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I remember the day it started, the day that everything changed. Dark clouds formed in the sky once again. I wondered how long it would be before it started raining, probably an hour, maybe two at the most. The barren landscape was already damp from morning rain. The ground was muddy; we stepped carefully, not wanting to make a sound. I looked back at the man behind me. He was busy concentrating on his footing, the same thing I should have been doing. He looked much older than thirty. The signs of age were clearly seen on his worn face. I wondered if that’s what I would look like in nine years. Most likely, everybody in Humurom looked older than they really were. It was the stress that caused it; the stress of an endless war with no end and no beginning.

I could see the church in the distance, or what was left of it. The walls had giant holes in them and the ceiling was almost completely gone. It stood out as the last remaining building in sight to not completely fall. It was also our evening hideout. Every day on our way home we would stop there and wait for the sun to go down before making our final walk home.

We were hunters. Assigned by our leaders in Humurom to do the most dangerous job there was. The Hunting Grounds were a mile away from our home, and were dangerously close to the enemy’s zone. Anybody who got stuck with that job knew that there was a good chance they wouldn’t be coming home at night. But I managed, with
the help of Milton. We were partners. I knew he wouldn’t let anything happen to me.

We made it to the church without being seen and dropped the large silver cases we had been carrying to the ground and sat on a large piece of fallen roof. Nothing remained inside from when the church was in use. I wondered what it must have looked like then. When people came and went on Sundays, chatting away without knowing true fear. It must have been nice. A strange feeling came over me. I waited to see if I could place it, and then when I did I became very aware of my surroundings.

“I have a feeling we’re being watched.”

“We’re always being watched, Hardin.” Milton said quietly.

“No, we’re always being followed. Watched means there’s someone nearby.”

“Geez, I wish you would stop saying things like that; you’re always making me paranoid.”

“Shouldn’t we be? If they catch us—”

“I know what they will do.”

“They” were the Cityers, a group of people that also lived in our torn-apart world. We Humurom’s were taught from an early age that the Cityers started the war that ended up destroying everything we ever knew. Because of this we lived in a bunker. That was a long time ago. This was year one forty-seven, one hundred and forty seven years since the war started. The Cityers lived in secret, we rarely saw them. Some of our hunters had been killed over the last twenty years or so and we know it was them.
“They may not do anything, actually.” I said optimistically
“What makes you say that?”
“I have a feeling.”
“Don’t go telling me about your feelings.” Milton said, setting himself higher on a large piece of concrete.
“I have a feeling that they aren’t any different than us.”
“I doubt that.”
“Have you seen one of their cities?”
“Of course not.”
The piece of roof was very uncomfortable. We readjusted ourselves many times. I looked around constantly, always expecting somebody to jump out. I had only become a hunter the month before. Milton was assigned to train me. I could tell that he found my anxiety annoying.
“I wish it didn’t have to be this way, Mil. I wish we could go off and find a place, just like in that story about the mice and the men.”
“That’s enough of you reading, it always gives you stupid ideas. Besides, don’t you remember how that book ends?”
“It may end differently for us.”
“Yeah, worse.”
“We could bring our families, maybe a few extra.”
“That’s enough of that . . . can you imagine all those people moving? It’d be a migration; we’d get blown away just like all the others.”
“I’m tired of this, the Cityers always about, attacking, they want us all gone.” I almost yelled. Milton shot me a stern look and I shut up.
“Of course they do, that’s what each side wants in a war.”
“It’s never been a war; in a war each side has a chance.”
“Yeah, we’ve barely had a chance, but they’ve always hated us.”
“But we’ve also always hated them,” I pointed out, “we learned from birth to hate them.”

The sun began to set. I could see it through the giant holes in the walls. That building was not really the best place to call a hideout, but we were used to it. I wondered what the other hunters were doing at that time. Some were sent on gathering missions, others to merely go somewhere. Everybody in Humurom over sixteen had to have a job, but there was not much to do, so some had jobs that cannot be considered work. The small library had people who sit and read since there is nothing else for them to do. Even though that’s safer I don’t envy them. If there’s anything I fear more than being outside its boredom.

“Wait till they see what we have, two cases of food, I bet there’s meat.” I exclaimed.

“Just don’t tell anybody where we found it, if anybody finds out we were in their zone again, you know what would happen.” Milton warned.

“But that’s where all the food is, I don’t get why we’re not allowed there, nobody needs to know we attacked them.”

“They don’t want us there because the Cityers are always patrolling. We’ll tell them that they left it in our Hunting Grounds, that way nobody gets in trouble and everybody gets some meat.”
“Not everybody, there’s not enough for everybody. Hey Mil, we should cook a little up right now, just to make sure we get some.”

“A fire would be seen for miles, it’s almost dark, and we need to be getting back.” Milton said patiently.

I decided to change the subject. “Do you remember how you attacked that guard?”

“Of course I do, it just happened.”

“That was great with the trap, and then knocking him out, by the time he gets up we’ll be back home. That was great!”

“Shush! You get excited too easily.”

Milton threw his club into the air and caught it. It’s the only weapon we had, but we didn’t complain.

“It’s hard not to with all this food, they should let us work the files for this, send someone else out to hunt from now on.”

“They only let really smart people work the files, you know that. They wouldn’t let just anybody deal with our history.”

“But I’m so tired of hunting - every day we chance getting blown up.”

“And you’d rather be stuck underground for weeks working the files?”

“It’s safer.”

The sun disappeared below the horizon. There were only a few minutes of light left.

“It’s almost dinner time.” I whispered.

“And we’re still here.”

“Why are we still here?”
“You know why.”

“Because there is large unexposed land between here and our entrance to home.” I mimicked.

“We need to get going soon, they’ll be expecting some kind of meat from us.” He lifted up the case. “Thankfully we got it.”

“We don’t need to eat meat, Mama hasn’t in years.” I said.

“That’s because she always gives her portions to you. She’s got an interest in making sure you’re fed, that you’re alive.”

“And you don’t?”

“My interests are in keeping myself alive, meaning I have to keep you out of trouble.”

“I don’t get into trouble.” I said, offended that he should think that.

“That’s because I keep you out of it. Don’t you remember that time I stopped you from running out in the open just because you thought you heard your mother? I mean, what would she be doing out here? Geez, how did I get stuck with you as a partner? I could have gotten someone stronger, or someone smarter. And then we might be bringing back five cases.”

Milton got up to leave, but sat back down when he saw I didn’t move.

“How did the war start, Mil?”

He sighed; I could tell he didn’t want to talk about it. But he wanted to get me going so he talked. “I don’t know. Everyone who was there is dead, and everyone here doesn’t care.”

“Maybe that’s our problem.”
“What?”
“If we can’t remember our past, then we can’t create a future.”
“Where did you get that?”
“A book.”
“Didn’t I tell you to stop reading?”
“You just did tell me.” I said.
“Well stop thinking about things you read. What are you always reading anyway?”
“Anything and everything, the library has all the books you would ever want to read; books on science, philosophy, fiction, and everything else.”
“If one of the leaders heard you they wouldn’t be happy.”
“That’s why I said it to you.”
“We should get going.” Milton said.
“How do you think it started?”
“Why do you want to talk about the war when we are right in the middle of it?” He stood up. “Just wait until we get back.”
“I want to know, besides, they won’t let us talk about it there.”
“Alright, if it will shut you up. I’ve always imagined that the Cityers were running out of food, and we had it, so they attacked, and the rest is what you see here.”
“It’s dark, I can’t see anything.”
“I meant that figuratively.”
“Oh.”
“Yeah.”
“So you think it all started over food?” I asked.
“No doubt, what else is there to fight about? Why do you think they patrol their zone? They don’t want us taking theirs.” He looked around quickly to make sure everything was alright. “And anyway, you know how crazy people get when they’re hungry.”

“I always imagined it had to do with more complicated but less vital things that we have forgotten about over the years.”

“You have too much time to think, it’s unhealthy.”

“What do you think is going to happen?”

“What do you mean?”

“In the future.”

He sighed. “We don’t need to be thinking about the future.”

“We could, just this once.”

“Alright just this once.”

“What do you think is going to happen?” I looked up through the hole in the roof and flinched, as if remembering a particularly vivid nightmare.

“How should I know?” He said.

“But what do you think?”

“I think . . . I think things are going to get better.”

“The war might end?”

“The war will end, and we will win. But for now we have to get home and show everybody this food. Because of this the night will be ours. Everyone will want to get our attention just so they can get a piece before everyone else. They’ll want to do things for us, and we’ll be treated like kings just for the night.”

“And then what?” I was feeling better already.
“And then we’ll go to sleep and wake up early tomorrow to begin a day no different than this one. And we’ll hope that it will be as productive as this one, and as lucky.”

“So nothing is going to change?” I asked, disappointed.

“Not tomorrow, but maybe the next day, or maybe the day after that, for now just live in the present, we are happy, safe, and about to eat and nothing can change that.”

We left the church and began the trek across the rubble field toward home. Single walls and dead trees could be distinguished in the near darkness. There were no noises save for our footsteps. That didn’t keep my brain from creating sounds that my mind translated into evil creatures.

“Mil?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you ever think of things from their point of view?”

“What?”

“Do you ever see things the way they would?”

“No, why should I?”

“They are no different than us. You have to look deep to see that they probably live in ruined cities that we destroyed. We will always be enemies because nobody can see that. But if you really got in their heads do you know how you would see the world?” I asked.

“No.”

“Exactly as you and I see it. They are us, we are them, but nobody cares. In the end we all will probably kill each other off, force us to hide again and again. It’s the greatest game of two beached
whales trying to fight till the end, it doesn’t matter who wins they won’t have any time to enjoy it.”

“Then it doesn’t matter if we fight.” He deduced.

“That’s what the leaders say. You don’t have to follow their lead, you can think differently if you want.”

“They don’t like that.”

“That’s why we are talking out here. The only way to end this war is to join them, the ones that are like us, the ones that can see past everything around us.”

“Geez, if you were going to go off like that why did you ask me all those things?”

“I wanted to know what you thought.”

“I’ve never seen you like this, man, it’s crazy, but why now?”

“I didn’t want to tell you yet, but I’m leaving.”

I wished I could have seen his reaction, but it was too dark.

“Where are you going to go?”

“I haven’t decided yet, but I know that when I get captured the right words may help us all out tremendously.”

“So that’s it, you’re just going to leave? It’ll be dangerous.”

“I know, but somebody has to do something. If we keep living the way we are now then nothing will ever get done. I may be able to change things for the better, remind the Cityers that we are all the same and have the same values and fears.”

“And what of your mother?”

“I will tell her tonight or maybe tomorrow. I know she will want me to do this if I know that I can help.”
“True.”

“I will leave first thing in the morning when we go to hunt. You have to tell the leaders that I was captured; it’s the only way they won’t come looking for me.”

“You really are a different person when the sun goes down, aren’t you? I’m going to miss you, man.”

“Don’t go doing that, I’ll be back before you know it.”

We made it back to the cliff right as the last light disappeared. We felt around for the metal ladder and climbed up. At the top we knocked twice on a large metal door that blended in to the side of the cliff. It opened and we entered.
My eyes quickly adjusted to the gas lamps hanging overhead. The entrance led onto the top floor of Humurom, a large circular walkway overlooking the six floors below and the dining area on the bottom. Hallways led from the main chamber down and around to all the levels. Everything was a brown metal: the floors, the walls, the railings, everything in sight. The faintest of footsteps could be heard no matter where the stepper was. The days were filled with noise of deer hide on metal floors. Strange works of metal art were placed on every level. The leaders thought it would give the place a “pleasant” look. It failed; it only reminded us of our limited recourses.

Milton thanked the guard who let us in and ran around the circular floor to a hallway that led straight to level 6, second from the bottom where the leaders were. I wandered out to the railing and looked down. Several people were already sitting at tables waiting for the kitchen doors to open. They whispered, if not then their conversations would clearly be heard by everyone.

I took the second corridor to the left, it passed through all the levels. The halls were dark and rarely lit by more than one lamp. I stopped and looked out at 2. It was the first of three levels that housed the occupants of Humurom, I can’t call them inhabitants. I also stopped and looked out at 4, where my residence was. By this time news must have gotten out that meat was in the bunker. Excited
talking replaced the usual whispering. I stopped at 6 to try and find Milton. Halfway around the floor I went past the Leader’s Office. Inside I saw Milton and Matilik, the head leader, looking into one of the cases. I couldn’t see what they were looking at, but they both seemed concerned. I decided that I would ask Milton about it later, and continued to the bottom, level 7, the dining area. Seeing the case open made me notice the emblem on it for the first time. It was a blue triangle with an orange eye in the center, very strange.

The leader of the Dining Office, a short lady with long brown hair, came up to me in a hurry. She handed me five Cut Passes and disappeared into the hallway. Cut Passes were given to the hunters who brought back food. They would allow the hunters and a few friends to cut the line and get the first share of the food, which was usually the largest. I pocketed two and kept the other three out so everyone would make no mistake that I was responsible for the meat.

The line was already forming when I arrived. I cut straight to the front and was the first one in. The kitchens could be seen behind the servers. I looked back and saw the dishwashing station that I spent many hours at when I was a teenager. The server was a guy I knew, though could never remember his name.

“’Bout time you got some real food. If you went another day - and I mean this - I was going to have Matilik switch you back down here.”

“Well then it’s a good thing I got some meat.”

“Yup, here’s your serving . . . oh two, alright here you go. Say ‘hi’ to your mom for me.”
“Alright.”

I had two plates, each with a small piece of dried meat and a glob of Nutrition. Nutrition was a white substance cooked up in the kitchens that replaced real food when we couldn’t get any, which was the case most days. It was the most tasteless substance imaginable, but it kept us alive. I knew the secrets behind it and was extra proud of myself for not having to eat only that.

On the way out people saw me and asked me for the passes. I was so excited to finally be getting some attention for being a hunter that I gave two away before even thinking about it. I guess I ruined my chances of being a “king for a night”. I should have had them beg for them, but that’s not really my style. A friend of mine named Stud was coming up right as I got to the hallway that would lead me up to 4. His name was strange, but it wasn’t his fault. The leaders decreed long ago that there would be no repeating names and no last names. Most names became hereditary. Hardin was actually my grandfather who died just before I was born. For some, though, they weren’t lucky enough to get hand-me-down names. Stud was one of them. When he was born his mother did not want to give him the name of an ancestor, so she made up one in hopes that he would be good looking. It apparently worked. Stud was about as handsome as they come in Humurom. His perfect hair and face reminded me of someone out of those old stories I read.

“Hey, Hardy, you want to give me one of those Cut Passes?” Stud asked. He saved the charm for other people; he knew I didn’t like it.
“Yeah, man, here you go. Make sure everyone knows it was Milton and me who got it.”

“Everyone already does, news travels fast around here. Speaking of news, did you hear Matilik was considering me for the Hunting Office?”

“How do you know?”

“That’s one of the perks of being in Leader Training.”

“Lucky.”

“We can’t all be hunters.”

“Who would want to be?” I was going to say something else, but he got lost in the crowd heading for the kitchens.

There were five offices in Humurom. When someone turned sixteen they were chosen by the leader of whichever office felt could use their services. There is the Dining Office, which deals with the food and every aspect of it. The Residence Office, that cleans peoples residences and also takes care of the halls. The Hunting Office, that sends people out to find food. The Files Office, which is in two parts. The first is the actual Files Office, that’s where one person spends all day with the history of Humurom. It’s a pretty important job. The other part is the library. There people take care of the old books. The last office is the Leader Office. That’s the most important one, and the one Stud was in. The leader of each office is chosen after a lengthy Leader Training period. Only really special people get chosen for the training.

I made it up to 4 and found my residence, 404. I carefully opened the door while holding both plates and was met with the
strangest smell. My mother was very sick and needed almost constant attention by the medics who come under the Residence Office. I didn’t trust them at all, nothing they did ever seemed to help her. The residence always smelled of whatever crazy concoction they could come up with using what limited resources they had. Mama was in her room at the end of the hall. She didn’t look well at all. She was in the middle of life. Her cheeks were sunken, breathing hard. I hated to see her like that.

“Hey, Mama, I got you some meat.”

“Really? The first in months, how exciting.”

“And guess what? I got it while hunting.”

“Oh, you know I don’t like it when you go that far out. You told me you were just going as far as the church.”

“But Mama, you know that there’s no food that close.”

I handed her the second plate.

“It’s already dried. You didn’t steal this from their zone did you?” She sounded worried.

“No of course not. Do you think we would have made it back if we had?”

“Don’t joke about that.”

“I’m sorry, Mama.”

We ate in silence. The meat was so flavorful; I almost forgot how great real food could be.

“Did you learn anything from Milton today?” Mama asked.

“I’m always learning things from him.”
“Good, now I hope you will be able to work the files now, or go back to washing dishes.”

“Mama you know only really smart people get to work the files. And there is no way I’m going back to the kitchen staff, I hated it down there.”

“But you like hunting better?”

“No, I guess there’s really nothing I want to do. I wouldn’t mind working the files, but I wish there was something else.”

“I know dear, but there isn’t anything else unless you get picked by the leaders. Sometimes we have to deal with what we have.”

“We always deal with what we have, which isn’t much. Her face suddenly brightened, it was nice to see. “Guess what I did today?”

“What?” I couldn’t suppress my grin at her happiness.

“I walked all the way around 4.”

“That’s great, you’re getting better.”

“We’ll see.”

“I know you’re getting better.”

“Are you going down to hear the music?”

“Oh, I almost forgot about that, it’s been so long since anybody brought back meat.”

Every time a big event happened in Humurom, including when the hunters bring back real food, the band plays. Everyone shows up to hear it. They play ancient violins and other odd instruments that have been created in our solitude, but it’s still pretty nice. The players themselves are trained from all the different offices.
“It’s nice that they do that,” Mama said, finishing up her Nutrition, “and you will be up with the leaders this time.”

“Yeah, but it’s no big deal; tomorrow will begin just like today never happened.”

“But you’ll have the memory, and you’ll grow from it. Just because tomorrow may be different then today does not mean you should forget it.”

“I know.”

“I think it’s about time you get ready for the celebration. You’ll want to look your best while you’re in front of everyone.”

“You’re right. I’ll go get ready.

I left Mama and went into my room. It was smaller and luckily did not smell as strange. There was a small mat in the corner that was once used by my great grandmother. I realized that I did not have anything to do to get ready. We only had one thing to wear. Everyone is assigned a gray shirt and pants. I don’t know who makes the clothes. Some say they are left over from before the war. It’s probably true, they seem very old.

Instead of going straight down to the dining area I went to 5 to the library. It was deserted; everyone was already getting ready to hear the music. I found a small table in the back and sat down, thinking over everything that happened that day. It was a pretty good day; I didn’t get killed and got meat, so it was a success. If only everyday could have been as productive. I scanned the bookcases for something I hadn’t read yet. My mind wasn’t fully into it so I sat back down to clear my mind. That was something I tried to do on a daily
basis. Bad things happened to those who dwelled too much on their situation. I’ve heard of people having complete breakdowns when they fully realized that there was no escaping the gloom. We were all either stuck inside a metal tube of a bunker or outside where we could get killed any minute by Cityers. I really didn’t want to lose it, so I made sure my mind was clear of all negative thoughts before going to sleep every night.

I could hear the band getting ready. They would drag their little stick things across the strings of their instruments, creating a horrendous screeching. When they finally got things ready and could make tolerable noises, I left the library and went down be the center of attention.

The leaders were up on a high table set out for just those occasions. Next to it was another empty table where the guests of honor sat. I took my seat and waited for Milton. It didn’t surprise me that he hadn’t shown up yet, he wasn’t one for big to do’s. I looked out at all the people of Humurom, about one hundred, and wished Mama had felt well enough to come. Matilik started out by thanking me and Milton for the food, the first in ninety seven days. He then let the music begin. The band played an up tempo song of their own creation. Everyone got up to dance. I waited at the table; I never knew what to do in situations like that. About an hour later Milton finally showed up.

“Are you alright, Mil?”

“Yeah, look don’t worry about me, what you should be worrying about is sleep. Wake up is at two pre-dawn tomorrow.”
“That’s early.”
“Yeah.”

Pre-dawn was about a half hour before dawn, so two pre-dawn was an hour. With no windows we would only guess when dawn was. The only clock was one that had to be cranked in the Leader Office. Two pre-dawn was generally at five.

“What were you looking at earlier, in the second case?” I asked.
“Don’t worry about it.”
“Was it something important?”
“It was nothing.”
“I want to know.”
“Just shut it alright.” He leans in close. “I’ll tell you tomorrow.”

I quickly tried to change the subject. “So how about that music?”
“It’s good.” Milton said nervously.
“The food was good too.”
“If only everybody got some, they ran out near the end.”
“That’s sad.”

“Look, I’ll be seeing you; I need to go by the Hunting Office.”

Milton left me there alone. I was really curious as to what was going on, but I knew that he would not be able to tell me in Humurom. Even whispers could be heard around corners.

The music lasted another hour. When it ended I went back up to my residence. I thought a lot about my mother and how sick she was. It did not take me long to come to the decision that I would not be leaving. I just couldn’t do it; she needed me there and not running
around looking for Cityers. Milton and I got lucky once, I was sure we could do it again.
I woke early the next day. Milton came and knocked on the door to get me ready. He was always the first person up and was good to make sure everyone else was awake. We went down to the Hunting Office and checked out. The other hunters hadn’t even arrived yet. In no time we were eating Nutrition and then heading out the door. Down the metal ladder, and into the massive rubble fields that made up our world. I never thought too much on where the rubble ended, I always assumed it just kept going on forever. By dawn we were at the church. I waited until we were on the path to the hunting area before finally asking what I had wanted to ask.

“What did you want to tell me?”

“That second case did not have food. It had weapons.”

I was mystified. “Really?”

“They were firearms.”

“You mean like guns? Were there any bullets?”

“No, and these were not like the ancient guns we have. These were new, shiny. The leaders are worried.”

“About what?”

“About why and how the Cityers are making new weapons. They think they are planning an attack - a big one.”

I began breathing hard. “They can’t do that; they don’t know where Humurom is.”
“For now they don’t. We have to be careful that no one follows us.”

“Oh, I wish they would let us carry guns.”

“Those old things? They would fall apart if we touched them. It’s like those books you read except we don’t have people taking care of the guns.”

“So where are we going today?” I asked, trying to remain calm.

“We have to stay safe and not go too far.”

“We won’t get any food if we do that.”

“We never get any anyway. Yesterday was a fluke. Look around, why would there be any animals around here?”

I looked around. Pieces of broken buildings were everywhere. It was cloudy again, as it always was. Dead trees were the only thing to see for miles around.

“I don’t know.”

Several small live trees appear. Milton sat down next to one, I did as well.

“Mil?”

“Yeah.”

“Why do we never see them?”

“Who?”

“The Cityers. This is such a huge area, and I’ve never seen them. But they seem to be around. What is it? Twenty dead hunters in the last five years.”
“Most of the ones who have disappeared, or died as we assume happened, were in their zone. They went too far like we did yesterday.”

“How do we know where their zone is?”

“Well, all the bodies we find are so far out that we assume it’s their zone. And what do you mean about not seeing anybody? What about that guard yesterday?” Milton said.

“Oh yeah, but he was in the middle of nowhere guarding some cases. Where are the others?”

“They hide, always ready to strike.”

“They aren’t any different. But I don’t understand why they kill.”

“You’re back on that?” Milton sighed.

“I think it’s true. But I still don’t understand it.”

“They are nothing like us.”

“Don’t think so rigidly.”

“Weren’t you planning on leaving today?”

“I need another day to tell my mother.”

“It’ll always be another day, man.”

“She needs me.”

“I know.”

We got up and searched for food for a while, but it was no use. There was nothing out there. No animals, no noise, no use. It was lonely being a hunter, out in the world with no one around. Occasionally I actually wished to see a Cityer, just to know that I was still alive. When I was alone I secretly wondered if we were all dead.
It would actually make sense to me on those long walks into the danger of the enemy zone. Maybe they weren’t even the enemy. Maybe they were just our ancestors coming to retrieve us for the next journey for our souls. Or maybe I read too much.

I never shared these bizarre ideas with Milton; he would probably tell me that I had a very overactive imagination. That’s the only way to survive Humurom. To think up thoughts that could take us away. Books do it the best, and that’s why I read.

Time passed slowly, but eventually it was dusk. Milton led the way back towards home. I couldn’t feel too disappointed in our failure; he had been right about it being a fluke. My mind slowly refocused on getting back.

“Do you think they’ll be mad that we didn’t find anything today?” I asked.

“Probably not, they’ll still be thinking about yesterday. There’s no way anybody would expect meat two days in a row, there’s not that many animals out here.”

“I’ve never seen a live animal.”

Milton nodded sadly. I doubted that he had ever seen one either. I could see the church up ahead. I spent most of the trip in my mind, thinking about where the animals have gone.

“Yeah, usually . . .” Milton said, but he didn’t finish his thought.

“What?” I asked, wanting to know what he was about to say.

“I heard something.”
I became very still. The noises were usually heard by me, and they were in my head. I had never heard Milton claim to hear anything strange.

“Alright, let’s go.” He said after waiting for a minute.

We went right past the church. The rubble field seemed extra quiet, as if it was listening as well. I wanted to run, to erase all doubt right then and there, but I knew Milton wouldn’t follow. He was walking slowly right behind me. It was the longest few seconds of my life. And then I saw something. It was small and in the air, coming down. Before I could react it exploded, showering us with fragments of rock.

I froze. I could hear Milton yelling something but I didn’t catch it. Two more explosions shook the ground and pained my ears. I heard him, he was telling me to run. Bodies came out from behind stones. I ran. I didn’t take a single look back. They were everywhere, but did not follow me. I couldn’t figure out why they only wanted Milton. It was too late. The final explosion was only a yard ahead. It shot me backwards. My head hit something hard, and that’s all I remember.

There was no noise. The sky was light; much earlier in the day then I remembered. My head ached terribly. I tried to sit up but was too weak, too light headed. I fumbled with the bottle on my belt and drank the water, splashing some on my face. It felt good. Slowly I began to feel better. After twenty minutes I could sit up, though my vision was blurry and had spots. I looked around; I was on the side of
the path, sitting on uneven rocks and concrete. My back and legs ached where the pieces cut into me. Then I remembered. My head spun around for some clue as to where Milton might be. I stood up. Back down the path I saw that the church had completely fallen. It was a sad sight, now no structure stood above the wreckage.

There was something gray on the path. My eyes adjusted and I saw that it was a body. I went to it, stumbling every few steps. All my hopes went to it being a Cityer. I knelt down and turned the body over. Behind the blood and dirt I could see his familiar face, dark to the bright world around him. I called to him softly. No answer. I couldn’t understand it. I had been asleep, he had to be too. No matter how I shook him he did not stir. My head dropped beside his and I began to cry. There was no one around, nobody to help us. The air was warm, though I shivered. I fell asleep there beside him, wishing so badly that he would wake me to go home.

It was around midday when I woke again. Milton still lay beside me. The situation had yet to fully register in my mind. I slowly got up and lifted him over my shoulders. Together we went home. The Cityers were gone, they had done their damage. He was heavy, but I barely noticed. Silent tears streamed down my face the whole time. I carried him up the ladder and knocked at the door when I got to the top.

What happened next was a whirlwind. The door opened immediately, followed by a shout of terror. It was then that the horror hit me. He was taken from me, I had one last look at his dirty face; it was the last time I ever saw him. My eyes blurred with tears as I was
led from the top floor down to the medic room. I asked to see my mother, to tell her that I was alright, but they didn’t let me. Someone came in, I think Matilik, and started asking me questions. I don’t remember what they were; I don’t even think that I heard them. After a while they let me go and I started my way up to 4.

The band was playing once again. They played the music reserved for death. People came out of their residences and heard the news from those who already knew. Nobody spoke to me. I don’t know why, but I was glad for it. My mother was sitting up in bed when I got there. She saw my tears and put her arms out. I didn’t say a thing; she knew the whole story from my face. I cried in her arms the whole evening.

In the days that followed everything changed. I was immediately relieved of hunting duties. Matilik put me in charge of the files. I spent my days reading and looking through Humurom’s history. It was boring, but I learned a lot. I never wanted to talk to anyone, and lost contact with several friends because of this. Stud came by every so often. He wouldn’t let me ignore him, and while I was annoyed at his persistence I was actually glad that he never gave up on me. He showed himself to be a true friend.
The Files Office was quiet, as it always was, one evening as I attempted to finish my favorite book. It had been nine months since I started working there and almost nine months since I realized that the job was the most boring ever. It didn’t take long to read the history gathered by the previous people who held that position. Every month they did what I did; write what was going on in a giant book with thousands of pages. The vast majority of the entries simply read “nothing”. That about summed up everything nicely. What surprised me was that the very first person to work as Files Historian, as the title was known, did not write anything. She had been there from year one to fifty three. The only explanation I could come up with was that “historian” had not been added to the title yet.

I closed *Don Quixote* a few pages before the end. It was hard to concentrate on anything for too long anymore. Mama was slowly getting worse and twelve hunters had been killed in the last nine months. Humurom was becoming a much more depressing place. Sudden screams and crying were becoming normal. Hunters had died before, but never so many in such a short time. The history stated that the Hunting Office had been created around year one hundred, and since then forty seven hunters had been killed; forty five of which in the last thirty years. Everyone was worried.
My mind was briefly filled with terrible thoughts. I got up from my tiny desk and went behind one of the many book cases smashed into that small room and retrieved one of three large paintings. Its bright colors cheered me up immediately. It was a simple painting of two people, a man and a woman, standing in a field of grass. The sky was blue and the grass a beautiful green. The man and woman had their backs to their audience. Their clothes were equally as marvelous as their backdrop. The man looked to be wearing a blue suit. The woman had a white dress and a cute little umbrella. I wanted to jump into the painting so much that it hurt. These three pictures were the only visual representatives of the world before the war. The other two showed tall buildings that reached to the sky. They were more abstract and didn’t show anything in detail, but they were still amazing. The pain of want was so strong that I hid the picture once again and thought about the present.

I began to talk out loud to myself, something that I had become accustomed to doing while alone.

“Four more deaths this month alone. Those Cityers - they must really want to wipe us all out. But what’s the point? What are they after? It must be really important. Unless . . . unless they are after genocide. Could that really be what they’re after? No, if that was it then they would have followed one of the hunters here and then reported it back. Maybe they are trying something different, but what? We haven’t attacked them in years, maybe since before the war started, so what is their problem with us?”
I wanted to get out of there so badly. Everything was going wrong; my life was going by without any input by me. Was there a place out there that was better? Did a better place exist out in that dangerous world? I didn’t know, and I didn’t want to think about it. I pushed it from my mind, but like everything else that I tried to avoid thinking about it came back in an instant.

I sat down again, attempting once again to finish the book. Not even a paragraph in and I heard a noise. I couldn’t place it, but it sounded as if it came from somewhere below me. At first I assumed it was somebody dropping something in a residence, and then remembered that the residences were above the Files Office, which was on 5. It must have come from the dining area. It was quiet for a few seconds then I heard it again. A loud bang, it was quickly followed by yelling and more bangs. I got up and went out to the railing and looked down.

About ten people were throwing chairs and knocking over tables. Hurried footsteps could be heard all around as more people joined in the ruckus. At first I assumed that another hunter had been killed, but these weren’t the sad reactions that usually followed a death. This was anger, the worst I had ever seen. Stud stood beside me, I hadn’t seen him approach. He was nearing the end of his leader training and was due to step up to an actual position soon. He looked worried as he watched the mess two floors below. It was turning into a mob.

“It’s going to get chaotic down there.” Stud said.

The people had made it into the kitchens. I could hear plates hitting the floor.
“What’s happened?”

Stud sighed, “Word got out that the leaders are planning to end the Hunting Office.”

“What? How does something like that happen? We need hunters.”

“It’s getting too dangerous; four deaths this month. Twelve since . . .”

“How did the news get out?”

“I thought people needed to know before it became official.”

“If you get caught . . .”

“Don’t worry about me.”

More people ran into the kitchens. The mass was twice as large as it was when I first saw it.

“I don’t understand the reaction,” I said, “no hunter has found anything in nine months.”

“And you’re still a legend for that.” Stud shook my shoulder.

“But why is everyone acting so crazy?”

“It’s not about the last time anybody had meat,” He explained, “it’s about the next time. Every morning there was hope that a hunter would find something, a deer or a case of food. What you see here is hopelessness. Those people down there realize that if the Hunting Office is closed; the hope of ever getting meat again ends.”

“Any chance they’ll change their minds?” I asked.

“Not likely, not unless someone can come up with an idea that brings hope back, however small the chance is.”
The ruckus got louder; people all over the top levels began shouting. Stud got called off to help the leaders keep order. I locked up the Files Office and went upstairs, away from all the noise. The whole time I thought about what Stud said, about bringing hope back. It appeared that most other people were too preoccupied with destroying what they could get their hands on to think up a plan.

I went to my residence to tell Mama the news. She was paler than usual and could barely get her head off her pillow. The smell had only gotten worse as the medics tried everything they could to keep her going. I tried to numb it all out, but it was impossible.

“What’s all the noise?” Mama asked weakly when I sat down next to her.

“The leaders are going to end the Hunting Office.”
She tried to get up, falling back down instead. “Are you serious?”
“Yeah.”
“That’s terrible.”
“I’d doubt they’d change their minds, but I think they should.”
“Someone needs to make them.”
“That’s what Stud said.”

Mama had a coughing fit. I didn’t know what to do and so rubbed her arm uselessly. I heard a knock at the door. I waited until Mama was feeling better to answer it.

“Stud?”

He stood at the door, looking out of breath. The noise had settled.
“Hey, the leaders are going to have an open meeting tonight. I’m going around telling everyone to be there.”

“Why are they doing that?”

“It’s the only thing they can think to do to keep the unrest down.”

Stud ran off to tell the next residence. I went back to be with Mama.

“Are you going to go?” Mama asked once I told her what Stud had said.

“Yeah, let’s see if anybody can think of a plan.”

“They’re hard to please. It’s going to take someone really smart to come up with something, like someone who works in the Files Office.”

“I don’t even do anything,” I explained, “I just look at the stuff.”

“But you’ve learned a lot.”

“I’ll think about it. Did the medics come by today?” I wanted any excuse to change the subject.

“Yes.”

“What did they say?”

“Oh, nothing too bad,” she lowers her voice, “I’m restricted to the room.”

“What? Why didn’t you start with that?”

“It’s not that bad.”

“Not that bad? The medics only restrict people to their rooms if they think . . . if they think the person is . . .”

“Beyond help.”
“Is that what they think?”
“What do they know?”
“Mama, they’re medics for a reason. They’ve been trained to make these decisions.”
Mama sighed, “Don’t worry about it.”
“Do you know what I bet would help? Real food, not that junk Nutrition they make down there in their little machines. You don’t even want to know what’s in that.”
“And I thank you for not telling me.”
“If they close that office then there’s no way anybody will ever get anything real to eat.”
“That’s why someone needs to make up a plan to get more food. The best idea would be one that makes it so nobody hunts because that’s clearly not working.”
“What else is there?” I asked, drawing a blank mentally.
“I don’t know, but I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”
I helped Mama back to sleep and then left the horrible smelling residence. So much happened that day already, and it still wasn’t over. I headed down to the library and sat in my seat in the back corner. Maybe I was the one who could come up with an idea, but what? I thought about what Stud and Mama said, but couldn’t make any connections with how to get food without hunting and managing to quiet the angry citizens of Humurom hungry for real food.
I spent the next half hour in the library, trying to think up a plan. There was a lot riding on it. If it was good enough everyone would look to the plan to save the Hunting Office; my mother was also a huge factor. I was certain that real food would make her so much better; I just needed to find some. I wondered what Milton would have said about it all. He probably would have had a plan, sold it, and already completed it in the time it took me to think of one.

The noise had greatly diminished since the open meeting was announced. There was no doubt, however, that it would pick right up again once it started. I finished *Don Quixote*, hoping it would clear my mind enough to think of something. It actually worked, five minutes later I ran out, heading straight for the Leader Office.

I wanted to get there before I forgot what to say. Stud showed me a secret entrance through a wall in one of the hallways. I took it and ended up in a closet. I could hear muffled talking from the leaders, but could not understand them through the door. I went over what I was going to say in my head, and then jumped out of the closet a little too fast. All the leaders were sitting at a large table. They jumped at the sight of me.

The Residence Leader was the first to speak. “What are you doing here? Get out!”

“Wait,” Matilik called, “Hardin is it? What do you want?”
It was my turn to speak. “I have a plan that can be announced at the meeting.”

“Then why are you telling us here?” Matililk asked.

“I wanted to make sure we worked out the details here first so that we don’t get anyone wanting to give their own.”

My old boss the Dining Leader looked at me suspiciously. “You don’t think anyone else has any good ideas?”

“The people are scared and hungry; you don’t want them to be making decisions in a mass.”

Matililk nodded his approval. “Alright, what are you thinking?”

I cleared my throat and prepared to be laughed at. “One final hunt. I’ll go back out, farther than ever before. It’ll take a few days but I might find something.

No one said anything. I kept expecting them to tear apart my idea, but they actually were thinking it over. The Residence Leader spoke first. “No one has ever tried an overnight hunt.”

“It’s interesting,” Matililk said slowly, “but are you sure you want to hunt again?”

My current boss the Files Leader came to my aid. “Hardin is much better now.”

“I am.”

“What does everyone think?” Matililk said to the other leaders.

The Hunting Leader was the first one to agree, his job would be saved if the plan worked. The Residence Leader was the only one to vote “no” but was soon convinced by the others.

“It’s decided.” Matililk announced.
“Thank you, so I’ll -”
“But,” Matilik interrupted, “you’ll need to bring a team.”
“A team?”
“Just in case something happens there will be others to bring back the food.”
“Nobody volunteers to be a hunter.” I complained. “How am I supposed to find anybody willing?”
“There actually are a few of them that like it.” The Hunting Leader corrected. “I have their residence numbers; I’ll give them to you.”
“Very good, we’ve made a lot of progress here.” Matilik said clearly relieved, “When we start the meeting we will tell everyone the news, though they already know somehow, then we’ll ask for any ideas. Make sure you raise your hand. Tell us the details we just discussed and we’ll agree. If this goes well then you may just be a hero again.”

The leaders left to get the open meeting ready, except for the Hunting Leader who stayed back a minute. “What of your mother?” I could hear the concern in his voice.

“I hope to bring back food. I think it will help her more than Nutrition.”

“Let’s hope so.”

I went straight out to get a good seat. The dining area was already packed. The chairs and tables had been replaced; there was no evidence of the afternoon’s riot. No one bothered to whisper now; complaints and insults were coming from every angle. The leaders
came out of the kitchens where they had been getting ready. Their appearance was met with a series of shouts and boos. Matilik took ten minutes to calm the crowd. He then cleared his throat and began.

“Thank you all for coming. As most of you already know we are thinking about shutting down the Hunting Office.” This was met with a new wave of jeers. “Please let me finish. You must know why we have chosen to do this. While we may not talk about it very much it is known that we are currently in a conflict that has been ongoing for almost one hundred fifty years. Every time someone steps from the safety of Humurom their life is in jeopardy. For so long this has been something overlooked for those not attached to someone in the Hunting Office. What a lie. We are all connected to somebody there. And that is why their safety comes as the most important thing. We have heard the band play that sad tune too many times over the last few months, while nothing has come from their sacrifices. But, if there is someone out there that has an idea that can save the Hunting Office please speak up now.” I raised my hand. “Yes, you there.” He called to me.

I stood up in front of everyone. There were several cheers as people saw who it was, their last meat bringer. “I propose a long hunting trip that would explore new areas in search for food. It would take several days, but I am confident that the main problem is that we are looking in the wrong areas. The hunters are only going towards the Cityers, not away.”

Someone in the back stood up. “They have us surrounded!” The man shouted.
“I don’t think that’s quite accurate.” I said, searching for the voice.

“We need to attack them!” Somebody else yelled.

There were many shouts of agreement.

This was getting out of hand. “Wait a minute!”

Everyone began shouting over each other.

“I will bring several hunters with me –”

“You will die if you go out that long.” Some random person shouted.

“We will bring extra Nutrition.” I grimaced at the thought of the stuff.

“We should attack now.” The first person called out above the roar.

“No! We have no idea where they are and do not need to be starting a war within a war. This journey is to be peaceful. To look for food so you idiots don’t destroy Humurom in your misplaced anger.”

“Who should we be mad at?” The same person asked.

“Nobody. What we need to survive is food, and I propose a way to get it.”

“We should be mad at the Cityers, they’re the ones killing our hunters and we should kill them.”

“This is about peace! Can’t you simple morons figure out that violence and violence only creates more pain? This trip is for food, and nothing more.” I was becoming increasingly heated.

“Milton would have attacked!”

“SHUT UP!” I screeched. “Milton was about survival.”
I found myself lunging after the man. The crowd parted and I had a clear shot at him. Suddenly Stud jumped in my way and threw his arms around me. He dragged me away from the scene; out of the crowd and up a corridor. The shouting continued as he pushed me into the Leader Office and closed the door behind us.

“I’m sorry.” Stud apologized.

“Who was that guy?” I said after I finally cooled off.

“I think he works in the Residence Office, don’t worry about him.”

“Milton wouldn’t have attacked anyone, even if I did lead him into . . .”

“No, don’t say that. That wasn’t you, it was only them.”

“Probably led there by me.” I whispered.

“Just don’t, alright; please, not now.”

“That was horrible,” I said trying to change the subject, “there’s no way they’ll let me go now.”

“I wonder whether or not this is all about food.” Stud looked at me suspiciously.

“Of course it is; my mother has been restricted to our residence. Real food might make her better.”

“But is that really all?”

“Well,” I started slowly, “if I run into a Cityer I might say something about how we are all the same and this fighting is useless.”

“So that’s it, you want to mediate.”

“I want people to stop dying.” I corrected.
“What makes you think they will want to talk? As far as we know all the deaths have been ambushes; no talking there.”

“That’s why I’m going to seek them out where they live.”

“Hardin, you’re never going to get close. They probably have guards everywhere.”

“Hey, Milton took out a guard once, how do you think we got that case of food?”

“And look how they retaliated, or are retaliating.”

“It should at least be tried.” I argued.

“Don’t get yourself killed,” Stud warned, “your mother wouldn’t be able to handle it in her condition.”

“I fear she can’t handle her condition.”

Matilik entered the office. He looked unfazed by the mess downstairs. “Alright Hardin, here are a few names of some hunters who might be willing.”

He handed me a slip of brown paper. “I’m going? Even after that?”

Matilik nodded, “Yes, after the shouting ended and ideas started coming we realized that yours was still the best.”

I became instantly relieved on the food situation, but increasingly stressed over having to leave my mother. “Thank you, how do I find these people?”

“Their residence numbers are on here.”

“When do I leave?”

“We’ll get everything ready. All you have to do is get a team together and tell your mother you’ll be leaving for a few days. Now I
have to get things ready. You really managed to shut those people up. They actually might get hope from this mission.”

“They didn’t seem like it when I was down there.”

“You probably didn’t hear it, but half those shouts were for your plan.”

Matilik left us. When he opened the door I no longer heard shouting. Maybe he was right.

“There you go, you’re all ready.” Stud said, clapping his hands together.

“I guess so.” I was feeling a little nervous, but also excited about the possibility of finally ending the war.

“I’ll take care of your mother while you’re gone.”

“You don’t have to do that, the medics will.” I didn’t feel like I could ask Stud for anything else. He already had been a great friend to me, taking care of Mama seemed like too much to expect.

“Do you really trust them for everything?”

“You’re right.” I didn’t trust them at all.

“Now get out there and get your team.” Stud said with a smile.
I had to tell Mama. She would be so proud knowing that I was going to help Humurom. That’s what I was doing after all, finally making it possible for everyone to go outside without being scared. I was going to be a hero once again. Only this time it was to last. One helping of meat only lasts one night, but the ability to get as much as we wanted; that was going to last a long time. I had the ability, I was sure of it, to create peace not known for a century in a half and probably longer.

My mother was going to get better after this, once she had real food. What bothered me was that she would have to hold out for several days without me. Not that I was much help. I did what I could, but had no medic training or any idea as to how I could do more. I was stuck in the worst place I could be. Right between not knowing how to help and not being able to; while watching others in the same place. It created feelings of utter hopelessness inside me. All this mixed with the notion that I may have been the reason Milton was dead. He was a professional who had hunted for years without being seen. I was a new and inexperienced and probably gave our position away. Stud didn’t want me talking about it, but we both knew it was my fault.

A new thought came to me. What if I gave away our location again? The more people that came with me meant more chances for death; which meant more sadness. I pushed the idea from my mind.
and refocused on looking for the Cityers, only wanting peace. If they attacked then we would lower our weapons and they would know we mean peace. I didn’t think long enough on the idea to figure if it would actually work. I was feeling better, and that’s all that mattered at the moment.

Mama was sitting up in bed when I got there, medic at her side. The medic left when they saw me, I wasn’t above giving them dirty looks. I knew they weren’t to blame for her condition, but blaming somebody helped me get through it.

I looked at Mama a long time. My mind searched for what she looked like before her sickness set in. There was only a hazy memory, probably altered over the years. In it she was laughing, her hair down and her eyes full of life. The only thing left was how she looked while ill. Face sunken and gaunt, eyes unfocused. There was a weak smile as she tried to remain hopeful. Her hair was falling out. I hated when people visited because they always reminded her of how it once was. Long, beautiful: the best hair in Humurom. I didn’t know if it depressed her. I never could bring myself to ask.

She glanced up at me and her smile instantly widened. I was her main reason to live, she told me that frequently. I only wished that the medics could find out what was wrong. We all wanted to know, but could never figure it out. The medics said the tests were too invasive to be tried, that it would only lead to further harm.

“What was all that? I heard shouting.” Mama’s voice was weak. I took Mama’s hand. “I pitched an idea to the leaders.”

“Really? What was it?”
“I am going to leave for a few days . . . o-on a hunting trip to see if there is more food farther away.”

Her smile faded slightly. “Oh, well you be safe. I know that if anyone can outsmart the Cityers it’s you. Please be careful.”

She took it better than I thought she would. “I’ll be back real soon. And I’m going to bring a team of the best hunters. We’ll be back in no time with food and the knowledge of where to get more.”

“I know you will.”

Mama closed her eyes and fell asleep. I half wondered if she was just trying to end the conversation. I kissed her cheek and stayed until I was sure she was asleep. I turned my attention to the piece of paper Matilik gave me. Two of the hunters on the list were on the fourth floor. It was getting late but I decided to see if I could get a head start on making a team. The first one was only two doors down from my own residence, which was strange because I did not recognize the name at all. When I got there I knocked, having no idea what to say. A young girl opened the door.

“I’m sorry that it is so late,” I said while looking at the floor, “but is Dala here?”

“I’m here.” She said.

I finally looked at her. She had brown hair and seemed very annoyed that I was at her door, which made me even more nervous. “You’re Dala? Is there another Dala, a hunter?” I knew there wouldn’t be since no one was allowed to have the same name as someone else. It seemed improbable that the leaders would make a list with someone who clearly was not a hunter on it.
“Still me.”
“Hunters have to be at least sixteen, and you don’t really look it.”
“I’m twelve.” She said as if it was the clearest thing in the world.
“Oh great.” I said sarcastically, believing that I had just become part of a bad joke.
“I can hunt.”
I had no reason to not believe her. “Right, well I was wondering if you wanted to go on a long hunting mission to find more food.”
“As long as I’m out there and not in here I’ll do almost anything.”
“Do you hate it in here that much?”
She nodded vigorously. “Yeah, how can anybody live in this metal tube? It’s terrible.
“So you’re in?”
“You’re a quick one. I’ll go, just get me when you leave.”
“Right.”
“Bye now.” She closed the door.

One down, even if it was a twelve year old. I got the idea that I should probably have met her parents, but was too happy in having a team started that I didn’t want any reason to doubt the members by getting parents involved. While there I noticed that the next person on the list was only a few doors down. I wasn’t as nervous and wanted to get as much out of the way while I was still confident. I knocked on the next door.

“Yes.” A girl about my age opened the door. She had black hair and skin much darker than mine.
“Hello, is Lace here?”

“She might be.”

I knew this girl was Lace, I had seen her several times before leaving the Hunting Office. I played along anyway. “If you see here tell her that I want her to go on a mission to find food.”

“I heard all about it.”

“Oh, well if you can get an answer -”

“I’ll think about it.” She closed the door before I could say anything else.

That was enough for one night. Before returning home I took a walk around. I absent-mindedly led myself downstairs through 5 and 6. No one was around; it was the perfect time for me to think. My steps echoed softly throughout. Half of the lamps had already been extinguished for the night. At two post day the rest would be put out.

Many thoughts coursed through my mind, most had no connection to anything going on, and so I concentrated on the ones that did; primarily the idea that I was on the verge of becoming a hero. That thought would not leave me, and I was glad. It made me feel like what I was about to do would actually mean something. After that there was no room in my head for the very real possibilities of danger. And I planned on keeping it that way. I was a strong believer in hope. While it never seemed to work before I thought that if I believed hard enough the journey would be a good one.

The floor cleaners came out for their nightly shifts. I felt it was about time to head back and get some sleep. Halfway around 4 to my residence I saw somebody coming towards me. It was too dark to see
who it was at first, but as we got closer to each other I saw that it was my old friend Peter. We stared at each other awkwardly for a minute, all our past adventures coming to mind.

We had met each other during lessons about fifteen years before. We were both quiet and didn’t have any friends. I noticed that we were similar and wanted to be friends, but it took three years for us to talk. After that we were doing all kinds of things together. Many nights were spent sneaking around after hours. That is until we were caught by Matilik, who at the time was the leader of the Hunting Office. We also both had our first jobs in the Dining Office. I was a dishwasher and he was a water collector. That was the best job in Humurom. Peter would spend all day going back and forth from the kitchens to the underground spring. The spring was in a cave reached by going through a very long tunnel. We would spend a lot of time down there because it was the only place we could go that wasn’t covered with metal.

Things started to fall apart between us when I was transferred to the Hunting Office. I was out all the time, and really tired when I got back. I always had a feeling that he wanted to keep his distance because of the danger I was in. As if he didn’t want to know someone who could die any day. I hadn’t seen him at all since I started at the Files Office. Being so sad all the time I never wanted to see or talk to anyone. The only person I did talk to was Stud, and that’s mainly because he wouldn’t shut up.
We continued to look at each other. After a while he opened his mouth, but thought better against talking. I started things off. “Hey” was all I could say.

“Hey.” He said back.

“It’s been a while.” I said.

“Yeah it has. You know that idea you had down there, it’s pretty good.”

“Thank you.”

“Have you found your team yet?”

“I’m still looking, but I’ve asked a few people.”

Peter took to looking at the floor. “I’ve never been out of Humurom.”

“Most people haven’t.”

“I know, just keep that in mind.”

“Do you want to come?” It was time to cut to the chase.

“I’m not a trained hunter.”

“You’re strong, smart, that works for me.”

“Thank you . . . so . . . can I come with you?”

I thought that I had made that obvious, but apparently not. “Yes, I’ll tell you the details when I can.”

It took a while for me to get to sleep. When it finally did happen I had a nightmare where I was constantly being killed by explosions. The hope did not transfer to my subconscious. In the morning I was awoken by a knock at the door. Still half asleep I thought it was another explosion. I was still shaking slightly when I opened the door. A messenger from Matilik told me that a meeting had been arranged
with all the willing hunters in the Hunting Office. I got Peter from his residence and we walked down together. Dala and Lace were there, along with one other person.

“Is this it?” I was expecting more people to show up.

Lace came up to me first, with a big guy who looked a little like her. “This is my cousin Morome.”

Morome was tall and large. I had seen him on occasion; he was easy to spot in a crowd. “I jumped at the chance to get back out there. I used to be a hunter, but was switched to the Residence Office.” He was much more pleasant than I thought he would be.

“Great, it’s good to have you.” I tried to sound like the leader I thought I would have to become in order for this trip to go well.

“Is this everyone?” Peter asked when he walked in behind me, mirroring my thoughts.

Dala sat on the large round table in the center of the room. “I don’t think the leaders want a giant crowd leaving.”

“That would be a migration . . .” I was instantly brought back to a different time. I wondered what Milton would have said if he could have seen us all there.

“Where are we going to go?” Morome asked.

“I think it best that we head away from where everyone else went.” Peter said. “Where would that be?”

Lace looked concerned. “You mean head away from the Hunting Grounds? The place has a name for a reason.”
“And when was the last time anybody actually hunted there?” Dala pointed out. “It should be called the ‘you’re being hunted grounds’.”

“But we’ve always gone there.” Lace said.

“And maybe that’s the problem brightness.”

I was beginning to see why Dala was a hunter.

“You better watch it.” Lace warned.

Morome stood between them. “Hey, cut it out.”

Peter also got in the mix. “This is about peace right Hardin?”

“We’re not hunting.” I said. The room got quiet. All eyes were on me. “You all are the only ones who need to know; do not tell the leaders. The mission is to engage the Cityers in talks.”

Lace looked like she was about to have a fit. “What? The only thing the Cityers are engaged in is killing.”

Dala slowly nodded her head. “Sounds interesting.”

“I agree with Lace.” Morome said. “This sounds insane.”

Peter spoke slowly, as if my mental state was in question. “Hardin, this is not a good idea.”

“Look, this is what I am going to do. If you’re with me than alright, if not then please leave.”

“This is just stupid.” Lace whispered.

Dala stood up. “Then leave, nobody’s keeping you here.”

I was feeling that nobody was going to come with me at that point. My hopeful feelings were beginning to diminish.

“Think it over, Hardin.” Peter pleaded.
“I have for too long now. I was originally planning to go nine months ago.”

“That didn’t kill the idea.” Lace said.

“Great choice of words.” Dala sneered.

“Well it should have.”

“Milton was alright with the idea.” I said, hoping it would help my argument.

“Everyone knows he was a little off.”

I was annoyed that Lace would talk about Milton that way, but I didn’t want to start another argument so I let it slide. “Listen, the Cityers are just like us.”

“Says who?” Lace was in my face now.

“Listen!” I shouted. “The Cityers are people just like us. I’ve been working in the Files Office and have learned our history, and it doesn’t add up.” This was the first time I told anybody this. “There is talk of brutal attacks by Cityers but it seems so one sided in its depictions of what happened. I can’t continue to believe that they only want to destroy us, there has to be some fault by our ancestors that they are angry about and I want to apologize for it.”

Morome was the first to speak. “Did you ever think that maybe they really did just want us all dead? If we are all dead then they could get everything and have the whole area to themselves.”

“I wondered that,” I admitted, “but then I wondered, ‘what is the whole area?’ In the files it talks of other people, other countries. Where are they? What happened to them?”

“Maybe they were killed by the Cityers.”
I couldn’t believe that. “Giant civilizations with millions of people being killed off by Cityers? I don’t think so.”

“It does sound strange.” Dala said.

I wasn’t getting anywhere with just telling them why we should go, so I decided to try to make them feel as if they needed to go. “In the files are paintings. Wonderful works of art with more colors than can be imagined. They show a world that isn’t gray and dead, but alive and beautiful. There are trees growing everywhere, buildings that go to the sky. That’s what I want to bring back; end violence and fear because they don’t work. It hasn’t so far and it never will. I truly believe that the only way to get back to that world is finding the Cityers and working out what’s gone wrong.”

“I agree.” Dala said quietly, thoughtfully.

Peter nodded in assent.

Lace groaned. “I still don’t know.”

Morome slowly began nodding. “It’s better than nothing.”

Dala turned to Lace. “Don’t you want to see that world?”

“It sounds nice,” She agreed, “but I would choose this world over death every time.”

Dala rubbed Lace’s shoulder. “We are a team now; we’ll look after each other.”

“Let me think it over.”

I had several onboard already and that was good enough for me. “Alright, I’m going to try to leave tomorrow morning. If I wait too long I might not want to go.”
Slowly the hunters, and Peter, left. I had a lot to plan out and went down for a late breakfast. The dining area was almost vacant when I got there. The only tables filled had floor cleaners eating before going to sleep for the day. The Nutrition was just as tasteless and nasty as usual. I took it up to my residence and gave half to Mama. She ate it quickly and fell back asleep. I sat there, in her room for a while, listening to her shallow breathing.

My mind fought with the idea of leaving. I wanted to be there for Mama, but the plan was already in progress. Once again I had to remind myself that the plan would work and that everything would be better. I mulled this over for half an hour. There weren’t many things that I could think about in the day before the journey. My mind was stuck on the same few thoughts and I couldn’t get passed them. My mother, the journey, being a hero, that’s all that was there.

I spent the entire afternoon taking a nap on my old mat, hoping some amazing idea would come to me in a dream, unfortunately none did. A knock at the door finally woke me. It was Matilik. He said everything had been decided and that we were to leave the next morning. We would meet at the exit. Instead of feeling excited, I became nauseas. All those thoughts exploded in me at once. All the worries and fears that I had been suppressing came to the surface when it became official that I would be leaving. I fought it, and tried to regain control of myself. I spent the night in Mama’s room, in the chair usually reserved for meal times. She woke several times, wished me good luck for the journey, and fell back asleep. I was afraid to talk to her about it, in case I changed my mind because of it.
The main fear was of the Cityers. I told the other hunters that they would gladly engage in talks with us. But all I could think of was the bright flash that came before I blacked out nine months before. There was a high possibility that that might happen again, but I didn’t dare think it. I was a strong believer in hope, and if hope prevailed in my thoughts then we would be alright.
VII

The morning came too soon. I woke up in the chair but don’t remember falling asleep. I emptied my old hunting bag made of deer hide, and filled it with water jugs and left over Nutrition I couldn’t bring myself to eat before. It was about time to leave. Mama was asleep. I woke her to say goodbye.

“Mama, I’m leaving now. Is there anything I can get you?”

“No, I don’t suppose there is. The medics are going to come by with food later.”

“Are you sure you’re alright with me going? The team is ready; I can send them on alone.”

She shook her head. “No, no, you are the leader; you need to go.”

“I’m worried about you.”

“She smiled sleepily. “Don’t be, you’ll do great. I love you, Hardy.”

“I don’t know,” I said uncertainly, “you’re restricted to your room, you can barely get out of bed.”

“I’ve always complained about not getting enough sleep.”

“Mama!”

She laughed. “Don’t mind me, go out there and have a good time.”
“What if something happens to me? The chances are really high.” I said it without thinking that it might make her fear for me.

“Don’t think of it. The more you think of bad things happening the more you’ll be certain they will.”

“Sometimes we have to think of things.” I whispered.

“I know, but don’t dwell, that’s where the problems are.”

“Do you think you’ll get better? I mean do you really think it?” I didn’t want to ask, but I couldn’t leave without knowing her answer.

“Yes, absolutely. Now go, the faster you leave the faster you can get back.”

“And what if I don’t find anything?” She took my hand. “You will, now go.”

“I’ll be back before you know it.”

“I know you will.”

She rested her head back on the pillow. I waited until she was snoring softly to go. In a strange way, I felt like I was going to miss that bizarre smell of our residence. When the door closed behind me I refused to look back. I would have plenty of time to look forward when I got back.

The noise of breakfast filled Humurom. Only a few people were in the halls. I found myself alone in the hall that led up to 1 and began talking with myself, hoping to keep myself calm.

“No one is going to die. No one will. I’m certain, but what if I do? So what if I do. No! Mama needs me . . . I need me. But what if I do? I will. No, no, no. I can’t think about that. I won’t think of it.
We are going to make trust, I’ll be a hero and Mama will get better. That’s all that’s going to happen. But what if it doesn’t? It will!”

I stopped in the dark hallway. I focused on my breathing, on slowing it, releasing the fear. I couldn’t do it. It was too late to change anything. I kept walking, ready for anything. Several people who were also in the hall stopped me and said that Humurom was depending on us. I wasn’t sure how to feel about that, and I didn’t spend very much time thinking about it.

The giant exit door was already a popular destination, with six people hanging around beside it, the four hunters along with Matilik and Stud. When I came up Matilik gathered us all together.

“All ready?” He asked happily.

“Yes.” I announced without consulting anyone else.

“Then good luck, and goodbye.” He strode off without another word.

The hunters looked serious, determined. Peter looked excited, he was about to go outside for the first time in his life.

“Let’s head out.” Peter tried to unlock the door. He had no idea what he was doing, so the guard came and did it for him.

Stud stood out of our way, watching. “Hardin.” He called. I went to him. He wished me good luck.

“Stud, please look after my mother.”

“I will don’t worry.”

My breathing grew shallower than Mama’s. “I don’t know if I can do this anymore.”

“You’re going to be fine; you’re going to make things better.
I shook my head as the nausea came back. “I don’t know if that’s possible now.”

Stud grinned to make me feel better. “Hey, unless things are perfect things can still get better. And there’s certainly nothing here that’s perfect.”

I nodded.

“Just breathe and walk on.”

“Yeah.”

Stud led me to the door. “Hardin, come back with a bunch of food.”

“I will.”

The door closed with a soft thud. I slowly turned around to see the world for the first time in almost a year. Everything was still, as it always was. A bright gray light from the sky lit the ruined landscape as far as the eye could see. The fresh air felt good on my face and in my lungs. The ground was littered with jagged bits of walls. Since working in the files I learned so much about how the world looked before. I never noticed it before, but streets and alleys could still be seen among the wreckage. I imagined houses and yards, just like I had seen in books. It depressed me to see how far away from that we were. I longed for it so badly. I would have given anything to walk down one of those streets before the war. But I knew that I never would.

We climbed down the ladder and began our trek into the unknown. The only clue I had as to where the Cityers might be was the
guard that Milton knocked out. He had been a little past the Hunting Grounds and that is where we were headed.

No one spoke. I was busy making up a plan that I should have already made up, and the hunters were focused on being silent. Peter made the most noise. He looked around in awe at everything around him, missing key steps and muddying his boots only minutes in. As I looked at the others I noticed something that I forgot: weapons. Peter had a long wooden club hanging from his belt, Lace carried a long wooden spear that was sharpened at one end, Morome had a thin metal tube accompanied by several projectile needles, and Dala had two weapons. The first was a thin metal tube which was jagged at one end, and a wooden bow. I had never seen a bow in person; she must have been the only person in Humurom with one. Dala seemed to notice that I was eyeing the weapons.

“This is big time buddy, you’re gonna need a weapon.” She handed me her thin metal tube. “Now I suppose that we are just going to head out until we find one of their cities. Any word from the files on where they might be?”

“Not a one.” I said dismally.

“At least we have something to go on.” She sneered. “If you want to be the leader you better get to the front, Peter was trying to call the shots this morning.”

“He’s smart.”

“He’s also never been outside Humurom.” She jumped over a large stone, landing silently on the other side.
“Then why are you following him.” I thought about jumping the same rock to show off, but I had a feeling I would just land on my face.

“I’m more of an ‘attack from the back’ type hunter. But I do have a question. When you were attacked, what did they use?”

I thought back to that day when we were attacked. I had tried for nine months to completely forget it, but it never really left me. It visited in my dreams, and at odd hours when I had nothing else to think about. “I’m not sure, but there were a lot of little explosions.”

“Grenades most likely, I’ve read about them. They would definitely do that. Did you know that you are the only person to survive a Cityer attack? I think that’s why the leaders approved this. They think you fought them or something. Did you?”

“Nobody has ever asked me how I survived. I think that they thought it must be too traumatic for me to retell it.”

“How did it happen?” She asked quietly.

All eyes were now on me. Everyone wanted to know my answer. “One of their grenades went off near me and I blacked out. When I came to they were gone.”

They all went back to what they were doing. Dala looked disappointed. “Oh. They thought you were dead. That leaves another question. Why didn’t they just follow you home instead of attack?”

“I wonder that a lot.”

I disappointed them in some way. I never heard the rumors about how I fought the Cityers, but I guess I wouldn’t since I spent my time trying to block out the rest of the world. The hunters must have thought I was some big hero, ready to go back and beat up a few more
Cityers. I feared that that was the only reason why they came, to see me in action again. If they still believed that I did those things than they were going to be really disappointed.
We came up upon it too fast. I wasn’t ready. My feet involuntarily stopped and my head began to spin. We had reached the ruins of the church. My body shook and I was certain that I would either faint or cry. I did neither. Instead I just stood there, staring at the spot where Milton had lain when I saw him dead.

“This is where he died.” My anxiety showed through my voice.

The metal cross from the roof lay nearby. I stumbled over the rubble and got it, placing in the ground right where he had been. I had read about praying, but had no knowledge of how to do it. I knelt down near the cross and whispered to it. “Please, somebody take care of Milton’s soul. Thank you for listening.”

“There are still holes, they were definitely grenades.” Dala said, looking around. I couldn’t help feel annoyed that she paid no respect for my fallen friend.

Lace put her hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry Hardin. Milton was the one that trained me.”

“Me too. He was really something.” Morome added.

This took me by surprise. For some reason I had never thought about others being trained by him. I always thought I had been his only partner. It showed that despite being a hunter for a while, I had no idea how the office worked.
“How was he to you all?” I asked, trying to make it seem that it was no big deal that they also knew him.

“He was nice.” Lace said.

Morome laughed, “He was insane.”

We all laughed, momentarily forgetting the danger we were still in.

“Hey come on, we shouldn’t stay anywhere too long.” Peter sounded worried. It was interesting that out of everyone there it was the one who had never hunted that was the most worried.

We continued on. I felt considerably better than I thought I would. Peter still led the way. The landscape never changed, save for some dead trees appearing here and there. We hid in places, snuck around others. Our eyes and ears were on full alert. Luckily they did not pick up anything. There was no one in any direction. There could have easily been a trap just ahead the whole time. After a while we snacked on Nutrition, but didn’t stop.

“You know,” I started with a chunk of dried up Nutrition in my mouth, “come to think of it, you all decided to come with a lot less begging than I thought it would take.”

“Anybody who doesn’t want the Hunting Office to close would have come.” Lace said.

“So what’s going to happen when we come back? Even if we talk to the Cityers, the leaders are still going to be expecting food or they will close the office anyway.” Peter pointed out.

“If we can make trust then we won’t have to worry about hunting being dangerous anymore.” I said.
“I don’t know,” Peter groaned, “I’m still worried about whether or not they will want to talk.”

Dala appeared at his side. “You can go back to Humurom if you want.”

“Oh no, I’m enjoying the fresh air.”

“Well, fresh enough.” Morome said.

“That’s why we all wanted to come out here.” Lace said. “It may be dangerous, but we are doing something, not just waiting for others to decide things for us.”

“Exactly.” Morome agreed.

“Alright, let’s keep it down; I don’t want to be seen by anyone.” Peter really was becoming the leader.

There were several more minutes of silence. Suddenly I thought of asking about something that had been bothering me for a while. “Does anyone know what happened to the second case?”

Lace appeared concerned. “What second case?”

“You guys didn’t know there were two cases?”

“Cases of what?” Morome demanded.

I found it hard to believe that they wouldn’t know about it, but then again it wasn’t hard to imagine that Matilik would keep it a secret. “When we brought back food that time, it was in a case that we found. The second case had weapons in it. Does anybody know what happened to them?”

“I never knew you found cases; nobody told us anything about where the food came from.” Morome said.
Dala chuckled, “If I knew there were weapons I definitely would have tried to get them. What were they?”

“Guns.”

“I bet they were mad to lose them.” Dala laughed.

“I think that’s why they attacked us.” I said thoughtfully. “And when they saw we didn’t have them they left.”

“What do you think they thought about that?” Peter asked.

“I think . . . they thought we were going to attack. I have a thought that they keep attacking because they are confusing our hunters for attackers.”

Dala nodded. “That actually makes a lot of sense. Did you tell that to Matilik?”

“No, this trip was to be only about food to him. I knew they weren’t going to let me leave if I told them anything else.”

“I can’t believe they let us leave at all.” Lace said.

I thought back to what Stud told me when we were watching the aftermath of the decision to close the Hunting Office. “They were desperate. They knew it was the only way to keep people hopeful, at least for a little while.”

“How can anybody be hopeful down there?” Dala said. “Every day that I come out to hunt I want to run and never stop.”

I knew how she felt. The only thing that kept me from leaving and never returning was my mother. I couldn’t leave her and I couldn’t bring her. I sympathized with Dala more now. She was so young, and yet lived in Humurom too long already. It’s a wonder that somebody let her be a hunter at all.
“How did you become a hunter so young?” Morome asked, echoing my thoughts.

Dala sighed deeply, as if remembering great adventures of the past. “Both my parents died when I was real young in the sickness outbreak ten years ago. My guardian was in the Hunting Office. He couldn’t control me so he took me out hunting with him. The leaders were mad when they found out, but I was already trained and nobody was volunteering anymore.”

The sickness outbreak was a terrible thing that happened when I was only twelve. About twenty people died, which was a lot considering how few people there were to begin with. Nobody knew what caused it for certain. “My dad died in that outbreak . . .” They all looked at me. I hadn’t discussed that with anyone.

I had enough with Peter leading. He had no idea where he was going and nobody seemed to care. I took over as leader and put us back in the right direction. An hour later we arrived at the Hunting Grounds. The only way to tell we were anyplace different was because there was a string of dead trees in the distance. That was the unofficial end of our zone. The Cityers were thought to be beyond it. It was just a little ways passed that that the guard had been when Milton knocked him out.

We stopped at the trees and made sure that our path was clear. This was the real beginning to our journey. The hunters readied their weapons. I slid mine in my belt, hoping it would show a peaceful gesture.
“I’ve only been this far once and I’ve never seen anyone.” Lace said quietly, cautiously.

“I’ve never seen any cities near here.” Morome said. “I doubt there are big groups of them here. We’ll have to keep going.”

And we did. Peter turned out to be fairly good at keeping silent. The sun was setting behind the constant cloud cover. It slowly grew darker, perfect for sneaking around. When it finally dipped below the horizon I realized that we need a new plan. It was getting too dark. Only minutes later we couldn’t see anything at all. We gave up and sat down. We ate without making too much noise, and then assigned night watch, though it should have been called night listen. Peter had first watch, followed by Morome and then Dala. We managed to find a dry area and tried to get some sleep.

It was incredibly difficult. My ears picked up every little sound and turned it into monsters and attackers. I concentrated on the others’ breathing and hoped to get to sleep. I finally did and had a strange dream about people being ground through a machine. It was gruesome but it didn’t have anything to do with Cityers so I was alright with it.

I found myself staring into the darkness; my head ached after resting on the hard ground for so long. There was no good position to be in, not that it mattered I couldn’t get back to sleep anyway. Then I began to wonder why I woke up in the first place. There was a noise, a shuffling nearby. I jumped out of my skin when Dala began talking.

“Hey, hey, get up. There’s something moving over there.”
The heavy breathing stopped, we were all awake. The noise slowly got louder. I strained my ears and listened hard. *Footsteps.* I couldn’t tell how many, but quite a few. My breathing became shallow in anticipation of them finding us. They were at least twenty yards away, walking in a group. The noise slowly declined into the direction that we were headed. I couldn’t tell what anybody else was thinking, but I was freaking out inside. What if they were the Cityers? This was not the chance I had been looking for. Any type of noise would probably draw an attack. Where were they coming from and how come we didn’t see them? Where were they going? Back to a city? I thought about following them but there was no telling if there were any trying to catch up that we might run into. The best chance we had was to wait until morning and then follow.

Minutes passed. I didn’t know what to do. Stay up and wait for more sounds or go to sleep. The hunters were still up, on high alert; waiting for further clues. There was only silence once more. The footsteps were gone and we had no idea where they were.

A scream. I froze with terror. It came from somewhere in the distance; in the direction the steps went. More followed. There was nothing we could do but sit and hope. Had they been ambushed? Were those people being attacked by Cityers? Then something else happened. A light appeared on the horizon. Small at first, growing in size until it glowed high into the darkness. It wasn’t the sun; the sky would have lightened before its appearance. It was a fire. Wood cracked and burned, accompanied by more screams. There was a city out there.
I dug my hands into the dirt, attempting to fight the urge to help. Whatever was going on out there was none of my business, and going would only make things worse for us. In the growing light I could make out the team. We all had the same look of terror, of surprise etched across our faces. Nobody moved; nobody dared give away our position.

The screams soon stopped, but the fire would continue throughout the night. Finally being extinguished by rain and having nothing left to burn. No one slept the rest of the night. We watched quietly, getting soaked in the rain.
IX

The sun lit the sky revealing that there was no one in sight, but I still didn’t dare move. In those strained hours I really thought that the open space we were in was good enough cover. Peter was first to move, he turned to the rest of us, still in shock.

“What should we do?” He asked.

I found my voice as well. “I need a look.”

I tried to stand but Lace caught my arm. “Are you joking? We need to go home, it’s clear they are not in any mood to talk.”

Morome took my other arm. “She’s right, Hardin.”

“Stay here then.” I shook them off and started towards the town, my feet sinking in the fresh mud. I could hear them whispering behind me, I continued on. There was a strong possibility of danger, but I didn’t heed the warnings, if there were Cityers around then this was my best chance for talks.

The remnants of buildings could be seen up ahead along with the smell of burnt wood. I walked down a road intersecting the rows of buildings. The sense of danger that I was in made a very small impression as I stepped into the still smoldering remains of what I assumed was a city. It left only a small sense of dread in the back of my mind that was overwhelmed by the feelings of remorse for those who had lived there. My steps crunched in ash and debris, but I continued, hoping to find someone to talk with. Assuming that the
burned structures were a row of individual residences, I believed that someone would be around. No one appeared; they must have evacuated.

Around a corner I came upon a sight that would change me forever. A pair of feet stuck out from under some burnt wood. They were small, blackened, those of a child. It startled me so bad that I fell backwards into a pile of ash, blurring my vision. It burned, but I managed to clean my eyes with the underside of my shirt. I didn’t dare look in that direction again. Instead I returned to the entrance where my team had gathered. They looked as though they were going to be sick.

It was in those next few seconds that my mind formulated an idea as to who was responsible for the burning of the city. It had somehow become apparent to me after seeing the team. My mind raced with the possibilities, the implications if my hunch were to be true.

“If you wanted to see Cityers, here they are.” I said.

Peter looked about to fall over. “Why would they do this to their own people?”

“They didn’t” I whispered.

“Then who did?” Morome asked.

“We did.”

They looked stunned at my answer.

“No,” Lace said, “we were all back there.”

“Not us personally, but other Humuroms.”

“No, you’re wrong.” Peter would simply not accept it.
“Think about it,” I begged, “who else could have. I just told you yesterday about all the weapons we have. And it’s bothered me for so long that they kill us. Well now I know why.”

“This could have been a land dispute, or anything else.” Morome argued.

“I cannot believe that a people so weak already would do this to their own.”

Lace threw her hands into the air. “What makes you think they’re weak?”

“I read the history, the war destroyed everything. It destroyed most everyone and ruined the land. Since then we have looked out for each other. Nobody would kill their own. This was vengeance, secret revenge for all the killings. Our people did this, and I’m going back to figure out why.”

“We can’t,” Dala said, “we are too far out. If we go back now the office will be closed and they’ll never let us out. We continue.”

Lace scoffed. “Leave it to the hunting child to kill us all. I vote we go back.”

“If we’re doing this by vote then I vote with Lace.” Morome said.

“I’m with Hardin.” Peter said.

If we did go back then Matilik would never let us out, Dala was right about that. If we continued then we chanced getting killed for starting the fire. Either way it didn’t look good for us. I thought of Mama. What would be the best route for her? “Dala’s right, I concede. We must go on, this is our only chance.”
Morome stomped his foot. “Is everyone mad? We’ll clearly get killed.

“We’ve always been mad. If you want to leave then leave, you knew what you were getting yourself into.” I retaliated.

“You said no one was going to get hurt, you said this was safe.”
I couldn’t believe Morome’s attitude towards this. “When did I say that? Aren’t you a hunter? You know nothing out here is safe.”

“Shut up before we are noticed.” Peter warned.
I hadn’t noticed how loud we were being. If someone was half a mile away they could have heard us.

“According to Hardin our own people did this, and they won’t kill us will they?” Morome was really getting on my nerves.

“I’m sorry this isn’t the skip through the meadow you were promised.” I could tell by his face that he had never come across the word “meadow” in his readings. That is if he did ever read.

“I wasn’t expecting this; I was still under the assumption that the Cityers were going to greet us with hugs and good tidings.”
The others had stepped back, not daring to quiet us. I suppose we were scarier to them than anybody who might be listening.

“Has anything out here ever been good?” I yelled as loudly as I would permit myself in those circumstances. “I thought you would use your head and read between the lines.”

“I’m sorry I don’t read all hours of the day. I actually do some work!”

“You wander aimlessly outside all day . . .”
“Shut it!” Lace intervened. “We are all going to get killed if you two don’t stop. Now I’m going with Hardin, who else.”

I almost laughed at Morome’s shocked expression when his cousin sided with me.

“I’m still with Hardin.” Peter said.

Dala nodded.

Morome could see his defeat. “Fine, I see no point in going alone.”

That was the end of that. Morome sauntered in the back of the group for most of the day as we continued on the path we had been following. I became the undisputed leader, the rest followed only when I moved first. It felt good to take control.

Trees sprang up here and there not long later, not the dead or weak ones that we were used to, but live ones with green leaves and brown bark. It was wonderful to see. They were so tall and looked so majestic towering over the mud and grass. There was grass! It was a bright green. I couldn’t quite believe that anything was still alive in the world. All my life I had always heard that everything was dead; and when I first went outside as a hunter it was proven true. This rewrote all conceptions I had of the Cityers. They lived in such a beautiful place. So why did they kill us?

My breathing quickened as I filled with elation. I knew we were getting close to something. The smell that came off the trees and grass was one that excited my brain. I had never felt anything like it. It was so fresh, unlike the stale metal smell of Humurom or the dead wet air of the Hunting Grounds. I wanted to plop down in the grass and
go to sleep for days and not have to care about anything at all. My eyes drifted back to the others. Not even Morome, who was still mad, could keep a straight face. It affected all of us. Once again our imminent danger did not show on our faces or in our minds.

We should have been thinking that someone was clearly nearby to take care of the area. It appeared too neat, too groomed to happen by accident. Unfortunately none of us had any experience with grass and didn’t know it needed attention to stay short. We were also not aware of the metal patches throughout the grassy field, or that several of them had lifted up slightly.

My mind was at ease for the moment. I looked at the others; it was as if seeing them for the first time. I saw Peter as my old friend, who I had yet to catch up with. “Hey Peter,” I said to him, “I’ve been meaning to ask: how have you been?”

He laughed. “I’ve been good. I’m surprised you wanted me on this trip, we haven’t talked in so long.”

“I’ve rarely talked recently. How were things in dining since I left?”

He groaned. “Terrible as always, they switched me from water gatherer to dishwasher when you were transferred.”

“Sorry about that.” I really was; being dishwasher was terrible down there.

“It’s alright.”

“Hey, remember that time that we snuck into the springs because you thought they kept extra food down there?”
Peter nodded. “That was forever ago, I can’t believe you remember that.”

It felt good to be talking to him again. “I remember all that crazy stuff we did.”

“What happened to that?” Peter asked.

“Things changed.” I said, losing my smile for the first time since smelling the sweet aroma of plant life.

“If this works,” Peter said slowly, “maybe we can have new good times out here.”

“That’d be something. And that’s the force, really, thinking of all the good times that could happen. It’s so much more than just food, its peace. I thought that idea was long gone, but I don’t think it is.”

“You’re probably the only one who doesn’t, everybody else has given up.”

A part of me knew he was right. “I don’t think they gave up. I think they’re just complacent. They figure as long as things don’t change at all it’s better than bad change. We need to remind people that things can actually get better with a lot of work and a little time.”

“But if nobody wants change then how do you convince them?”

“I hope by doing what we’re doing.”

He smiled. “Lying to them?”

“By making progress in a way that they can’t stop, and then show them the results if it works. Then they can’t be mad about us going around behind their backs and they’ll let us continue until everything is better.”
“You really are an optimist.” Peter said.

“Which is strange because inside I’m really negative.” I replied.

That was the first time in a very long time that I shared a piece of personal information with anybody. I usually tried to only talk about what was going on, maybe how I felt about it in a generic sense, but definitely not anything revealing my inner thoughts to that degree. It must have been the trees and grass. Occasionally I would tell somebody something personal if I was in a really good mood. And I was there, so that must have been the reason. I don’t even recall telling Milton anything too personal. Or maybe I was overreacting, but either way I was feeling very self conscious. The more distance between me and somebody else the better was my mindset with regards to what went on in my head. Then again Peter was my friend so I suppose it wasn’t that bad. It probably doesn’t make sense that I would feel so stupid for saying that but I treated my inner thoughts with care. My worst fear was for people to feel sorry for me because of what’s happened in my life. And I thought that if they knew anything about my inner thoughts then if anything happened to me they would feel sorrier for me. Even trying to explain it makes no sense. I put the thoughts away eventually and continued on with the mission.
Time passed slower than ever. The amazing feelings conjured by new sights and smells died away too fast for our liking. My feet ached horribly and I can assume that the others felt the same way. We stopped and ate, finishing off the first half of our rations. Nutrition tasted worse than ever being a few days old. It became clear that we all wanted an end to the journey.

“Why haven’t we found anything?” Peter moaned.
Lace shook her head. “Maybe we went the wrong way.”
“They’re hiding, just like we do.” I said.
“Then how are we going to talk to them?” Morome asked. He seemed to be angry with me again.

“Should we wait?” Dala asked.
“No, let’s continue.” I said, looking around the field of grass for any sign of human life. “They should come out eventually.”
“I can’t believe we made it this far without being seen.” Morome said.

“Unless we are always being seen.”
“I have a feeling we’re being watched.” Lace said.
“We’re always being watched.” I said softly. “If anybody sees or hears anything then warn the rest of us quickly.”
Dala sighed. “The guns would really be coming in handy.”
The grass soon disappeared, being replaced by stone. After a while it started to rain. We all slipped on the stone ground at least once. The rain stopped before too long. I bet we looked pitiful. Out there in the middle of nowhere soaking wet, I hoped it would lead the Cityers to think we were only there to seek shelter. It was a long shot, but I needed to hope for something.

“Stop!” Lace whispered. We did as instructed. “I thought I heard something.”

My heart was pounding faster than ever. I could sense that she was right. In the distance I could see a long line of trees. Woods, that’s what the books I read called it. Or maybe a forest, I really wasn’t sure what the difference was. “I think we should run. I see trees up ahead.”

“Agreed.” Morome said. “Ready? NOW!”

We took off at full sprint. The moment we started people sprang up out of the ground all around us. We didn’t dare stop; I could see weapons on all the ones that I dared to see. It was so sudden that we ran infinitely faster with no concern about anybody else. I couldn’t feel my body, only the fear and expectations of pain. But it never came. The trees grew gradually closer and within a minute we had traversed the entire area until we were hidden by their trunks.

When we felt safe we stopped, about one hundred yards into the woods. I collapsed to the leafy ground and tried hard to catch my breath. The others did similar. Once we regrouped we all hid behind the same tree and looked back, no one had followed us.

“They didn’t attack.” Peter exclaimed.
“What were they waiting for?” I said. It was strange. They had us right there, and didn’t even try to attack. Don’t get me wrong, I was relieved they didn’t. There must have been some reason for it, but what? Were they scared? No, they never were scared of killing our people before. I couldn’t think of any reason. I was just amazed that we were still alive.

Morome laughed awkwardly. “I call that lucky.”

My mind ached with a decision that I didn’t want to make. But then again, we were so close to fulfilling our mission. I was feeling really nervous about it all. “I want to go back.”

It wasn’t the first time they looked at me like I was crazy. “They had weapons.” Lace protested.

“This is my chance.”

“To do what, get killed?” Peter said.

“I wanted to talk to them, and there they are.” Outwardly I was trying to defend my decision, but inside I wanted to start running again to put more distance between us.

“They sprang from the ground carrying weapons.” Lace said again. “I vote we wait for friendlier ones.”

“They are just defending themselves.” I started back towards the Cityers before my mind could send my feet deeper into the trees. I shook so bad, it must have been visible to the others. They didn’t follow.

At the edge of the woods I stopped and looked out. There was nobody in sight. I grabbed the metal rod Dala gave me and stepped out. Each step was chosen carefully. I was expecting someone to
spring out of the ground with every step. I made it back to around the same area we were at and searched the ground, feeling a little safer since nobody had attacked. There were several small metal squares on the ground, clearly where the Cityers had come out from. I poked at one with the rod but nobody answered. This was even stranger. First they didn’t want to attack and then they wouldn’t even come out. It was as if they were scared of me. It hit me that that may not be as strange as I had originally thought. They probably knew that it was the Humurom’s that destroyed their town. That hadn’t been proven yet, but I was sure of it.

I returned to the others, who had not moved a single pace. They were surprised that I was still alive. “They’re gone.”

“Good.” Lace said.

Dala looked intrigued. “This whole thing is fairly odd.”

She was right. Everything that had happened since we had left Humurom was fairly odd. The worst part was that we didn’t have any idea what was really going on. I thought I was sure that Humurom burned that town, but there was some small part of me that couldn’t believe it.

“Let’s go then, I have a feeling we are close to some animals.” Morome took the lead again. I didn’t care enough to protest, my mind was slowly filling with new and horrible ideas as to what was going on.

I wasn’t much into conspiracies, but I had to go over all of the possibilities. The first thought was that Humurom was secretly engaging in terrorizing Cityers in response to years of hunter deaths. That sounded most likely to me and was the one that I believed.
Another was that the Cityers were killing Humurom’s hunters in response to their town’s burnings. That was just as likely but for some reason I was skeptical. And those were the only two possibilities that I could think of. I felt slightly better after realizing that there were only two possibilities. I didn’t even bother thinking about any others.

“Lace?” I decided to stop thinking about all that other stuff and just concentrate on getting to know my team.

“Yeah.” She slowed down a bit to walk with me.

“How long have you been a hunter?”

She smiled. “About three years.”

“Did you volunteer?”

“No, not at first; I was chosen. Before that I was in the Residence Office as a medic.”

I tried not to think less of her because of that. I realized medics had it hard since there wasn’t much they could do. “So what made you want to come out here?”

She sighed. “I didn’t want to see the Hunting Office close. Nobody does.”

I pointed at Morome. “What about him?”

“He doesn’t want to see it close either.”

“No, I mean what did he do before becoming a hunter?” I could have asked Morome myself, but I didn’t think he wanted to talk to me.

“Morome has always been a hunter. He started about eight years ago when he was sixteen.”
“Wow.” Most people didn’t start in the Hunting Office. The leaders liked to see how they did other places first and then switch them over.

“I can’t believe you didn’t know him. Humurom is not very big. Didn’t you ever come to any of the Hunting Office parties?”

“There was only one when I was a hunter, and I skipped it. I found my time better spent in the library.”

“You read a lot?”

“I try to. It’s been hard recently, so much on my mind. That’s why this trip has been good; it makes me feel like I’m really doing something.”

She nodded slowly, thinking it over. “I wasn’t sure of this plan - actually I’m still not - but I admire you actually trying something. Most people don’t care.”

“Do you?”

She sighed. “I don’t know yet. Sometimes I still feel like it’s all a mistake, but you have gotten me this far, so why not a little farther.”

“Hopefully that’s all it will take.”

“I guess we’ll see.” She said.

“What’s your plan for when we get back home?”

“I guess it all depends on what happens out here, I don’t want to think that far ahead.”

“Yeah, me neither.”

“Hey you two,” Morome called, “hurry up.” We had ended up a good ways back, not even noticing that we fell behind.
The forest seemed never ending. I read that they can take up a large area, but I never really thought about how big an area they meant. We might have already left the Cityer area. That was a thought that really got me going. If we could actually find the end of their area then maybe there were other people beyond. There could be whole civilizations that might help us in our cause. Then it hit me, if there were other civilizations out there then how come they never came before. It’s not like Humurom was in the middle of a huge forest and they couldn’t find us. It made me mad just to think about other people not wanting to come to our aid. I dropped the idea.
Nutrition was being served at that moment in Humurom. It was getting to be evening and dinner time. I imagined Mama being fed by the medics or Stud, I hoped Stud. I should have been there. I hadn’t accomplished anything yet outside and it was beginning to show on the team. They were becoming moody and unresponsive to each other. Our food rations were slowly diminishing. The only reason they didn’t quit already is because they knew it was going to be their last time outside if they didn’t find anything. That hope drove us on. I still wanted to find the Cityers, but the hunters only cared about getting food. I doubted that the leaders would let us come out this far ever again, even if we did find food. Our only hope was making peace, though it was met with groans every time I said it.

My mind wandered to random places. One was the Files back home. I remember it said something about the Hunting Office being created in year 100. I know that they mainly ate canned food for that long, but why no hunting? Even if we still had canned food I would think that we would be hunting. I suppose that meant that nobody left Humurom until year 100. And that’s another thing that bothered me. Why were they in there? I get that they were afraid of Cityers and didn’t want to get killed by whatever had destroyed everything, but why not open the doors every once in a while, let in some air? If there was nobody outside then there was no hunters to get killed so I can’t
think that it was that. Maybe they were just so scared. My head hurt; perhaps there wasn’t any reason at all to be thinking that far into it. I once heard the Files Leader complain about plot holes in some of the fiction books in the library, but it is possible that the characters didn’t think about the most obvious solution to their problems.

Everything left my mind when Morome yelped. He had stumbled on something hidden under a pile of leaves. It was a metal pole. “What is this thing?” He asked angrily.

“Let me see it.” Dala pulled it away and examined it. “It could be a weapon.”

“Whatever it is it’s old.” Lace pointed out.

The thing was rusted all over and was practically falling apart in her hands. Dala swung it around. It was jointed in the middle. We continued. Less than a minute later we came to a large metal cage in the same condition as the thing Morome found.

Dala whistled. “That’s a big cage. Parts are missing. This metal thing would fit perfectly.”

“It could fit a person.” Lace said.

“Why would they put people in here?” Peter sounded as if he didn’t really want to know.

Morome stepped carefully around it, examining it from all angles. “Look at the top; it’s still got some rope. It’s a trap. It would hang from a tree and then drop on its victim when they triggered something.”

Peter hesitated. “A people trap?”

“Probably for deer.” I pointed out.
“Then why is it so tall?” Peter seemed more worried every second.

“Some deer are tall.” I tried to sound soothing.

Lace clicked her tongue. “What hunter has time to rig this?”

“Most hunting is waiting.” Morome was touching the cage in various places.

“No,” Dala said, “most of our hunting is hiding. What’s interesting is that the Cityers are way out here. It would take several days just to get to us.”

That was similar to what I had been thinking earlier, though that particular detail never crossed my mind. Lace didn’t seem to think it was that impressive of a fact. “So?” She said, not realizing what implications it held.

“So,” Dala continued, “why would they travel so far just to attack us?”

“Because we are attacking them.” I was still attempting to bring them around to my way of thinking.

“Maybe we are not so much attacking, but trying to clear them out; get them farther away.” Lace actually had a point there.

I thought about that for a minute before responding. “Either way we shouldn’t be doing it. Our main objective now is to show them that we are not like the other Humurom’s. We only want peace and can get our people to want that too.”

“How do you plan on doing that?” Morome must have been alright with talking to me again.
“If the Cityers agree then we can go back to the leaders and tell them we are already halfway to peace. I think peace will be much better for us then what we currently have.”

“Stop!” Dala whispered as loud as she could.

It was so sudden I froze in mid step, my right foot inches off the ground. We were all frozen, there was not a sound. No breeze, no animals, just silence. I quietly put my foot on the ground. It created the smallest of noises. I shook silently in anticipation. For several minutes we stood there, too afraid to move. I could sense it; this time there was definitely something there. I could feel eyes watching me from somewhere. I tried to look up into the trees but was unable to move my head out of fear.

A sight, out of the corner of my eye I saw something small in the air. It looked familiar. Before I have a chance to connect it with a memory it exploded, showering fire and light all over us. The others sprang into action, removing weapons from their places and readying them. They ran all around as new bodies entered the fray. Sound ceased to exist for me. Explosions rocked the ground and blasted away the ground and tree trunks. We were soon covered in dirt and leaves.

I couldn’t move, couldn’t think. There was a blur of activity all around. It’s as if I was not in my body, only watching the turmoil through someone else’s eyes. It was a scene from a book come to life. And then, up ahead, I saw someone familiar. Milton stood only yards away from me. His face was expressionless, undisturbed by everything going on. I wanted to call to him, to make sure he was really there. A hand grabbed me and led me away. I finally had control over my body.
I looked back and could see glimpses of what was really going on, Dala readying an arrow on her bow; Morome blowing a dart from its launcher, Lace sprinting away from another blast, Peter leading me away.

My hearing returned. I ran through the woods for some time, hearing loud bangs and shouts from behind me. I could see the church still erect, the path to Humurom; and I know I’m leaving Milton to die again. I fight my restrainer and try to go back for him; I can’t let him fight alone again. But Milton’s not there, my team is. And I’m leaving them this time. It’s the same situation, different people, but the same outcome.

We stopped in a mass of branches and shrubs, hidden from view. I sank to the ground, my mind finally working properly. The terrible truth sinks in. I’m no better than I was that day nine months before. Instead of running for my life I froze, putting everybody else in jeopardy. Peter tries to tell me that everything is alright but I couldn’t believe him. We didn’t know what to do so we stayed put. The loud noises stopped, the shouting ceased. Peter left me alone to go look for the others. I started to cry. Mostly out of frustration with myself for being so cowardly. Through my tears I saw something shining on the ground within the leaves. It was a gold bracelet about an inch wide. I absentmindedly put it on. When I heard footsteps I dried my eyes and stood tall, hoping for the best. The whole team came into the thicket with Peter. I almost cried again out of relief. They appeared injured, but alive.
I hand out the rest of the water rations. They all drink; I didn’t feel worthy to do the same. Lace is the first to speak. “Nice talking.” She said angrily.

“I’m sorry, I froze.”

“We got that.” Morome said bitterly.

“I saw Milton.” I said.

“You had flashbacks.” Morome spat.

“It’s time to go home before we get killed.” Out of everyone there, I was surprised the most that it came out of Dala’s mouth.

“We can’t go back there, we are stuck.” Lace said.

“No, we’ll make a wide turn.” Dala had blood on her face and her arm, but otherwise looked unharmed.

I knew nobody would listen to me, but I had to try. “We haven’t talked with them yet.”

Morome looked about to explode, but he kept his voice low.

“Didn’t you just see that? They don’t want to talk. I knew we should have gone back before. We failed.”

“We only fail if we leave now.” I pleaded.

Peter touched my shoulder. “Hardin, just stop, it’s over. It’s a miracle no one died.”

“They weren’t expecting us to fight,” Morome continued, “we took them by surprise. It’s the only reason we’re alive.”

“If I just had one more day.”

“Shut it! It’s over, let’s go.” Peter surprised me almost as much as Dala.
I knew then it was over, if I couldn’t even persuade Peter then there was no way I’d persuade anyone else. I had one card left. “Is your life more important than all of Humurom? There are no animals left. If we stop now then they shut down the Hunting Office and everybody dies.”

“No, everybody eats Nutrition.” Lace said.

Her ignorance on the matter angered me. It was time to reveal the dark truth. “That’s made from human hair, human skin and flesh. We have become cannibals just to survive and I am not going back to that.” The conviction in my voice made them all speechless.

“What?” Lace asked faintly.

Peter nodded. “It started slow. They put tiny amounts into the food once it started running low fifty years ago. Since then they have forced to put more. I think it caused the virus outbreak ten years ago. It’s also why some people are really sick now. The younger generation has become immune, we think.”

“It probably affects us somehow.” I found their shock comforting in some way. I hoped it would convince them that my plan could still work.

Lace looked like she was about to be sick. “How do you know?” Peter took this question. “It’s a Dining Office secret, very few people know.”

“It’s one of many reasons why this trip is necessary.” I said. Morome looked just as sick. “They would never willingly feed us people.”
“There is nothing left.” I said softly. “We either eat our dead or we die out completely. When I first found out I tried to starve myself but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. You have to realize that there is only hopelessness if we go back now.”

“We’ve survived this long.” Lace said.

“Yes we have.”

“No, I mean we’ve lasted this long eating Nutrition.”

“Are you kidding me? You actually want to go back to that?”

“I just want to go back.” She said. “We all have people that we care about. I went along with you because I thought you were strong, we all did. Rumors went around that you killed ten Cityers just to bring Milton’s body back. And then we get out here and realize that it was all a lie. You didn’t fight anybody; you didn’t even help your team now. If you want to go then go, but you’ll be going alone.

My temper was rising quickly at their complacency. “I’m sorry that I’m not the person you thought I was, I wish that I could be but I’m not. I am the only person who has a plan. Plans that will bring us farther then we have come in one hundred forty seven years. And if you want to back out now, after all we’ve come through -”

“That’s why I want to go back. Humurom mourns for days with each person killed. Do you really want them to mourn for five more hunters?”

“We are the last hunters. Don’t you see the urgency of our mission?”

“The mission’s over.”
Without another word they all left the thicket. I followed, knowing that there was nothing left for me to say. Morome led the way, farther into the woods, preparing for a loop around somewhere up ahead. The mission was truly over. I walked well behind the others, thinking about all the things that were going to change when we got back. The leaders would never let us out again. Nutrition would be the only food for the rest of our lives. I imagined that another virus would eventually break out and kill all of Humurom eventually. The others gave up but that didn’t mean I had to. I began to formulate a plan to sink back and then go off on my own. It was my only chance to continue with my mission. With no water and very little food left it was going to be hard, but I thought I could do it.

Morome stopped. I was too busy with my plan that I didn’t notice. I came within inches of running into him. Everyone was staring at something; they looked amazed at whatever it was. I looked up and was equally amazed. About twenty yards away the trees suddenly ended. My eyes shifted upward up to see a translucent wall. Upon a more careful inspection I noticed odd iridescent swirls and ribbons “floating” within its depths. It created the sensation of peering into a river. This wall extended in all visible directions indefinitely. My ears detected a very quiet humming.

I was angry, sad, and had an acute feeling of hopelessness. Every one of those feelings melted away instantly. I pushed ahead of the others, they called me back but I didn’t care.

“What in the world?” Morome said.

“It’s huge.” Lace said.
I crept closer to it.

“What is it?” Dala asked.

I was only a few feet away.

“Is it dangerous?” Peter asked.

I lift my left arm up to it. It was indescribably beautiful, my mind fogged into a trance.

“Watch it.” Dala warned.

Only inches away. Blue sparks shot from the wall to the bracelet.

“I wonder . . .”

What happened next was so fast that it was over before I knew what was going on. The moment my hand touched the wall I felt a strong force pulling me forward. My whole body lifted off the ground and then touched down again so quickly I wondered whether anything even happened. I looked around. My eyes squinted in the evening sun reflecting off of shiny buildings that reached to the sky.
There had to be a mistake, there was no way anything I was seeing could be real. Tall buildings were everywhere, in all directions. They were towers, constructed out of an odd metal and reached heights I never imagined possible. There were many windows on each floor; many reflected the sun into my eyes. The sun! It was there, not hidden by endless clouds but actually there in its bright beauty. I couldn’t believe how bright it was. I was too afraid to move at first. My body still shook, though I then realized that it wasn’t because of what had happened but because it was so cold. The warmth of the forest was gone. I had never felt the air so cold. Slowly I became aware of the noise of people. I couldn’t see anybody but I could tell there were people around. If I was able to move my feet I would have tried to hide. I was standing on a white stone platform that was connected to the main land by a small white bridge over a small stream.

It was too late to try and hide, somebody had seen me. An old man walked up to me wearing strange clothes. He had on bright yellow pants and a gray jacket with several muddy stains. Or were they just part of the design? I couldn’t tell.

“Did you just come through there?” The man asked.

“. . . I’m dead . . .” I said vaguely.

“You are?”
“Were we ambushed again?”

“Again?” He asked, clearly confused.

“Where are the others?” It was the first time since I saw the buildings that I thought of them.

“Are they dead too?” I couldn’t tell if he was joking or not.

“I don’t know.” I looked at his face for the first time. He had a short scraggly beard and his eyes were wide with wonder. I wondered if I looked the same way. “Who are you?”

“Who are you?” He shot back.

“I’m Hardin from Humurom.”

“Humurom!”

“Is this a city?”

“Yes.”

“You’re a Cityer!”

“What? No.”

“Then I am dead. Or am I in the past? Is this Humurom?”

“This is Azureland.” He said proudly.

“Where?”

“Azureland. You know, land of the Azures.”

“Where?”

“Azureland, land of the Azures.”

“Of the who?” I was more confused than ever.

He leaned in close; I could smell his terrible breath. “You say you’re from Humurom?”

“Yes.”

“That’s fantastic.”
“How so?”
“Just . . . here come with me.”
“Where are you going?”
“Our mayor is surely going to want to meet you.”
I turned around. The wall looked the same as from the other side. “What is that?”
“That’s the Rainbow Wall, and you just came from inside it.”
“Inside it?”
He laughed. “Come along now, they will explain everything. I can’t believe it; this has to be a good sign . . .”

The old man took off across the bridge towards the buildings without looking back. I took a look back at the wall and chuckled. I wasn’t with the Cityers, but I was someplace better, a place where no one wanted me dead. Was that even possible? I guess I was about to find out.

The buildings looked taller the closer we got. Large groups of people hustled about in the evening sunlight. I flinched every time I saw someone, convinced that the next person was going to try and attack. He stopped me at the first street. I wanted to jump for joy at the sight of it. It was so much busier then I imagined. Strange automobiles sped by extremely fast. They were different than the ones I had read about in the library back home. Most were large and square with big wheels underneath. They stopped when lights hanging above them turned red. We crossed and continued down a small street between the buildings. There were very few people here. The ones that were outside were seen lifting strange tubes up to their mouths
and breathing out colored smoke. It fascinated and disturbed me. Something smelled rancid there, like Nutrition when it sits out for too long.

When we came out into the open street the most beautiful building of them all was right in front of us. It was white with pillars on all sides and a huge dome at the top. Various sections were bronze. This is the building that we went into. It was warm inside. The walls and floor were both dark red. The only thing in there was a small desk in front of a large wood door. The man went straight to the person behind the desk.

“I would like to see the mayor.” The old man announced. “This fellow is from Humurom.”

“Very funny.” The desk clerk said. He looked up at me. There must have been something about my appearance because he immediately looked impressed. “Seriously?”

“Tell him.” The old man prodded me in the side.

“I’m from Humurom.” I didn’t know how that was going to help.

“I’ll let him know, you can go in.” He opened the door and let us through.

The door led to a long hallway that disappeared around a curve in the distance. “Why did that guy believe that I was from Humurom?”

“Everyone wants to believe.” Was all he said.

I was going with the flow at this point. The way things had happened in the last few minutes were dream-like, but I didn’t dare try to wake up. If all that just happened ended up being real then I probably just made the greatest discovery in the history of Humurom.
Or did that old man just make the greatest discovery in all of Azureland? It was hard to see which angle this was coming from. What I did know was that it was too early to make any final decisions on how to feel, but that’s not how I worked. Instead I was so glad to be out of reach of Cityers that nothing else mattered; after all the old man didn’t seem to know who Cityers were. The Cityer territory must have ended around that place where we were ambushed. Maybe that’s why they wanted to kill us, to keep us away from Azureland where people would help us. This was definitely turning into the best day ever.

It smelled good in there, better than I ever thought a building could smell. The floor wasn’t hard and metal; instead it was soft and even a little plush. I was surprised at how warm it was compared to outside. The cold air was so new, but also felt really good. It had wiped away all feelings of anxiety and kept my excitement under control.

The old man was in a hurry to get to the end of the hall. Every few steps he would squeeze his hands together and exclaim excitedly. With every curve revealing that we were nowhere near the end he would grumble incoherently. He was an interesting character to watch. I found myself being a little too amused by his antics. He looked back at me several times, each with a creepier smile then the last. After a few more curves another large wooden door appeared. The old man skipped up to it, squealing the whole way.

The door led into a large room. Stairs led down into a circular slope surrounded by a wooden wall that was a good twenty feet high. At the center of it all was a small circular platform with a rail three
feet high around the edge. The old man told me to stand on the platform and I did. He told me it would take several minutes and so I waited. Finally I could hear doors opening behind the wall but could not see them. Heads appeared all around and looked down at me. Suddenly the small platform lifted into the air and I realized that the rail was so I wouldn’t fall off. It stopped at eye level with those sitting behind the wall. Only their heads and shoulders were visible. One man was directly in front of me, he was a foot higher than all the others. He was the first to speak.

“You are from Humurom?” He asked. “I am mayor Gilik.” He added as an afterthought.

“Yes, and I would really like to know where I am now.”

“How did you get out?”

“Out of what?”

“The Rainbow Wall.” He said as if it was the clearest thing in the world.

“I don’t know.”

“Nobody has ever gotten out.” He sounded impressed.

“Where am I?” I was tired of his questions and wanted some of my own answered.

“Azureland.”

“Where is that?”

He leaned over the wall, as though wanting to have a private conversation. “What do you know of your nations past?”

“I would hardly call Humurom a nation.”

“What would you call it?”
I thought for a second. What would I call it? I thought it a nation before I ended up in Azureland. “We live in a mountain; there are only a hundred of us left. We are all hungry and tired of being scared.” This was as far as I was willing to go into our strange predicament.

“Scared of whom?” Gilik asked.

“The Cityers.”

“Who are the Cityers?”

“I think it’s time that I get some answers.” I said, not believing that the mayor didn’t know who the Cityers were. They were living right next to them after all.

“You will, but first you need to answer me.”

I could see all the other people behind the wall watching me closely. I became very self conscious. Why were they all there? What was the point? I tried not to think about it. If I still believed that everything was safe then I would be all right, it worked so far. “The Cityers are the other people . . . uh . . . in there.”

“You mean the Bozlins?”

Too many new words and ideas were coming at me; I didn’t have enough time to process them all. “Who?”

“You don’t know anything about the past do you?”

That really rubbed me the wrong way. I remembered the strange omissions from the Files Office and knew there was some truth to what he said. “I know our history.” I said stubbornly.

“Do you know of the war?”

“Yes,” I said slowly, “it destroyed everything.”

He extended his arms. “Obviously not everything.”
“This is the world isn’t it? The part that was not destroyed during the war.” This should have been clear to me already, but for some reason it just then hit me.

“Only your part was destroyed. The rest of the world lived on uninterrupted.”

He had just proven to me what I had been suspecting for a while. “Then why did no one help us. We’ve lived alone for one hundred and forty seven years. We ran out of food. Our hunters have been killed by Cityes.”

“I think to fully understand you need to hear the story from the beginning.”

That was the best idea I’d heard from him. “I think that would be best.”

He cleared his throat and began. “One hundred fifty years ago a war broke out between two small countries. These countries were called Humurom and Bozlin. We in Azureland along with the other countries surrounding the combatants tried to stay neutral. The war started over a dispute on who owned a small piece of land right between the two countries. It escalated quickly. It got so bad that the surrounding countries got together to decide what to do. They tried to force an armistice, but to no avail. Then news broke that both the Humurom’s - known as Hums - and the Bozlins had nuclear weapons.”

“Sorry,” I interrupted, “what kind of weapons?”

“Nuclear, they are much stronger than normal weapons. The surrounding countries became very worried about these weapons, and so secretly met to figure out how to stop them. Well, it was decided
that there was no way to stop them. But that wasn’t good enough. Nuclear blasts would have destroyed far more than just the two countries. And so it was decided that the Rainbow Wall should be built around them. The wall itself is a sort of computer program.”

“A what?” Yet another new word, though this one sounded familiar. I probably read about it once.

“A - it is a - think of it as an impenetrable wall created by machines and run by people. It successfully shielded us from the nuclear attacks that destroyed everything inside the wall. The original plan was to wait until the radiation went away and then go in. But we had no knowledge on what types of bombs went off and so could not know the amount of time needed. The other main problem was that once the wall went up we had no way of getting in. That can be seen as poor foresight, but the wall was needed so quickly that we were not fully aware of what it was until it was up. Did that help any?”

“How did you know the bombs went off if you could not get in?”

“It lit up, glowed for hours.”

He didn’t seem very sorry for what happened, but I suppose that’s what happens when a subject is treated as ancient history. It was still alive and well for me. I felt like I was in the history class I never was able to attend. “You mentioned radiation. What exactly is that?”

“It’s a - I’m no chemist - but it is basically the aftermath of a nuclear explosion. It’s what’s left over. It’s deadly, and cannot be seen by humans. It’s a poison.”
I could tell he was attempting to find a description that I could understand. It made me feel stupid. “Is it gone?”

“Apparently, you’re alive.”

“Many of us are.”

“I’m surprised. I’m guessing that mountain of yours is a bunker.”

“Yes it is.” Finally a question I knew the answer to.

“There’s only one thing remaining.” Gilik said. He leaned in again. “How did you get out?”

“I think it had something to do with this.” I held out my wrist, I still had the bracelet on. “I found this bracelet after my team and I got ambushed by the Cityers - Bozlins - it was on the ground. When we got to the wall it reacted, and then I ended up here.”

“Very interesting, we’ll get someone to look at that. Now you said something about a team.”

“Yes. We were on a mission.” I told them the entire story about why we went on our journey. I looked down at the floor twenty feet below the entire time, not wanting to see their reactions. It felt good to tell the tale. A weight was lifting off of me as I spoke and I wanted to continue, to tell everything about Humurom. I kept a few things secret, primarily Nutrition and the burned city.

“You have had some life, Mr. Hardin.” Gilik said when I finished. He didn’t look surprised by anything. “I think you will like the next part better than the last. You’ve made it, and now can rest.”

“Excuse me sir, but made it?”

“You got out, away, wasn’t that the point?”
“I’m not sure that was the point, but I’m happy with the result.” I almost collapsed from the disappearance of all the stress that twenty two years of living in Humurom created.

“It’s late, we’ll get you a room, please follow Mr. Jess. He will take you there. Somebody will be by to take a look at that bracelet tomorrow. For now enjoy your stay.”

The platform descended to the floor. I turned and saw a stiff looking man standing at the top of the stairs. I went up to join him. Mr. Jess led me out into the hall. The old man stayed behind, mumbling something about getting paid. Mr. Jess followed the curves to the end of the hall and came out in the entrance room. I was led off to the side where a staircase I hadn’t noticed before stood. The second floor was full of small hallways that reminded me of Humurom. Mr. Jess took me to a room, let me in, and told me I would be staying there. He left without another word.

It was the nicest room I had ever been in. There was an actual bed as opposed to an ancient mat. A window looked out over the city and was half covered by thick drapes. The sun had gone down, revealing hundreds of tiny twinkling lights. I didn’t move from the window for a long time, trying to take it all in, but it was impossible. I had already exceeded my awe limit and could only stare out without a thought to worry me.

A knock shook me out of my trance. The sudden noise woke my survival instincts. I cautiously made it to the door and opened it. A man stood there wearing a gray uniform similar to my own. He had a tray in one hand. He handed it to me. “What is it?” I asked.
“Beef.” He looked at me like I was something that was supposed to be thrown out.

“Really?!” I took it and closed the door. I had heard of beef in my readings but had never seen it. It smelled so good and looked even better. Next to the brown and juicy meat was a pile of white stuff I thought was Nutrition at first. I tried it, and luckily it wasn’t. I don’t know what it was but it sure was good. I ate everything quickly, not realizing how hungry I was. A wave of sleepiness came over me; I had been up for a long time by that point. I lay down on the bed and looked up at the ceiling. I started to think about everything that happened, but fell asleep before I could conjure up a single thought.
I slept well for the first time in years. Though near morning I had a dream of huge explosions killing everyone I knew. I woke, feeling good despite the dream. For a few seconds I wondered why I would be feeling good at all. I was just about to go down for my morning Nutrition before realizing that I didn’t eat that anymore. It was the greatest feeling ever to know that I didn’t have to eat that. I jumped out of bed and jumped for joy a few times before falling back to the bed. When there was a knock on the door I didn’t feel anxious, I simply went to the door and opened it without a care in the world.

The man there came straight into the room.

“Good morning, Hardin, I am Calrus and am here to take a look at that bracelet. I also brought some clothes for you to wear. Your current ones look a bit worn.”

“We are only allowed three pairs.” I had no idea why I said that. It was too personal to tell someone I just met.

He didn’t seem to hear me. “I listened to the audio from your conversation with the mayor, and so I know your predicament. I was wondering if you knew where this bracelet actually came from.”

I didn’t like how he knew everything about me already. “The Cityers probably made it, they have made new weapons recently: guns, grenades, they even have meat.”

“From a country living in the dome?”
“Dome?”

“Yes, well the wall is actually a dome. It’s just that the name stuck.”

“The Cityers have been working, getting things done while the Humurom’s are just wasting away, not trying to improve life.”

“Very sad, but what I mean is, the wall is a computer program, constantly being run by a giant computer. It can only be altered if the computer alters it. So how did the Cityers come up with something that could alter it?”

“You would know better than me. I couldn’t understand most of what you said. What I did get is that you know enough to make something yourself to get in.”

“Originally we could not do it because we did not have access to many of the computers. You see there are countries that surround the dome, and they all had computers in the network and each computer had a specific code to control a tiny piece of the dome. They all had to agree in order to bring the dome down. Since they did not put in a code to allow entrance we could not get in. They feared that entrance would equal exit, and so thought the wall would not withstand the blasts. About one hundred years ago all computers were wired into one super computer. They hoped that this super computer would replace the many, and it did. Every country put their codes into a key, creating five keys. One country had some of their computers die before they could get the codes and so we do not have all the codes and so cannot get in.”
“I am having trouble keeping up.” I only understood about one tenth of what he said.

He laughed. “Never mind this, we’ll figure out this bracelet’s secrets. Get dressed. Someone is waiting downstairs to show you around.”

“Around Azureland?”

“Yes, I hear you’ll be staying with us for a while. You might as well learn your way around.”

“Am I still needed?”

“Oh, yes, everyone is really excited to learn everything you can tell us. I’ll probably be seeing you tonight with my first tests done, so see you then.”

Calrus left. The clothing consisted of a gray shirt and pants - much nicer than mine, a large white coat and black shoes. I changed into them and looked at myself in the mirror in the adjoining bathroom. I looked like one of the people from the paintings in the Files Office. The bathroom wasn’t too hard to figure out, though the noise from the toilet scared me a little. In Humurom we had people to take our waste away. I don’t know where it went. Someone left a razor out. I shaved; thankful it wasn’t the thin sheet of metal I used at home. I found myself comparing every little thing to Humurom.

I left the room to go downstairs. I wandered down the hall. Doors similar to mine were on both sides. I turned a corner and heard a voice down the hall. I stopped. Something about this man’s tone unnerved me. I had heard it before. He was nervous and scared.

“I know they know something, they have to.” The man said.
I peeked around the corner at him. He was a little shorter than I was. He wore a black suit and had a short beard. It looked more like he had forgotten to shave for a few days. It looked as though he was staring at the wall, but I heard a voice answer him.

“Don’t worry, sir. I promise you they don’t know anything.”

“Excuse me? Do you think I’m wrong about this?”

“No, sir.”

“All the evidence points to it being here.”

I was becoming scared. He sounded almost paranoid from fear. I turned and went back down the hall I had come, not wanting to hear anymore. Across from my room was a strange door. Beside it was a sign: *Push to go down*. I did as I was told. There was a ding and the door opened, revealing a small closet like room. I entered. The door closed on me. For a moment I was certain I had made a mistake and was trapped. Then I noticed more buttons, each with something beside it. *Mezza, B1, B2, 1, 2, 3, 4*. The *down* that I was promised on the outside was nowhere to be seen. I hit the button next to 4 and hoped it would take me down. In hindsight I suppose it wasn’t very smart to hit the highest number present and be surprised to go up. The door opened again. I was at the very top of the building’s dome. There were only pillars, no walls, and I could see out across the whole city. It was huge. In one direction was the wall - or dome. It went straight up to the sky, disappearing in the clouds. The opposite direction showed the city ending and a barren green landscape after that.

I got back into the moving box and tried *B2*. It took me to a room full of the strange automobiles I had seen the day before. Then *Mezza*
was attempted. I ended up in a large room that looked like the entrance except there were chairs and a lot of people mulling about. This seemed right to me. If anybody needed me I’m sure they could find me there. I took a seat on a very comfortable couch and waited. Before long a girl about my age came up. She wore a yellow coat. I enjoyed the variety of dress.

“Hardin?” She asked. She had blonde hair and dark, almost black, eyes.

“Yes.”

She smiled brightly. “I could tell. I’m Nara; it’s nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you.” I said uncertainly.

“Are you hungry? Come on, the café just opened.”

She turned and walked away without even waiting for an answer. I got up and followed. There was something about her I liked, it was something about how happy she was; I wasn’t used to that sort of behavior.

The café was attached to the side of the building. It had tables set out all over and was very crowded. It smelled of an assortment of food, I wanted very much to try it all. We got a small table in a corner next to a window where we could watch all the people walking by. Two plastic rectangles were already on the table, they had a list of food available for purchase. It was strange to see prices attached to food; I really did feel like I was transported into one of the books I read.
Nara noticed me struggling with the different names. “I don’t guess you’ve had any of this, have you?”

“I doubt it, but I’m pretty sure I’ll eat any of it.”

A lady came by and asked us what we wanted. Nara ordered us both an omelet. She then spent the next few minutes explaining to me what it was. The food came. The omelet was a lot better than Nara made it out to be.

“I’m sure you have a lot of questions. I’m not sure if I’ll be able to answer them.”

There weren’t too many things I wanted to know at the time. I liked figuring things out as they came to me. “Who are you? I mean, what do you do?”

She put her fork down and crossed her arms. “I used to work as a secretary for the mayor. Now I run errands for him.”

“I’m an errand?”

I meant it as a joke, but she thought I was serious. “Don’t think of it like that. Here, let’s go look around outside.”

We left the café and started down the street. It was really cold out, but the coat I was wearing kept me warm. She pointed out places she thought were interesting and I pretended to know what she was talking about. She told me about the people on the streets and why they were dressed the way they were. Different jobs meant different outfits. The people in charge of selling food wore simple uniforms, different for each place they worked. The government workers wore nice clothes, usually with jackets and nice pants. I lost track of the others she said, she went through so many.
“Is there anything like this inside the wall?” She asked.

I almost laughed at the thought. “Not at all, I read about buildings but never actually saw any until now.”

“Things have changed a lot in that amount of time. But having no buildings, that’s strange. I know there were some before the wall.”

“Everything was destroyed. We did have a church though, but it eventually fell to.”

It was several minutes before she spoke again. “How much did you know about life outside the wall?”

“We didn’t know about the wall.”

“How did you not notice that?”

“We were too scared to explore. My team and I only got permission to leave for more than one day because things were getting so desperate. I really wanted to make peace with the Cityers; that was the main reason for going.”

“How so?”

“Well . . . we struggled.”

“Sorry,” She said quickly, “I shouldn’t have asked.”

I waited for several people to pass between us on the crowded street. “It’s alright, I’d be curious to.”

“I’m sure you have loads of questions about here.” She already said that, I think she was getting nervous about something.

“I don’t even know where to start. Maybe it would be best if you started telling me things about this city.”
“Ok, um, I’m not very good at this. But . . . uh, this city was built up around the wall. The person who founded the city thought it would become a tourist destination, and he was right.”

“How bizarre.” I imagined what my team would say if they knew they were living in a tourist attraction. It was only the second time that I really thought about them since getting to Azureland. I wondered how they were, what they were doing, if they made it back alright, or if they were still looking for me. And what of Mama? She would still be at home eating Nutrition. Not being able to leave the residence. This brought my excitement down. I worried about them and hoped they were all alright. “Does this place have a name?”

“Wall City.”

“How creative.”

She nodded. “They weren’t very imaginative back then.”

“Was this country in any way connected to Humurom?”

She scrunched up her face in concentration. “Well . . . it bordered Bozlin, but I think there was trade.”

I looked up at the blue sky and bright sun, loving the feeling of the air. “You know what’s weird? All my life I’ve wanted to be in a world with blue skies and bright sun, but now that I’m here I find that I can’t enjoy it properly.”

She looked put out. “Why not?”

“It’s too much. My mother is sick back home. My team is in there somewhere and I have no idea what’s going on. It’s just that I’m a little stressed.” I figured that she already knew all about me so I didn’t mind sharing that information.
“I’m sorry; I didn’t know it was like that. You hide your stress very well.”

We walked through a grassy park with trees and small animals running about. My first thought was how easy it would be to kill one. I wished we had them back near Humurom. People were running about, and I don’t even think they were being chased. “Hey,” I said; an idea popped into my head, “are your medics any good?”

“Yeah, we have a lot of machines that could help anyone with any illness.”

“Really?”

“What does your mother have?”

“I don’t know, our medics don’t have anything to diagnose correctly. They’ve guessed, but I really don’t trust them with her.”

“It’s too bad you can’t get her here.”

I stopped; several runners had to quickly change direction so they didn’t run me over. My mind ran with the possibilities. “What if I could . . .?”

She stopped as well. “How?”

I couldn’t hold in my excitement. The solution to my problem was all around me. “I got here. It would be very dangerous, and she’s very sick. But imagine if I could get her; she would get better in no time.” I was just about in hysterics, I was so relieved. “The only problem is getting her past the Cityers, but I bet people here have things - weapons that I could use, right? They could come: warriors, fighters, we could finally beat them.”
“The Bozlins?” She wasn’t nearly as excited as I was about my new plan.

“Yes, the Bozlins.”

“I thought you wanted to make peace with them.”

“I did when I thought it was the only way to make things better. But now, now we don’t need to. Now I realize that they are just murderers.”

Nara frowned. “That’s a quick change in attitude.”

“I’m not as desperate.” We started walking again. “If I can get a few more of those bracelets than I’m good to go. Trust me; I don’t mind leaving the Cityers in there after what they’ve done.”

Nara didn’t speak for a while. She looked as though she was trying to figure out some way to argue my decision. “Maybe they have a reason to do what they were doing.”

I put my hands in my pockets, they were getting really cold. “I don’t care anymore. I don’t need to.”

“Alright then, when do you want to go?” She said sarcastically. “As soon as I can get the bracelet back and find some people to help. I’m afraid that if I stay too long than I won’t want to go back at all.”

“You haven’t even seen anything yet.”

“Oh yeah, you’re right. Lead the way.” I was so happy that I didn’t care where we went or what we did. I couldn’t wait to get Mama to Azureland; she would have such a good time there.

Everything was different now. My mood was so improved that all the wonder around me finally sank in. I looked up at all the tall
buildings and was properly astonished at their size and structure. The people I passed were so nice, some said “hello” to me and I said “hello” to them. Each one had a huge smile on their face when they saw me. Nara led me all over Wall City with a running commentary, though I don’t remember much of what she said. I spent most of my time imagining what Mama or Stud would be doing if they were there with me. Stud and I would be going through the shops and looking at all the new fashion trends, glad that we didn’t have to wear gray anymore. Mama and I would probably be sitting in the park, watching all the little fuzzy animals running about.

As evening approached my glee faded slightly due to fatigue and overexposure to the sensation of constantly being excited. I tried to hold on to it as long as I could, but by the time Nara started leading me back I was simply content. Deep within I found myself missing the people back home, and even wanted to hear the patter of footsteps on metal. It was bizarre to miss that horrible place, but it was all I knew. I remembered the paintings and the admiration I felt for the people who painted them. I didn’t need to anymore; I had made it to their world and saw what they saw. The greatness that I thought would come from being in a city was nowhere to be found anymore. The feeling that I needed to get out of Humurom that came from the paintings was gone, replaced by the feeling of need to get my mother and friends out of the dome. It actually felt good to have a goal again, and this one actually had an ending to it and didn’t run solely on hope.

“It’s not exactly as I imagined it would be.” I said on our way back that evening.
She smiled. “I thought the same thing when I came here. It took me a while to get used to it.”

“Where are you from?”

“The country; out in the middle of nowhere really. It’s not the same here, so many people don’t care about anything; they just live.”

“We have people like that in Humurom. They can’t seem to see very far down the road. It’s like they don’t care about what they leave behind. I wanted to fight that kind of thinking, that’s why I’m here now.”

“People are people.” She said wisely.

“Possibly, but if we can show them that good things can happen maybe they would believe it.”

“How do you do that?”

“By making progress first and then telling them about it?”

“By lying.”

I laughed. “Wow, people really are people.”

The sun sank below the horizon, bringing in the night. The sparkly lights I had seen from my window the night before appeared all around. The mood was perfect; the world was calm; moving slowly to an unheard beat. I smiled slyly, knowing how lucky I was. Nara added an extra spring to her step, occasionally twirling around in the darkness. She said the early night was her favorite time of day, everything was so peaceful. I agreed wholeheartedly.

My mind and body were so tired by that point that all I wanted to do was rest for the journey home the next day. We entered the building through the empty entrance hall and went up the stairs. I told
Nara about my problems with the moving closet. She told me it was called an elevator, and that it was a lot less intimidating than I had come to believe. She had to show me to my room because I had already forgotten which one it was.

Calrus was sitting on my bed waiting; he had on a white scientist’s uniform. “Oh, good,” he got up from the bed, “have a nice day?”

“Yes.” I said, expecting to hear good news.

“Wonderful, now I have some news on the bracelets. I believe that we can reverse engineer them to create others. The only problem is that it will take a while. So you will be stuck here until we can accomplish this.”

It felt as though the floor had fallen out from under me. “What? No, I was going to go back and get my mother. She is very sick and needs the medics here.”

“I’m sorry but we cannot risk sending you back in until we have more bracelets. And besides, you cannot get her out unless you have more than one.”

“I can go back in and try to find more.” I pleaded.

“It’s too dangerous, you could get killed and our way in would be lost.”

“The Cityers created these, I’m sure more people are going to come out.”

“This might be the only one.” He pointed out.

“I found it on the ground; I sure hope that’s not how they treat something that’s one of a kind.”
He sighed. “Whatever the case is you have to stay for a while, and I promise that as soon as we finish you can have this one, and another. In the meantime I have talked with Gilik and he says that you can make a journey to see the whole country. That should keep you busy. We now have to find someone to go with you.”

Nara shot her hand up. “I’ll do it.”

Calrus and I both looked at her. “Splendid, now good night to you both.” With that he left the room.

I collapsed onto the bed. “Now what? I can’t just wait around.”

“It’s alright; Calrus will finish in no time.”

“My mother may not have any time.”

“Don’t worry, everything will work out.”

I found myself being comforted slightly in her optimism, but I knew that in reality there was only a limited amount of time for my plan to work. Nara left a short while later. The man with the food came back and gave me more beef. It was good, but I couldn’t enjoy it very much. It felt terrible to have nothing constructive to do. I wasn’t very good at wasting time, though I suppose I was going to have to try.
The sun snuck in through the curtains to wake me early the next morning. I tried to get back to sleep but the anxiety I was under prevented that. I went out to meet Nara in the lobby. The elevator was a lot easier to use the second time. I waited on the same couch as I did the day before. As I was waiting two people stopped a short distance from me. I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop, but when I heard something about me I couldn’t resist.

“So you say he’s staying here?” The first man asked.

“That’s what I hear.” The second man replied.

“What do you think he looks like?”

“What makes you think he looks any different?”

The first man scratched his chin. “I don’t know. I assume he’s been living underground or something for years. He probably looks like a bum.”

They continued walking. It was interesting to hear the unfiltered opinions of me. Nara came up a little while later. I asked her what people thought of me. She told me that I was getting popular and that people wanted to meet me. They probably wouldn’t recognize me though since I blended in so well. We went to the café again and had some more omelets and then headed out.

“Where are we going?” I asked when we stepped out into the frigid morning.
“The mayor wants you to see the country, and this is the easiest way.” She said casually.

“How are we going to see the entire country?”

“By train.”

The word sounded familiar, but I couldn’t place it. “I don’t know if you forgot, but I have no idea what that is.”

“Sorry, a train is a very large vehicle that travels a rail line. It goes pretty fast.”

“Oh yeah, I’ve read about those.” I was happy that I was an avid reader. I would have been even more lost if I wasn’t.

“Do you want to try it?” She asked, though it was clear that it had already been decided.

“Absolutely.” It was so nice to be able to try new things without worrying about being ambushed by Cityers.

The train station was about a mile from the government building. It stood a good deal taller than many of the buildings, and was much wider. Nara bought the tickets and soon we were on one of the many platforms with about a thousand other people. A loud whistle accompanied a train coming up to the platform next to ours. The train was silver and very large. The front was curved down.

“Whoa, that’s different than the ones I’ve seen.” I was used to old style trains with a smoke stack on the top.

“They’ve gone through a few changes over the last hundred years.”

“Are they faster?”

“You’ll find out.”
A few minutes later a train pulled up in front of us. The doors opened but only a few people got on. Nara picked out two seats at the very back of the car, several rows away from anybody else. A man came by and took our tickets. Only seconds later we took off. That’s really the only way to describe it. I was pushed back into my seat as the train shot out of the station at an amazing speed. I tried to sit up but Nara pushed me back. Once we were at the desired speed I could move again.

“No way!” I exclaim excitedly, wishing to experience the acceleration again.

The tracks curved their way out of the city and into the countryside. A few houses passed by in the blink of an eye, but mostly there was just grass and hills to look at. Nara opened a book and began to read. I spent my time looking out the window at everything passing by.

“How many countries border the wall?” I ask suddenly, several minutes later.

“Five.” Nara said without looking up from her book.

“Are the other four like this?”

“Wall City is the nicest city as far as technology and building size, but overall most of the places are the same.”

“And nobody can get into the wall?”

“No, which is what makes your bracelet so strange.”

“The Cityers must have an incredible Technology Office.”

“I suppose so.” She said while turning a page.

“So who are these other countries?”

She closed her book. “There’s Murion, which is to the south.”
“Where is Azureland?”
“Where is Azureland?”
“Where is Azureland?”
“Where is Azureland?”
“Where is Azureland?”
“Where is Azureland?”

“Where is Azureland?”

“To the east. Then there’s Zamiastin to the north, Westernia to
the west, and then a tiny country called Dizuria right between
Zamiastin and Westernia.”

“And are these the world’s only countries?”

“And are these the world’s only countries?”

“And are these the world’s only countries?”

“And are these the world’s only countries?”

“And are these the world’s only countries?”

“And are these the world’s only countries?”


“Oh no, there are hundreds. Some are across huge oceans.”

“Oh no, there are hundreds. Some are across huge oceans.”

“Oh no, there are hundreds. Some are across huge oceans.”

“Oh no, there are hundreds. Some are across huge oceans.”

“Oh no, there are hundreds. Some are across huge oceans.”

“Who are these the world’s only countries?”

This really put me over the top in my amazement quota. I could
only imagine a world so large. What caught my attention the most was
the oceans. “Oceans? Are we going to see one?”

“No, Azureland doesn’t have a coast, but it does have a lake, and
that’s where we’re going.”

“I can’t wait to see water.” The tiny springs at home were
probably no match for a lake.

I looked out the window again and saw white flecks whizzing past
us. “What is that?” I asked, not sure if I should be worried.

She laughed. “Snow.”

I read about snow on many occasions. “This day has everything!”
It was safe to say that the train was all I needed to push my
responsibilities from my mind. The snow made sure they stayed away.

I quietly watched the snow as Nara went back to reading. I
shivered despite it being warm on the train. My mind was at ease in
those few minutes. The ground slowly grew white as the snow
accumulated. I wanted to go out and play in it, like they did long ago.
A half an hour later the train slowed to a stop.

“Here we are.” Nara announced, leading the way off the train.

“That was it?”
She was laughing again. It wasn’t mean or sarcastic, but kind and understanding. “Yeah, that was it.”

I liked watching her laugh, she had a pretty smile. “It was a short ride.”

I followed her off the train into the freezing snow. I flinched every time a snowflake hit me, they are so cold. The platform was just a long stretch of stone sitting up off the ground. The train took off and we were the only ones who got off. There was nothing to see but white in all directions. At first I thought that she made a mistake but she led me away into the snow as if she knew where she was. I was so excited I jumped off the platform. I don’t know what I was expecting but I let out a yelp as the snow froze every part of me it could. I rushed over to Nara, shivering uncontrollably.

“IT’S FREEZING.” I chattered.

“Its snow, of course it is.”

“I should bring some back for my friends.”

“It’ll melt.”

“It does that?” I asked stupidly.

Another laugh. “You have so much to learn. Books can’t teach you everything.”

We walked for a while. I tried hard not to sink into the snow; it must have started much earlier out there because it was much deeper. “Are we going to the lake?”

“Yes, and we are also making a slight detour. My parent’s house overlooks the lake, and I thought we might as well go see them.”
I sensed that she was trying to keep this part a secret until then. I presumed that she didn’t have time to go home very often. “You could have just told me from the start. I’m alright with anything; I don’t have anywhere to go for a while.”

“There it is, up there. See it?”

I looked. Up ahead the ground sloped up, and on the top of the hill was a two story house surrounded by bare trees. “It looks nice.”

“I’m going to go in first, let them know about you.”

“Me, the guy from the wall.” I expected I was supposed to be a secret.

“I can’t tell them that, I’ll just say you’re a friend from the city.”

“I’ll wait here.”

Nara went in. I tried to get a view of the lake but was too afraid to move very far and so couldn’t see it. She came back out in a hurry. “You’re a floor cleaner, alright?”

I was so confused. “I’m a what?”

A middle aged man appeared at the door. “Hello there Hardin, come on it.” We went in. “I’m Mr. Kilray. I’m sorry to say my wife will not be joining us, she is at her mother’s, she is very sick.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that, sir.” I said, knowing all too well how hard that can be.

“Call me Mr. Kilray, or Joe, but no sir.” He had a friendly smile, blonde hair, and dark eyes like his daughter.

“Yes s—Mr. Kilray.

The house was warm and smelled inviting. He led us into the living room to the right of the door. Several plush chairs were sitting
out on a very ornate carpet. We all took a seat. He clapped his hands together. “Now, what do you do in the big city, Hardin?”

I tried to remember what Nara had told me. “I’m a door cleaner.” I said proudly.

“Floor cleaner!” Nara suddenly shouted, making the rest of us jump.

“Floor cleaner, excuse me.” I corrected.

He stared at us as if we were both crazy. “Right,” he said slowly, “well whatever you clean I’m sure you do a good job, you look like a hard worker.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m going to take Hardin out to see the lake,” Nara said nervously, “come on Hardin.”

We both went out the back door. At the bottom of the hill the lake started, and didn’t end at any visible shore, it was that large.

“What a sight.” I whispered as I took in the view.

“That was close. When I told him someone came with me he automatically asked if it was the man from the wall’.”

I wasn’t surprised. “He’s smart.”

“And he knows I do Giliks dirty work.”

“I’m dirty work?” I said without taking my eyes off the water.

Large sheets of ice were floating around.

“I didn’t mean you.” She said quickly.

“I’m joking. But that lake is amazing. Does the ocean look bigger?”

“Way bigger.”
“Wow.”

“Hey kids,” Mr. Kilray called from the back door, “come on in and get some food, it’s almost dinner time.”

“Already?” I asked Nara after her father disappeared inside again.

“He eats really early.”

The kitchen was to the left of the front door. There was a table, a counter, and a stove and a few other things I didn’t know the name of. The table was full of some of the most amazing smelling food I had ever seen. And there was so much of it, enough to feed at least six people.

“How was this cooked so fast?” I asked.

“I have a Speed Cooker; things get done in a minute.” Mr. Kilray said.

“That’s incredible.”

He looked back at me. “What do you use?”

“Oh, I use one of those; I just don’t usually get so much food out of it.”

“Uh-huh.” He said slowly.

“Let’s eat.” Nara called out loudly.

We all sat down around the table. I helped myself to some beef because it was the only thing I recognized, but soon I was trying a little of everything.

“So what brings you two all the way out here?” Mr. Kilray asked as he shoveled a yellow something onto his plate.
Nara answered for me. “Hardin is a floor cleaner and doesn’t get out much. When I said I was going to see my parents by the lake he was like ‘by the lake!’ and came right along.”

“Is this true Hardin?”

“Why shouldn’t it be?”

“What?”

“It’s totally true.” I exclaimed. I wasn’t very good under this kind of pressure.

“Do you always act so strange?”

“I don’t get out much.” I said with a smile.

I made my way around the table and found that everything was good. I felt more alert and overall a lot better than I had at home. I think it was the food. This proved to me that my mother would probably get better if she were there. It helped my mood slightly to know that.

I came to a soup bowl near the end of the table. “What is this?”

“It’s chicken noodle soup. You know; the easiest and cheapest food you can buy for the Speed Cooker.” Mr. Kilray explained.

“Of course it is.” I really should have stopped talking.

“So dad,” Nara cut in, “I love what you did with the yard.”

Mr. Kilray didn’t take his eyes off me. “You can’t see the yard.”

He didn’t say anything for the rest of dinner, but he managed to keep a suspicious eye on me the whole time. After we ate he invited us into the living room to have chocolate cake. It was the first time I had chocolate. All I can say is that I was very impressed.
“So what do you two make of the fellow who came from inside the wall?” Mr. Kilray asked over cake.

“You found out fast.” I said.

“I have a TV.”

I wasn’t sure what this was and so made my best guess. “So do I.”

“With you?” He asked with a grin.

“He doesn’t.” Nara said.

“I left it on the train.”

Mr. Kilray tried hard not to laugh.

“I think it’s great, a very historic event.” Nara attempted to get back on subject.

Mr. Kilray nodded. “Too bad nobody knows where he is. News reporters found out that he was sent away somewhere, tons of rumors.”

“Maybe he wanted to see the country.” I said.

“Maybe the lake.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. I looked over to Nara. She had a look on her face as if to say: “this was a terrible idea”.

“What do you think of the wall, Mr. Kilray?” I asked.

“What do I think of it?”

“This cake is great.” Nara said in vain.

“What’s your opinion of it, what does it stand for to you?”

“Did mom make it?”
“I bought it.” Mr. Kilray said. “It stands for a lost cause, Hardin, a period when everybody was making the wrong decisions. It’s something we can’t take back, we can only learn from it.”

I thought about this for a minute. I could see where he was coming from, and I couldn’t blame him for feeling that way. It’s not like he could see what was going on inside. “I see it as a terrible idea as well, but I also see it as a tragedy for all those inside. Their neighbors and friends chose to hide them away instead of helping them.”

“Differing opinions are what makes the world so great.” He asserted.

“I agree.”

“See, now we’re best friends.”

I enjoyed his sense of humor. Most people in Humurom only knew morbid humor. Mr. Kilray was the personification of Azureland in my eyes. His personality was new and fresh, I hadn’t met anybody like him before. “What do you think should be done about it?”

“The guy who came out changes everything. Before that nobody ever knew anybody was alive, and now we have to figure out everything we can that he can teach us to see if there are others and if they’re friendly. If so, then we’ll try to get them all out. There’s no way we’ll get the wall down, so that’s the only way.”

“And if they’re not friendly?”

“Then they’ll try to keep them from coming out. The thing I don’t understand is why they let him out of the city. I doubt they have all the information they need.”
“That is a good question.” I said quietly.

Mr. Kilray got up. “It’s getting late, I’ll clean up.”

I sat there while they got things cleaned up. I wasn’t sure what to do and so just tried to stay out of the way. I wanted to ask Nara why she hadn’t asked me any questions, but I found it difficult to get her alone. Every time she came by the living room she was called back to help in the kitchen. It bothered me that she hadn’t asked anything. There must have been some reason why I was out there besides wasting time. I would have probably gone crazy trying to wait it out in the city with nothing to do, but was that the only reason? I had a sneaking suspicion that I had become a piece of something bigger than I realized. The thought freaked me out a bit and I pushed it from my mind.

Mr. Kilray showed me to a guest bedroom on the second floor. Night came before long and I spent the evening watching it snow, using the front porch light directly below the room for light. I tried to sleep when I got tired, but couldn’t bring myself to rid my mind of the day’s anxieties. Finally I gave up and went downstairs to watch the snow better. I sat in the living room and pulled the curtain back. The house was still, quiet, it was so nice.

I heard a noise behind me and looked to see Mr. Kilray standing there, looking serious. “What do you think of it here?” He asked quietly.

“Sorry?”

“I know you’re the man from the wall, you didn’t exactly hide it very well.”
I sighed. “I know, I don’t get why I can’t tell anyone.”

“You’re already famous, a hero to some who wished that some good news would someday come from that eyesore. They want you to not be sucked into the hype. I think that’s why they sent you away. The less you know about your fame the better, that’s how I see it.”

“I just wish they would let me back in.”

“They don’t?”

“No.”

“How did you get out?”

“I found a bracelet that transported me out. Now the scientists in the city are trying to recreate it, and until they do I’m stuck here.”

“And did you tell them everything they could possibly learn from you?”

“No, not really.”

He nodded slowly. “Then why send you across the country?”

“No idea.” I was just as stumped as he was.

He sat down in one of the chairs. “Where did you live in there?”

I retold my story, starting with Humurom, but without the Nutrition. How the team was formed and how we got to the wall. He didn’t ask any questions or interrupt me. I could tell he was taking it all in very seriously.

“That’s too bad.” He said when I finished. “I would say it’s odd that we speak so similarly, but I guess that humans grow and change at the same rate no matter where they are. It’s just amazing that you all survived so long. What did you eat?”
I hesitated, not wanting to tell too much. “For the first hundred years we ate canned food. Since then we’ve had to hunt deer and eat something called Nutrition.”

“If the entire place was destroyed by nuclear bombs then how are there deer?”

Leave it to the man living hundreds of miles away from the dome to come up with the one question I should have been asking for years. I couldn’t believe that I had never thought about that before. Could deer survive nuclear explosions? I doubted it since humans couldn’t. Maybe they hid somewhere like we did. It didn’t make any sense and all I was doing was making my head hurt by thinking about it. But I needed an answer, and knew I wasn’t going to get any there. I mentally told myself to remember to ask it as soon as I saw Calrus again. “I don’t know.” I finally said. “There are so many questions I can’t answer.”

“Maybe you will eventually.”

“Hopefully.” I liked talking to Mr. Kilray, he was very understanding. I was glad Nara took me out there.

“What are you going to do when you get back?”

“Try to get my mother out. She’ll be better here than she is there.”

“Well, I hope you succeed.”

I turned back to watching the snow. He shifted in his chair, I thought he was about to get up, but he didn’t. I looked over and could tell that he was watching me. I wondered if I was what he expected
from someone from the wall. “I can’t believe all this.” I said after a while.

“I imagine it’s a little overwhelming.”

“It was at first, but I’m good at adapting to sudden changes, or at least I think that I am.”

“I hope it gets better for your people. It will be nice to get everyone out. What did you know of the outside?”

I had to think about that for a moment. “I saw paintings of green grass and people enjoying the outside. It was always a fantasy of mine to be able to go out and not be afraid; to sit on grass and enjoy the sun. We thought the sun didn’t like us, never shining down on us. We had no idea that there was something blocking it.”

“It must have been warm in there. The sun must have been heating up the walls, not letting the warmth out or the cold in.”

“That’s why it was so warm.” I mused.

“Nara tells me that you both are leaving in the morning. I’ll leave you be, I only came down for a snack. You can help yourself to something if you can figure it out.” He went back upstairs.

I had grown tired and followed him upstairs. The bed was nice and soft, like the one in Wall City. I fell asleep almost instantly, waking again at first light. I took time to look over the little details of the house. The walls were white with a yellow hue. They could have been any color and I wouldn’t care. I was just happy they weren’t metal. The floor was made out of pieces of wood, very unique. My room was filled with shelves of books and little dolls. I imagined that it was my room; that I spent every day of my life sleeping in it. It was a
nice fantasy, but I soon returned to the sad reality where I grew up in Humurom.

My stomach alerted me to the need of food and I went downstairs, ready to be met with breakfast. Instead I found the kitchen empty. I was the first one up, and I had slept in until dawn, that was late for me. Mr. Kilray had said that I could make food if I could figure out how. I decided to attempt it. The problem was that I couldn’t find any food. The cabinets were filled with square boxes of various sizes. There were words on them of different foods. One had peaches in it. I had read about peaches on numerous occasions and was excited to finally try them. The words on the box seemed strange. For instance one said “fresh peaches”. Now how could peaches be fresh if they were in a box in a cabinet? I took the box down and opened it. Inside was a smaller box. I opened that box to find that it had a small bowl inside with white chunks of what appeared to be salt. The smaller box had more writing on it.

*Heating Instructions:*

1. Open box
2. Put in Speed Cooker for two clicks
3. Enjoy!

What did that mean? Two Clicks? I assumed the Speed Cooker was the large white box with a door on the front that sat on the counter. I put the peaches in and closed the door. To the right of the door was a small round dial. I twisted it and heard a click. One mystery solved! It clicked a second time and I waited. Nothing happened. I tried a few more clicks but still nothing happened. I
noticed a small button under the dial. This was obviously the “on” button; I can’t believe I didn’t notice it earlier. I pushed the button and was pleasantly surprised to see the cooker light up.

The peaches turned from white to a lovely orange. But they didn’t stop there. They quickly turned darker and shriveled up. Was I supposed to open the door? Hit the button again? I didn’t know. To my horror the peaches turned black and caught fire. I yelped and threw the door open only to be met with the most terrible odor I have ever encountered. I was so scared that I fled out the back door to avoid suspicion.

I went down the snowy hill towards the lake, settling on a rock only a few feet from the shore. Little waves lapped up against a tiny strip of sand. Despite the cold I wanted to stay in that spot as long as I could and enjoy the sights and sounds. No thought went towards home, or my responsibility to get back there. I wanted so badly to be from there, to have spent my childhood looking at lakes and snow and not metal and Nutrition. I couldn’t turn back time, but perhaps I could live there and experience it as a child who is looking at the world as if everything is fresh and new. I was over the small bit of disappointment caused by the noisy city, and experiencing the initial wonder again. I thought I would probably be feeling that way every time I was in someplace new. My mood went through so many ups and downs in a weekly basis at home that sometimes I wondered if there was something wrong with me. I had no answer and never wanted the medics to come anywhere near me. Perhaps that was just how I was, and there was nothing wrong with me.
I heard footsteps behind me and looked back to see Nara. “That was some smell you created in there.”

“Is he mad?”

“He can’t stop laughing.”

That wasn’t the reaction I was expecting, but I was glad I could go back inside without fear of being yelled at. “What’s the plan today?”

She nodded towards the lake. “I was thinking about a boat ride. Want to come?”

I jumped up, the only thing better than looking at the lake would be to travel on it. We went to a small wooden boat a little ways down the shore and got in. I was surprised at how it rocked and almost turned over. She steadied me and I sat down, a little frightened of what it was going to feel like. Nara pushed off from the shore and we glided into the open water, pushing past sheets of ice along the way. The boat swayed from side to side. I pretended like I was used to it but we both knew I had no experience with anything like that.

“This is fun.” I said. “Though a little more daring then I thought. I keep feeling like I’m going to fall out.”

“You won’t, I promise.”

I heard a hint of humor in her voice and was unsure of how to respond. “I’ve been thinking about how to get my mother out, and I think I may expand my plan.”

“How so?”
I actually hadn’t spent any time thinking about it and made it up as I went along. Though it sounded right and I was glad that I said it when I was done. “I want to get everyone out.”

“That would be a -”

“Migration. Is that what you were going to say?”

She frowned. “No, I was going to say it would be a dangerous idea.”

I was a little embarrassed. “Yes it will be, but it’s possible. I don’t mean moving everyone out at once, just a few at a time. With the help of some weapons and fighters from here it should be easy. The Cityers will have no chance of stopping us.”

She looked at me for a while, searching for something in my expression. “I think you’re going in the wrong direction with the Bozlins.”

“They went in the wrong direction first when they killed Milton.”

“I don’t know who that is, but you can’t tell me it’s been a one way street.”

I was not familiar with that expression. “If you are trying to say that we caused any of it then -” I was about to say that she was insane, but I remembered the burning homes that I had witnessed. “Then you’re probably right, but they’re not my people, and I need to help my people first.”

“You’re putting people in categories; that’s never a good idea. That’s how the wall went up in the first place.”

“Then there’s no problem continuing the ideas.” I said stubbornly.
She looked about to yell, but thought better of it. “You don’t have to think like them, the people of the past, you can think differently.”

I was back in the church saying something similar to Milton. *People are people.* Something about that really annoyed me. It wasn’t the same thing at all. When I told Milton that same thing I wanted him to think independently of the leaders. In that boat that day I wanted to save my people from certain doom. She had no idea what she was talking about. “I do think differently, but decisions are made for the good of as many of ‘your’ people as they can be.”

“And good decisions are made for the good of everyone everywhere.” She stopped short as if remembering something she was supposed to do, or not do. “It’s really cold out here. Do you want to go back?”

I could tell she was hiding something, which made me slightly paranoid. But I chose not to act on it. “That sounds good.”

Nara rowed the boat back to the shore and we dismounted. I tidied up my room and spent another few minutes fantasizing my made up childhood. We met in the living room where we had breakfast. The smell I made had thankfully left. After breakfast we said our goodbyes.

“Goodbye you two, it’s been an interesting time.” Mr. Kilray laughed.

Nara hugged her father. “I’ll stay longer next time.”

“It was nice to meet you, Mr. Kilray.” I said.

“Best of luck Hardin, I look forward to seeing you again.”
We left the house and returned to the snow. Nara led me back towards the train platform. It occurred to me that I had no idea where we were going, but I didn’t care at that moment. I was alright with wherever. The platform was empty and covered in snow, just like the last time I saw it.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to stay very long.” I apologized.

“It was nice to see him at all; I never get to come out here. Thank you for being alright with it.”

“I thought it was great. You know I’m sure we have time if you want to go out and see your mother and grandmother.”

“No, I thought we could take a Journey Train for a few days.”

“Again, I don’t know much about here.”

She cleared away snow and sat on the lone bench. “Sorry, the Journey Train is a slow train that families like to take for vacation.”

I sat down next to her. “Do they go anywhere?”

“They ride around the country.”

“Their entire vacation is spent on a train?” That sounded boring to me.

“They stop at various stations and get to explore the towns for a day.”

“Well that’s not too bad. Is it expensive?”

She pulled two pieces of cardboard out of her pocket. “My dad has two year passes that he let us have.”
A train appeared on the horizon. It was not nearly as fast as the one we had taken out there. It was also much taller and wider. It stopped in front of us and we got on. The first car was nothing as I expected. There was a large tank of water six feet high with people swimming around in it. I was bemused by their means to entertain themselves. Nara led the way into the next car. A sign on the door read: *Bake Your Own Cake Car*. Ten oven and table sets surrounded the walls. The travelers wore long white outfits and funny looking tall hats. It smelled really good in there. The next car was more normal, a simple dinner car.

We made our way past the *Catch a Butterfly Car*, through an empty car used for entertainment and made it to the *Sleepers*. These were three cars in a row lined with beds. We settled on two beds in the last car. Nara explained as much as she could. About how some rich rail owner thought that travelling vacations were the next big thing and so opened the first Journey Train. There were different kinds; each train had different combinations of activity cars.

The whole thing seemed so insane to me, and yet there I was, enjoying every minute of it. The rest of the morning was spent at the pool. Nara rented me a bathing suit, which I found rather disgusting, but apparently it was their way of doing things so I didn’t complain. The pool was so crowded and I didn’t know how to swim, so it was a short visit. After the pool we tried our hands at making a cake. I had no visual or mental picture as to how the endeavor was supposed to be handled. I did whatever Nara did. She cracked my eggs and I poured the flour. She watched me the entire time to make sure I was doing it
right. It was a fun time; I don’t remember having a better time in my entire life. My batter flew out of the bowl when I mixed too hard and we laughed and joked about it. She followed it up by accidentally throwing her mixing instrument halfway across the car, though it was clearly forced to make me look better.

The cakes baked in a Speed Cooker for six clicks. Nara’s came out looking and smelling amazing; while mine drooped and was an odd shade of gray. Next we squeezed a white icing onto the top. It was so delicious that I covered mine with it in hopes of making it taste better. Hers was definitely better, but she gave mine a good review since it was my first. We sat at the table to eat them.

“This is the greatest thing. I can’t wait to see my team trying to make a cake.” I took a bite of my cake and wished I hadn’t. I don’t know what was wrong with it, but whatever it was I could only laugh at a mistake that had no repercussions.

“You seem really proud of them.” Nara said.

“They saved my life. And even though they didn’t exactly agree with me –”

“How’s your cake.” She interrupted.

There it was again, her interrupting me. “Why do you keep doing that?”

“What?”

“You keep changing the subject.”

“I don’t mean to.”

I wasn’t convinced. She only seemed to do that when we started talking about Humurom. And she was the one who asked the first
question. That was the end of talking for the evening. We took the leftovers of hers with us and threw mine away.

Once that was finished we went to the dinner car, though in my excitement I don’t remember what we ate. It was all a blur, a joyful blur. It was in stark contrast to how I felt around dinner time at home. There I was tense. Even months after my short stint as a hunter I dreaded dinner time, more than the average Humurom. I had the same dread when the hunters returned. It was terrible not knowing if they all would come back. The difference was that I had Mama, and each dinner meant the close of another day where she was still sick and I was nowhere near finding a way to help her. I wondered what she was doing at that moment. Stud was probably giving her dinner while the medics prepared some kind of concoction that wouldn’t work.

The night ended in the Sleepers. I was on the top bunk and Nara was on the bottom. I found it endlessly amusing that beds were stacked on top of each other. It wasn’t snowing; there was only darkness out the windows. I watched anyway, trying to relieve myself of the last bits of anxiety. It was strangely freeing to be with people I didn’t know on a moving train in a country I wasn’t familiar with; because it was safe. I wanted to temporarily leave my wonder and lack of knowledge behind and finish the trip as someone from Azureland. I had attempted that before but always succumbed to the fact that knowledge is hard to fake. The main problem was that when I entered the wall again I would have to find the fear and anxiety to survive. At that moment on the train while watching the darkness all I wanted to do was enjoy it. I knew I should have been wary, and I was to a certain
extent about why I was out in the middle of nowhere, but it didn’t dampen my spirit as it should have.

The slowing of the train woke me. We were coming to a stop at the first town. Out the window I saw cute little houses that were all the exact same. Nara and I went to the dining car for a quick breakfast and then went out into town. A light coating of snow was on the ground. We wandered about for a while, all the time going farther out towards snow covered fields that extended out into the distance.

A tower stood a good ways out. I was a little surprised that Nara went straight for it, leaving the train and other travelers. It was a tower made of red stone. It looked really old, even older then the church back home. The inside consisted of a long and tight spiral staircase that ended in a viewing room at the very top. There were no windows, just open spaces. The floor was covered in a thin dust of snow. We looked out into the distance. There was nothing at all except for the town. Humurom looked so full of towns and cities that it was strange to see so much open space in Azureland.

“How old is this?” I asked after a while.

“Really old, I believe about three hundred.” She made several small noises as though fighting with herself to ask me something. “Have you thought any about the Bozlins?”

“Thought about them?”

She laughed awkwardly. “Are you still going to leave them? Because I was thinking, maybe some people here can go in and talk to them.”
“Nara, I tried that already.” I said soothingly. “They attacked and then we ran. They’re not going to talk, I realize that now.”

“It was just a thought.” She said quickly. “Do you know who built this tower?”

“No.” How was I supposed to know?

“The Humuroms and Azures did it together. It showed friendship. That’s the whole reason why it was built, just to show that there was a bond. It served no purpose.”

I scoffed. “Why would anybody build anything with no practical purpose? What a waste of time and material.”

“You’re too used to having no time and no material to appreciate it.”

I know she didn’t mean it as an insult, but I took it as one anyway. “They could have made something worthwhile.”

“Is this trip worthwhile to you?” She asked, visibly annoyed. “Because we really haven’t done anything productive.”

I watched several people coming towards the tower, not wanting to look at Nara. “I’ve seen the country.” I said quietly.

“And what good is that if you go and get yourself killed by the Bozlins?”

That really set me off. “Then why did you bring me?”

“I—there are people coming in, we better get down.”

There she went again, changing the subject. I was too angry to realize that she was the one who brought up the subject in the first place this time. She headed down the stairs and I followed close behind. Making sure to stomp my feet on every step. The realization
came to me that I was probably sent away for some political reason. Maybe the bracelet was the first step to getting an army into the wall. Or perhaps they wanted me away while they agreed what to do with me. So many horrible ideas entered my head, most ending with me being experimented on in a lab while my people got slaughtered. These were probably unfounded, but when I was mad or scared I could really create some strange thoughts.

Nara started toward the train, not taking a look back to see if I was still there. For a second I wanted to go back to the tower until the train left, but I knew I needed the train to get back to the wall. There was no telling if a faster one would even come out there. I caught up to her before we reached the town.

“I want to go back.”
“We are.” She said angrily.
“No, now, I want to get back to the city.”
“We will get there eventually.”
“Why did they want me away? Were they planning something?”
“What?” She stopped just feet short of the first house.
“I know there’s a reason why I’m here.” I said quietly as several people passed us. They sounded happy, without a care about anything else. “Why do you keep changing the subject every time we really get talking about my home or why I’m out here?”
“You’re paranoid.” She said with a shrug.
She tried to continue but I stopped her. “No, I’m not.” I actually was, but telling her that wasn’t going to help my argument.
She made some more of those strange sounds before saying: “Gilik thinks you’re unstable. He wanted you in the country because he thought it would keep you calm more than the city. And he didn’t want you seeing the wall every day; he thought it would send you into flashbacks. He instructed me to try and not talk too much about Humurom, but it’s been hard.” She stopped for me to respond, but I didn’t. “I really do want to know about the Bozlins.”

“I’m not unstable.” I whispered. Somehow a huge weight was lifted off of me. All those scary thoughts drifted away as I found out that the truth was much less frightening.

“I know, but he wanted to be safe rather than sorry.”

My mood brightened dramatically. “Let’s get back on that train before it leaves us. Do you have any way to contact Calrus and see how long it will take for him to finish?”

“I have been in contact with him.”

“Really? I haven’t noticed.” Long distance communication sounded so amazing.

“They didn’t want you to think about it.”

“Can you contact him now?”

“Yes, on the train.”

Back in our Sleeper Nara took out a small device from her bag. She pointed it at the wall and Calrus appeared on the wall. My eyes widened in disbelief, it was as if I was looking at him through a window. It occurred to me that this was how the man had been speaking to the wall on my first morning.
“Oh Nara, how are you?” Calrus then noticed me. “And Hardin, it’s nice to see you.” He was clearly nervous about my presence.

Nara smiled slyly. “We were wondering if you were done with the bracelets?”

“Oh, I’m afraid not.”

My spirits sank slightly. “Do you know when you might be?”

“At least another week, they are very complicated.”

I frowned. “Really? It’s strange that the Cityers were able to create them.”

Calrus hesitated before speaking. “Well that’s the problem; I don’t believe that they did.”
The next few days went by relatively fast. We spent our days baking cakes or catching butterflies. The latter proved to be an exacting undertaking. The butterflies never wanted to stay in one place; yet liked to crawl around on our backs. Our nights were spent in the entertainment car. Each night had a different performer, mostly musicians. It was refreshing to hear music that wasn’t depressing.

The towns we stopped in were all so similar that I lost interest quickly. Nara explained various different aspects of Azureland life to me. How the town governments worked, why there was so much open space. Unfortunately I never paid attention long enough to hear the explanations. My mind was filled to the brim with what Calrus had said. He couldn’t give any answers, which only excited my imagination beyond belief. I had fully invested myself to the belief that the Cityers had created the bracelets. I mean, who else could have done it? They had grenades and guns, why not super advanced bracelets? Besides, I found it right in there territory. It could have been that somebody who built the wall dropped it. I was under the impression that a crew had to actually build it. But that didn’t explain the fact that nobody could get in. Unless that was the only one made and whoever dropped it didn’t want anybody to know that they made it. How the bracelet ended up there was not the main concern. That honor went to the mystery of the bracelets creation. If it wasn’t the Cityers then who
created it? It wasn’t the Humurom’s, and it evidently wasn’t the Azures.

I spent many hours devoting my thoughts to that end. In consequence I never caught a butterfly and most of my cakes ended up subpar. Nara noticed my state and frequently gave me comforting glances. These, like many things she did in those few days, really annoyed me. I didn’t want her pity or her understanding. My mood had shifted to the darker edge and all I wanted was to be talked to like a normal person, not somebody who was in need of comfort. I was on edge a lot. The new development was yet another twist in my life; I needed more time to adjust. And I wasn’t even adjusted to being in Azureland yet. I guess I wasn’t good at sudden changes. My mind was a mess by that point. All I wanted to do was get my mother and friends to Azureland, and then forget everything else. But that was going to be hard for me to accept. I still wanted to help everyone from Humurom.

The train slowed into Wall City six days after we left Mr. Kilray’s house. We disembarked and went back to the government building. Nara let me go back to my room alone; she knew I wasn’t in the mood to talk to anyone but Calrus. It was night when we arrived. I was too tired to go looking for Calrus that late, and so went to bed. I couldn’t sleep at first; there was too much buzzing around in my head. I went to the window and watched the tiny figures moving about under the streetlights. I wondered what they were thinking about, what problems they had. It didn’t make any difference, they didn’t care about me and I didn’t care about them, but it did put the situation in
perspective. All of them had problems, and I would bet that every person out there thought theirs were the worst. Sure they might not have had a sick mother living on Nutrition in an old bomb shelter, but did that mean that their problems were any less significant to them? No, of course not. Strangely this brightened my mood slightly. It made me realize that I wasn’t alone in any way, ever. Not physically, nor mentally, not even emotionally. There would always be somebody who understood.

The next morning Nara woke me up. She had gone to see the mayor the night before and arranged an appointment for me. I went straight to his office once I got directions. It was hard to find and I got lost a few times before stumbling upon it. It was much smaller and out of the way than I was expecting. He invited me in and I took a seat in a tiny couch next to his desk.

I jumped straight to the point. “I was wondering if anybody knew anything else about the bracelets.”

He smiled at me from across the desk. “I haven’t talked with Calrus today, but I assume it is still a mystery.”

His lack of knowledge on the subject unnerved me. “Thank you sir, I also have a request of you.”

Gilik raised his eyebrows. “Anything Hardin.”

“When the bracelets are done I will go back into the wall. My mother is really sick and I will get her out and bring her here where there is better medical treatment. What I ask from you is that fighters come with me to better my chances of getting her out.”
I hadn’t been that nervous since being inside the wall. He looked at his desk sternly for a moment, thinking it over. I began to sweat, something I rarely did when nervous. I had become so accustomed to the feeling that when it was time to be anxious my body did not show any signs of it. Azureland had indeed changed me; made me used to safety.

“Oh, I am sorry, but I cannot authorize that. It would be too dangerous.” He said finally. I could tell he wasn’t the least bit sorry. I felt like I looked at him for the first time then, seeing who he really was. I saw someone who was perfectly comfortable in their own world and wanted nothing to do with helping somebody from another. I had seen a similar look in Humurom.

“It being dangerous is why I need the fighters.” I said dully, not wanting to anger him.

He smiled in a way that proved beyond a doubt that he never had any plans to help. “Hardin, you’re out, be happy with that.”

“I’m not going to let my mother stay in there.” I held my anger in check.

“I am very sorry, but I cannot authorize that.”

I decided to go where I probably should not have. “Is there somebody higher up I can talk to? The leader of Azureland maybe?”

His face turned a sick shade of purple. I struck the right nerve, but at the wrong time. “This situation is in my city, I see no reason to bring the President into this.”

So there was somebody higher up than Gilik. I’m sure Nara told me. It was probably one of those times I wasn’t paying attention.
had one more card to play if it came to that, but I had no way to contact the President even if I wanted to. I thanked Gilik for his time and left. That meeting proved very important to me. It showed the true face of Gilik, and shrank his power in my eyes. Nara met me in the hallway. She was a welcome sight, somebody who actually cared about me. While Gilik’s image shrank hers grew in my mind.

“What happened?” She asked eagerly.

I smiled as I became conscious to the fact that my best ally was with me the whole time. “He won’t send anyone. Do you know if it’s possible to meet with the President?”

“I doubt I could get through. Besides, Gilik likes to keep things under control himself here.”

“Don’t you think word has gotten to the President by now? I’m sure they would help.”

She nodded. “Yes, but it would take too much time to get them involved. Especially if you go back soon.”

“Fine, I’ll just do it myself.” There was no other option. If I wanted this done at all, and I did, then I would have to go on alone. It would probably be better to go by myself anyway, less targets.

Nara thought that the bracelets wouldn’t be done for a few days and that I should go out and see the town on my own. She gave me a small little card that I had to give to people when I wanted to buy something. I left early the next morning, ate in the café, trying out the card for the first time. The waitress took it and then gave it back a minute later. I had another omelet, they became my choice breakfast.
The morning was cold, cloudy. I didn’t want to stray too far from the government building for fear of getting lost. Lucky for me it was quite a bit taller than most buildings, so wherever I went I could still see it. I found an alley lined with interesting shops and people. I started down it, hoping to find something for Mama. Something I could give her when she got out of the wall.

The first shop sold clothes. I ventured in and looked around, but everything was outlandish and bold. I was used to a dull wardrobe and so didn’t buy anything. Each shop was stranger then the last, and the people matched. Outside of a window half way down the alley I came across a book shop. It smelled old in there, and was the first reminder of Humurom that I had come across. It was a splendid sight, books on shelves reaching to the ceiling. They weren’t falling apart or torn in any way, unlike the ones at home. The covers were not made of leather but of paper. I took one down and looked over it. The language and layout was almost the same as the ones I was used to. Azureland had retained some of its old ways after all. The shop keeper came to my aid.

“Finding everything all right?” The old woman asked.

“Yes.” I said, putting up the book.

“You look like you’re in to classics; would you like to see our collection?”

“Oh, no thank you. I’m actually looking for new books.” I had twenty two years of classics; it was time for something fresher.

She took me to a table in the center of the shop. The books there had a slick surface she called “plastic”. I liked the feel and
bought the first book I touched. I had no idea what it was about, but I didn’t care.

I spent the rest of the morning looking through shop windows, thinking about the wall. I would have to go back any day, was I ready? I thought so. The only thing I feared at that point was being ambushed by Cityers. If it were to happen again maybe they wouldn’t kill me since I was going to be alone. As a prisoner I could explain my intentions and maybe bring about the peace I had originally intended. I don’t know why I changed my mind so frequently. I distinctly remember telling Nara that I didn’t care about the Cityers anymore, but knowing that I might see them made me come up with a plan just in case.

I ate lunch at a small restaurant. I didn’t understand the menu and accidentally ordered a plate of animal eyeballs. That alley was a strange one indeed. I exchanged the eyeballs for some kind of meat; I was too scared to ask what it was. I didn’t get sick so I suppose it was edible.

The cold started bothering me by that point so I started back. That evening was spent dwelling on my upcoming mission, though every time I tried to think up a better plan I got distracted by something out the window or a noise in the hall. I was procrastinating. I knew once I was out there my instincts would take over. My mind was exhausted of these thoughts. I went to bed early.

The next day was more of the same. Calrus promised that he was almost finished and I wandered around town all day. I brought the book along but didn’t feel like reading it. I grew mentally tired of
everything around me. The delay was working against me. All I wanted to do was sleep. Two days later Calrus came to my room.

“Guess what?” He asked, I didn’t answer. “It’s done.”

“Really?” I sat up, alert.

Calrus put five bracelets on the small table next to my bed.

“Yeah, the technology was hard to crack, but we did it.”

I jumped out of bed. “So I can go back now?”

“As soon as you want to.”

“I’ll go in the morning. It’ll be great; I’ll get my mother out and be back in no time.” I was telling this more to myself then to Calrus.

“Speaking of your mother, I brought some medication to bring her. That way she will feel up to the trip.”

I stared at him for a while. What was medication? The idea that something I could bring her would make her feel better had to be too good to be true. “There are things here that I can bring her so she’ll feel better?”

“Yeah.” He said coolly.

“That’s amazing.”

“The only thing now is to figure out who made the bracelet.” Calrus said.

“Are you sure it wasn’t the Cityers?”

“Almost positive, there’s no way that the technology could have been created by a country in their position.”

“I don’t know,” I said slowly, “they have grenades and guns. I’m sure they could manage this.”
“There’s a lot about the wall you don’t know. Trust me, it wouldn’t be possible.” He gave me several small purple pills before he left and told me that the affects would not last very long.

That night I packed my bag with food from the café, mostly chocolate bars, but also a few pieces of bread. I had chocolate on the train and thought it might last the trip. In addition they would probably help me sell the idea of Azureland. Anything with flavor would excite someone from Humurom. I went to bed early, hoping that I could sleep off my anxiety. Instead I tossed and turned for several hours, not knowing if it was the last time I would sleep on an actual bed.

I don’t know if I slept. Next thing I knew it was near dawn. I tried making my bed up the way it was before I slept in it, but I had tossed the blankets away and could not remember how they were situated. I took one last look at the room; made sure I had the bracelets, and went down to the lobby. I remembered that strange man I overheard on my first morning. I hoped he figured whatever it was out.

The lobby was empty and dark. I snuck out into the cold morning air. It wiped away any sign of drowsiness. The city was the same as the lobby. The sky lightened as the sun readied to make an appearance. I never was awake to see dawn in my short time in Azureland. I wanted to wait and see it, but I knew I had to get back as soon as possible. I wondered what my mother was doing. Hopefully she would be sleeping, awaiting breakfast.
It took me a while to find the little bridge that led to the wall. I crossed it and found myself face to face with the wall. It didn’t glow in the waning darkness. I slipped a bracelet onto my wrist and held my breath, trying not to think of anything but my mother. My wrist was only inches away when a voice stopped me.

“I thought you would try to sneak away.”

I turned to see Nara standing on the other side of the bridge. “I have to get there before I change my mind.”

“Good luck.” I could hear the emotion in her voice.

“Thank you. Hopefully I’ll be back in a few days.”

“Gilik wants to talk to you before you leave.”

I couldn’t tell if she was being honest or not. “Another good reason to leave now.”

“I’ll tell him he just missed you.”

“See you soon.” I turned back to the wall.

“Hardin, be safe. I’ll miss you.”

I smiled. “Don’t go saying that, I’ll be back before you know it.”

I lifted my wrist to the wall and closed my eyes. I felt my feet lift off the ground and slam back down in an instant. I slowly opened my eyes and became instantly nauseous. I was back in the forest.
The sight and smell was too familiar to me, I couldn’t stand it. I started off slowly, my ears picking up the tiniest sounds. I was more scared than I had been on the first trip through that forest. The trees proved to be good hiding places. I took advantage of each one I came to by hiding behind it. My mind sharpened to the world around me, despite how hard I tried to keep it dull. I didn’t want to feel the nerves and dread that had begun to overwhelm me.

The sun quickly lit up the dome in a grayish light. I was still wearing the gray clothes that were given to me on my first night in Wall City. They had been washed once. I shed the jacket; it was much too warm for it. I came to the spot where we had been attacked within minutes. There was no sign of our past confrontation save for a few holes in the ground. Shortly after that I came to the cage. Its purpose was still unknown, but I had a sneaking suspicion that it might somehow be related to the bracelets.

Every step was one more towards home, but also one more towards a possible attack. I was less conspicuous than a five person team, and that improved my chances of survival. The forest ended abruptly several hours later. The open fields were next. I boldly stepped out and walked, without looking anywhere but forward. I was nearing the area where we first saw the Cityers pop out of the ground. Sweat poured down my body as I approached. As I passed the square
patches on the ground nothing happened. Before I knew it I was quite a ways away. I suppose I should have been happy, but there was a small part of me that actually wanted to get captured; to know the truth of the Cityers once and for all.

The most important priority was still ahead, and so I continued. My initial fear subsided as fear sometimes will if kept unchecked. It was hard to say if I was even heading in the right direction. There was so much open space that I could have easily left the unmarked trail home behind in favor of a new route to nowhere. There was only grass as far as I could see. I wished for a Journey Train. I could have easily made a bad cake in the amount of time needed to get home. Or maybe I might have finally caught a butterfly. I imagined Nara walking beside me, telling me valuable information. And of course I wouldn’t be paying attention. If only she was there; I needed the company.

All of the sudden I felt that someone was watching me. I couldn’t see anyone, and it may have been my imagination; but there was no point in taking chances. I dropped to the ground and was partially hidden by the grass. I listened hard for any sign of movement. There was no breeze; no noise or movement at all. I stayed down for the better part of the day, thinking it better to travel by night.

The sun took its time to cross the sky that day. Eventually it did turn night. I got up slowly in the late twilight to see the field just as empty as it had been before. That feeling of being watched must have been unwarranted. I was used to being paranoid, but now it was different. It used to be constant, I always knew something was about to go wrong. Azureland changed that. That day in the field the
paranoia came and went, allowing me some time to think everything was all right, before plunging me back into anxiety. I mention that feeling a lot, but that’s because it was so strong. It dominated my mind and body, putting me on edge.

I couldn’t see where I was going. Not that I needed it, there was nothing to walk into, and as far as I knew I was going in a straight line. I grew tired and stopped to sleep. I was too tired to care where I was, but I was confident that no one would see me. I woke at first light, ready to go. There’s not much to say about the morning. I ate some bread for breakfast, hoping I had enough so I wouldn’t have to eat Nutrition again. By midday I found the burnt town. After everything I learned in Azureland I still had no answers. It could have been the Humurom’s who were responsible. I wasn’t convinced anymore, but still thought it probably was them. I took a long loop around the area, not wanting to see what I had seen before.

Why would the Cityers want to live above ground at all? They must have felt safe enough to attempt it. Compared to the strict rules of Humurom, the Cityers must have been lax. I wanted to confront Matilik about it; to get as much information as possible. I was not sure if he knew anything or not. As leader he might have been passed information that could help fill the holes in my existing “history of Humurom”. What I had so far wasn’t holding very much water.

One hundred fifty years before I entered Azureland there was a war between two countries: Bozlin and Humurom. The war escalated dangerously and threatened to spill into bordering countries. So those countries got together and voted to lace a giant dome over Humurom
and Bozlin until the fighting was over. The discovery of nuclear bombs caused the wall to go up before it was ready. Nobody could get in, no one could get out. The nuclear bombs went off; destroying the two countries and lighting up the dome for hours.

Humurom was survived by the people who made it into a bomb shelter, constructed inside of a mountain. For the first one hundred years the people inside the shelter ate canned food, afraid to go out because of the radiation left after the nuclear explosions. Soon the population increased and the food started to run out, forcing the inhabitants into a corner. The Hunting Office was created and the door was opened for the first time, revealing a world vastly different than the ones their ancestors knew. Somehow deer survived the nuclear blasts, and were hunted. But it wasn’t enough to feed everyone. Drastic measures were put into place, known as Nutrition. Bits of the deceased would be put into machines and come out as food. I almost threw up just thinking about it. It kept them alive, and that’s all that mattered to them. Things got even worse when the hunters began to be killed off by the Cityers, the new name for the Bozlins. It was assumed that they were responsible because they hated the Humuroms so much.

The deer ran out and the leaders were too scared to let people leave, forcing the close of the Hunting Office. That’s when I took a team to seek out the Cityers. I found Azureland instead and discovered the history that I was never taught. A few questions remained. How did the deer survive? Why were the Cityers hunting hunters? Who
created the Bracelets? I doubted Matilik knew all the answers, but I hoped he could help with at least one.

By night I arrived at the ruins of the church. I found a hiding place between two pieces of fallen roof and ate some more bread. I thought about spending the night there as the light was quickly disappearing, but was strangely excited to get back home. My old mat would be more comfortable than the hard ground. I set off on the final leg of the journey. I knew it so well that I didn’t need to see where I was going. I made it to the mountain a few minutes later, climbed up the side, and arrived at the door. I knocked, no one answered. I continued knocking but to no avail. I shouldn’t have expected anyone to answer. The ground wasn’t so bad. I curled up and used my bag as a pillow, hoping someone would eventually open the door.

I made it back with a lot more ease then I thought it would take. But I was only half done. The hard part would be getting back to Azureland with Mama. I closed my eyes, promising myself that it would be just as easy.
I opened my eyes slowly, and then jumped to my feet as I saw someone standing over me. The man had a huge smile on his face. At first I thought it was an enemy, but thankfully I was proven wrong.

“Somebody reported a noise last night; and here you are!” Stud said excitedly.

“Hey Stud.”
“We thought you were dead.”
“You did?”
“The hunters came back and said you disappeared at some wall, probably a trap by the Cityers. They assumed you died.”

I hadn’t thought what their reaction was. I would have thought the same thing. “No, not at all, that wall is greater than anything we ever thought possible.”

“Wait!” He suddenly exclaimed. “Everyone needs to see you, they won’t believe it.”

I asked the question I was dreading. “How’s Mama?”

His smile instantly faded. “She’s not doing well. Your disappearance was hard on her.”

“I think I can help with that.”

“Well let’s get inside and you can tell everyone. They’ll be so excited.”
He had left the door ajar and we entered. The usual smells of Humurom hit me hard. I stopped, certain I was going to vomit. I breathed deeply to adjust myself. “Has anyone left since I’ve been gone?”

He led me into the main chamber. I looked down and saw the floors below, ending with the dining area which was full of Nutrition eating breakfast goers. “There’s no reason for it to open,” he said, “the Hunting Office was closed as soon as the hunters got back.”

Stud insisted that I make a statement in the Dining Area. I wanted to see Mama first, but when I was noticed everyone got so excited that they steered me straight to the bottom. Matilik joined in and called for a table to be cleared for me to stand on. I saw the team when we passed the library. The former hunters had been reduced to working there, though there was nothing to do.

Dala came up first. “Back from the dead!” She disappeared in the crowd seconds later.

Lace jumped in front of me. “We are so sorry we left you.” I tried to tell her that it wasn’t her fault, but she too disappeared in the mass of people.

When we got to the bottom Matilik led me to the cleared table in the center of the dining area. “Can I see my mother first?” I asked. “I want her to know I’m all right.”

“Someone will let her know.”

I was pushed onto the table. I stood there in front of everyone, startled by how many people were there and that they all seemed happy to see me. I searched my brain for something to say, but
decided that I would sound better if I didn’t have a preset speech. I didn’t know how much people knew, but I guessed that the team did not tell the whole story when they got back.

“Hello everyone,” I started, “I know my being alive comes as a shock to you, sometimes it comes as a shock to me too. All my life I knew that what lies beyond Humurom is dangerous and deadly, and I should have thought about that before I brought other hunters out into a hopeless task.” I found the team in the crowd and nodded sadly to them. “You see, when we left all those weeks ago, I had no plan to find a new place to hunt as I had promised. I went out with the objective to make peace with the Cityers. It didn’t work, we never spoke. We did encounter them, twice. The first time we ran. The second time they ambushed us, and for the first time I realized how dangerous a mission it really was. There will be no peace with the Cityers, because they have no intention to speak with us. And so we should not pursue that course. Instead there is a much better course to take. As you all probably know, we happened upon a mysterious wall and that I disappeared there. The hunters thought me dead, but I wasn’t. I was transported to a city, bigger and more beautiful than anything anybody here has ever seen. It is a place where the sun beats down and the air is frigid and clear. That city is called Wall City, and while I was there I learned why we live in such a terrible place. It is strange . . . I had to go so far away to find out what was kept from us here. We are all taught from a very early age that there was once a war so destructive that it destroyed everything around us. What we didn’t know is why we were never helped; after all, the whole world
wasn’t destroyed. The truth is that the countries surrounding us and the Cityers decided to put a giant wall around us known as the Rainbow Wall. It was designed to absorb the blasts of extremely powerful bombs that had the capabilities to destroy so much more. But in their haste they forgot to put a way to get in, and so we have been closed off to the outside world ever since. Our ancestors knew that after the bombs went off a poison remained in the air and so they never let anybody out. When food got low they started the Hunting Office and opened the doors to see a world completely in ruin. But I have good news; we don’t have to live this way anymore. I know my way back and can assist others in journeys to the wall. I have the only way out. Are you ready to leave here once and for all?”

The crowd had remained silent the whole time I spoke. I wasn’t sure if it was because they were in awe, or because they didn’t believe a word I said. I was going to continue about how great Azureland was, but Matilik cut me off.

“Wait!” He shouted. I wasn’t used to hearing him sound angry. “You are saying many wonderful things, but why should we believe you? Because you have new clothes?”

“I also brought food.” There was a huge roar when I said that. I began tossing out the bars of chocolate that I brought. “Please share them, I don’t have many.”

Matilik took a piece and ate it. “This is good, but is not enough for everyone to believe you.”

“I believe you!” Someone shouted. Others echoed the same thoughts after trying chocolate.
“Hardin, may I please have a word with you.”

I saw how angry he was and followed him away. I got plenty of pats and even a few hugs as I passed through the crowd. He took me up to the old Hunting Office, now almost bare. Matilik turned and forced a smile. “I can’t have you giving these people false hope.”

“It’s not false, it’s all real.” I knew that what I said could be seen as too fantastic for our world, but I had to get him to see that it wasn’t.

“It may be, but a journey of that length would kill many here, so many are sick. They wouldn’t be able to run away like the hunters can if attacked.”

“I don’t mean all at once,” I pleaded, “that would be - never mind. I was thinking about bringing only a few at a time.”

“No, absolutely not.” He said stubbornly.

“Staying in here will kill them . . . unless you don’t want them to see something.”

“What?”

“I saw that burnt town, I know what you did.” My anger rose quickly at the thought.

“Well can you tell me?” He sounded honest.

“You’re sending people out to destroy Cityer towns.” He was too surprised at the accusation to respond at first. “No I’m not. The only people who have ever left here are hunters.”

“I saw the town burn,” I was beginning to shout, “all of us out there did.”

“Then the Cityers must have been the ones who did it.”
“Why would they destroy their own town?”

“That’s not my concern. Have you ever seen anybody leave here that is not a hunter?”

I had to think about it. “No.” I finally said.

“I don’t know who is attacking the Cityers, but they can keep going, because with each one gone we have less to worry about.”

“What’s it matter now? You closed the Hunting Office.”

Matilik had managed to keep his voice down, but it started to rise slightly. “It was too dangerous, and that is also why you are not leaving here unless you want to go alone.”

“There are so many good things there, nobody will go hungry and nobody will be in danger.”

“But they will be to get there.”

“Listen to the possibilities.”

He leaned in. “Listen to me, no one is going and that’s all I am going to say.”

“You’re killing everyone!” I screeched.

“No, if they leave they will die.”

I saw no sense in continuing the endless argument. Matilik went to calm the crowd. I shook visibly, I had never dreamed of getting into an argument with Matilik. He treated me as if I was no longer a Humurom. I made up my mind to leave with Mama as soon as possible. I snuck out of the office, afraid to be seen by anyone, and went up to see her.

When I got there the smell almost knocked me out. My eyes watered, but I got to her room all right. She was on the bed,
completely alone. I listened to her shallow breathing for a minute. Stud was right, she wasn’t doing well. Her face was sunken and gray. I felt the pang of my absence. I should have been there for her sooner.

“Mama . . .” I called softly.

She opened her eyes and immediately tried to get up. “Oh Hardy, I knew you weren’t dead. I told everyone, ask them, I told them.”

I laughed nervously. “Mama, I couldn’t wait to see you again. I’ve been on a journey. It was wonderful and I want you to come.”

“You know I can’t. I can’t even get out of bed anymore.”

“I have something for that. It will make you feel better. Swallow this.”

I handed her one of the pills that Calrus gave me. She swallowed it with difficulty. “Wherever you went must have been nice, but why did you come back?”

“I couldn’t leave you. Now rest, you’ll feel better when you wake up.”

“Thank you, please don’t leave again.”

I held her hand. “I won’t ever leave you.”

I waited until she fell asleep before getting up. I hoped the pill would help. I wasn’t sure what exactly it was supposed to do. I went to the library, still sneaking around, afraid that Matilik would see me. The library was filled with displaced hunters sitting around, that was all they could do anymore. I didn’t want to go in and be mobbed by them so I decided instead to go to the Hunting Office, which I knew would be empty.
I sat on the floor in the Hunting Office for a while, trying to figure out my next move, absent mindedly staring at the far wall. Matilik clearly didn’t want to deal with me, and I in turn didn’t want to deal with him. Whatever I did it would have to be without his consent. Mama looked so ill that all the plans to get her to Azureland would have to wait until she got better. I hoped that the pills would help.

While I sat there going over my almost hopeless situation I noticed something odd about the wall I was staring at. On the right side, almost to the corner, was a small hole. Usually that would have been covered by a wooden cabinet; but that, along with all the other furniture, was gone. I went over to inspect it. It was too dark in the room to see how deep it was so I stuck my finger in it. It was only an inch deep. I pushed on it. The wall budged. I pushed harder and the wall slowly gave way under the pressure, sliding back from its position. I used all my strength and the wall opened like a door, revealing a small room.

The feeling was akin to the one when I walked through Wall City for the first time. How could I have missed that all the times I had been in there? Were there more secret rooms? The room had a small table against the wall, which were all covered with shelves. On the table was a single sheet of paper. It had yellowed with age. All the shelves were covered with similar looking papers. I went through them. They had all been written by the first person to work the Files Office. Most of the notes were rants about how terrible it is living in the bunker. There were years of it. They mentioned the bombs, but not in detail, only that they think they were nuclear. Nutrition is
mentioned, but only briefly, and the person doesn’t know what it is made from. This predates my date for the beginning of Nutrition; I always thought they started it much later.

I went to the table and read the papers there, they were much more interesting than any of the others, and written for future readers. I read it to myself.

Hello. I am speaking to you from bunker year 53. I was only a little girl when the bombs went off. We have been stuck in here ever since. No sun, no breeze. I don’t know what things are told in your time, but I feel that I must relay the truth about why things are the way they are. Meaning why lessons have been shortened and why artifacts are being destroyed or altered. It is fear. The leaders today are fearful of you, the future generations. They fear that if you found out about the sun, or about how great the outside is, then you will revolt until you can go out. I don’t know how much will be left, but I fear no trace of the past will be left. That is why I will attempt to save books and paintings, because that may be all that is left from the outside world. It is not just fear. We are all ashamed, so many of the older citizens are talking of removing our history so our past deeds are not found out. We doomed ourselves to this existence. There were only six nukes made. And I fear that all six have been detonated. The radiation could keep us in here for centuries. But I know that if anything can be done it must be done by the youth. They still have the craving for knowledge. Someday the youth will figure out a way to fix this, and will make the future better than the past. Don’t forget, the Bozlins are mostly friendly. It was only a few of
their leaders that messed everything, just like here. There is no reason to be scared of them, though rumors say otherwise.

Things must have really changed with the Bozlins over the years. They went from being mostly good to wanting to kill us. Though I suppose that was just me jumping to conclusions again. I can’t say that I learned too much from the letter. I did feel better about not being the only one who wanted to get away. I found it interesting that she put so much faith in the youth. That youth was gone and the one that replaced it was old, and they didn’t want to do anything. They had grown accustomed to the way things were and didn’t want anything to change, even if it was for the better. I finally made a break through with the chocolate, but I wondered how many of those people would actually want to walk all the way to the wall.

I took another look around the room and found a small door on the back wall. It was three feet high and the same color as the rest of the wall. I examined it, and tried to open it but couldn’t. A voice startled me back to a standing position.

“I’m not surprised you found this room, you were always very clever.” It was Matilik. “I first came here as the ‘new guy’ in the Leader Office, assigned to one day be leader of the Hunting Office. I never understood why a hunter couldn’t take it over. I guess the leaders feared they would be unstable.”

Once my heart stopped racing I spoke. “Why didn’t you tell anyone?”
“Tell them what? That I found the rants of some old woman? It didn’t matter, what would that change?” He sounded dangerously calm, as if trying to lure me into trusting him.

“We could have been taught about the outside, how amazing it was.”

“She should have let that be destroyed. There’s no reason for that sort of thing to be lying around, giving false hope.”

“It is very real hope.”

He sighed. “Not this again, so many would have died looking for a better place, when all they need is right here.”

“Nutrition?”

“I forgot you worked in the Dining Office.”

“How can you explain that?”

“It’s necessary. Everyone would have starved without it.”

“I’d rather.”

“Then leave, go back to your wall. The people here don’t want any of your new world.”

I pointed down towards the dining area. “That’s not the way it sounded.”

He brushed this aside. “You got them excited, it will pass.”

“What are you afraid of? If it’s not something outside then it must be something in here.”

“I’m afraid for the safety of my people.” He pleaded. I could tell he was starting to play the victim.

“Don’t you see that if we make it out then everyone will be much safer? They’ll be able to go out and start normal lives.”
He suddenly shouted. “And many will leave, never return, and Humurom will cease to exist as a country; and as a people!”

I was beginning to understand his position. “You’re trying to preserve us here.”

“We can continue to grow, get stronger here.”

“No we can’t, the body can only take so much Nutrition. All you’re doing is poisoning us.”

“Nutrition is safe; it goes through an extraction and an altering process.”

“If people knew what they were eating they’d leave in a heartbeat.”

“But they never will.”

“People know.”

“Very few do, and they will not want to ruin it for the rest of them.”

“That’s about to change.”

He considered my threat. He nodded slowly. “Alright then; if you really want to know why I don’t want anybody to leave then here.” He pulled a skeleton key out of his pocket and handed it to me. “I don’t know if anybody ever knew about it. It was passed down from leader to leader, and I am the first to find out what it goes to, and it is in this room.”

I should have been skeptical, but my curiosity took over. The key fit perfectly into the small door on the wall. It swung open and a light breeze hit my face. It was too dark to see what was in there. I leaned in, my hands slipped on a grimy sloped surface.
“I’m sorry Hardin, but this is better for everyone.”

I tried to pull my head out to hear him better. I felt a thud on my back and I slipped down the nasty slide. It sloped left and then right, carrying me deeper into the ground. I tumbled the whole way, getting my body coated with slime. I hit the floor with a whack and ached all over. I heard a faint click from up above, Matilik locked the door.

I got up and wiped the grime off my hands. I was in a tunnel, I could tell by the echoes from water dripping onto the metal floor. There was no point trying to crawl back up since Matilik locked the door. I finally got to see his true colors. He was someone so bent on keeping Humurom alive that he was willing to get rid of anyone who wanted to change anything. That might have been a trait passed down from leader to leader. Though I suspected it was more accurate to say that each leader handpicked someone who believed that already to replace them. That was the last straw, I no longer felt like a Humurom anymore, and I was fine with that.

I didn’t waste any time feeling sorry for myself. My anger outweighed my “what just happened” feeling. I started down the tunnel. I ran into the walls multiple times. I wasn’t sure if that was because the tunnel was curving or because I couldn’t walk straight. Several hundred yards later I saw a small bit of light up ahead. My step quickened and I arrived in a large room. A small patch of light flooded the floor from a grate in the ceiling. With it I could see large cylindrical objects stacked on the left and right side of the room, six in total. The bottom of one on the left read: Humurom I. The one above
that read: *Humurom II*. What were those things? They couldn’t be... bombs? They were down past a creepy tunnel. What else could they be? That lady from the letter said there were only six, and there were six down there. Does that mean that none were set off? How could that be possible? Everything outside was destroyed.

The grate in the ceiling appeared to be the only way out. While I wanted to know the mysteries of the bombs, or whatever those things were, I wanted to get back before Matilik had a chance to turn everyone against me. I climbed onto the first bomb, trying to forget what it was. I then climbed on to the second and then the third. I was up near the top of the room. The grate was only a little ways away. I jumped and grabbed onto it. It was so old and rusted that it immediately gave way, dropping me to the floor. I landed on my back. It ached tremendously, but I had to continue. I climbed the bombs again, this time with great difficulty. I jumped, this time managing to hang on to the edge of the hole. I pulled myself up and found myself on the ground, a little ways away from the path that led to the ruined church.

My back hurt so bad that on the way back I took one of the pills that was meant for Mama, hoping she would be all right with one less. There were still three more. I climbed up the side of the mountain and knocked on the door. There was no response. I sat down and waited. Twenty minutes later my back felt much better, even better than before I fell. I couldn’t believe that a little pill could have that much of an affect.
It was another hour before the door opened. Stud appeared and pulled me inside, closing the door quietly behind me. Before I could explain what I was doing outside again he dragged me down a hall and into a closet used by the Night Cleaners.

He took a look at me and cringed. He wasn’t one to get dirty. “Matilik told me to not let anybody in, which doesn’t make any sense since nobody leaves. What happened?”

“Good old Matilik doesn’t want me to reveal what Nutrition is. He thinks people will want to leave if they find out.”

“What is it?”

I ignored him for his own good. “We need to be fast. Go and see if any of the hunters want to go to the wall again. Where are they?”

“They were all put into the library since Hunting closed.”

In the excitement I had forgotten that I had seen them there earlier. “I’ll go get my mother, have the hunters meet me at the door in ten minutes. If they’re not there then I’ll assume they don’t want to go.”

“Do you have enough food?” He asked.

I doubted that I had enough, but there was no time to waste getting Nutrition. I was not going to eat it and I was not going to let anybody else eat it either if I could help it. “Yes, I brought enough in my bag. Now go. If Matilik sees me he won’t let me out.”

Stud left the closet. I waited a few more minutes, until I was sure there was nobody around, and quietly slipped out into the hall. The shoes I was wearing were a lot louder than my old deer hide ones. I had to be extra careful not to make too much noise. I snuck down
several floors to 4. I was lucky enough to not be seen. I got there at
the perfect time, there were no medics around. But then I wasn’t so
sure. I heard footsteps coming from Mama’s room. I tiptoed in and
was greatly surprised at what I saw. Mama was standing up, not only
that she was walking around as if there was nothing wrong with her.

“Hardin, what did you give me?” She smiled brightly as she
danced around the room.

“It works!” I said too loudly. At that moment I was too happy to
care who heard me.

“This is amazing. I haven’t felt this good in such a long time.
Where did you get it?”

“I’ll show you, but you have to come quickly. We need to leave.
In Azureland they’ll be able to get you back to your full strength.” I
was becoming increasingly hopeful of our chances to get to the wall.

“Leave? But I feel better now.” Mama tried out walking
backwards.

“It won’t last. And I only have a few pills left.”

“But it’s so dangerous outside.”

“We need to go. I can’t stand to see you sick.”

“What is this Azureland?”

“It’s a place so amazing, and I know how to get there. It’s safe
and beautiful. Do you want to go?”

“I’ll follow you. I can actually walk again.” She added happily.

“Good, get your stuff together.” There wasn’t much time.
Matilik would be on to us at any moment.
“All I have is right here.” She threw something on the bed. It was the case that Milton stole from the guard.

“How did you get that?” I went up to it and saw the strange design in the center, a blue triangle with an orange eye inside it.

“They gave it to me after you disappeared. They wanted me to remember you with it.”

I grabbed the case and went into the other room as Mama got dressed in a cleaner outfit. It was strange to see the case again. I was trying to leave my life in Humurom behind, and one of the most sensitive memories would always be with me. Only a day after we were heroes for bringing food back in it Milton was killed. Once back in Azureland I promised myself that I would distance myself from thoughts of Humurom. Milton and Stud would be the only reasons to remember any of it. Mama and the team would be associated with Azureland.

Mama finished getting ready and we left the residence, both happy to never have to see it again. We snuck up through the bunker. Nobody was around, lunch had started down below. The chatter and footfalls from the dining area helped to muffle our steps. The team from before was already at the door. It was good to see everyone was willing to go back out with me. It was a little odd though considering how our conversation went when we were near the wall. I had a feeling that they felt bad about leaving me behind once they knew I survived.

“Where’s Stud?” I asked, looking around for him.

“Here.” Stud said from behind me.
I turned to see him carrying the other case. “What are you doing?” I couldn’t take my eyes off the case. I remembered what was in there.

“I thought you might need some defense.” Stud opened the case and handed the four guns to the hunters. I did not take one. Milton was right, they definitely looked better than the ancient guns Humurom had. They were sleek and silver, with a strange cartridge of liquid that hooked into the back. “I’ve been on the team to try them out. They have some kind of liquid that gets shot out. There’s about half left in each one. Now you better leave before anyone finds out.”

“You’re going to get in so much trouble.” I would rather go defenseless then have to think about what they were going to do to him when he got caught. “Come with us.”

“I was going to get in trouble anyway for letting you in, and then out again. Besides somebody has to be here to lock the door again. Now get out of here.”

He pushed us out the door. I got one last look at him and tried to convince him to leave with us. He only smiled and closed the door.
XIX

We were back outside. I followed the path to the church with my eyes. It was deserted as always. We made it down the mountain. I helped Mama. Once down we started. It was such a sudden departure that I wasn’t quite sure how to react to it all.

“Hardin,” Dala said, “I would follow you anywhere . . . now, but what are we doing?”

I hadn’t realized that they had followed me blindly. I suppose I didn’t tell Stud to tell them anything except that I was headed to the wall again. “Sorry, I had a very short time to get out. We are going to Azureland. That’s the country I was in. The most important part is to get my mother there. She is going to feel much better there. And how about these guns, they might help.”

“What about making peace with the Cityers?” Morome asked.

“They don’t deserve it.” I said simply. “Not if they are going to keep ambushing us, besides the only reason I wanted to do that was so we wouldn’t get killed hunting. But now that we don’t have to worry about it . . .”

“How are we going to get through the wall?” Lace asked.

“I have more bracelets. That’s why I was gone for so long, because they wouldn’t let me in until they were done, and I needed more than one anyway. What I’m really surprised about is that Peter came.”
Peter had been quietly walking along. He turned toward me at the sound of his name. “After being outside, the inside just wasn’t cutting it anymore.” He said with a laugh.

“It’s so amazing out here.” Mama said.

In the rush out I had almost forgotten that Mama was there. I wasn’t used to her walking around, and so forgot about her actually being there with us. “Oh, you’ve never been outside have you?”

“I have once, my father took me hunting but that was a really long time ago.”

My grandfather died before I was born. I heard stories my whole life about how great of a hunter he was. “It hasn’t changed much has it?”

“From what I remember; not a bit.”

“It will though, soon.” I couldn’t wait for her to see Azureland.

I cautiously walked in front of Mama. We passed the church and I pointed it out to her as the place where Milton died. We didn’t stay long; I wanted to get as far as possible before night. The more we walked the more I realized just how tired I was. I couldn’t stop to rest, every step counted.

When I felt safe I would tell stories about Azurland. I wanted to hype it up as much as possible, to make sure that nobody would try and go back. “They have snow there.” I said an hour after we passed the church.

“What is snow?” Dala asked.

“Don’t you read?”
“I’ve been forced to recently. That’s all we do since they put all the hunters in the library.”

“Well snow happens when it’s really cold. It falls from the sky like rain, only it’s solid and white.”

They all sounded amazed.

“What else is out there?” Morome asked.

“All kinds of great things. They have trains, which are like these big -”

“We know what trains are.” Dala interrupted.

“Right. Well they have these extra big ones that people take vacation on.”

“Vacations,” Mama said dreamily, “that sounds great.”

Lace didn’t sound as astounded. “How do they have vacations on a train?”

“They have train cars that have almost anything imaginable, even one for making cakes.”

“That’s wild.” Peter said.

“It sure is.” I agreed.

“Are they different than us? Do they talk weird?” Peter asked.

“Not at all, they look and sound just like us.”

Peter raised his eyebrows in disbelief. “Any differences?”

“Living conditions.”

This was met with grunts of assent.

“Personally, I think that it has something to do with our people trying to preserve us in some way. So every leader made sure that we would not change. At least that’s how Matilik made it sound before he
trapped me in a dark tunnel.” I probably should have waited to tell them that after we made it through the wall. Though I guess the grime on my clothes would have come up eventually.

“He did what?” Lace said. Mama looked equally concerned.

“It’s no big deal, I got out.”

“It is a big deal.” Mama said.

“Not really. What is a big deal is what I found down there. Six nuclear bombs, at least I think they were nuclear.”

“What does that mean?” Lace asked.

“Those are the bombs that caused this.” I gestured all around. “At least I thought they did. There were only six made, and I found six. So what does that tell you?” I waited for a response. None of them seemed to know what it meant. “It means that something else destroyed this place.”

Peter threw his arms in the air. “So what did?”

I thought they would be more concerned about what happened to their country. “I don’t know, but I bet it had something to do with the Cityers.”

The day passed unremarkably. By night we arrived at the burned town. I no longer trusted Matilik at all, but there was some honesty that I picked up on when he said he had nothing to do with it. I had never seen anybody leave or come in except for hunters, and there was no way they could get all the way out there and back in that amount of time. But the town burned in the middle of the night, after we left. Knowing Matilik’s true nature, I had to believe that there was still a chance that he was involved somehow. I explained the importance of
the town to Mama. She assured me that Matilik wouldn’t do such a thing.

We ate a small dinner of what bread was left and then went to sleep for the night. Morome took the first watch. All we had to eat now was a small bit of chocolate. I suspected that we would make it to the wall by the next night. About an hour before dawn Mama began to feel bad again. I gave her the next pill. My back started to ache, but I had to save what was left for her.

Nothing happened for most of the next day. I had time to think over my harshness towards the Cityers. My predisposed hatred had subsided somewhat, but I still did not want them to get to Azureland if they were going to attack us. Something stirred within me. There was some part of all of this that wasn’t piecing together. Perhaps it never would. The Cityers were mysterious, and that’s the way I planned on leaving them.

As evening on the second day approached we had our first sighting of the forest. Hunger was taking over, but it did not dampen our spirits about almost being at our destination. The idea of a new and glorious world was beginning to excite the team. They talked louder as it seemed our way was clear. They must have forgotten that the dangerous areas were still ahead.

I recognized the place immediately; it was my third time there. We were right around the small squares that the Cityers jumped out of. I noticed something out of the corner of my eye and stopped. The others did as well. About a hundred yards away to our left I saw movement in the tall grass.
“Did you see that?” I whispered.

“I’ll check it out.” Morome whispered back.

Dala went with him, guns raised. They crept slowly over in the direction that I pointed out. Morome suddenly started running up to something, yelling “stop”. I positioned myself in front of Mama just in case. Morome and Dala fought with something in the grass, and then pulled a boy up and carried him over to me. He wore a dirty blue uniform that was similar to ours. He struggled with his captors, with a look of terror on his face.

I was startled by this turn of events. I had spent so much time thinking about what I would do if I was caught by a Cityer that I was at a loss for what to do if we caught one.

“Who are you?” I asked, trying to sound intimidating.

“My name is Orin.” He said quickly. “I promise not to tell that you’re here.”

“Who would you tell?”

“No one.”

“He means who would care that we’re here?” Morome growled.

“The other Bozlins.” Orin cowered under the grips of Morome and Dala.

“So you still call yourselves that.” I mused. “I prefer Cityers.”

“I promise I won’t tell; I’ll stay right here.”

“What do you think we came to do?” I felt like I would finally get some answers.

“It’s no business of mine.”

Morome raised his gun. “Tell us!”
“I think you’re here to kill us.”
“What?” Lace said in disbelief.
“Why would you think that?” I asked softly.
“The Hums have killed so many before.”
“So that’s what you call us. Your people keep killing us.”
He looked confused. “No, you’re the ones doing the killing; our people are just trying to survive.”
Peter joined in. “No, our people are just trying to survive.”
I could see that this argument wasn’t going anywhere. “We have conflicting stories here. Is it at all possible you’ve been lied to?”
He shrugged. “It is, but I work as Security. I’m out to check what happened to one of our towns, we haven’t heard from it.”
“It was burned, but it wasn’t us. Or at least I am pretty sure it wasn’t us.”
Orin nodded slowly, the realization coming to him. “All those people gone. Who else could it have been?”
“It couldn’t have been the Bozlins?” I asked.
“No, we are only here to survive. Unless it was an accident.”
So they were only trying to survive as well. It was such a simple prospect, but had evaded my reasoning. “It wasn’t an accident. We heard people going towards it right before it burned.”
Mama came out from behind me. “Why do you live outside?”
“We always have. One hundred years ago a group left the bunker and settled outside.”
“What about the radiation.” I asked.
“There wasn’t any, they were surprised.”
I pursued the subject. “You mean no nuclear bombs went off.”
“Apparently not, but something obviously did.”
“What about the wall?”
“What about it?” Orin did not sound at all surprised that he was trapped inside the wall.
“If the Bozlins made something to get out, then why haven’t you?” This was my last hope on the subject. Orin would know better than anybody if the Cityers really were the ones who created the bracelets.
“We don’t know how to get out.”
My heart sank. “But you have to. I found these bracelets.” I held out my wrist so he could see it.
“I’ve never seen that. But I guess you also think that we made those guns.”
“You didn’t?”
“No.” He said casually.
I could not believe what I was hearing. It had to be them. “I got the case with these guns myself, there was somebody who had them; we knocked him out and took them.”
Orin seemed surprised at this. “I am in the know about a lot of things; my father is in charge of security. I see everything that comes in and out, and I have never seen any guns like these.”
I scratched my head, completely out of ideas. If the Cityers did not create the guns then who did? Maybe Calrus was right about the Cityers not being able to create the bracelets. I still thought that
there was a chance that Orin could be telling lies. He was awfully compliant with us considering we had two guns to his head.

“I don’t get this at all.” I groaned.

“Neither do I.” Orin admitted.

“Where is your bunker?”

“Right up there, it’s underground.”

“Alright, you’re coming with us to the wall. Make sure nobody sees us. We’ll figure out what’s going on along the way.” I figured if Orin was with us than nobody would attack.

Orin agreed and led the way into the forest. I had a feeling that Orin was excited about the idea of leaving Bozlin. Morome walked closed behind, his gun at the ready. Come to think of it I don’t think any of the team actually knew how to shoot it.

The trees were silent. I could see that Orin was nervous about leading, as if there was something in the forest that he didn’t want to tell us about.

Mama came up beside me as we walked. “What are you going to do with him?”

“Keep him with us. I’m afraid that if we let him go than he’ll bring trouble for us. We’ll let him go when we get to the wall.”

“What if he’s telling the truth?” Despite everything that Mama had been through, she still believed that everything and everyone had good intentions.

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” I wanted to believe that the Cityers were behind everything. I wouldn’t feel bad about leaving them behind when we went through the wall.
We arrived at the cage.

“Do you know what this is?” Morome asked Orin.

“No, but I’ve seen it before. I thought it was a trap set by the Hums.”

“So who set it?” I asked to no one in particular. I really hated all these mysteries.

“If what you’re saying is true,” Orin said, “Then there’s a lot we don’t know about this place. What’s on the other side of the wall?”

“It’s actually a dome. Azureland is on the other side. It is a giant country that is really amazing and safe.”

“And you’re going there?”

“Yes.” I said cautiously, not wanting to give him any ideas.

“That sounds great. Everyone should come.”

“That would be great if your people stopped trying to kill us.”

“I promise you they’re not the ones.”

“Whatever, the important thing is to get to the wall.” I wasn’t in the mood to argue.

“Shh!” Dala suddenly stopped.

“What is it?” Morome asked.

“Listen”

A bright flash ends all hope of a peaceful end to our journey. A loud explosion rocked the ground. I threw my hands over Mama and ran. More flashes and explosions went off all around. Orin ran beside me, helping to cover Mama. For the next few seconds all I saw was a blur of green and spots from the flashes. We took cover in the same
thicket that I found the bracelet in. I set Mama down, told Orin to stay with her, and went out to see what was happening.

I hid behind a tree and stole glances when I thought it was safe. There were several bodies on the ground. I couldn’t tell who was who. I slowly went towards the place. Guns were firing and flash bombs were going off, but I had to know if anyone needed my help. I had to redeem myself for the last time we got attacked, when I almost killed everyone by freezing up.

As I got closer I saw that Morome was on the ground. There was blood on his face and seeping through his clothes. Dala came up at that moment. She too had blood on her. Without a word she picked up his feet while I positioned my arms under his shoulders and we carried him away. He groaned. I was relieved to know he was still alive.

Loud buzzing rang through the air. Strange flying machines dipped below the canopy. They sped by shooting everything in sight. We dropped Morome off with Orin and Mama and ran back. I picked Morome’s gun off the ground and began shooting wildly around at the flying things. I hit one; it crashed in a fiery explosion only fifty yards away. A person went flying from it. The trees shattered when hit. The whole forest was filled with wood shards whizzing about.

The people on the ground disappeared. The flying machines picked up their intensity. There was no way to defeat them all. Our best bet would be to make a run for the wall. I ran back to the thicket and crammed myself in with the others. Peter and Dala came up behind me. We tried to come up with a plan, but it was no use.
Morome couldn’t walk, I did not want Mama to be in the open, and we had no idea where Lace was. Dala and I left to find her.

She was in a clearing made by the explosions. She was covered with blood, sweat, and dirt. Her face was contorted in rage. She positioned her gun and shot straight at us. Had she lost her mind? No. She shot above us. A flying machine had been barreling towards us and we hadn’t even noticed. Lace’s shot hit it square on. It flew over our heads and smashed into a tree. Its fiery demise lit up the whole forest. Trees burned and cracked in all directions. Besides that there was silence in the skies. We breathed easy and felt like we got the victory.

When we got back to the thicket everyone was out. Peter put Morome on his back. We slowly started towards the wall. No one spoke. There was a sense of finality to it all. All we had to do was get to Azureland and it would all be over. I handed out the bracelets. There was not enough for everyone. Dala and Orin were the only ones without one.

Through one of the openings in the trees I saw the rainbow squiggles of the wall. There was laughter and sighs from the team. We stepped out into the opening, only feet away. And then all of our happiness was taken away. The buzzing sliced through the air and we all took defensive stances. The flying machines were coming and there were a lot more this time. At least twenty could be seen.

“What do we do?” Peter cried.

“Get to the wall.” I ordered. “Peter, you have to take two bracelets and bring them back in for Dala and Orin.”
“Yes, sir.” Peter lifted Morome’s arm up and they both disappeared through the wall, followed by Mama and Lace.

The shots started from the flying machines. We ran back into the forest and ran in circles trying to confuse them. Gun shots rang out and we saw that people were on the ground. I took my bracelet off and throw it to Dala. She ran to the wall. Orin and I sprinted off through the trees. We stopped a good distance away and listened. Orin vomited and rested against a tree. It didn’t look like he could take much more.

“Who are these people?” I asked him.

“I don’t know.”

“You said you were going to help us.”

“They attack us just as much. We always thought they were you, you always thought they were us. We must both be wrong.”

Dala came up to us.

“I thought you were going through.”

“I did, now I’m back.”

She handed us bracelets and we made a run for the wall. Gun shots followed us, narrowly missing. Orin and Dala disappear through. I took one last look back and saw a line of people coming into the clearing and the flying machines getting closer. I put my wrist up to the wall and suddenly found myself blinking in the Azureland sun.
“How amazing.” Mama said in awe.

“It’s better than I ever thought.” Dala agreed.

“It’s actually real.” Peter exclaimed.

“So this is what’s on the other side. It’s cold out here.” Orin said.

My excitement in getting out was overshadowed by Morome’s injury. Lace was tending to him nearby. An excited shout came from up ahead. Nara was running towards us.

“You made it!” She said as she came up. “I knew you would.”

“Morome is hurt badly.” Said Lace. She looked around confused. She was not sure which emotion to show, excitement over being in Azureland, or terror at her brother’s condition. She managed both at the same time.

Nara’s glee ended when she saw how we all looked. We must have been a sorry lot to look at. Everyone was covered in blood and dirt. And I just noticed long splinters sticking out of everybody. “Stay right here, I’ll get some help.” She ran off.

I felt woozy. My vision was spotty and I could feel my legs start to give way beneath me. “Hey Mama, we made it.” I saw her excited reaction as I fell to the ground, unconscious.

I slowly opened my eyes and saw that I was back in my room in the government building. For a minute I thought that I hadn’t even
gone back in yet. I groaned at the thought of going back into the wall. I sat up and saw Mama sitting on my bed. I jumped up, wide awake.

“You look great!” I shouted.

“It’s only been the first treatment, but I feel loads better.”

“It worked.” I laughed in amazement. “It all really worked, and here we are; in a better world.”

“Morome is still being treated. His injuries were worse than we thought.”

“But he’s here, I’m sure they’ll get him better.” His condition no longer concerned me. He was in good hands with their medics.

Mama gave a small smile. It was so good to see. “I hope so.”

“How long was I asleep?” I stood up. My muscles ached. I could see the small scars from the splinters. I had at least twenty.

“You went out yesterday afternoon, and now it’s morning.”

“Have you been outside?”

“No, I’ve been in treatment all morning.”

“There is so much stuff in this building. What did they do to you?”

“They hooked me up to this machine and I just sat there. They also gave me food, real food!”

I smiled at her enthusiasm. “That’s fantastic.”

She put her arms around me. “Thank you so much for bringing me here.”

“No problem.”

There was a knock at the door. Mama answered it. Nara came in, looking out of breath.
“Good, you’re awake. Gilik wants to talk to you, he says it’s important.”

Nara led me through the building to Gilik’s small office. He looked anxious about something. There was another man there.

“Hello Hardin.” Gilik said dully.

“Hello sir.”

“I’m glad to see you made it back alright.” He didn’t sound it.

“Thank you.”

He straightened some papers on his desk, stalling for time.

“News however is not so glad. This here is the President.” He pointed to the man standing beside the desk.

“It is nice to finally meet you.” He said. “I have heard a lot. I am very interested in this whole situation.”

The president looked stiff and unapproachable. If I had seen him anywhere else I probably would have turned and gone the other direction. He nodded at me. I wondered what could be so important that the president had to show up. Then I thought that Morome must have died, but that fear was proven unwarranted.

Gilik continued. “We have had more questions concerning what was inside the wall than ever before. You gave us great insight when we spoke that night you came out.” He shot a gloating look at the president. “We thought most of our questions were answered. That is until we spoke to your team and that Bozlin boy last night. They told us what you told them and what they knew, and we became increasingly disturbed. I thought that it would take years to decipher the whole mystery, but I believe you brought the biggest clue with
you.” He reached under his desk and pulled out the case that Mama had kept her stuff in. “Does this look familiar?”

I wasn’t sure what he was getting at. “Yes, my mother kept her stuff in there.”

“No, does the symbol look familiar?”

I looked closely at the blue triangle with an orange eye in the center. I had never seen it anywhere else. “No.”

“It is the symbol of Dizuria.”

My mind searched for the memory with that word in it.

“. . . And then a tiny country called Dizuria.”

Was it possible that the tiny country of Dizuria was killing the hunters and burning towns? According to the faces of Gilik and the president, it certainly seemed like it.

I don’t remember how the meeting ended. The next thing I knew I was wandering through the building in a daze. We finally had an enemy. Why would Dizuria do such a thing? It was about time I learned a little about that tiny country. I wasn’t sure if that building had a library but I looked for one anyway. Several minutes later Nara caught up to me. She led me out onto a balcony to discuss what Gilik told me.

The air was bitter cold that day. Snow was flurrying around. I looked out across the vast city, uncertain of what to do.

“So they think it was Dizuria?” She asked.

“They’re certain. They say that that seal is too new to have existed before the wall was put up. They were the ones to create the bracelets and they are the ones killing everyone.”
She sighed. “I wonder why?”

“You know what? This was a lot easier to deal with when I thought I could keep the enemies in the wall and be done with it. But now I know that can’t happen because the enemies are inside and out.”

We sat in silence for a while listening to the sounds of the city. Nara grabbed my hand. “Hardin, don’t go looking for trouble.”

“How do you mean?”

“I don’t want you seeking out these people. Now that we know for certain who is behind this Azureland can handle it.”

“Nara, these people have killed so many of my people. What do you want me to do? If I can help then I will.”

“And what of your plans to get everyone out?” She asked.

“You didn’t see those flying things; there is no way that I can get everybody out with those things flying around.”

“Alright, but how about for now you just let the President and Gilik come up with a plan?”

I agreed to this. Nara led me back inside and I went back to Mama, only one thing on my mind. A tiny country like Dizuria would surely not attempt to attack Azureland. As long as we were there, we were safe. I made plans to take the team and Mama around the city and maybe even around the country by rail. This brightened my spirits slightly. That’s all I could ask for at that time. After a while I realized that perhaps the Dizuria news was the best I had gotten for a while. At least now we had a real enemy.
Chapter I of the sequel to Hardin’s War
Hardin’s Dilemma
The sun was bright on all the busy citizens of Wall City. The people hustled across streets and down sidewalks to get to their jobs and lives. They took little notice to all the people around them doing the same thing. On one particular street walked Nara and I, much slower than those around us.

It was our morning routine to walk around those crowded streets before she had to report to the Mayor’s office. Nara would share what news she had and I would wait patiently for the news that pertained to me going back in the wall to try and save the rest of Humurom. I didn’t want to go back in at first, but as time passed and days wore on I yearned to reenter and save the only home I knew. I couldn’t stand not being able to know what was happening inside.

“Have you heard any news yet? On anything?” I asked; stuffing my hands deep into my pockets as a cold wind blew by. It was early spring, but winter didn’t seem to want to give up its hold just yet.

“You know I haven’t. I would have told you if I had.”

“I know; I just can’t stand waiting around for things to get decided. Things may be getting worse in there and I have no way of knowing.’’

I looked up at the giant dome that was visible from anywhere in Wall City. There were still so many mysteries about it. Why the tiny country of Dizuria wanted inside was the most striking at the moment. It had been two months since I risked six lives to get my sick mother out of the horrible conditions of a one hundred and fifty year old bomb shelter. She desperately needed medical attention. Everything turned out all right in the end on that journey, though my friend Morome was
badly injured. It was around the same time that I found out that the people I had grown up knowing to fear were actually innocent. Hunters from my home of Humurom had been getting killed while looking for food. For years we blamed the only other country in the dome, Bozlin, but we discovered that it was actually Dizuria that was behind it all. Sadly in the last two months no more had been discovered.

“I’m sure the president and Gilik will figure something out.” Nara said.

“Isn’t it strange that the president comes here so often?” I asked.

“Evidently he thinks this is important enough to be involved in. And didn’t you want him here?”

“I did, but I hate to think that this is getting so much attention by the government here. He makes everything take too long. If it was just me and Gilik then I probably would have been back in there with some troops to finish those Dizurians off.”

“Gilik can’t authorize sending anyone in and the president doesn’t want to.”

I groaned. “But now we have an enemy. We should be sending troops straight to Dizuria.”

She frowned. “How is your mother?”

Nara wasn’t very good at changing the subject, but I let it slide. “She’s doing great. The treatments are almost over and the doctors see her making a full recovery.”

“And Morome?”

“He was released from the hospital a few weeks ago.” I said. I had completely forgotten to tell her when it happened.
“Where are the hunters now? I haven’t seen them in a while?”

“Gilik sent them on a Journey Train to see the country. I think he just didn’t want us all in his face all the time.”

“That’s right. I remember now.”

Nara and I went into a little bakery to get something for breakfast. Every morning we walked someplace new and stopped in at someplace different. It was such a big city that I wondered if we would ever explore the whole thing. We each got a little pastry and went back outside. She had to pay for everything because I didn’t have any way of making money. Since I wasn’t a citizen of Azureland I would have a hard time explaining to employers where I was from since me being from Humurom was still kept secret. Or at least it was supposed to be. Several local newspapers ran the occasional article about how I was being experimented on. Nobody seemed to know that the hunters had ever come out.

I felt bad about Nara buying everything for me, but I promised myself that if I ever managed to get a job I would pay her back.

The first thing I felt outside was another cold blast of air. “I wish it would get warmer.” I lamented.

“It should be heading that way soon.”

She didn’t seem to be bothered by the cold at all.

We turned around and started back towards the government building. I tried to think up something that I could ask her that I hadn’t yet, but nothing came to mind. So I asked her something that I had already asked her many times.

“What do you know about Dizuria?”
She sighed, clearly exhausted by that question. “It’s supposed to be a nice country. It has several resort cities on the ocean. The government is secretive and the leader rarely leaves.” She put up her hand to stop me. “Except he was here just as you arrived.”

This was the first I had heard of this. “He was?”

“Yeah, I just remembered. I was supposed to get him an appointment with Gilik but he left before I could. He only stayed one night.”

For the first time in two months I felt like I was getting somewhere. “I must have been the reason he was here. He probably assumed I stole the bracelet.”

“No, he couldn’t have been. You being here wasn’t made public until the day after you arrived. He was here that same night you came out. It was probably just a scheduled trip that happened to coincide with you.”

That didn’t dampen my spirits. “But either way he was here. I wonder if I saw him.”

“Maybe, you were staying on the floor usually reserved for officials from other countries. The public does not have access to that floor so you were safe there.”

So I might have seen the leader of the enemy country. That excited me for some reason. I was so close to the person causing all of the trouble and didn’t even know it, and he didn’t even know I was there.

My mind filled with all sorts of fantasies where I beat this mystery leader up and threw him down the elevator shaft. Those sure made me
feel good. If only I could get a chance to do it in real life. After a while I grew tired of the fantasies and grew bored when thinking about how little there was for me to do.

“I wish I had something to do.” I finally said.

“Gilik did suggest that you go on a Journey Ship and see the world a little. Ships leave from several countries all the time, even Dizuria.”

“I told him that I wasn’t going to leave while Mama was going through her treatments. And don’t you think it’s strange that he wants all of us Humurom’s gone from Wall City?”

“He just wants you all to be doing something and not just waiting for the president to decide on what to do.”

“If you say so.”

We passed a stand selling newspapers and Nara grabbed one up. She paid for it, grabbed my arm, and took me out of the busy sidewalk and into an alley.

“Do you see this?” She flashed the newspaper in front of me but I didn’t have time to make anything out. “Someone knows there are more of you here.”

“How did they find out?”

I took the paper and looked. There was a headline that read: More among us. The picture showed a blurry image of people in front of the dome. It was a real picture. I could even see Lace kneeling over Morome and me falling to the ground.

“No idea, it could have been any number of things.”

“I don’t get it. Who could have been waiting there to get that picture, and why only put it out now? We’ve been careful around town.
No more than three of us leave at a time and if anyone asks who we are we say we are part of the janitorial staff.”

“I don’t know who leaked it, but I’m sure Gilik will be mad.”

“I hope he can find out who did it. What do you think it means for us?”

She thought for a minute. “It may mean you all should leave for a while and let the rumors die down.”

“I’ll think it over.”

We arrived at the building about twenty minutes later. Nara left me to start work and I went straight for the elevator.
Also by A.S. Morrison

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Hardin’s Calling

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Poije

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