing. We were one of the few couples who knew how to jive, and I saw people looking at us and smiling when we were on the dance floor. I’d like to think that it was because we were dancing well, but I think it was also because of our costumes. Everybody else was dressed in a medley of colours; Will and I stood out because of the starkness of our black and white.

But, we also received lots of attention just sitting. People would come by and talk to us; some would say that they had voted for us which I didn’t really understand; some would make a pleasant comment on their way to the floor; others would stop and ask who we were. They knew Zorro of course, but they hadn’t been able to figure out who I was. I said I was Melissa of the Wilizy, and then after too many blank looks and more questions, I started to add automatically that “She was a Spanish princess who was in one of the Zorro movies,” and that would satisfy them and they’d move on.

I’m not sure when it was exactly that I caught on. First, I noticed that the couple in the table next to us was upset that they had been given the wrong table and had to move. I remember watching the two people who were really supposed to have their table weave their way through the crowd and sit down. They weren’t wearing much of a costume; just some nice clothes and black masks over their eyes. I was prepared to smile at them when they looked our way, or even do my Melissa was a Spanish princess routine, but they never asked us about our costumes. They didn’t look at Will and me at all which was strange because everybody was looking at the people around them and their costumes. Instead, the couple took seats so that their backs were to us, which I thought was kind of funny at the time because that meant they weren’t looking at the dance floor. But, I didn’t think anything of that at the time.

Sometime after that, Will and I came back from the dance floor to find that the couple at another neighbouring table had left. Both had been wearing the exact same costume – the Cat in the Hat. They were particularly noticeable when they danced because their hats towered above everyone on the dance floor and you could see them from anywhere in the ballroom. When another couple sat at their table, I thought that they were joining them, but the two Cats in the Hat never came back, which seemed strange to me because they had left so early. Why would they go to all the trouble of getting all dressed up and leave in the first hour? I also remembered wondering why the second couple had sat down at the

table so that their backs were to us. But, I didn't think anything of that at the time.

Things all clicked into place shortly afterwards. Will and I were on the floor dancing, and we were doing a lot of twirling back and forth which meant that I was always facing in a different direction. I saw two men in dark suits approach the couple sitting at a third table near us and lean over them. It didn't look like they were having a pleasant conversation. I kept sneaking peeks as Will and I moved around the floor and saw the two men escort the couple to the exit. It was then that I noticed that the other two couples that had been ignoring us so intently were now turned slightly in their seats. I felt their eyes.

Will was still looking at me with a slightly goofy smile that told me the new Izzy was still a hit with him. Dancing automatically, I ignored him and began looking around the ballroom properly. Almost everybody there were in elaborate costumes. I saw only two couples who had not gone to a lot of work to get ready for the ball. Both of those couples were sitting within grabbing distance of our table.

Pairs of black-suited men were stationed at all four exits. I had assumed that they were like the ticket takers at the door – standing there to watch the doors so that no one could enter without a ticket. All of the men were husky. All of them were within a few steps of blocking the doors. All were looking at the sector of the ballroom where Will and I were dancing. I started leading Will on a series of dance steps that took us slowly through the crowd. Their gazes followed us.

A waiter was leading a couple to the recently vacated table next to ours. They were costumed properly but the lady was particularly interested in looking at Will. She was dark brown in skin colour, and I was too far away to be sure, but I think she had an IOF nose. I realized that the trap was now three-quarters complete. The couple at the fourth table near us would soon be asked to leave. Then, another couple would take their place. They'd ignore us at first. I stopped watching and began thinking.

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### **From Will's journals: April 19.**

Izzy had really gotten into the dancing. A couple of times, I had started to take us back to our table because we didn't know how to do the dance. Each time, she pulled me back and said something like "We should try this one," so we did. I didn't mind. I still couldn't take my eyes off her.

When I wasn't staring at Melissa's dress, I was staring at her hair. Her red hair was all frizzy around her forehead and around her ears, and the curls hung down below her ears and at the back of her head and sort of just dangled and bounced every time she moved. I had never seen anyone in the IOF look like this. I hadn't seen anyone look like this anywhere. Apparently, I wasn't the only one who felt that way. So did everyone else in the ball. I could feel eyes on us all the time.

I remember noticing that she wasn't smiling any longer. I thought it was because we had been dancing a long time and she was getting tired. When the band started a new dance, I was going to take her back to the table so she could rest. Instead, she stepped into an embrace with me. I noticed that all the other

dancers were holding each other too – they hadn't done that before. I guessed that was because the band was playing something slow now. Neither Izzy nor I knew how to do that kind of dance, so we just held each other and shuffled our feet. I felt Izzy's lips graze my ear and was going to give her an ear lobe kiss too when she began whispering.

"Don't look around; keep dancing but listen carefully to what I tell you. The IOF is here."

Naturally, I started to look around, but she was ready for that. The hand behind my head steered my face back against hers.

"They have agents sitting in three of the four tables closest to us. I'm not sure if they're all IOF because they don't have the IOF brown skin; but, I'm sure that they're working for the IOF. In addition, they have two security guards stationed at each exit. They watch us when we're dancing and their hands start fidgeting with their clothes any time we get near an exit – that means that they have weapons and we won't be able to get by them. There may be a safe way out through the washrooms, but only one of us can take it. If both of us moved towards the washrooms at the same time, I'm sure they would become suspicious. Four of the security guards could get there before we could. However, they won't be worried if you go to the washroom while I go back to our table."

I started to speak, but she stopped me with a finger pinch on the back of my neck.

"We don't have time to discuss this! This plan can work; we don't have time to make another. The IOF is after **you**. They don't care about me. I would not be able to rescue you, but you can rescue me. When I give you the signal, you and I are going to give each other a little hug like people do when they have finished a dance. You are going to turn and walk slowly towards the corner of the ballroom where the washroom sign is. You're facing it now. Can you see it?"

I whispered, "Yes."

"You are in no great rush to get there but you must walk in an almost direct path so that the guards won't worry about where you're going. Meanwhile, I'll return to our table and sit down. They will not worry about you when they see that I am sitting at the table. Go into the men's washroom. It should be empty because everyone will still be dancing. Look for a window that is big enough for you to squeeze through and break it. Then, turn your sky-sling on and wait for someone to come into the washroom. It might be the guards, or it might be another dancer. Leave the washroom when they do and come back to our table and hover over it."

"Contingency #1: If there is no window, there should be ceiling tiles that can be pushed up. Turn invisible, go into the ceiling, find a way that you could conceivably escape and paint that picture. You're not going to escape though – you're going to watch at our table, or outside, while they capture me."

"Contingency #2: There's an exit sign by the washroom sign, so the emergency exit must be down that hallway. It's bound to be guarded, but perhaps by only one man. He may be disguised as a janitor or washroom attendant. He won't be stationed directly in front of the exit door, but he'll be close by. If you have no other way to escape, find an excuse to walk close to the man and disable him. Paint a picture of yourself fleeing through the emergency exit and then return invisibly to our table."



I managed to say *But*, before Izzy squeezed my neck hard.

“You are to let them catch me. Do you understand? You are to let them catch me! This is not necessarily a bad thing. Remember how we were wondering how we would issue our warning to Zzyk? We weren’t going to be bushwhackers, remember? We were going to find a way to let him know that we wanted changes to the IOF and that we didn’t want to get into a big war, but we would if we had to. I am going to tell them that I deliberately let myself be captured; that I want to talk to Zzyk so that I can negotiate with him. I will tell them that I am there under a flag of truce. I’ll tell them that you’re close by. I’ll tell them that if they break the truce, you’ll know it and will retaliate.”

“After they catch me, they’re going to take me out of the ballroom. They’ll probably have a copter nearby. They’ll put me in the copter and fly to Edmonton. Stay watching until you can confirm that’s where they’re headed and then go back to the Wilizy. Use the ship to catch up to the copter and trail us to our final destination. You’ll have a couple of hours of flying time at least. Use that time to think of ways that you can demonstrate that you’re watching me. You’ll probably have to create some explosions to get their attention – think of how you’re going to do that. Remember that anything you do has to be explainable in some way that doesn’t reveal that you can make yourself invisible.”

Again, I tried to speak, but she cut me off.

“I will try to find a way to send you signals. As long as I’m in the open somewhere, I’ll figure that you’re nearby watching. I’ll have my mask around my neck. If you ever see it over my eyes, you’ll know that I want to be rescued. If they take the mask away from me, or if my hands are tied so that I can’t lift it, I’ll use a 2 + 2 signal to ask you to save me. If you do have to rescue me, don’t reveal our secret weapon.”

Izzy gave me a quick hug and whispered. “Go now. Don’t look back – men don’t do that when they’re going to the washroom.” Then, she spun away from me and I couldn’t see her.

## Chapter 16

### **From Izzy's journals: April 19.**

I saw the consternation of the guard returning from the washroom hallway and caught the signal that he made. I lowered my mask to my throat and stood up, my handbag in my hand. “Took you long enough,” I said to the first person to reach me. I wrapped the half-cape around me in preparation for leaving.

My table neighbours quickly surrounded me but they paused automatically when I held up a hand. “Let’s not make a scene. Do you really want people to realize who you are? You can put on the restraints outside.” I brushed by them. They were caught standing around looking foolish and I made them run to catch up to me before I slowed down and led them out of the building.

A four-passenger copter was waiting for us. I stopped in front of the doors and held my arms out for restraints. The dark black woman with the fancy costume approached me and I took a good look at her as she began to pat me down for weapons. She didn't have the IOF brown skin, but it's easy to dye skin darker than it really is. I was pretty sure who she was, so decided to take a little gamble. It would be worth it if I were right. "You don't think I would be foolish enough to ask for a truce meeting and then walk in with a weapon, do you Abby?"

The woman, Abby, looked up with a start. I had been right about the nose; up close I could recognize the mouth too. Months ago, I had watched Abby trying to conduct a discreet surveillance of Will's camp and failing badly at it. She had spent most of the time chewing on snacks, and not too prettily either. It made sense that the IOF would send someone who could confirm Will's identity.

"The people you pay to spy in Surrey aren't very good, Abby. I trolled myself around Surrey for 3 days before your spies finally noticed me. The free tickets to the dance were a nice touch, but by then, I would have pretended to fall for anything."

I had spent some time trying to figure out how they had found us. The IOF was waiting for us at the dance. Will didn't know about the dance until he returned from his excursion, so I had to have been the one to break security. I had talked about the dance with staff in the dress shop and the hair salon, but there was nothing about me that would have made them suspect I was from Alberta. Changing an IOF gold coin at the bank however was obvious, at least in retrospect. We had never thought that Zzyk would have white-skinned spies in B.C. More proof if we needed it that he had territorial ambitions.

"I'll keep the handbag," she said.

I shrugged. "I won't mention the slackness in the operation. Just make sure that someone is at the other end who can make decisions."

"Why? We know what we're going to do with you."

"Don't you recognize a flag of truce when you see one? The white dress? How obvious can we be? You think I'd be wearing this monstrosity if I weren't trying to get caught? Just be sure that someone who can arrange the details of the truce will be waiting. Will won't like it if I'm harmed."

"Who's Will?"

"Zurt didn't like his name. He goes by *Will* now."

"Zurt, Will, whatever. Where did he go?"

"When we saw you come in Abby, we figured the trap was almost ready to be sprung. Will's going to meet us in Edmonton. Our copter isn't as fast as yours, so he had to leave early."

Abby strapped me into a back seat with a chain that went around my waist several times and then through a bracket in the copter. She took a seat next to me. *Interesting*, I thought. *They've tightened up how they transport prisoners.*

Halfway to Edmonton, I turned, tapped Abby's knee, and indicated I wanted to talk. She leaned over. "I'm kind of hungry. Do you have any sunflower seeds with you, Abby, or do you gorge on those only when you're in the woods?"

I don't think she liked that.

# # # # # # # #

A man in a blue suit was waiting for the copter when we landed. Abby unfastened the chain around my waist and led me to him. "What's this about a truce?" he asked.

"I'm here under Zurt's white flag of truce," I said as confidently as I could manage. "Zurt has taken the name Will now. Will wants me to give Zzyk a private message. I'll take Zzyk's reply back to Will. I am carrying no weapons but I don't expect to meet Zzyk face-to-face. We can talk via a secure visual circuit. I'll wait over there until you can set it up." After pointing to the terminal building, I started to walk in that direction. Abby moved to stand in front of me.

"How do we know that you are representing Zurt," the blue suit said. "You could be running a giant bluff after our B.C. agents caught you."

"You know that I was with Will at the dance. Abby can tell you that I gave myself up willingly. But, we were expecting you to disbelieve. So, hang on a sec, would you?"

I lifted my right hand until the pinky ring was touching the end of one of my earrings. "It's ringing," I said and waited. "Will, we just arrived in their military base south-west of Edmonton."

I listened to what Will had to say before answering. "Yeah, sure. No problems. Everybody was on their best behaviour."

-

"It was smooth, most of the way. A little bumpy crossing the Rockies. Yours?"

-

"Will, the reason I'm calling. The people here don't believe that I'm acting on your behalf. Could you give them a little demonstration of your desire for me to have a meeting with Zzyk?"

-

"Yeah. Just like we talked about."

-

"I'll ask." I turned back towards the crowd of agents. For obvious reasons, I hadn't moved far off. "Say, do you folks have anything around here that you don't want destroyed?" I think my question caught them off guard because they didn't respond.

"I don't think so, Will. They didn't say anything. But, don't blow up the helicopter that brought me in. Abby left my handbag in it."

-

"Yeah, you were right. It was Abby."

I turned back to the group. "It'll be here shortly. For obvious reasons, Will isn't in the immediate vicinity. You may want to crouch down. I'm not sure what elevation he'll choose." I knelt on the ground. Abby and the pilot saw me and did the same. The blue suit ignored us.

I heard the whine and the blue suit winced and ducked after the fact - Will must have passed only a meter above him. There was a brief delay and a small copter on the other side of the airport exploded into a giant ball of flame.

"Will has that targeting down pat, doesn't he? I'll tell you we blew up a lot of B.C.'s tundra before he got everything calibrated. You may think that the missile was launched from back there," and I pointed in the direction that Will had come from. "Will has developed a spiral approach for his missiles that he says will

prevent anyone from tracking them back to his launch pad. You can try if you want. Can I go into the terminal building now?" I started to walk away and then turned and said, "Abby? When you're ready to guard me again, could you bring my handbag with you?"

# # # # # # # # #

### **From Izzy's journals: April 20.**

They kept me waiting until dawn. I figured they were trying to add stress; worked pretty well for them too. Every other hour, I'd have a pretend telephone conversation with Will via my earrings. I felt Will's breath every now and then – he was probably hovering next to the ceiling above me and came down from time to time to blow on my hair to reassure me.

It was dawn when a muscular man strode through the doors to the terminal and blue-suit left before the door had finished swinging. "You are who?" the man said.

"You know who I am, so let's not play games."

"Very well. Do you wish to be called Melissa or Izzy?"

"Melissa. Melissa of the Wilizy."

"What's the Wilizy?"

"Our group. People opposed to the IOF."

"All two of you, eh? Will and Izzy equal the Wilizy."

"And your name?"

"If you know Abby, then you know who I am, so who's playing games now Melissa?"

"Just wondering if I should call you Rick or Ricky." I had recognized him as soon as he came through the door. I know Will would have had the same reaction I did – a cold chill down my back. Rick was the head tracker who had tried to catch Will after he took off his brain-band. Rick's job was to make people disappear.

"Rick will do."

"Are you here to speak on behalf of Zzyk?"

"No, I am here solely to facilitate a meeting. This terminal is not going to work for us. Hard to put in a secure feed; much too open. Plus, Zzyk is not going to be available to talk with you for at least a day. He asked that I get you settled into some comfortable place. Give you a chance to catch some sleep. I'm prepared to negotiate the location."

I thought for a minute before responding. "Not a military base, not a prison, not a building associated with the DPS or any other branch of the IOF in any way. Just so you know, I will remain in touch with Will throughout my visit. If that communication is interrupted in any way, Will is going to interpret that to mean that I have been drugged, I have been imprisoned, or I have been disabled in some manner. That would not be good for you. Will is still struggling to control his emotions. He has a lot of anger towards the DPS and towards Zzyk in particular for pretending to be his volunteer-father. I am the person who is helping him to deal with that anger. If you interfere with my ability to keep his anger in check, he

will respond in a way that will demonstrate how much he has learned recently about explosives.”

“Anything else?”

“I get to see the location first and approve or not approve it. I will take food and water supplies into the location with me. In the event that negotiations take longer than expected, Will is going to send me food, water and other living necessities. You may examine the package he sends electronically or by any similar probe that you wish, but you may not open it. I need to have confidence that you are not tampering with my food or water. If you think that there is something objectionable in the package Will sends, you may describe it and I will remove it from the package and show you that it has no potential harm to you.”

“Anything else?”

“Not at this time.”

“Our requirements: Zzyk will not meet with you personally. He will meet with you by a secure audio and video feed. He will interpret any attempt to backtrack that feed as a hostile act and he will then demonstrate the knowledge that he has gained over a half-century of working with explosives.”

“We’re agreed?”

“We’re agreed.”

I took off my cape and walked into the part of the terminal where there were machines to dispense food and water. I started visually measuring how much I could wrap inside my cape. Noticed the coin slot. “Anyone here have change for a gold coin?” I asked.

# # # # #

I grabbed a short nap so that my sleep cycle wouldn’t get out of whack; woke myself around noon and re-established pretend contact with Will. Told him that everything was all right and made meaningless conversation while I looked around. Did all of this from in front of the big window. One solid sheet of glass – no side windows that would open or close. No way in or out of the room except through the one door into the hallway. That door had a lock – might stop a breeze, might not. Already knew that I was on the ninth floor of a ten-floor building. Stairway access was the only way up; building had an elevator, but I had no reason to believe that it would work.

I disconnected with Will, grabbed a food bar, and looked around. I was in a small living space in an infant care facility. Entering from the hallway, you’d find yourself in a narrow alcove. A shallow closet with a folding door was on your right and the entrance to a bathroom on your left. If you walked a couple of paces past the wall of the bathroom, you’d be in the living area, which was rectangular if you ignored the alcove. The large window took up the entire wall opposite the hallway door. The two side walls were completely bare. The only thing in the living area was a sleeping pad and blanket.

Rick had said that the care facility had been built with a larger staff population in mind; they had never used this room. I didn’t believe him for a minute; scanned the walls for signs of previous occupation – pictures, mirrors, etc. I also was looking for evidence of fresh holes in the walls where bugs could have been inserted. Saw nothing. The walls had a fresh coat of institutional beige paint and

there were lingering smells of cleaning fluids. Nice of them to clean the place up for little ol' me.

I didn't mind the deception. Any place that the DPS offered me was going to be bugged – I knew that. The longer I took to approve a room, the longer it would take to have my meeting with Zzyk. I was already stressed out about that; I wasn't going to make it any worse by being picky.

The main reason I accepted the room was because the building was full of children – a fact that I confirmed before even looking at my room. I figured there'd be less chance of the DPS attacking a room in an infant care facility than some deserted house somewhere. I suspect that they chose this place for the same reason – less opportunity for Will to get nasty.

If I were the DPS, where would I put a bug? A vent was high on one of the side walls. It could house a wide-angle camera but it would not be able to see me if I were on the sleep pad immediately below it. Nor could it see into the entrance alcove. I would have looked inside the vent, but it was too high.

Surely, they'd want something that gave a view of the first camera's blind spot. Something near the hallway door would do that. All they needed was a pinprick hole in the wall with a camera behind it. Concluded that they would have installed two cameras. Between them, they would cover the whole room.

The bathroom was small but functional. It had a normal sink with a painted wood counter top and cupboard below. Nothing was stored in the cupboard; a single bar of soap was on the counter. The narrow wooden dowel holding the thin face cloth and the even thinner towel was too light to be used as a weapon.

The tub was scarred but clean; usual shower fixture; securely fastened – no way to remove. Tiles on the walls around the tub were all stuck securely to the wall; a cloth shower curtain with the usual waterproof liner hung from a sturdy wooden bar. The bar might be strong enough to be a weapon but it was securely fastened to the wall. I had no tools. I might be able to break the shower rod in two by hanging from it – stored that thought away.

Would the DPS bug the bathtub/shower? An empty light socket was above the tub. Previously, it would have held a heat lamp but no one in Alberta had used those for a long time. The empty socket would be a good place to hide a camera. I tried to get a look-see. Put one foot on the side of the tub, one foot in the soap container inset in the tile wall, one hand grabbing the wooden bar holding the shower curtain, and my other hand waving uselessly below the empty socket. The ceiling was just too high. Decided to shower in my dress from now on. Not sure if I was being paranoid or not – but if I was going to be constantly wondering if I was being filmed, I would remove that worry. I didn't mind being in damp clothes if it was going to reduce my stress.

Back to the sleeping pad to take stock of my resources. Six plastic water bottles. That's right, plastic. Surprised me, too. Some potential for a weapon there. A dozen food bars – zero possibility of use for offense or defense. My cape could be used as a sling of some kind to hurl heavy rocks at people; no heavy rocks found in the apartment. I could whip one end of it at an intruder – would deter a DPS agent a millisecond. Cape could be used to blindfold somebody; couldn't see how that need would come up. Nothing about the other clothes I was wearing would be useful other than keeping me warm and they weren't built to do that very well.

Pinky-ring? Not a weapon. My grandmother's locket around my neck? Thin chain might be useful. My ballet slippers – thin and useless. My handbag? The decorative chain that allowed me to hang it from a shoulder had been confiscated. The handbag held only one possible hope – my shoes with the high heels. My bottle of toenail paint? Couldn't see any value in that. Everything else inside the handbag was soft.

Thought some more about the shoes. I was surprised that they had left those in, actually. Took a good look at them. Found a pinprick hole in the sole of the left shoe. Scary that they'd have something that small that would work.

And, my sky-sling. Not a weapon. An escape tool, but if I used it, we could say good-bye to our secret weapon. I went into the bathroom, closed the shower curtain, and huddled into a tiny space by the door where no camera could see me. Took my dress off and unwrapped the sling from around my waist and stuffed it into my handbag where I wouldn't be tempted to use it.

I didn't hear from Zzyk at all – but wasn't expecting to. Went to bed early – already getting nervous about what would happen tomorrow.

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### **From Will's journals: April 20.**

I watched as Izzy pretended to talk with me. Zzyk was trying to discover how she was communicating with me and was bombarding the outside of the building with sensory beams. It's exactly what I would have done, so I wasn't surprised. This was good for us because he wouldn't be able to find anything and that would drive him crazy. With all the beams flying around the building, I couldn't approach the window. However, I had the long-range scope in my sling and I could see into the room. I ran a long-distance electronic scan and found signs of bugs inside her room.

My first priority was getting food and water to Izzy. She had enough with her for two days, perhaps three and I didn't see Zzyk releasing her any time soon. A food package might give me an opportunity to send her a message about the bugs. However, it couldn't be a written message in case the DPS searched the packages. I couldn't put anything in the food package that would reveal that we weren't actually communicating. The only thing keeping Izzy in that apartment, and not in a prison, was the deception Izzy was creating that she could talk with me. Nor could I send her a weapon since it could be picked up by a security scan.

Izzy had thought that Zzyk would release her with a message of some kind after she gave him our warning. I didn't see that happening – not if Zzyk were as ruthless as we had been led to believe. That meant that I'd have to find a threat I could use to force Zzyk to release her. Before I had teamed up with Izzy, I had spent almost a month hiding in the DPS file room and reading their confidential reports. Something from those files might prove useful if I could review the notes I had put onto my pinky-ring. This was the safest time to do that. Right now Izzy was sitting on her sleep pad and pulling things out of her handbag. She was safe for now. I concentrated on reviewing what I had found in the DPS filing cabinets.

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Izzy was practicing ballet when I finished calculating the totals on my mental spreadsheet. It only confirmed what I had already felt would be the case. I couldn't guard her and develop an effective threat at the same time. I had thought of one potential threat, but I'd have to spend significant amounts of time away from Edmonton. That would leave her unguarded. Izzy had been confident and completely in charge at the airport – she appeared to be handling the stress very well. She should be all right. The alternative was to blast a hole in the window of her apartment, fly in with my sky-sling, and take her out. Since Zzyk had cameras both inside and outside the apartment, that would lead, inevitably, to him realizing we had invisibility powers. I'd hold that option in reserve in case she called for a rescue.

I watched Izzy swinging her arms in graceful circles and rotating on the toe of her right foot in little circles. She said they were called *pirouettes*. I left to prepare a food package.

## Chapter 17

### **From Izzy's journals: *Day 2 of imprisonment.***

I heard someone knocking on my door. Rick said he had to install a videoconference unit and it would take only a minute. The unit used a normal power outlet and Internet connection. I didn't see any control buttons on the console – asked him about that. Rick said that the incoming feed had a signal that would turn the unit on and off. He left without saying anything else.

Monstrous console. Lots of room for bugs and sensors. Paranoiac? Sat down on my pad waiting for unit to click on; fiddled with my dress to ensure I was all covered up; had my speech all rehearsed.

After fifteen-minutes, I recognized what was happening. Zzyk would keep me waiting while one of his bugs recorded my reaction. I moved my sleep pad to a corner of the room and began working on yoga and that helped to relax me; told myself that Zzyk couldn't unsettle me with silly little mind games.

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Throughout the afternoon, I pretended to have conversations with Will. Made sure that I mentioned the delays and how silly they were. Said it was good for me though because it gave me a chance to work on the reorganization of the Southern Alberta chapter of the Wilizy. Gave Will the detail of my plans for a new orientation session for all the new recruits who wanted to sign up. Answered Will's pretend questions.

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Heard the video conferencing unit click on; looked at my pinky-ring; 6:00. Zzyk had kept me waiting for six hours. Looked at the monitor and saw a big, brown face staring out. Heard him say, "Melissa, are you there?"



I moved to stand in front of the unit. Thought about sitting on my pad; but wasn't going to kneel, and wasn't going to try to get into a sitting position in front of him in this dress. Standing position was best anyway – wouldn't put me lower than him. If he wanted to play mind games, I was ready. "I'm here," I said.

"I'm having trouble seeing all of you – camera is catching you only from your waist down. Would you mind sitting?"

His voice was raspy – like he had a cold, but not exactly. Deep voice; pronounced his words clearly. "There should be a zoom-back command on your camera," I said. "I'll wait."

"Ah... There you are. I finally meet the granddaughter of Melissa Stanley. I've heard a lot about you."

"And I've heard a lot about you. Do you mind me calling you Zzyk or would you prefer an honorific?"

"First names are best, don't you think?"

I shrugged and waited. He had the correct IOF brown colouring; the right shaped nose; looked like he had been tipped out of the gestation incubators just like everyone else. But, Zzyk was born well before the IOF had introduced genetic manipulations. Had he created IOF's citizens in his own image, or did he just have a good makeup person?

"And how is Zurt?"

"Will was fine the last time I talked to him which was..." I looked at my pinky ring computer... "twenty-one minutes ago."

"Good. Good. And you are his – girlfriend?"

"No. As you might expect, Will does not have those kinds of emotions. Think of me as his executive officer."

"Ahh. So, that would be your first lie, Melissa," Zzyk smiled. Proud of himself. "I have a full report from our friends in B.C. You weren't behaving like an executive officer when you were dancing and Zurt was certainly not emotionless. Tell me, have you seduced him yet?"

*I thought a crude word. I thought it twice more. One minute into the meeting and Zzyk has caught me in a lie and he's making me flustered. I hadn't been expecting the girl friend question and I had blurted out the first thing I could think of. Now, he's asking me if I have had sex with Will and there was no way to answer that kind of question – even a "None of your business" would be revealing. I resolved to take some time before answering his questions from now on.*

"Do I sense a little embarrassment, Melissa? Your cheeks look a little pink. I mean, if you've seduced him, I don't mind. I am only Zurt's volunteer-parent, it's not like I'm his chaperon. And, I can understand Zurt being attracted to you, especially so soon after he removed his brain-band. I saw pictures of you at the dance. You were wearing these same skimpy, revealing clothes, parading around half-naked, flinging your body in sex-like gyrations. Why wouldn't he be attracted to you? Did you seduce him as part of the graduation celebrations you attended with him or did you save that for later?"

*Sex-like gyrations? We were jiving! Was Zzyk a prude? I mean, I'm as prudish as they come; prudish about sex talk; prudish about using crude language. That was one of the consequences of living with dissidents and trying to be everything that they weren't. But I was definitely picking up some vibrations of someone even more*

*prudish than I. Was that why the brain-bands were programmed to tamp down the sex drive? Was that the reasons behind neutering all the IOF women? If so, I could put him on the defensive too.*

“Are you curious about Will’s sex life because you’re still a virgin?” I asked.

Zzyk stared at me without saying anything. His face filled the screen so I took that opportunity to look closely. Gray hair at the temples, dark brown hair otherwise. At his age, he should have been mostly gray. Thin moustache, somewhat gray. Clean-shaven otherwise. I saw no evidence of anything fake around his nose. No obvious break in the skin texture; no abrupt change in any of the facial lines that would be there if someone had been a little sloppy applying the make-up. Come to think of it – for a man who had to be in his 70s at least, he had very few age lines. A few wrinkles around his eyes, but nowhere else. “Are you wearing make-up, Zzyk?” I asked as pleasantly as I could. I already knew the answer. His hair was dyed; his wrinkles were covered; he didn’t want to reveal his age to me.

The camera shot pulled back so that I could see him seated at a desk. The shot was still tight – no way that I’d get any clues to where that office was.

“Well played, Melissa. Shall we move on?”

I shrugged.

“You told Rick that you had a message from Zurt,” he prompted.

“Actually, that message is from the Wilizy,” I corrected. I started in on my prepared speech, trying to deliver it as respectfully as I could. “The members of the Wilizy wish to recognize your skill and accomplishment in leading Alberta and the IOF through very difficult times. We cannot imagine what it would have been like after the oil shock. We expect every government in the world had difficulty coping with it. You had a vision and you imposed it on the people of Alberta. We have strong feelings about the way that you imposed your vision, but we weren’t there at the time, so we can hardly criticize. Violence was rampant everywhere, we’re sure. You did what you thought was necessary and you chose methods that were in common usage at the time.”

“Do I sense a *But* coming?” Zzyk’s fingers were steepled together and were propping up his chin.

I ignored the interruption. “You have kept Albertans safe, well-fed, educated, healthy, and reasonably prosperous given the conditions. People may hate you, and I’m sure I’m not revealing anything that you don’t know by saying that. However, you kept Alberta functioning throughout all the turmoil and citizens should thank you for that accomplishment.”

“But?” Zzyk shifted in his chair and crossed both arms across his chest.

“That was decades ago. Today, although they are safe, healthy and educated, the people have no will to live. They have no enjoyment in their lives. Brain-bands have removed whatever chance they might have had to be happy, so they live as zombies until they overdose on contraband brain-band chemicals which, curiously, the DPS has been unable to eradicate.”

“And you want?”

“We think it is time to reinvigorate the people of the IOF. We think there should be a gradual relaxation of the brain-band enforcements; we think there should be a gradual reintroduction of basic human rights and freedoms; we think people

should be able to bear children again. We'd like to work with you in helping the IOF create better lives for everyone."

"If I disagree?"

"We'd have to ask you to consider retirement."

## Chapter 18

### **From Izzy's journals: *Day 3 of imprisonment.***

At the end of our meeting yesterday, Zzyk said he had to consult with the IOF's Board of Directors about our proposal – they were the ones who made the important decisions. It would take some time to get them all together; he'd give me their decision. Yeah, right! I figured it was just a way to drag everything out. So, I wasn't expecting anything to happen today when someone knocked on my door near bedtime. I opened it to find Rick. Two DPS uniforms behind him were holding a large, rectangular, wooden crate. "This came for you this evening," Rick said. "We have examined its contents without opening the box as stipulated. There are about thirty foil-wrapped oblong-shaped items that blocked our probes. I have assumed that they are food bars, but would like the opportunity to verify that. Where would you like the crate?"

I told the guards to place it against a bare wall. They had to turn it sideways to get it in. Didn't appear too heavy, just big. Rick stayed in the doorway the whole time. Two thick, wide metal bands secured the crate. One went up and down; the second went sideways. The ends of each pair of bands were crimped together so that the band fit extremely tightly against the crate.

I looked more closely at how one of the bands was fastened. One end of a thin wire was attached to the crimping; the other end went into a large ring made of braided wire. Embedded within this braided ring was a green flashing light. Even I could see that this was a trip wire. The other metal band had a similar braided ring and a green flashing light. Anyone disturbing the metal bands would have their interference recorded. I pulled the wires off the crimpings, the lights turned red, and the crimped metal bands fell apart.

I lifted the lid to the crate. "They're in the middle," Rick called.

I found three light cardboard cartons easily. Each one was a different variation of a commercial brand of food bar. I took the cartons to the door and watched as Rick opened each carton with a knife and sliced through several bars in each carton at random. He also felt around and under each bar and then left without saying anything.

I finished my nighttime exercises as though the crate's arrival had meant nothing. Obviously, Will would have told me it was coming; obviously, I knew exactly what was in the crate. What would be the rush in unpacking what I had been expecting?

After an excruciating hour of fake exercises, I fished in the crate, loaded up an arm full of supplies and went into the bathroom. Two wonderfully thick, fluffy

yellow towels and two similar face clothes were on the top of the pile. Hidden in the towels were twenty chocolate bars that I recognized from the Chocoholic Shop but they were wrapped in paper so that Rick could not have guessed their origin in case he had decided to break the agreement. I had smelled the aroma as soon as I opened the crate and had felt their shapes as I was rummaging around looking for the food bars. I wolfed one down making sure that my back was turned to the presumed camera above the bathtub. It wouldn't do to reveal how excited I was to get Will's care package. I put one towel and face cloth on the counter for my shower later tonight; stored the chocolate bars and the extra towel and face cloth in the bottom of the cupboard.

Back to the crate in the living room. Pulled out a heavy green canvas tent that had taken up most of the interior space. Spread it out on the floor and thought about where I would place it. Didn't seem to matter so I just placed it in the middle of the room. Didn't expect to find anything inside the tent – no secret messages or such stuff. If Will weren't taking a chance on revealing the Chocoholic Shop, he wouldn't take a chance on paper messages to me either.

Each time I had a fake conversation with Will, I had wondered if he might be just outside. I always spoke in a normal voice but towards the windows just in case. The fact that he sent me a tent confirmed that he had been outside at least once. He was telling me that a camera was watching me and the tent would allow me some privacy.

With the tent out of the crate, the rest of the contents were visible. Found the two halves of the center pole for the tent, enough water for three weeks, five wire hangers, a bottle of shampoo, and a bottle of something called a bubble bath. I didn't recognize either brand. I also found two thick pads of sketching paper, a small case of sharpened pencils, a carton of twelve tubes of acrylic paints, two brand new palettes, a set of brushes, and a collapsible easel.

That left five cloth bags of various sizes. The smallest held an assortment of underwear that I did not pull out and display in front of the camera. Opening the second revealed a pair of moccasins with several pairs of new socks stuffed into them. The third held a pair of white shorts and an emerald short-sleeved shirt. I found a pair of white slacks and an emerald green turtleneck in the fourth. In the largest bag were two skirts (white and emerald green), two patterned blouses (one emerald green decoration laid onto white, the second in the reverse), and a frilly white vest. Everything appeared to be in my size – at least from what I could determine by holding them up against me. I recognized the clothes from the B.C. store where I had bought my dress. Will must have found the store's name in the packaging that I had left in the Wilizy and had flown back to Surrey to buy them. That explained the strange shampoo.

I hung my new clothes on the hangers and put them in the closet – all except the shorts and the short-sleeved shirt that I took into the bathroom. I also took the top half of the tent pole. Placing the bathroom's threadbare face cloth on the rounded top of my pole, I rammed it into the empty heat lamp socket hoping to hear the crack of a glass lens. I didn't, but banged the pole in and out for a while anyway, before leaving the old face cloth jammed into the socket. Then, I found out what the mysterious bubble bath did. It made bubbles in a bath. Go figure.

What a sweetie. Buying me clothes; buying me underwear even! I tried to visualize Will doing that and simply couldn't.

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### **From Izzy's journals: *Day 4 of imprisonment.***

I was doing pencil sketches of the faces of different imaginary people. I didn't want Zzyk to know that I liked to sketch the same child over and over. This would raise questions in his mind and a Z never likes to have unanswered questions floating around in his brain.

I don't know why Will had included the paint set. I hadn't progressed past pencil sketches and didn't have the foggiest idea how to even prepare the paints, let alone use them. Read the instructions on the tubes; found out that the paint was very fast drying. Decided that I would try a little painting – but not in the traditional manner. Held one of my completed pencil sketches against a wall and brushed a wide, thick band of paint across the top of the paper. Quite a bit slopped onto the wall. Oops. Repeated the process on the bottom of the sketch. Double oops! Found out that it was true that it dried quickly. Strong too. Found out that dried acrylic paint would hold the paper against the wall. Decided to hang my sketches in non-likely bug locations today. Soon, I will start hanging my artwork in places where I suspect there's a bug. Don't know if Will had this in mind when he stocked the crate. Cameras don't work too well when a piece of paper is stuck in front of the lens.

I was working on my sixth sketch when I heard the videoconference unit click on. Looked at my pinky-computer. 6:00 – the same time as two nights ago. I had already pushed the empty crate into the center of the room, so just walked over and sat on it.

Zzyk asked some meaningless questions at the beginning – was I comfortable, did I have enough food, and so on. Pretending that he didn't already know the answers. I used single word answers. *Just give me the refusal so that I can go home, Zzyk!*

He surprised me. Said that the Board had discussed the matter; said that there was some merit in what I had asked; said that they had authorized Zzyk to make us an offer. They were willing to give both Zurt and me an opportunity to work with them. Zurt would take a position as Assistant Research Director and learn Zzyk's job with the anticipation that at some point in the future, he would take over as Chief Research Officer of the DPS. I would be given a job in their planning directorate – the unit of the IOF that makes strategic decisions. In time, and if I learned the job properly, I would be promoted to the Head of the unit. Zzyk apologized that my job was not higher in the hierarchy, but I was very young, and it would not do IOF morale any good to give an inexperienced and untrained recruit a position above others who had been there longer. Zurt was different – he would not be jumping ahead of anyone.

"So we report to work in Edmonton and everything will be forgiven?"

"Yes, certainly. We think both of you have great potential. Youths make mistakes. We realize that. Especially when they don't have brain-bands to guide them."

"That suggests that we will be given brain-bands to ensure that mistakes are not repeated?"

"Oh, yes. Surely. Everyone working for the IOF wears a brain-band."

*Oh no, they don't, Zzyk. Will discovered the truth when he was hiding in your file room. So now, I have caught you in a lie and I've seen how well you can do that.*

"Would you like an opportunity to think about it?"

"Naturally, I have to tell Will of the offer. We'll have a reply for you tomorrow at this same time."

Zzyk clicked off.

An interesting development. I had thought that Zzyk would just turn us down flat and I'd be allowed to leave under my white flag. Now here he was actually negotiating, or pretending to negotiate. Essentially, he wanted us to voluntarily turn ourselves in and let our memories be wiped. That would save him the problem of catching us. But, since he had been so reasonable, I couldn't storm off in a huff. I had to play the game a little longer.

I pretended to call Will; gave him Zzyk's offer accurately. Then, listened to Will storming. Said "Uh huh" a lot. Told him several times to calm down, take deep breaths. Finished with "I'll give Zzyk your response" and hung up. Went back to my sketching. *One more day.*

# # # # # # # #

### **From Izzy's journals: *Day 5 of imprisonment.***

The videoconference unit clicked on at precisely 6 p.m. Zs tend to be obsessive about anything that can be measured so I was ready and sat down on my crate. There were no pleasantries this time.

"Your response?"

"Regrettably, we can accept no offer that would end with us wearing brain-bands and being confined under the supervision of someone in the DPS. However, I do thank you..."

"How do you see this working, then? You want input into our decisions, but you won't work with us?"

"We don't need to be involved in the details of how changes are made. We can work with you, but at a distance and only in changing the broad directions of the IOF."

"But, that's the function of the board! You are asking to be given the powers of the board but without having any of their experience or knowledge? Two fifteen-year old children are going to become the governing board of the IOF? That is entirely unreasonable."

"I can see that we're at an impasse, so..."

"I'd like to hear Zurt make that decision. Why don't we find a way for the three of us to meet? I'd like Zurt to hear the specifics of the work that he'd be doing for us. His private physics lab; decision-making ability on which projects he assumes;

creative license to experiment on anything he wishes; and, an excellent compensation package. The brain-band would have nominal settings only. I'm sure he'd be interested if I could talk with him directly."

"In some DPS office?"

"In **my** office. You would be present too, of course."

"We are **not** going to turn ourselves over to the DPS."

"Melissa, you seem to be the stumbling block here, so I'll sweeten my offer to you. We will not require you to wear a brain-band. Unfortunately, that would prevent us from giving you a job with staff who are obliged to meet the same rules as everyone else in the IOF. But, we will set you up in a comfortable apartment. Zurt can visit you during the workday. He may even stay the night. This way, you can service his needs without..."

"I can **service his needs!**"

"Well, yes, certainly. With Zurt's brain-band controls at a minimal level, he will still have sexual urges. You can satisfy those urges, just as you are doing now. Nothing will really change in your lives..."

"You mean that I will be Will's slut?"

"Why yes," Zzyk responded with a perfectly innocent look on his face. "Aren't you that now?"

## Chapter 19

### **From Izzy's journals: Day 6 of imprisonment.**

I had been speechless yesterday after Zzyk's gracious decision to allow me to continue being Will's slut. He had said something about letting me think about the offer and then had clicked off before my sputtering had formed into actual words.

Had tried yoga, but that hadn't worked. Tried painting too – filled some pages with dark red paint slash marks – then quit. Dancing worked. Rid myself of anger by exhausting myself; then, had a long hot soak before bed.

Today, even though I knew what Zzyk had been doing, I still found it difficult not to be outraged at his accusation. Serves me right for reacting to him the first time he asked me about seducing Will. I had shown him a weakness and he had taken advantage of it. It was becoming increasingly clear that Zzyk was going to string this out as long as he could without giving Will any reason to respond with force. Of course, Zzyk didn't realize that Will didn't know what was going on – other than the *I'm all right* physical message I was continuing to send. It wasn't much of a secret signal any more. I had no reason to be wearing my green mask, so I took it off.

I was back sketching when I heard Zzyk call my name. I made him wait while I added a line or two to my sketch before walking to the console. Chose not to sit down. I was going to tell him that his comments were disgraceful and that I didn't see any point in continuing these discussions, but didn't get the chance.

"I have realized that my offer to you yesterday was insulting," he said. "I have asked permission to revise it, but have not heard anything from the Board yet."

I was looking for the trap and so didn't say anything.

"In the meantime, I'd like you to meet someone." Zzyk gestured to the person behind the camera who panned to a man sitting behind a table. The first thing I noticed was that he was white, a rarity in Alberta let alone in a DPS office. I couldn't see what he was wearing because the camera zoomed into a headshot. White hair and lined features. An executive-level brain-band. Thick glasses. "Melissa, I'd like you to meet Harold Stanley," Zzyk's voice continued. "Your grandfather."

# # # # #

I hadn't stayed in front of the monitor for long. The man behind the table tried to engage me in conversation: asked me questions about myself; offered to try to prove he was who he said he was. I listened for a bit and returned to my easel. Nothing would be gained by talking with this man, even if he were my grandfather. When he continued talking at me, I tried to pull the power cord out of the outlet but it was locked in place; turned the unit so that the man had a view of the door instead. He got the hint.

I spent the rest of the day churning out sketches and attaching them to walls. I left the two prime locations for a camera untouched for now – the vent high on the wall and the area by the hallway door. I didn't want to suddenly spring something on Zzyk; was giving him lots of warning that he'd be losing his bugs soon.

I was also making a weapon but since I had to do that in the bathroom, I couldn't spend too much time on it. Even more reason for blinding Zzyk's cameras soon.

# # # # #

### **From Izzy's journals: *Day 7 of imprisonment.***

I made Zzyk wait for me to appear in front of the camera again. Had spent an hour in yoga to prepare myself.

"I have approval to improve my offer of two days ago," Zzyk opened the conversation. He had a smug expression on his face.

I just sat on my crate; saw no reason to open my mouth and give him any more openings than I already had.

"I can understand that somebody with... uh, exuberant emotions like yourself would feel the need to express them sexually. So, the Board has agreed to let you liaise with others who wanted to avail themselves of your services when you aren't with Zurt. You can charge them whatever your going rate is. We do have other men with low brain-band settings, and you are pretty in a cheap, slutty way..."

"You're letting me be a whore for the entire executive level?" I said this with more control than I had had two days ago. Hearing this kind of accusation a second time took the bite off. Plus, I was about as deep into a tranquil state as I could get and still respond.



“Certainly, if that is your wish. Or, if you don't wish to charge, you can be the slut for as many men as you need to satisfy your urges. Again, I do not judge. I realize that this is not something that you can control. After all, you know what they say about the apple not falling far from the tree.”

“**What!**” Goodbye tranquil state.

“Your grandmother of course, Melissa. Surely you knew? She was a slut like you. Her husband found out. Sex with a young aboriginal student. It was grossly unacceptable back then, of course. Other liaisons – high-ranking members of the dissidents. She was apparently sleeping her way to the top but I don't think she ever charged for her... uh ... friendship. Her husband took pictures to confront her – to force her to control her lust. They didn't work. She liked looking at them. He had no recourse but to leave her; came to us for help. We still have the pictures. Here's one.”

The camera zoomed to show a grainy picture of two naked couples. I recognized grandmother's face; the other could have been Doc's. I tore my eyes away. “You've faked the picture!” I was about two-seconds away from losing it entirely. “I'm leaving. These negotiations are over!”

“I'm afraid we can't let you do that, Melissa.”

The locked apartment door opened abruptly and Rick was framed in the doorway.

“Unfortunately, you have been seen by some unsavory elements – apparently you like to stand in front of a window for all to see your half naked body. You are a very noticeable person. Sluts usually are. People have talked; that talk has made its way to the remaining dissidents. I understand that they hate you intensely and have sent an assassination team. We couldn't allow you to leave and then be killed on your way back to Zurt. As you've said, Zurt is prone to anger. He might think we were responsible. Instead, we will protect you from assassination. If the assassination team can't see you, they can't shoot you. Plus we now have guards stationed at all entrances to the complex and on the floors above and below yours. Guards are in the apartments next to you and in your hallway to protect you. Nobody can enter this building without our approval. Nor can anyone come within rifle range of the building. You can reassure Zurt that you are entirely safe from harm. We will not keep you here any longer than necessary. Just ask Zurt to come to the front door of the complex and we'll turn you over to him.”

I couldn't stand the sound of his voice any more. I tried to pull the plug on the Internet connection. It was locked into place like the power cord. “You didn't think I would let you control the length of the meetings, did you Melissa?” he said in a sweet, condescending manner that I was learning to hate.

I turned, looking... the bathroom.

Zzyk's voice followed me in. The volume on the set rose dramatically. “Rick is going to leave you some pictures of your grandmother – at work, shall we say? I asked your grandfather if he wanted them and understandably, he said No. You are her inevitable heir, so they belong to you. But, your grandfather would like to tell you his side of the story.”

I couldn't hear anything else Zzyk said with the shower running. Another wonderful birthday for Izzy. Standing in the shower with her clothes on; blubbing and pounding on the walls. They just don't get any better than this.

## Chapter 20

### **From Will's journals: April 27.**

I wasn't in Edmonton last night when Zzyk's men covered all the windows in the infant care facility with bamboo shades. I had seen the DPS doing something on the roof the night before but hadn't known what. I had also seen them leading children out of the building, so that gave me some forewarning and I had time to get a measured response ready. So, when I checked in at the care facility and couldn't see into Izzy's room, I figured she was now officially a hostage.

The Calgary office of the DPS is in a five-storey, black brick building. I didn't know exactly how many people worked in the building, but there had to be at least a hundred. 100 to 1 seemed like a fair exchange to me. I had programmed about fifty filament lines to wrap themselves around the building. I had ten pinky-ring batteries on each line so when I powered them up, they carried enough charge to issue a serious electrical shock to anyone coming anywhere near the walls of the building. Nobody would willingly get close to this field let alone want to push their way through it. The shock would render them unconscious first. The field also glowed and made a strong humming sound so that Nobody could intrude by accident. The filaments themselves were invisible. Nobody was getting in or out of this building while this force field was on! I shut down access to the roof as well and returned to Edmonton. The presence of so many armed DPS units on the grounds around the complex told me that Izzy was still inside but not if she was in the same room.

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### **From Izzy's journals: *Day 8 of imprisonment.***

I knew that I had blown it yesterday; messed up really badly. I had been in control during Zzyk's personal attack, but hadn't expected his accusations about my grandmother. After I calmed down, I realized that the pictures had to be fakes, but that had come long after I had fled into the bathroom. Will had seen my grandmother's full file in the DPS file room; told me that there were lots of pictures in it; even described them for me; told me that I would enjoy looking at them. Will knew me well enough to know that I would not enjoy the picture Zzyk put up on the monitor. Somehow, Zzyk knew how I would react to this attack – the attack had not been random. The picture ready to flash on the screen, the envelope dropped onto my floor – this had been planned. How had he known about my feelings towards my grandmother?

I knew all of this **now**. But, this was the day **after** the attack. I had to find a way to remain calm **during** his attacks. The yoga was helping, but I felt like I was in a giant fishbowl with Zzyk watching me every minute of the day, analyzing

everything I did. Since that would give him a tremendous advantage, I had to find a way to get him on the defensive.

I was sure that he had two cameras in the room and I thought I knew where they were. Did he have more? Using the empty crate to stand on, I checked every millimeter of the ceiling and the walls. If I found even the tiniest hole, I covered it with acrylic paint. I had left the two most likely camera locations untouched – I had something special planned for them.

Zzyk's only weakness that I had been able to find was his vanity, so I made two pencil sketches of him. The first showed Zzyk as an old man. I made his hair totally grey, his face pasty white and with big cavernous wrinkles, and his mouth with two gaping holes from missing teeth. I let him keep his dark brown moustache. It made him look even older.

In the second sketch, I painted his hair an outlandish green and yellow and made it stick out at all angles. Also gave him a big, hooked witch's nose, two horns in his skull, two big red and blue party balloons tied to and floating above his horns, and mismatched elephant ears that made his head tilt sideways. I also shaved off half of his moustache.

Now to position the pictures properly. I draped the tent over the videoconference unit so that I could work unwatched – just in case it had a camera that was active when Zzyk wasn't talking to me. I grabbed a piece of the discarded metal strapping band that had been around the crate, pushed the empty crate against the hallway door, and went into the bathroom.

I had finished work on the high heel of my non-bugged shoe yesterday. I had discovered earlier that the heel had an interior metal spike to give it strength. I had used the louvers of the bathroom's air vent to scrape away the hardened covering of the heel down to that spike. The louvers had also allowed me to sharpen the end of that spike into a sharp, flat edge. I now had a useful weapon.

Even better, I now had a serviceable screwdriver that I used to remove the metal grill from the bathroom's air vent. Placing a piece of the crate's metal strapping band partly into the gaping hole of the vent, I used the sharp edge of the grill to cut off the length of band that I needed and then to crimp and shape it into the form I wanted. I did this to a second piece of strapping as well and returned to the living room.

The space right in front of the hallway door was in a blind spot that could not be seen from either camera. I climbed onto the crate and jammed the sharp pointed end of the metal strapping into the plastered wall above the presumed camera. I attached one of the sketches to the other end of the strapping, and then made a few adjustments in the bends of the band. From now on, this camera would see only what was hanging directly in front of the lens – the picture of Zzyk as an old man.

The spot below the presumed camera in the living room vent was now in a blind spot too. Pushed the crate against that wall and repeated the process. This camera got the sketch of Zzyk as a clown.

Zzyk's two pictures were now being broadcast to some office in the DPS building. I was sure that Zzyk was not watching the surveillance himself. He'd have some flunkies watching me and they'd write up reports on my activities.

Those flunkys were now in a difficult situation. Did they dare report that they had seen funny pictures of their boss? Or, would they share them with friends?

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It was almost time for Zzyk to appear. I had removed the tent from around the videoconference unit after posting the two pictures of Zzyk in front of his cameras. I was feeling a bit smug. Would Zzyk do anything to reveal that he knew about my sketches? Had he even been told yet? I turned the monitor towards the easel; that way, it would not show how I had covered the cameras. If DPS forces were getting a laugh at Zzyk's expense, I wanted that to continue as long as possible.

I was standing in front of my easel, as though I was sketching, when I heard the unit come on. This time, I would speak first. "Zzyk, are you going to release me?"

Zzyk raised his hands and shrugged. "The dissidents. Much too dangerous right now. I'll explain that to Zurt when he arrives. You did communicate with him, did you not Melissa?"

This was one of the questions I had anticipated and prepared for; had been inventing various transmission difficulties in my pretend conversations with Will over the last couple of days. Sometimes, I'd say something like – "Oops, you're fading out," or "I lost you for a full two seconds." Figured Zzyk would be trying to discover how we were communicating; gave him as much false feedback as I dared. So, when he asked me about telling Will about his offer, I took advantage of the opportunity to drive the *You're old and Will isn't* message home.

"Yes, I communicated with him but not in a way that you can hear," I answered. "Will said we didn't have to use outdated equipment any more. He had been monitoring your actions – waiting to see if you could discover how we were communicating; said that you were stuck pursuing the uncreative, conventional approaches and there wasn't any point in continuing the experiment. We're using a much tighter system now – means that you can't hear even my side of the conversation any more. You didn't think we had only one communication device, did you?"

"That may explain why the workers in my Calgary office are unable to leave. Zurt is trying to hold them hostage." Zzyk said the last with a big smile. "So predictable. Newton's third law. Equal and opposite reaction. And, in doing so, Zurt has revealed his feelings for you. You're worth 150 of my workers to him. Does that impress you? I'm surprised it was so low. The sex must be getting boring. I'd have thought a young slut like you would be worth at least 1,000 of my workers."

I sat motionless as well as emotionless, as tight into my yoga state as I could get. He was trying to get back at me for taking my shot at him. I heard his voice only in the background – a droning, boring voice.

"I could break Zurt's force field if I wanted to. Its vulnerability is the power source. Eventually, it must run down. Repeated intrusions into the field will drain the power. But, why would I do that? My entire Calgary staff is locked inside a building. So what? They'll get a tremendous amount of work done – sixteen-hour work days from now on, you know. And, they're safe, just as you are. Since he knows that you are safe, Zurt is not going to do anything to my workers; that wouldn't be an equal response. Even if Zurt did up the ante in some way, it would

make no difference to me. I don't care what happens to barely skilled workers. They are easily replaced. But, that's not the case with you. Zurt **does** care and you **can't** be replaced. Where else could he find a white slut?"

Realized from the long silence that he was waiting for me to react. "Oh, are you still here?" I said. "You don't mind if I sketch while you try to intimidate me, do you?" I opened the pad to a clean page.

"If you're going to sketch, why don't you sketch the guest I brought for you? After you showed up in Edmonton, we went out and found her. The two of you probably have a lot to talk about."

I looked up. The camera had zoomed out to show a figure sitting next to Zzyk. I recognized her immediately; pretended to start sketching her.

"Melissa," my mother said. "Why don't you tell that brown-boy to turn himself in? Zzyk has promised that he won't give me a brain-band if you cooperate. You and I can live together in the same apartment. Zzyk says that you'll be earning lots of money by following in your grandmother's footsteps. I always wondered about her and that brown quack. Well, he's dead now – jumped out of a copter, Zzyk says. No loss, that's what I say."

I turned the monitor around so that it was facing a blank wall. My dear mother rattled on for a while, telling me how she wasn't surprised how I was earning my money. She promised not to say anything about it when we were living together – after all, we had to eat. Eventually, she stopped and the videoconference unit clicked off. Now I knew how Zzyk had learned how I felt about my grandmother.

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I was in the bathroom, getting ready for my bath. I was pulling the bubble bath bottle out of the cupboard below the bathroom sink when a flash of pink caught my eye. Stopped and looked. Pink? Opened the clothes bag holding my new underwear. Pulled the pink pair out – what there was of them.

Couldn't believe my eyes. I wouldn't put these on if I were in a locked room with the lights off. Who would wear these? Who would buy these? Not Will. Definitely not Will. I hadn't been able to visualize him buying the regular kind – what I was now holding between two finger nails would have sent him running from the shop.

If Will hadn't bought the underwear, who had? And, why had Will included them in my care package? Certainly not to wear. They would have more value as a slingshot.

That didn't make sense and everything Will does must make sense to him. I knew that Will had deliberately sent me the green and white clothes to help me keep my spirits up by reminding me of my grandmother. But, what if he had intended me to discover a second message? I went outside to the hallway closet. Pulled all the clothing out and looked closely for subtle messages.

Nothing about the shorts, pants, and skirt looked unusual. The short-sleeved shirt, turtleneck, and blouses carried the message of the white and green but nothing else that I could see. I hadn't worn the vest yet – the apartment was kept more than warm enough. I held it up. Dainty mazes of interlaced white wool; it would go nicely with the turtleneck or over a blouse. Knots at the bottom of the vest had a tiny white feather interwoven within them. Obviously made by a craftsman.

Little white feathers.

I looked at the moccasins I was wearing. Not the same kind of work here – well done, but very utilitarian, the kind one would wear every day. Very comfortable. Probably homemade. I looked closely at the pattern on the top. Not decorative; meant to send a message. Realized that the pattern had been on Yollie’s vest when she had read me.

Everything clicked. The clothes, the shampoo, the bubble bath, the moccasins. Yollie had picked them out for me. Will had to have asked her to do that; but why would he have asked? I had more than enough clothes in the Wilizy to choose from. He wanted me to know that Yollie had picked them out. Why?

Then, I got it. You sly dog, Will!

## Chapter 21

### **From Izzy's journals: *Day 9 of imprisonment.***

Discovering last night that Yollie had purchased the underwear had given me a great boost of optimism. She wouldn’t have done that on her own – her parents must have agreed. That meant that the whole family had agreed to help Will. Doc would also be involved! So, it was with some confidence that I was waiting for Zzyk’s nightly visit. I heard the monitor crackling to life and I stood behind my easel, a picture of Winnie there to give me determination.

“Good news, Melissa,” Zzyk opened. “Zurt has given up trying to hold my Calgary workers hostage. He obviously hasn’t been able to find any other lever, so I think we can say that your stay with us is almost over. Since Zurt’s capture is inevitable, why don’t you ask him to come in now and save your mother a lot of unnecessary pain?”

The camera panned and I saw her in a chair. Three DPS guards were with her. Two were restraining her. The third man was off to the side. My mother’s head had been shaved.

“These are the men who will introduce your mother to her brain-band. Since she’ll be starting with one so late in life, it will be impossible to correct her behaviour with the tiny zaps we give children. Hugo will be in charge of the instruction. He has your mother’s brain-band all ready, don’t you Hugo?”

The man in question raised a hand. It held the band. He showed it to my mother and she cringed visibly. The camera panned back to Zzyk.

“One of the guards holding your mother to her chair is Hugo’s apprentice. He will assist with the more physical parts of the learning experience. The other guard was recently employed at our surveillance headquarters. He made the mistake of distributing copies of the little sketches that you made of me. I have reassigned him to this detail as punishment. He is very anxious to please me. These three will instruct you about your own brain-band in the event that Zurt is captured before you agree to my offer. That shouldn’t be long now – one young boy against an entire army? How long would you give him, Melissa? My interrogation team is

hoping that you won't accept my offer. They don't have much opportunity to practice now that the dissident movement is broken. I'll give you a chance to see them at work on your mother."

I stared at Winnie's picture. *Will has a plan; He has others helping. Will has a plan; He has others helping...*

"Your juvenile little prank did make me think though, Melissa. Zurt would know that your sketches wouldn't have any impact on me; he would have told you that Zs don't care what others think. That tells me that you and Zurt aren't actually communicating. It was a giant bluff – or at least it has been since I lowered the blinds. So, later this evening, the guards on your building will remove the blinds to allow you to send a signal to Zurt. You'll have to go back to wearing your green mask again, won't you Melissa?"

"You're admitting that you couldn't tap into our electronic signals, Zzyk?"

"There were no electronic signals, Melissa. Only physical ones. Now, where was I? Oh, yes. I see only one weakness to where I'm holding you. The window is vulnerable to a small missile followed by a desperate helicopter dash through overwhelming firepower. To prevent Zurt from getting injured trying to rescue his slut, I will make him think twice about that option. Later tonight, you will see what I mean."

I said nothing, pretending to sketch.

"You can't hide your emotions from me, Melissa. I know what you're thinking. You're wondering if you can watch your mother get fitted for her brain-band without begging me to stop her instruction. Let's say that you do resist this time. But, I have an endless number of levers that I can use on you, and Zurt has no levers he can use on me. Oh, if you want a hint as to what levers I'll use on you after your mother had had her instruction, look outside your window later tonight."

"I know you like to flee – you did that when I told you the truth about your grandmother. As your mother has assured me, you **are** a coward. Why not just send Zurt the signal that he should turn himself in?" Then, he smiled at me and waved his finger at me like I was a *bad little girl!* "You do realize, don't you, that I can shut the water off to your building? Where will you hide after I do that? I can fill your bathroom with the sounds of your mother receiving her brain-brand instruction. I can have Rick give you a chair to hide under, if that will make you feel better." Then, he clicked off.

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Later that evening, the bamboo blinds were lifted back up to the roof and I heard them lower Zzyk's deterrents. Four baskets twirling and bouncing in the wind appeared right outside my window. The sounds of the four crying infants in the baskets were clearly audible through the heavy glass pane. I wondered if Zzyk would actually torture infants but didn't wonder long. Of course, he would.

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I knew that I could escape my mother's torture tomorrow. Could always run into the bathroom and bury myself in the bathtub with my clothes wrapped around my

head. Saw myself on my hands and knees, cowering under my grandmother's colours.

Couldn't disgrace her name that way; couldn't disgrace myself that way either; would hate myself for being so pathetic. I knew that Zzyk was deliberately giving me lots of time to think about what was going to happen to my mother. But, what if I turned this to my advantage instead? He had accused me of being a slut without warning and I had reacted; he had shown me a picture of my grandmother being a slut without warning, and I had reacted badly. But, neither worked on me the next time he tried them. What if Zzyk's pleasure at drawing out my torture was his weakness? He had given me time to prepare myself, so Prepare yourself, Izzy!

I wondered if I could just put myself into a yoga trance before they started; but, that hadn't worked before. Dancing myself to exhaustion wouldn't work; what about a picture of Winnie? Or, what about concentrating on Will having a plan and having Yollie's family to help? Could I keep my mind occupied enough so I wouldn't see or hear what was happening?

But, as I thought about it, I realized that all of these were just a way of escaping – of running away from what I had to face. They were the cowardly way. I had to face what Zzyk was going to do to my mother with my eyes wide open and staring at the screen. I thought that I might be able to do that if I could make tomorrow the second time that I had seen my mother being tortured. The second time wouldn't be as bad as the first time. That meant I had to see my mother being tortured tonight.

So, I sat down in front of the dead video conferencing unit and I visualized my mother being tortured. I knew exactly what they were going to do, so I watched it in my mind; listened to it in my mind.

The first time, I lasted less than a minute. Walked away from the console; did some yoga; then, had a talk with myself. I didn't talk about Will having a plan; didn't talk about Winnie; talked about myself.

I told myself how I would hate myself for being a coward if I couldn't last more than a minute. I told myself that I hadn't been a coward when Will and I had buried all those bodies. I visualized myself carrying those dead bodies in my arms and I told myself that I had made it through that day – I could make it through tomorrow. Did that repeatedly. Then, I went back to the video console.

Lasted longer the next time, but it was still pathetic. Back to the self-talk; gave myself a time challenge – *Last five-minutes longer next time*. Rewarded myself with a few minutes of dancing or some chocolate if I succeeded. Kept telling myself I could do it; kept watching myself bury children in a mass grave; then, went back to the video console determined to last just five minutes more.

I tried going to sleep around 2 a.m. Yoga helped with that and I managed to drift away. It was a restless sleep; had a dream about Hugo, the torturer; not a bad dream; was an idea; the idea wasn't revenge; it was justice. Slept better after that.

## Chapter 22



## **From Izzy's journals: *Day 10 of imprisonment.***

I tested myself early this morning with another visualization; managed to reach my deadline. It wasn't easy, but not impossible either. I still felt all the emotions – anger, disgust, and hatred towards the torturers. It wasn't as though I had escaped into mindless oblivion. However, I still managed to sit in front of the console while my mother's torture played out in my mind.

I felt terribly unclean afterwards; tried a steaming hot bath; didn't help; wasn't unclean like a dirty body; was unclean in my head. I tried to comfort myself that surviving tomorrow would allow me to bring Hugo and Zzyk to justice – Hugo sooner than Zzyk. But that wouldn't happen if I couldn't escape. I knew that Will would be searching for a lever that he could use to pry me loose from my captivity. When he found it, I had to be ready with my escape plan.

Any escape that I tried would fail if Zzyk still had me under surveillance. The videoconference unit was big and bulky – it had lots of room for sensors in addition to the conferencing camera. It was time to go exploring.

I probed the console's cover with eyes and finger tips; found a disguised cap to a recessed screw; found three other caps too. The screws were in too tight for my poor little shoe-screwdriver. The point of the bathroom vent was equally as sharp and gave me much more leverage. I had the cover off easily.

The console's insides were full of electronic gear; must be way more gear than was necessary for a videoconference unit. But, I couldn't even begin to make sense of it. It was warm inside the unit – some equipment was on. That's all I could figure out.

I was sitting behind the unit, wondering if it would be safe to try cutting into the window glass with my shoe-driver if the monitor were facing the other way. My only escape route was through that window, and I was sure I could eventually cut through the glass with the heel of my shoe, but I couldn't let Zzyk see me doing that. Then, inspiration hit in the form of the two tiny little trip wires that Will had used to connect the braided rings to the metal binding of the crate. They were part of the crate's security system. I found them still connected to the braided rings in the bottom of the crate.

I ran through my new plan to get out of the apartment several times in my head; knew absolutely that it would work. But, I'd have to put the videoconference unit out of commission first. I could try ripping out some wires from the insides, but that would just bring Rick running. Putting the tent over the unit would mask what I was doing and would not alert Zzyk. Best of all with this new plan – I would escape the apartment using tools that were already in the room and I was going to leave them there to show how I had done it. I wouldn't give Zzyk any nagging doubts about how I had disappeared that would cause him to think about secret weapons.

Once out the window, I could get up to the roof quite easily, and I wouldn't need to use my sky-sling at all. From the roof, there'd have to be some obvious way that I had left the roof; didn't know what that would be but figured Will would handle that. That's when I got the most wonderful idea. Zzyk had unwittingly shown me the keys to his kingdom. All I had to do was watch Hugo torture my mother long

enough for Will to be ready. Once I was free, the Wilizy would be the ones with the advantage.

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5:55 p.m. I was waiting for the console to click on. Doc had once told me that being frightened of frightening things was normal. Not being frightened meant I was wacko. Well, I was definitely not wacko cause I sure was frightened. Frightened for my mother – no one should ever be tortured. I was frightened for Will and me if Zzyk won; frightened for Hank, Yolanda, and their family. But mostly, I was frightened for those babies if Will couldn't find a threat that would work on Zzyk soon. Knew with absolute certainty, one of them would be tortured next.

6:15 p.m. Zzyk never showed up for his meeting.

9:30 p.m. Lasted through to the deadline I had given myself. Zzyk had made another mistake. Adding another day so that I would stress out had actually given me another day to prepare myself. I started a bath; wondered if I would ever feel clean again.

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### **From Will's journals: April 29.**

My attack on the Calgary DPS headquarters hadn't worked at all and I had removed the filament fence before Zzyk could study the force field any further. I should have known that Zzyk wouldn't respond to threats to people, or even to a building. But, it was worth a try – if nothing more than as a delaying tactic while I had continued to search for something that Zzyk would care about. Found it. I had be around Izzy long enough to know what to do next.

I was in the Wilizy running through the plan one last time when the alarm on the homing filament interrupted us. I asked Doc to take over the meeting and was glued to a power pole a kilometer from the infant care facility minutes later.

Zzyk had ignored the threat on his building but I knew absolutely that Zzyk would react to my next threat. However, I needed to talk with Izzy so that I could determine the extent of her escape plans and so that we could co-ordinate with each other. I hadn't been able to communicate with her up to now – not just because I wasn't anywhere near Edmonton, but also because even approaching the complex now was dangerous. Doc had been watching all of the activity outside the building with the long-range telescope in the Wilizy. His alert about the blinds disappearing and the babies being suspended in front of the windows had brought about the meeting of the full team – things were obviously heating up if Zzyk were now using babies as hostages. That wouldn't affect our plans up north; what we didn't know was if they would affect Izzy's plans. I had never considered for a moment that she wouldn't be ready to escape.

Our lack of communication with Izzy had been a severe problem – one that I could now address much more easily thanks to Zzyk's decision to evacuate the building. Earlier this evening, I had inserted a filament into the power line leading to the infant care facility and had instructed the filament to find the complex's hot

water tank. This was easily identifiable by its power connections and by the fact that it had a constant high temperature. I had left the filament inside that tank.

The alarm a couple of minutes ago had told me that someone in a nearly empty complex was using a lot of hot water. Like for a shower or a bath. Earlier, I had taken the filament into a cloud so it would know what mist was. Now, I instructed the filament to find the mist in the care center building. The filament beeped at me while I was hanging from the power pole.

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### **From Izzy's journals: *Day 10 of imprisonment.***

I had pulled the shower curtain aside and was reaching for the towel when I saw one of Will's filaments poking out of the bathroom's power outlet and bobbing up and down. I jumped out of the tub and grabbed the filament instead. The end of the filament had a connector that would fit into a pinky-ring input port. I couldn't help my hand from shaking when I connected it; heard a computerized voice speaking in my mind.

"Izzy, I can't give you normal voice signal. Computer-computer voice only. Are you OK?"

"Identify yourself stranger," I sent back. Being paranoid, I guess. If Zzyk had figured out the secret of the filament, we were done for. Still, I wanted the assurance of knowing absolutely that it was Will.

"Tarzan."

"Sigh. Kiss. Smooch. Hug. Miss you," I sent back.

"Are you all right?"

"Better now."

"Do you have an escape plan? Even part of one?"

"Yes. Give me an hour and I can be out of the building. I'll need help when I reach the roof. Cover of night is essential. Are you all right?"

"I am now."

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Will wanted to know about the bugs in the apartment before we communicated any further. I told him that I had disabled everything except what might be in the videoconference unit – at least I thought I had. He told me to take the filament out of my pinky ring and hold it outside the bathroom door for ten-seconds. He had already checked and the bathroom was bug free. I did what he said, reconnected the filament after the ten seconds, and was happy to hear that everything was clean except for multiple emissions from the conferencing equipment. Will said that the heavy tent was preventing him from identifying the signals. Also, there was a very faint signal inside the closet.

"One of my shoes has a bug in the sole," I said. "I figured Zzyk had something in the conferencing equipment, and managed to remove the back of the unit, but I didn't know what to do next."

Will asked me to put the end of the filament inside the back of the unit, which I did. Then, I told him that I'd meet him back in the bathroom; didn't tell him that I

had been naked the whole time I was talking to him and needed to put some clothes on. I was dressed when I heard the filament scratching on the bathroom door and let it back in. I shut the door and reconnected.

“I saw visual, sound, motion, heart beat, skin temperature, breath rate, plus other sensors that I’d need to test more carefully to determine what they were.”

No wonder Zzyk had been one step ahead of me all the time – he was reading my biometrics! Realized Will was waiting for me to answer a question. “Sorry. Repeat.”

“I can disable these sensors, but that will alert him immediately. Can you leave the sensors in place and still escape?”

“Yes! I’m ready now.” A computer-computer exchange couldn’t convey the excitement I was feeling. “Meet me on the roof!”

“No place to land,” Will replied and my excitement was instantly gone. “At least fifty soldiers are on the roof – all on high alert waiting for me to approach the building. They have what appears to be a giant net. I’m not sure what else they have. Also, Zzyk has soldiers surrounding the building, not only immediately outside, but in three concentric rings as well. That doesn’t count the copters they have patrolling outside the rings – looking for a missile launching site, I assume.”

I didn’t know what to say. I hadn’t given any thought to what Zzyk would be doing to catch Will; had been focused entirely on my situation; felt guilty about that.

“Izzy, are you still there?”

“Sorry. Yes. I had wanted to leave tonight because bad things will be happening tomorrow.” I told him what I would be seeing tomorrow at 6:00.

“Wait. Probably thirty-minutes.”

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Will was back more quickly than that. Told me that advancing his own plan to tonight was impossible. Also, trying to start both plans earlier tomorrow in order to avoid the 6:00 meeting with Zzyk would have me trying to escape in daylight which I had told him had to be avoided. Doc thinks that there’s a way to deceive Zzyk into abandoning your mother’s torture, but you won’t be able to avoid watching it altogether. He ended with, “How much can you tolerate?”

## Chapter 23

### **Izzy's words: *Day 11 of imprisonment.***

I spent most of the morning practicing with the weapon Will had given me. Will’s explorations of Stanford University had led him to a laser lab and knowledge about light that the DPS had kept from him. While I was in New York filching chocolate bars, Will had been working on some new powers that could be added to the filament. He had intended to surprise me with a working prototype when the masked ball in Surrey interrupted his plans. I had two of the prototypes on my thumbs now – they were the braided wire rings that he had sent with the crate.

Will just needed to transfer the software's operating program to them and that had taken five minutes last night.

I could fire one of three types of beams out of the braided rings: a gravitational beam that would either attract or repel; a magnetic beam that would also attract or repel; and a laser beam that, depending on the intensity, could do anything from carrying a communication signal to cutting through heavy steel. Will had used that laser beam at the airport to slice through the copter's gas tank and that had produced the giant fireball.

I could create a short, narrow magnetic, gravitational or light beam if I wanted a lot of close-in power, or I could have a long, wide beam for broader effect. The gravitational and magnetic beams were invisible to the naked eye; the laser beam appeared as a bright light. All of these functions were activated by thought or voice messages to the braided-ring. The light saber of Star Wars meets the 21st century.

I was doing my martial arts exercises, pretending to use a laser beam. I couldn't practice with the real beam since Zzyk's sensors in the video conferencing unit might pick up some trace of them from inside the shroud of the tent. I set up the most likely scenarios in my mind and practiced swinging my light saber in a pretend battle. Princess Leia in moccasins, white shorts, an emerald green short-sleeved shirt, and an invisible sky-sling. I'd be wearing that special touch to my fashion statement throughout the day just in case Zzyk had a surprise up his sleeve.

Exactly at 11:00, Zzyk started bombarding the room with a throbbing base beat of some musical instrument. I expect that it would become quite aggravating in time. I took the tent shroud away from the video conferencing console, grabbed two of my paintbrushes, and started drumming an accompaniment on my wooden crate. About half an hour into my drumming practice, I started making up songs to go along with the beat. I was making up songs about Zzyk when the sound suddenly stopped. Unfortunately, not too many words rhyme with Zzyk. He might say that he doesn't care what people think about him, but I bet'cha that Zzyk **does** care about inferiors calling him *thick as a brick*.

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At 5:30, I checked that the room was ready. Everything I wanted to take with me was stored in the large cloth bag that I could sling over my shoulder. That bag was in a corner by the window. The glass of the window had four small holes through them that were unnoticeable unless you were right in front of them. Four clothes hangers, the shower curtain, some of the metal band from the crate, two soggy towels, and half of the tent pole were thrown together in a big mess in front of the window. I had laid the tent out flat in the center of the room next to the empty crate. I had also thrown a couple of my unopened plastic water bottles around the room and had scattered some art supplies and the last remaining metal band in the vicinity as well. Except for an obvious clear space in the middle of the room where the kidnapping squad would stop to threaten me, the room was a complete mess. The bathroom was a similar pigsty with all of my art gear thrown into the bath tub to keep it out of the way. Guess I'm not a very neat hostage.

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**Will's words April 30, 5:30 p.m.**

The copter that I had borrowed from the DPS was on the ground and safely out of sight in the northern forests of Alberta. Hank, Yolanda, Wolf, and Yollie were hovering invisibly in the air a few kilometers away from me and that copter. They were all fully proficient in operating their slings – had been for over a week now. We had completed some dry runs with the weapons and the communication network this morning. Right now, the five of us were close enough to be able to communicate directly with each other through the communication channel on the wide-band laser beam that we were using; plus, we all had pre-programmed laser-comm links back to the Wilizy which was hovering invisibly over the infant care facility in Edmonton, hundreds of kilometers away. Granny was in charge of communications – she had just notified us that Izzy had opened up her commlink. From now on, Granny would know everything that Izzy said and would hear everything that came out of the video conferencing unit. She'd pass the important stuff to us, as necessary.

Doc was operating the long-range telescope in the Wilizy right now; later he would make the necessary pickups from the roof of the care facility. The last time he reported in, fifty-six DPS guards were on that roof. Doc was proficient with the computer ring weapon as well. Winnie was in the Wilizy too – Yolanda had said that she was too young to be left by herself so she had taught Winnie how to use the Wilizy's telescope. Later, Winnie would take over Doc's job on the scope. All of us were waiting for Izzy's Proceed signal.

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**Izzy's words: Day 11, 6:00 p.m.**

Zzyk looked at me sitting on the crate and smiled. I was wearing my moccasins, white slacks, emerald green turtle neck, and the white vest with the feathers. The emerald green mask from the ball was around my eyes. He probably thought that I was going to use it to block out the sight of my mother being tortured. That's not what it was there for. I was wearing the mask because I was going to escape in Melissa style. I was going to leave them with something to remember.

"Have you asked Zurt to come in, Melissa" he asked.

"Nope."

The camera panned to show my mother slouched in a chair with black leather restraints preventing her from sliding to the ground. The brain-band was attached to her bald skull; she had bruises on her face, a swollen lip, and one closed eye. Hugo's apprentice stepped up to her side and shook her. "Your daughter is watching now; talk to her."

I didn't pay much attention to what she was said; watched her though. She was having difficulty getting the words out. The camera panned back to Zzyk.

"Are you sure I can't convince you to bring Zurt in? Perhaps you've asked, but he's refused? If you just told us where Zurt was, or where he would be at some point in the future, your mother would be spared."

I didn't see the point in telling Zzyk where Will was going to be – he'd find out soon enough. I did want to say something, though. "Zzyk, you do realize that what you're about to do crosses the line. You understand that the Wilizy will respond."

"Threats from a fifteen-year old slut mean nothing to me."

"Show me my mother again."

The camera panned.

"Can the guards hear me?" I asked.

"They can," Zzyk replied.

"I want to be sure that the three of you understand that what you're about to do crosses the line. I want you to know that the Wilizy will respond."

Hugo sneered, showed me a little control box in his hand, and tapped it a few times. Each time he did, my mother shuddered. The guard next to my mother slapped her again when I looked directly at him. I couldn't see the face of the third – he was in a shadow.

"Well, Melissa. Will you promise to bring Zurt in or do we go ahead?"

"Proceed," I said.

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### **Will's words: 6:05 p.m.**

"Izzy says Proceed," Granny said into my brain. I lifted the DPS helicopter off the ground and began flying west. A pumping station for Zzyk's oil pipeline quickly came into view. I circled it, instructed my braided ring to create a long, narrow laser beam and the pumping station disintegrated.

Sensors on the line would report a loss of pressure and fail-safe measures would be employed to shut down this segment of the pipeline system. This oil was precious. Alberta's oil sands were probably the last remaining source of oil in the world. Alberta didn't use what they produced for itself. Instead, Zzyk traded the oil to other countries. The oil sands were the source of Zzyk's wealth and power.

Zzyk had placed a heavy military presence around the Fort McMurray oil sands facilities to deter foreign forces from trying to take his oil away. I had also seen small mobile military units throughout the area – ready to counter attack the flanks of any enemy force. "Got'cha, Zzyk," I sent. It was the signal to everyone that Target #1 had been destroyed. I turned the copter northwest towards the next pumping station and away from Fort McMurray.

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### **Izzy's words: 6:25 p.m.**

"She's enjoying it!"

A uniformed man I had never seen before approached Zzyk's desk and repeated his comment. "I tell you, she's enjoying it!" He put a sheaf of paper on Zzyk's desk and pointed to things as Zzyk quickly leafed through the pages.

I saw Hugo step back in apparent hesitation – looking at his boss for instructions.

“Don’t stop, Hugo,” I said. “Zap her again.”

“See, she’s enjoying it. This reading is off the chart. She’s not angry, she’s not afraid. She’s enjoying this!”

They all looked at me.

I had moved my crate so that I was closer to the screen, and was leaning forward to get a good view, a big smile on my face. “You didn’t know that I hated my mother?” I asked as innocently as I could manage in spite of the turmoil in my gut. Will had changed the polarity of a number of sensors so that they’d show the exact opposite reading of whatever emotion I was feeling at the time; what the uniformed man thought was me enjoying my mother’s torture was actually me wanting to dig out Hugo’s eyes with the sharp end of a rusty crow bar.

Zzyk held up a hand to Hugo. “Wait. I have to rethink this.” He looked at me steadily. Assessing the new information. A Z assesses new information slowly; I decided to help him out.

“My mother shunned me for eleven years – refusing to talk to me or have anything to do with me that entire time. She never had a kind word for me; she never cared if I was sick; she never comforted me when the other kids in the camp turned against me. I grew up with a mother who hated me and showed me that hatred every chance she could. So, you tell me. Why would I care what happens to her?” I knew my mother was conscious; I knew that she heard my words. I couldn’t tell her that I didn’t want her tortured.

Zzyk motioned to someone behind the camera and another uniform appeared carrying a thick binder. “There are hints of that,” the man said. We all waited while Zzyk read the pertinent pages that had just been flagged.

Another uniform entered the camera shot. The cluster around Zzyk dissolved as he approached. He whispered something in the Zzyk’s ear.

“Well, well, Melissa. Zurt just blew something up.”

“I told you we could communicate.”

“So, do you know what Zurt blew up?”

“A pumping station.”

“Ahhh. That changes things now, doesn’t it.”

I let him stew.

“The message being – pumping station now, oil storage facilities if I don’t agree to your demands.”

I shrugged and smiled.

He turned to the waiting Hugo. “Take Melissa’s mother back; see that she receives what medical treatment she needs. You return here, afterwards.” Then, he looked back at me.

“I’ll tell Will at our next scheduled communication,” I said as though I didn’t care. In my mind, I messaged Granny that the guards would be leaving Zzyk’s office and taking my mother with them soon.

“You can’t tell Zurt now?”

“Will’s very angry at you. Said he’s going to blow up enough pumping stations for you to see that he’s serious. He has deliberately shut down our communications system so you can’t pressure me or deceive me into stopping him.”



"Looks like we're going to be working together, after all," the evil gnome conceded.

"We thought you'd see it that way. Will usually burns off his anger in about an hour and a half, perhaps two. Most of your pumping stations should be safe so long as you don't provoke him any further."

## Chapter 24

### Izzy's words: 6:30 p.m.

"Pumping station #2 has disappeared," Granny's voice murmured in my brain. I immediately instructed my pinky ring to begin timing. I was pretending to work on my sketchpad, but was actually keeping a close eye on what was happening in Zzyk's office through the live feed that still connected me. Zzyk had disappeared after his presumed concession speech and had just returned.

Granny's voice came into my mind again. "Izzy, Doc reports that almost all of the security forces surrounding the Edmonton infant care facility have redeployed at high speed to the nearby military airbase. I've already told the team up north."

That was why Zzyk left his office, I concluded. I watched him working through a big stack of papers on his desk. The aide reappeared and whispered in his ear. I stopped the timer. Zzyk had received the message about the second destroyed pumping station fifteen-minutes after the fact. I waited and watched Zzyk's office while making meaningless scribbles on my sketchpad.

The aid returned and I looked at the time. Pumping station #3 had disappeared at 6:45 and the aide reappeared nine-minutes afterwards. "The pursuit is getting closer to Will," I messaged to Granny. "They're less than ten-minutes behind him now."

She replied, "Doc says that two troop transports are heading north out of Edmonton."

We had made it easy for Zzyk to go after Will. I had worried that we were making it too obvious – but Will said we weren't. Said that Z's are used to thinking in straight lines, not curved ones. They're used to being logical, not sneaky. I knew he was right. That description fit Will perfectly – at least when we had first met. I just hoped that it fit Zzyk perfectly too.

Will was traveling in a straight line from one pumping station to the next and at what appeared to be the fastest possible speed his aged helicopter could manage. After the second strike, Zzyk knew exactly where he was headed. My comment about how long Will would take to lose his anger told them how long they could expect Will to continue blasting pumping stations. It was easy for them to calculate the optimal location for their trap. The troop transports would arrive at the trap well before nightfall – Will had planned it that way deliberately.

Granny's voice came back into my head. "Doc says that he has Hugo's copter in view and will turn the telescope over to Winnie now."

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**Will's words: 7:15 p.m.**

"Pumping station #6 is gone," I sent to Granny. "Any change, Yollie?" Yollie was at high altitude – watching the southeast corner of the sky. I was flying northwest at treetop level – far too low to see any impending threats.

"The DPS copters behind are still keeping pace with you," she replied. "They can be on you in five-minutes if they choose to increase speed. Fort McMurray's two troop transports are holding position two-minutes behind the copters."

"Any sign yet, Hank?" I sent. He was keeping an eye out to the southwest for the two troop transports from Edmonton.

"Nothing yet."

"Wolf?" Wolf was watching the northeast. The nearest base in that direction was small and quite distant. I wasn't expecting them to respond, but wanted to be sure.

"The northeast is clear."

"Yolanda?" Yolanda was watching the northwestern skies – the direction I was heading. The place where the trap would be set. There was a large military base in that direction and we were expecting their copters and troops to cut me off at some point.

"Some copters are coming into view now. Can't determine numbers yet. No sign of troop transports yet. You'll be able to destroy pumping station #7 for sure. Not sure after that."

"Granny – what's happening in Edmonton?"

"Izzy is pretending to do yoga; Zzyk is pretending to do paperwork. The guards have returned from taking her mother away."

"Did Doc find out where they went?"

"Yes. Doc told Izzy that her mother is being kept with other captured dissidents inside a large compound with twelve buildings – mostly dormitories as well as a cook shack, latrines, and so on. The prison is in the middle of nowhere with a double set of electrified wire fences around the compound and security guards who appeared to be very lax – at least the few minutes that Doc was overhead. That's probably because the area between the fences is mined, just like at the borders."

"Did Doc follow Hugo back to Zzyk's office?"

"Yes. We now know where Zzyk is hiding."

## **Chapter 25**

**Izzy's words: 7:30 p.m.**

"Will's copter is down," Granny's voice echoed in my brain. "He's safe but on foot. Forest cover is good."

Zzyk's aide appeared one minute later. He had a spring in his step and he spoke animatedly albeit quietly to his boss. Zzyk pushed aside the paper on his desk, opened a drawer, and took out a nail file. I watched him attend to his nails from underneath my eyelids.

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"Pursuing copters have established an initial perimeter with Will's downed copter as the center," Granny announced. "Hank says at least forty copters are dropping soldiers to the ground. The circle is approximately two-kilometers in diameter. They have Will surrounded but there are large gaps in the perimeter line."

The aide reappeared, whispered and disappeared. I heard a thunderclap way off in the distance. Bad weather coming. Great!

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**Will's words: 7:45 p.m.**

"Troop transports have dropped their soldiers into the defensive perimeter," Yolanda said from her guarding position high above us. "The perimeter is still being filled. I'm guessing a thousand soldiers are in position and waiting. How's it going down there? You're running out of time."

I heard Hank reply, "We're almost done."

"Me too," I said from inside a dead tree. I had chosen to have mechanical difficulty sooner than planned after I saw the huge downed cedar. Pretending that my engine had failed, I had veered off course, crashed the copter in a visible area, and hightailed it on foot north. I made sure that I left visible signs of my passage until I had reached a creek where they would expect to have difficulty following my trail. From there, I had sky-slinged it back to the fallen cedar.

Hank had used the cutting tool on the light sabre to hollow out a space inside the fallen tree big enough for me to hide in. Now, he was slicing up the dark rotten wood that he had already dug out into unidentifiable little pieces. Wolf was scooping these up into his jacket and dispersing them. I had climbed into the cavity and was roughing up the smooth sides of the cavity with two little digging tools I had made out of the light sabers on my thumbs. I rotated in a complete circle to get all sides of the cavity looking like I had carved them out with a knife.

"All empty troop transports have left the area and most appear to be returning to their bases," Yolanda reported. "Looks like the two Edmonton transports are going back to Fort McMurray and not back to Edmonton. The soldiers in the perimeter are now advancing. You have ten minutes at best before soldiers could have a visual sighting. You need to get out of there soon!"

I made a little nick in a finger, left a blood smear, and climbed out of the hollowed out trunk. Hank and I pushed the mud/root plug Yollie had made into the end of the log and we checked that it was undetectable. Then, we all hovered in place, sweeping the ground clean of our tracks with some cedar boughs before joining Yolanda in the sky. Yollie would return to the site later and pull out the plug so that they'd eventually find out how I had supposedly hidden from them.

The five of us banked off into our assigned directions and we all accelerated to just under the speed of sound.

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**Izzy's words: 8:40 p.m.**

Zzyk waited until it was dark before giving me the bad news that Zurt's copter had crashed; bragged that he had over a thousand troops in a small circle around Zurt and the circle was closing as the troops walked forward a few feet at a time. They were so close together now that they were almost holding hands. Their portable lights meant that nighttime would not give Will any chance to escape.

I told him that I didn't believe him.

Zzyk described what Zurt had left behind in the copter after it crashed; chocolate bars wrapped in plain white paper; also blood smears.

I didn't say anything; turned around so he couldn't see my face; started thinking happy thoughts. In case they still had someone monitoring the sensors, they would see my despair.

"Hugo, I believe you have been looking forward to meeting Miss Stanley?"

I turned around at that.

"Take your team. Feel free to use a great deal of force but I want her alive."

"I know where Will buried all of the gold coins that we took from the DPS. I'll trade you..." I wasn't allowed to continue.

"I'll know the location soon enough, Melissa," he snickered and broke the connection.

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I moved to the window and began making wracking sobs to cover any noises I might make. I saw a lightning flash in the distance and paused, counted the time to the thunderclap, and returned my attention to the window. I inserted the modified metal hooks of the four hangers into the tiny holes I had previously melted through the windowpane and turned the hangers so that they were securely fastened to the windowpane. Two shower curtain rings were hanging from each of the hangers. Since the shower curtain was still attached to the rings, the curtain dangled from the windowpane and trailed away on the floor. I wrapped the loose end of the shower curtain around my waist and began to rotate in place – gradually tightening the curtain in the process and, in turn, fastening me securely to the part of the windowpane that I was going to cut out.

The other gear I needed was nearby. I had already formed the wooden crate's metal strapping into a circle big enough for me to climb through and had positioned that metal circle against the glass window. Now, I began heating the metal with one of Will's trip wires that was now connected to my pinky computer. With both of my hands free, I was able to hold the wooden tent pole tight against the hot metal strapping and keep the pressure on it while it melted through the windowpane. The soggy towels kept the wooden pole cool to the touch. The shower curtain kept the circle of glass in place until I was ready to pull it into the room. The hot metal strapping pushed through the glass in seconds.

While I was melting my escape hatch, Doc was landing on the roof and disabling the six guards who had been left behind. Then, he lifted the four baskets containing the crying children to the roof one at a time. The empty baskets returned at about the same time as I was manhandling the cut-out circle away from the remaining windowpane and onto the floor. The glass was still too hot to touch directly but I had the damp towels to take care of that.

I was messaging Granny that I was ready to escape when a rolling thunderclap put an exclamation point on my excitement. Granny gave me Winnie's countdown on Hugo's copter. It was 8 blocks away, then 7, then 6... At four blocks away, there was a bright flash and a huge clap of thunder. Everything in the apartment went dark, including Zzyk's videoconference unit and its sensors. The guards would have to land and walk up eight floors in the dark. That would give me plenty of time. Using the light from my pinky-ring, I spilled hair shampoo and bubble bath all over the floor between the hallway door and the center of the apartment and then made sure that everything I'd need was where it should be.

Back to the window. The lightning strike had taken out the power to the whole neighbourhood. I pulled one of the empty baskets through the hole in the glass and into the room. A quick climb up that rope and I'd be gone. I turned my green mask so that the thick fabric covered my eyes and assumed a position with one foot in the basket. When I heard the sound of splintering wood, I sent a mental communication to the Wilizy that resulted in a brilliant lightning flash outside the window that would allow Hugo to see that I was escaping.

## Chapter 26

### **The Narrator: Evening of April 30.**

This is one of those times when I, as your narrator, must intrude into the story. Neither Will nor Izzy knew what happened in Zzyk's office after Hugo and his team had been given the pleasant duty of capturing her and bringing her back to Zzyk's office complex. But, from records recovered from DPS offices decades after Will and Izzy's final battle, I am able to fill in the holes of what happened that evening of April 30, 2082.

At 8:40, the mood in Zzyk's office was one of elation. Well, as much elation as a Z might be able to conjure up. Zurt was surrounded, on the ground without transport, and at least slightly wounded. The cowardly slut Izzy had tried to cut a deal at the last minute to save herself from some pain. Zzyk had ignored her and had dispatched three men to use whatever force they wanted to subdue her and bring her in. While some of the platoon guarding her room had been pulled out to search for Zurt, Zzyk was confident that he'd have the pleasure of her pained company by 9:30 at the latest. After all, he still had guards above her, below her, in the rooms to either side of her, and outside her door. A thunderstorm had disrupted the electrical power to that part of the city, but that would not alter what was going to happen to her.

It was 10:00 now, and the platoon of guards that had been sent to determine why Hugo's team wasn't responding had returned to head quarters. They brought with them only one person – Hugo's apprentice. The cowardly slut, Hugo, and the third guard were nowhere to be found. Also missing were the four babies and their baskets.

The platoon leader described what he had found in the apartment – the film of liquid soap on the floor, the metal cutting band, the circle of glass lying on the floor, and the ropes hanging outside the window. It was clear how she had escaped. The platoon leader gave Zzyk the poster that he had found pinned against one of the walls by her emerald green, high heel shoe - the one with the bug in it. The poster had a sketch of a young girl on the top and the following words below:

**FREE BABY  
FOR EVERY IOF HUSBAND AND WIFE  
WHO JOIN THE WILIZY**

Zzyk ripped the poster into bits and turned his attention to Hugo's apprentice sitting in the chair previously occupied by Melissa's mother. The apprentice was still in the plastic DPS restraints that the rescue team had found him in. The blood on his face had dried so, what Melissa had carved into his cheeks was quite clear.

"How did she disable you?" Zzyk asked.

The apprentice didn't know. He had been blinded by the lightning and had slipped and fallen on the floor. He had woken up to find himself in restraints.

"Probably a filled plastic water bottle," the platoon leader said. "Several other water bottles were scattered around and he has a swelling behind his ear."

"Do you know what she carved on your cheeks?"

The apprentice nodded, wondering how much longer he had to live. "Two letters – a W and a Z," he said.

"Did she say why?"

"As a warning to others who abuse defenseless citizens."

The timing couldn't have been better for the apprentice. Rick entered the office at that point. "Everyone out," he ordered and Zzyk's office quickly emptied.

"Everyone's too frightened to give you the news," he explained to Zzyk.

"What news?"

"Every troop transport that was used in the operation was destroyed ten-minutes ago. From all accounts, they were all blown up simultaneously. They were parked, empty, at three different military bases at the time. We don't know how they were destroyed." Rick paused. "That's not all."

Zzyk nodded for him to proceed.

"Three of our reserve troop transports in Edmonton and all four of our transports in Calgary were destroyed at the exact same time."

"The southern chapter," Zzyk said to himself. "And Zurt?" he asked Rick.

"He's not inside the circle. " We're still looking, but in the darkness..."

Zzyk and Rick sat without talking. Digesting the news. Understanding the implications.

The plans for the B.C. assault were useless now. Instead, they themselves were now vulnerable to attack. The bulk of their forces would have to remain in the north to protect the oil.

Buying replacement planes for the destroyed transports was impossible – they weren't manufactured any longer. With most of their troop transports destroyed, the DPS would have to deploy their forces in small units around the IOF. No longer could they respond quickly to threats by amassing and transporting overwhelming force.

“What happened to Hugo?” Zzyk asked Rick at one point in the long evening.

“No idea,” Rick replied.

Zzyk would never learn that Izzy had dropped a heavy tent onto the roof of one of the buildings in the dissident prison compound at about 9:30. She had watched from her sky-sling as some dissidents came out, climbed onto the roof, and undid the gift-wrapping. Hugo and his tent restraints disappeared into the building. Shortly afterwards, that building was full of guests. All of the dissidents had been tortured upon their capture as a matter of routine. Hugo's victims would decide what justice he deserved.

Meanwhile, the third DPS guard – the technician who had distributed Izzy's cartoons of Zzyk – was sitting all by himself on an Aboriginal Nation mountainside. Safe. Unharmed. Cold. For some reason, Zzyk never asked Rick what had happened to him. But, a good executive assistant would be expected to know, and Rick did.

## Chapter 27

**Will's words: About 10:30 p.m., April 30.**

By the time I returned from Calgary, the rest of the transport demolition team had already arrived at the Wilizy. Granny had turned off the black cloud chemical making machine and so the ship was making slow but steady invisible progress towards the Aboriginal Nation border in the clear, moonlight sky. Winnie was drawing pictures of herself on the galley table – she had seen Izzy's collection of Winnie portraits and was keen to try some of her own.

Doc arrived shortly after I did. Doc warned me that he hadn't told Izzy yet that he had married Granny while we were being tourists. He didn't want to distract her while she was dealing with Hugo. We were all just sitting around the galley waiting for Izzy when she messaged that all had gone well at the prison and she was on her way to the ship. We were all on deck to greet her when she appeared through the sail portal. Yollie pushed me forward so I was the first to be hugged. Only it wasn't just a hug. Izzy was trembling at first and then we were kissing a bit, and then I sort of forgot about the others being there until Wolf said something about dousing us with a fire hose which made every one laugh except Izzy and me. Granny said that there was “nothing wrong with a little passion” and she had been watching us closely so that she could learn a few things to try out on Doc. Izzy

looked at Doc and he gave her the wink, and so he and Granny were next in line for the hugs. I think Izzy likes Granny and Doc certainly has been happy the whole time we were working together.

Izzy went around the whole group – was introduced to Wolf who gave her a much longer hug than he had to. The greeting with Yollie was much shorter – I don't think Izzy likes her that much. Then, we all trooped back into the galley where Winnie was waiting with hot chocolate that she had cooked all by herself and we all finally got to relax in the galley where we sat around the big heavy table on folding wooden chairs that Hank had provided. He had also brought in a sofa so that Doc and Granny would have a comfortable place to sit when they were in the ship.

We decided to take turns recounting what we had done and how well it had gone – part of making sure that we hadn't forgotten anything and part so that Izzy would know everything that had happened while she was a hostage. We let Winnie go first – so she told us how she had used the telescope to follow the copter from the building with no windows to the building with ropes hanging off the roof, counting down the blocks as the helicopter flew just like Doc had told her to. Granny said that she had done a very good job, which made Winnie smile and she curled up on Granny's lap.

Doc had his turn next. He cautioned that just because we knew where Zzyk's office was – that didn't mean that he would be there in the future, or that was where he lived. He could live in the building deep underground, or he could have tunnels from that building to others. The office's location was useful information, but its importance should not be exaggerated. Doc also told us that he was late because he had transported a DPS technician into A.N. territory. Since it was her idea, he'd let Izzy tell us about it.

Granny asked Izzy to tell us about her eleven days in the apartment and we all stared at her and waited.

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### **Izzy's words:**

I didn't want to say much about the time I spent in the apartment. Some things had happened there that I wasn't particularly proud of. I was happy about the escape plan though, so I described that up to the point where Doc and I had loaded everyone aboard the copter.

I thought I should explain what I had done about the two torturers; I didn't have the opportunity to talk it over with Will ahead of time. I told everybody where I had dropped Hugo and they all thought that Hugo had received justice. I also told them about using the light saber to put a W and a Z on the cheeks of Hugo's apprentice. I had first thought of the idea while I was practicing with the light saber this morning. I had remembered Will carving Zs into the air and that had made me wonder how the people in the IOF would respond to a Zorro-like person fighting against the DPS. I hadn't intended to actually do anything – Will was the one who had the costume; he was the one who thought Zorro was so cool. I had daydreamed through most of the movies he had been glued to.



My decision to dress up in green and white and a mask was just a whim; but carving the letters into the apprentice's cheek had strategic values. It would reduce the effectiveness of Zzyk's DPS security forces in the cities and villages. Zzyk would never allow a DPS guard to appear in public with a W-Z scar on his face. Instead, this guard would be removed from active duty – at least with the citizens. If we were able to apply enough scars, Zzyk would have a numbers problem. The actual W-Z symbol came to me unexpectedly. Told them that I did it only to the one man – we didn't have to do it again if Will and the others didn't like the idea.

The technician had also been a whim. I explained that he had ended up on Hugo's team as punishment for circulating cartoons that I had drawn of Zzyk. Both he and I were sure he wouldn't see the morning if I disappeared and left him tied up in the apartment. I offered to help him escape to B.C. but the technician surprised me by asking to join the Wilizy instead.

I realized that it wasn't up to me to decide. Involving a stranger in any way, no matter how trivial, was a threat to us all and to the Aboriginal Nation as a whole. Doc left him on an A.N. mountainside with the remains of my food and water and a map to the nearest community. Doc told him that if he were serious about joining the Wilizy, he should sit there and wait for us to decide if we wanted him; someone from the Wilizy might come and get him; or, we might not. I figured that abandoning the guard was a reasonable first test of his desire to join us; if he was still there in a couple of days, Yollie could give us a reading.

I finished by telling them about my last whim – the poster about the babies. Zzyk's use of the babies as hostages had made me realize that the babies were the keys to our war with Zzyk. They, not his pumping stations, were his most vulnerable assets. So, I thought about saving the babies as part of my escape and tried to figure out what to do with them afterwards; realized that IOF adults would jump at the chance to have a baby. So, why not pretend to offer babies as part of a fake recruitment drive? Zzyk would have to assign his army to guard duty around infant day centers. The thinner those forces were spread, the more vulnerable he became. He'd never know if we were distributing the posters or not.

Told them that I had a bunch of other ideas too; asked when everybody would be available to discuss strategy. There was an awkward silence.

Saw Granny whispering in Winnie's ear. Winnie climbed down from Granny's lap and held up her arms in front of me. I pulled her into my lap and wondered why Granny was trying to distract me.

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**Will's words:**

I had to explain to Izzy that the agreement that I had made with Hank and Yolanda was for this operation only. I hadn't talked with them about anything further than that. I looked at Izzy and raised an eyebrow. She nodded. So, I said that we would like to extend the agreement with everyone.

Yollie jumped right into the silence. Asked if there would be danger? Would they have to fight the DPS again? I hesitated because we'd always be facing high risk no matter where we were or what we were doing. Looked at Izzy for help.

"Zzyk will be doubly dangerous now," she said. "He underestimated us; thought I was just a slut; thought Will was predictable."

"Count me in," Yollie said.

"Are you planning to continue to use the slings and light sabers?" Wolf asked me.

"Yes, plus I have ideas for some other weapons," I replied.

"I'm in too," Wolf said quickly.

Izzy and I both looked at Hank and Yolanda. I hadn't been able to tell Izzy yet that they had been the biggest help in the operation. Both of them had been fighting the DPS for a long time. "Family of eight to raise," Yolanda said. She hadn't even looked at Hank – they had obviously talked about this possibility already. "Perhaps we could help with some short term operations," Hank offered.

"I have to start grade one," Winnie said from Izzy's lap. I had thought she was sleeping. "But I can help on week-ends," and we all smiled. Izzy gave her a little kiss on her forehead.

That left Doc and Granny. They whispered back and forth for a while. Doc spoke for the two of them. "We can help with planning sessions. We'd like to be involved at that level. We'd also like to have minor roles in your operations – just like this time. Both of us enjoyed tonight, but we'd be a risk to all if you had to rely on us for quick reflexes, immediate decision-making, or the physical mobility of people your age. Plus, we have medical teams to train. We'll serve in emergencies of course, but we can't contribute on a daily basis."

I looked at Izzy and she had her head down, her face pressed against Winnie's head. I knew that she had really wanted Doc to be on the team.

That left just four: Izzy, me, sixteen-year old Wolf who had hugged Izzy far too long and had been looking at her a lot during the meeting, and fifteen-year old Yollie who I knew Izzy didn't like. Four teenagers against the DPS – at least it was double what we had before.

"It's going to be a great team!" Izzy said.

## Chapter 28

### **Izzy's words: About 11 p.m., April 30.**

We continued going around the circle of folding chairs – debriefing each other. I tried to hide my disappointment. Not about Doc. I knew that he was right about not playing an active role; he would help us with the planning and that was where we really needed him. I was glad that he was with Granny; saw them holding hands; wished that Will was next to me, not on the other side of the circle.

I was most disappointed about Hank and Yolanda. I didn't know them very well, but having two adults leading the Wilizy would have been much better than four

teenagers doing it on our own. I wondered about Yollie. Granny or Yolanda would have controlled her; without them, I figured she'd be bossing us all within a week. I didn't know Wolf at all. He was the mirror image of his father – just younger.

Put my cheek back down on Winnie's head; heard her snoring gently. I really liked Winnie; having her on my lap was making me feel good all over; had to drag my attention back to the debriefing.

While we talked, Yolanda and Yollie each took a turn passing out refreshments. Yolanda was subtler than Yollie, but I noticed that both of them passed out more drinks or food as an excuse for pausing behind me where I couldn't see what they were doing. Later, when we were done, Granny hobbled over to where I was sitting, leaned over to wake Winnie, in the process putting one hand on my shoulder and leaving it there for a long time while Winnie struggled awake.

"Say good night to Izzy," Granny said and Winnie grabbed both of my hands in hers to turn herself around and gave me a kiss on my lips. I felt a tingle. Not from the kiss. From her hands.

"Do you mind carrying Winnie to her hammock?" Granny asked.

I said, "Of course not," and stood up to rearrange her. I put my arms underneath Winnie's bum and she had her face against my neck and her arms around my shoulders. I felt her hands move up and touch the bare skin on the back of my neck. There was another tingle.

"Those stairs are steep, Mother," Yolanda said. "I'll help you."

"I'll come too so that I don't have to sit next to Wolf any longer," Yollie said.

That's how all the women ended up in the middle of what appeared to be a hastily constructed cabin below deck for Hank, Yolanda, Winnie and the four babies. Yolanda closed the door. "The men don't get to hear this," she said.

I put Winnie down onto her hammock, and she sat with her legs dangling over the side, smiling sleepily at me. We were standing in a loose semi-circle around Winnie's bed.

"First, I should explain what you have already noticed," Granny began. "You didn't want to talk about what happened in the apartment and we suspected that would be the case. So, each of us read you during the evening. We didn't do that to test you. We read you to try to assess the damage that Zzyk did to you. We agreed on the way down to the cabin that you have been hurt, but not badly. A couple of hours holding Winnie in your lap for the next couple of days should fix that."

"Holding Winnie?"

"In my family, first daughters are readers, second daughters tend to be healers. Right now, she has to cuddle and she has to like somebody for it to work. When she's older, she'll be able to use just her hands."

Yolanda took over. "All three of us agreed that you have changed dramatically since Yollie's first reading. We don't know exactly what happened since you left, but its effect has been noticeable. Our culture is full of evidence that changes of this nature can occur after a cathartic event brought on by stress. I myself experienced such an event. Our children each go on wilderness treks without food or water, for example, as an attempt to artificially create that growing experience. Yollie completed her trek two years ago and it was only after she came back that we were willing to entrust her with any responsibility."

"I was angry at being a giant and angry at carrying the curse of knowing what my boyfriends were thinking when they were out with me," Yollie chimed in. "I finally saw that the good outweighed the bad," she added.

Yolanda resumed the speech-making. "What Yollie saw in you before is gone. We don't know yet what will replace it. The change has not been completed. But that is not why we are standing together in this cabin and why Winnie is trying very hard to keep her eyes open."

I look and that was certainly the case.

Yolanda continued. "When Will came to us and asked for our help, he spoke about the strategic benefits of our two groups joining forces. How we had a common enemy; how any lever that he could find to weaken Zzyk would be to our benefit; and how he suspected that Alberta still had oil because of some reports that he had read. But, he couldn't do the necessary searching for that lever while guarding you."

"We listened and talked among ourselves. Hank, Yollie, and Wolf were the keenest to join. Mother and I were willing, but we wanted to know more. We invited Will to meet with us again and asked him - *What would Izzy say to us if she were here?*"

"Will spoke much more passionately, and indeed eloquently, the second time. He told us about your feelings about violence and justice. We learned about the massacre of the Nevadan pacifists and how you insisted that the dead bodies of the children and their parents had to be carried to their graves. We learned how hard you found that to do. We learned that afterwards you had to be alone for a couple of days and how you came back a different woman. We learned how intent you were on preventing the same thing that occurred in that village from happening to children like Winnie."

"We were moved by Will's words and frankly surprised that someone as emotionally controlled as Will could not only recognize those feelings in you but also could express them with such intensity. We three women agreed what we would do after you were rescued from Zzyk's control. We wanted to do this, partly because of what you had done for the massacred families, partly because you had deliberately placed yourself under Zzyk's control in an attempt to save children like ours, and partly because we knew that you had been deprived of a loving family of your own."

"There is an ancient ritual in our tribe," Granny took over. "I have experienced the ceremony only once and that was in my childhood. Yolanda and Yollie have never had the opportunity to participate. Winnie is old enough to remember it and that is why she is here and has been practicing her lines ever since we told her what we were going to ask you."

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So, that's how I became a member of Granny's family - an honorary sister/daughter/granddaughter. Everything was done in their language - even Winnie's speech of welcome. Yollie stood close to me and translated the whole ceremony in whispers. I was holding on to my emotions, but just barely. Even Yollie seemed choked. It's a secret ceremony, so that's why I can't say any more.

## Chapter 29

**Izzy's words: About 11:30 p.m., April 30.**

Winnie fell asleep the minute her head touched her pad, so the four of us tiptoed out of Hank and Yolanda's temporary cabin. "Yollie, why don't you help Izzy unpack her things?" Yolanda suggested as we passed the door to Will's and my cabin. "I'll bring your bag down for you, Izzy" she said when I started to speak. Then, she helped Granny up the stairs and Yollie opened my cabin door and motioned me in.

"There's one thing to learn about our mother. With the youngsters, she'll flat out tell them to do something. With us older ones, it's phrased as *Why don't you...?* It's still an instruction, no matter how it's phrased. Wolf and I tease her about it, but she just smiles and says, *You can always say no.* Like we would. Our mother wants us to stay down below – get to know each other; sister-sister stuff, you know. OK?"

We took the pads off the hammocks and sat on them on the deck. There was a little rap on the door, a pause, and a hand deposited my clothes bag inside the cabin and then the door was shut. I got up and started to unpack.

"You don't have to unpack – that was just an excuse. Both Granny and Mom want me to talk to you about something; they thought that you'd feel better about it coming from someone your own age than from them."

"What?"

Yollie motioned to the pictures of Winnie that were all over the cabin. "Winnie came barging in here one day – she doesn't have a sense of private space yet. Mom found her in here and saw the pictures. She knew immediately why they were here. Granny did too."

"Just learning to draw," I tried.

"Even if I weren't a reader, I'd know that's not the real reason. You're using them to distract yourself from sex. Mom said to tell you – *Been there, done that.* Granny told me to give you the same message from her."

"And you?"

"I haven't had to distract myself yet. Boys don't like having their minds read – and every family in the nation knows about the Yolanda women and their mind-reading skills. Plus, I come in the large-package size that I can't disguise no matter how much I'd want to. I was jealous of you – with your thin body and your cute boyfriend, so I was more direct than I should have been when I read you. I'm sorry about that."

"Everything you said was true," I admitted. "I got mad because it was true and reacted with my blade; shouldn't have," I ended lamely.

"OK, so that's the awkward part out of the way. What are you going to do about those?" She pointed at the pictures.

"I need them to remind me of what could happen if I'm not careful. Strong emotions, remember?"

“Mom and Granny say that they can tell you about more effective ways of birth control if you ever want to know.”

I thought for a bit and shook my head. “Doesn’t seem right.”

“OK, I’ve done my duty as a sister. Now, can I have my underwear back?”

I fished in my bag and held out the pink monstrosity. “I figured you had bought them; knowing that your family was helping Will made a big difference for me.”

“I didn’t actually buy them,” Yollie said. “Plus, as you are delicately not saying, there’s no way those puny little things would fit my big butt. But, they’re mine now. I found them in Wolf’s camp and I’m holding onto them in case I have to blackmail him. He knows I have them, too.”

“You blackmail your brother?”

“Brothers, not brother. I have something on most of them now. Six boys, two girls; well three now. The numbers are not in our favour. I just even out the odds a little.”

“Yollie, do you mind if I keep these for a little longer?”

So, I had to tell her why I wanted them. About Will’s filament being there when I got out of my bath; and how I figured out afterwards that the filament had a camera on it because Will used that camera to see what was inside the video conference equipment; and how I just knew he had peeked at me in the bathroom when I had no clothes on.

“I can sit on him while you skin him.”

“I was thinking of something a little less drastic. Besides, he **did** rescue me, and he **did** send me more than my share of our chocolate bars, and he **was** responsible for finding me a family.”

“So why do you want the pink slingshot?”

## Chapter 30

**Will's words: About 11:45 p.m., April 30.**

Granny and Yolanda had come back from putting Winnie to bed, and we were just sitting around the galley. They were bantering back and forth, and I was listening, enjoying being included when we all heard this big howl of laughter from below.

Granny said “That sounds interesting” and she started to stand up.

“I’ll come too,” Yolanda said and followed Granny who was scuttling along faster than I had seen her move before.

I was going to get up too, but Doc shook his head at me, so I didn’t.

“That doesn’t sound good at all,” Hank said.

“Definitely a warning call,” Doc said.

“Have you been teasing your sister too much, Wolf?” Hank asked.

“Nope; other way around actually.”

“You and I should be clear of any danger,” Doc said to Hank. “Yolanda and Granny were upstairs with us when we heard the warning call.” Even Doc called

Granny Granny when we were all together. Too much confusion otherwise. He told me he calls her Yollie when they're alone.

"If Wolf didn't cause it, and since Hank and I are clear, that leaves you, Will."

I stammered a little. I didn't know what to say.

"Here's the way I see it," Hank explained. "That was Yollie's howl. That meant that Izzy was telling her something. That something would be about you. Did you do anything recently that might make Izzy a little peeved with you?"

"But she kissed me when she got here, and she wouldn't know what I did anyway."

"Will, Will, Will. She knows. You explain, Doc."

"The kiss was just to make sure you were healthy enough to take what she's going to do to you, boy. What did you do?"

So, I told them how I had inserted the filament into Izzy's bathroom and was using the camera to confirm that it was her bathroom, when Izzy got out of the tub and turned towards the filament while she was reaching for a towel. And then, I saw her and forgot entirely about turning it off.

"I take it Izzy doesn't bathe in a wet suit."

I shook my head. I didn't know what a wet suit was, but Izzy wasn't wearing anything at all when she got out so I figured No would be the right response.

"So, you saw your girl friend naked when she didn't want you to see her that way. Been there, done that." Hank said.

"Me too," Doc said. He saw my look. "When I was your age I was quite a bit rowdier than I am now. Hockey player, you know."

"What about you, Wolf?" Hank asked.

Just then, we heard Yollie's howl again. This time, she was joined by three other voices. I recognized Izzy's giggle. In addition, there was a definite cackle along with what could only be described as a rolling snicker.

"Time to hit the sack," Wolf said and he left abruptly.

"Inclement weather ahead, I think, Doc. Perhaps you and I should post a watch over the ship?"

"With that bird call, I think that's an excellent idea," Doc said. "You stay here, Will."

"What bird call was it, Doc?" I asked.

"That was the call of **The Get-Even Bird**," Doc said on his way out.

I was sitting, wondering what kind of bird that was when I heard Izzy climbing the stairs. She was still giggling. It was not a pleasant sound.

