The Seed Speaker

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The Seed Speaker
by
Adam Blake Wright

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
Charissa Menefee, Major Professor
Christiana Langenberg
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2016

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WORKS CONSULTED ............................................................. 165
As U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Earl L. Butz once said, “Food is a weapon.” In other words, control what people eat and you control everything. My thesis thus began with a simple question: What would happen if Monsanto took over the world? Though this might seem preposterous, agriculture is a complex adaptive system that interacts with nearly every aspect of our globalized era, including foreign policy, trade, immigration, science, warfare, technology, education, and health care—the list goes on. In that case, what will happen if corporate power continues to be consolidated, not only in the agricultural sector (for example: the recent merger of chemical companies Dow and DuPont) but also in seemingly every other global industry? What will happen if climate change wreaks more havoc than we ever thought possible? What will happen as social media evolves into an increasingly influential tool for revolt? What will happen once virtual reality completely replaces our interaction with nature? What will happen as more and more of the world’s citizens continue to flee rural areas for urban centers? What will happen when people can no longer grow food freely and must constantly pay an ever-growing series of fees and taxes and royalties, stripped of their most basic right to survival?

Beyond these somewhat unexpected ideas, a simple conversation with a friend helped shape The Seed Speaker. Though my friend’s extended family owns a multi-million-dollar food company, her bipolar grandfather was kicked out of the business due to his erratic and morally questionable behavior. As such, my friend grew up around an immense amount of power and privilege yet never received the direct benefits of said power and privilege. From this story (and with permission, of course), I began to construct a main character—one who was to inherit a great dynasty but is now a shunned observer consumed with contempt. This notion served as the novel’s interior access point.
and allowed me to create a complex, muddied world of family intrigue tarnished by corporate corruption.

Aside from the seeds of inspiration that sprouted my thesis in its infancy, the majority of my novel is a direct reflection of my experience as a dual degree graduate student in Creative Writing and Sustainable Agriculture at the nation’s first public land-grand institution. For example, last summer I took part in an eight-day tour of Iowa in which I visited an industrial feedlot and had conversations with farmers about illegal immigration, the War on Drugs, the 1980s Farm Crisis, and the Des Moines Water Works lawsuit. I attended back-to-back lectures by Kevin Fulta, a leading GMO proponent, and Vandana Shiva, an internationally-known anti-GMO advocate—both in the same month. As a freelance writer for Edible: Iowa, I have investigated topics ranging from the local food movement to sustainable meat processing. Quite simply, I filter my life through the lens of food, which in turn enriches and informs all of my creative work.

Perhaps no other experience has influenced The Seed Speaker more than my time as the summer writer-in-residence at the Iowa Lakeside Laboratory, a 147-acre biological field station that offers college courses and research opportunities in the Iowa Great Lakes region. At this site I had the privilege to work with some of the world’s leading research scientists. With their aid, I visited a Department of Natural Resources fish hatchery, trapped field mice for a mammology course, participated in the excavation of Native American artifacts with the State Archaeologist of Iowa, collected algae samples with a Bulgarian limnologist, spent fifteen straight hours cooking alongside dining staff, and shadowed a technical assistant in one of the state’s most prominent water quality labs. In doing so, I was able to have frank conversations about topics such as agricultural policy, research ethics, and the public distrust of science. One of the novel’s characters, Mama Bear, is an amalgamation of the many scientists, advocates, and students I met. Furthermore, not only did these interactions inform my novel and ground it in real-world science, but they also underscored
agriculture’s disastrous impacts on Iowa’s waters. Without my residency at the Lakeside Lab, water
would not have emerged as a central focus in Part II of the novel.

When writing about food in a state that can cynically be described as nothing more than a
genetically modified cornfield, it can be hard to have hope and advocate for change. That is why *The
Seed Speaker* is a young adult novel inspired by the many students with whom I have interacted; I
have a passion for empowering youth and am incredibly appreciative of their imagination, tenacity,
and lack of inhibition. I believe now more than ever that change is incremental and often does not
visibly manifest itself until another generation comes to power. In that regard, I greatly admire
young adult novels such as *The Hunger Games*. Not only is the book immensely popular and
entertaining, but it also brings up serious themes of poverty, corporate control, military power, and
media manipulation. It is a model piece that proves how young adults can be challenged to rethink
the world. That art can make a difference. That change is possible.

In writing this novel, I often thought of my twelve-year-old cousin Bella. She is smart,
beautiful, and wants to be a doctor like her father. She loves to read and e-mails me all the time
about how she can’t wait to own my book. *The Seed Speaker* is dedicated her. It is a warning about the
world that she is inheriting—power should not be for the few; women should not value themselves
solely in the context of romantic partnerships; food is something to be loved and respected;
tradition is just as important as technology; all life on Earth should be valued dearly; and our broken
world must be fixed before it is too late.

In many ways, this is also a novel about words, language, and history. As a writer and
teacher, I look at rhetoric closely and continually note the influence of and resistance against
corporate interests on our campus. For example, the Curtiss Hall Monsanto Student Services Wing
sits directly across from many of my sustainable agriculture classes to form an ironic map of
competing ideologies. Likewise, I received a private tour of the Monsanto Huxley Learning Facility
by Director of Millennial Engagement Vance Crowe, an experience that more than any exposed me to the desperate lengths to which corporations will go to manipulate the public and shape a vocabulary that often represents the exact opposite of their actions. Words are powerful. So what does it mean when everything is trademarked and capitalized? What happens when words are transformed and stripped of their original meanings? In a world infiltrated by tiny screens and multimodal media, the written word is perhaps more powerful than ever before. Young people need to know how to look behind the curtain, question authority, and dig deep to avoid accepting mass messages at face value. Change doesn’t happen if we only read about it on Twitter.

And so in the end I want you and Bella and other readers to know this: That for me what began as a novel of fear evolved into one of hope. I believe in a world in which technology and tradition can live in harmony. I believe in a world in which food sovereignty is a right for all. I believe in a world in which climate change should be addressed proactively rather than retroactively. I believe in a world that can be better, even if the one I write about is not.
PART I

THE STALKS
“Keep drawing,” Mama Bear says, tapping my sketchbook. “And don’t get so worked up.”

“Yeah, but the drone’s not here yet,” I say. “It’s never this late.”

Mama Bear points to the horizon without looking away from her journal. “Focus.”

I run my hands through the 4-Ever-Green Grass and grab a clump. Even though the stems are impossible to uproot, I pull with all my might. “But — ”

My grandmother drops her pencil. “No more buts, Tezra. Science is about observation. You look at something again and again and again until you know without a shadow of a doubt that what you believe to be correct is actually so. If you can’t clear your own mind then how can you ever expect to find the truth?”

It’s no use to argue with her. How a sick woman can be so content is impossible to understand. But I can’t sit here and pretend everything’s fax to the max when that still doesn’t change the fact that Mama Bear’s medicine is late. What if something’s wrong? What if the delivery never gets here? With so many looming threats, why should I care about whatever undiscovered truths Mama Bear thinks might exist when none of it even matters? Nothing is more important than my grandmother’s life. Not science. Not these stupid drawing lessons. Not even her desperate desire to train me as an apprentice.

Mama Bear places her hand on mine and strokes it gently. For once, she looks away from her paper and moves her gaze toward me. We share the same round face and almond-shaped brown eyes, though Mama Bear’s pale skin carries the deep cracks of old age. “Stop dwelling. All we have is this moment, and if we’re lucky, maybe we’ll have another one. Or maybe we won’t. So savor this. Be present. Take in everything that is around. Observe. If not for yourself at least for me.”
My grandmother’s touch invigorates me. Perhaps she’s right. There’s nothing I can do about the late delivery and even though science is totally bogus I still love Mama Bear dearly. Besides, drawing lessons aren’t so bad. At least there’s no numbers to record, no formulas to calculate, no conjectures to test—only me and the observation at hand. I pick up a pencil and reluctantly begin to sketch the surrounding landscape. The Stalks, a distant city of Maize-Made skyscrapers and flashing Ad Bombs, crowns Mama Bear’s small restored prairie. I try to focus on the leaves of a milkweed, a small bug that crawls across its veins, though I’m much more interested in the tall yellow building that stands behind it.

While my grandmother loves science, I prefer history. I can’t help it—I’ve collected things from the Before Times for as long as I can remember. Where science is about truth, history is about experience. I observe my artifacts closely but in a much different way from Mama Bear’s method. An artifact speaks to me, summarizes its life, and yet I still have to fill in the gaps. Observation isn’t enough, and so that’s why my sketch includes the story of all that is unseen. I color in dreams, secrets, even my deepest darkest fear that someone will discover the truth about my powerful and destructive family.

Mama Bear groans and falls back into the grass. She shakes violently, mouth foaming as blood-shot eyes roll back into her head. She refers to such incidents as spells, like those magic tricks from Before Times stories, but there’s nothing enchanting about these ever-worsening spasms. I rub my grandmother’s cheek before taking her under the shoulders and dragging her back inside. I kiss her forehead, and though the air is cold, she burns up. I tell her I’ll be right back, cross the room, and dip a fabric scrap into a bucket. The water level is low, so I’ll need to leave soon with Ahtu to find more. Nurse first, errand girl second, then lab assistant, Generator—the list goes on. Always another duty, rarely a moment to stop.
“The phenotype,” Mama Bear screams. “I just identified the phenotype! Someone tell Elwin!”

I sigh. “He’s not here.”

Mama Bear whimpers. “Tell him to come back. Please.”

When my grandmother gets like this, she confuses things, muddies them up, can’t keep her memories straight. She forgets that she was a famous scientist. Forgets that her ancestors built the most powerful corporation in the world. Forgets that she was shunned from Corporate Headquarters and forced to live with the very experimented-upon rejects that loathe our relatives with all their souls. Even forgets that I’m the only family member she’s still allowed to see.

“Grandpa’s not coming back,” I say, wringing out the cloth. “You know that.”

“Yes, yes,” she says quietly. “And the micro-protein?”

I shush Mama Bear as I dot her face with water. She closes her eyes and relaxes a bit. With her gray hair braided into buns on the top of her head, she looks strangely peaceful. Sometimes I envy her ability to forget, to let go, to pretend that the only thing that exists is one’s own mind. To live in a space where there is no pain, no suffering, no Kutter-Flies, no experiments gone wrong. If only we could trade places. But no. Physical suffering scares me. For whatever mental relief might be gained, I couldn’t withstand the pain. The grinding of teeth. The mashing of intestines. The constant need for medication supplied by the very people who brought this madness upon us.

Medicine. Mama Bear needs it now. That damn drone should be here already. Like clockwork it arrives at the same time, every week, always with more and more medication. But it’s late. Something is wrong. I can feel it.


I snap my hand back. Sparrow is my mother’s name—not her real name, of course—but the only name Mama Bear can stand to say anymore. Like my grandfather, my mother is someone I
have only known as a fairy tale, either dead or still working at Headquarters. Mama Bear shouldn’t be talking about such things. In the right mindset, she bans any conversation about The Owners.

Mama Bear’s blank face morphs into a frown. “My dear Tezra, I didn’t mean — ”

The moment of clarity vanishes. Her eyes once again roll back into her head and she shakes even more wildly than before. The drone needs to get here soon. Needs to get here now. I can’t watch any longer and turn to the other side of the room. Crisscrossed cornstalks weave into one another, forming the walls of our Maize-Made cabin. Animal hides hang above the stove, while beside it a floor-length mirror hides the entrance to Mama Bear’s lab. I can’t fathom losing my grandmother to the monster inside her, especially when she is so close to finishing her experiment. Even if I don’t like science, I still want her to succeed.

Mama Bear wails as the high-pitched delivery signal chimes loudly.

“It’s okay,” I say. “Don’t worry. Everything will be better in a minute.”

I open the door. A Med-Drone 7.0 hovers above the front steps, its silhouette like an arched seashell with two black propellers. Dark-blue slits where eyes might be scan my retinal pattern and a prerecorded voice utters: Tezra Baine. Identity Confirmed. The drone whirls with mechanical grunts, descends downward, releases a package from its underbelly, and flies away.

The package is bigger than normal. Perhaps that’s why it took so long—an increased dosage, a double supply. I open it and find two short metal cylinders, including one engraved with my name. I nearly scream. It’s been so long since I last received a Corporate Perk that I almost forgot what it’s like to hold one in my hands. What’s it been, two or three years? At least that much. If Mama Bear finds out, she’ll treat me like a total wastoid, so I stuff it in my pocket before she can notice. Like she even would, my poor sick grandmother…

I walk to Mama Bear’s bedside, twist open the other cylinder, and pull out a syringe marked with the company name Baxter & Baine. How can she trust medication from a corporation that so
long ago kicked her out of its inner circle? How can it be, again and again and again? Doesn’t matter. I find a vein, tap the syringe, and stick it in Mama Bear's arm. She doesn’t struggle until I remove the needle.

“No more!” she shouts, sitting up and wrestling with my hand until the syringe drops to the floor. “I told you, child, I don’t want any of that!”

“The drone was late,” I say, looking into her distant eyes. “You almost…”

The expression on Mama Bear’s face changes several times before settling into a halfway normal smile. She rubs my shoulder and pulls me closer. “I’m sorry. It’s the medicine talking. Not me.”

“But you’re fine now.” I hug Mama Bear tightly and the rich smell of soil wafts from her pores. Unearthed by her latest spasm, the necklace that’s usually hidden behind her lab coat hangs in view, a simple black cord adorned with a cylinder-shaped pendant. Green swirls contrast the pendant’s cloudy white sheen, and it feels slightly below room temperature as I tuck it back into its rightful place. “That’s all that matters.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” she says, kissing my head. “But now I must get back to work.”

I take a step back, my hands still gently pressed against the bed. “But you have to rest.”

“Not when there’s work to be done. Observe every moment, remember?”

I nod my head and help Mama Bear to her feet. She moves to the other side of the room, stops in front of the mirror, and places both hands against her reflection. After a series of audible beeps, the mirror sinks to the floor to reveal a staircase. Mama Bear blows me another kiss and steps inside, disappearing downward until the mirror slides back into place with a soft thud. I run to the mirror and place my own hand against it before dropping my head forward. The glass feels soothing against my shaved scalp as I hope that Mama Bear’s medicine will keep working.
Now for water. I find Ahtu napping outside, his great blue belly moving up and down. I wake him, crawl onto his back, and ride away from the Stalks. He knows exactly what his duties entail, as my Stagg3X-Series deer is hard-wired for navigation. His antlers work like massive, intricately woven antennae, and I can feel his mechanical innards whirl and buzz as they compute northward. For miles: corn, corn, more corn. We reach the field’s edge and trot downhill as the land reveals Before Times left-behinds. Giant, decrepit buildings made of wood, concrete, steel, other things with names long since forgotten. I often wonder what it would be like to live in one of these strange brick caves instead of the Maize-Made house that I’ve always known. Just stories, I remind myself, impossible to attain.

“Let’s go to the hideout,” I say.

“But what about the given task?” Ahtu says, mouth closed, a low monotone voice vibrating against his neck. “You were told to get water.”

“Come on, just drop me off and then you can go the reservoir on your own.” After all, I have more important tasks—the Corporate Perk is still hidden in my jacket and I need somewhere private to open it. “You’re a big boy, you can do it.”

“Very well,” Ahtu says.

He abruptly turns to the left and dashes over large vines, train tracks, dead logs, other landmarks that only he and I can decode as signposts to Centerfold Lagoon. When the water tower emerges atop the tree line, Ahtu slows to a halt. I jump off and rub his nose—warm skin, cold breath, always such a strange and wonderful sensation. I make sure that the buckets are properly strapped to his back and send him off. His haunches bound into the overgrowth: ashen blue fur, brown swirling leaves, then stillness in which to enjoy my sanctuary.

Four and a half years ago, well before Centerfold Lagoon was named Centerfold Lagoon, I discovered the tower on my twelfth birthday. Mama Bear had finally given me permission to explore
beyond the Stalks, but only with Ahtu. Always with Ahtu. When I first saw the tower I wasn’t even sure what it was. I only knew that it captivated me, called to me, whispered that it was something special. I observed it for months, encircling the perimeter, inching ever closer, though still afraid to climb inside, unsure what secrets it might contain. I was scared enough to be an Owner and couldn’t imagine inviting even more risk and danger into existence.

Then during one of my excavations I found an old picture with a little story attached to it that explained how these towers once held water for surrounding people. Though there isn’t a lot of water anymore, Mama Bear always reminds me that it’s what makes us, so I swallowed my fear and finally scaled the tower to find a large, empty container. It wasn’t a brick cave by any means, but from my many times keeping guard with Ahtu I knew that it was safe and solitary. Free from The Owners. Free from Mama Bear. Free from Corporate Coupons, botched experiments, oversized syringes, secret identities.

So now it’s mine. All mine. I scan the tower’s base for markings, footprints, Robo-Bees, then check the security system for any unusual activity recorded since my last visit. Nothing seems alarming so I hoist onto the rusty ladder and climb toward the empty tank that holds my secret collection of artifacts. Since I’m not big on heights, I don’t look down and keep my eyes on the tank. It’s stamped with multi-colored shapes that sail out at sharp geometric angles, and underneath, in precise block print, are words I can barely recognize. Just an IOWA on one end with everything else stained by rainbow smudges.

I reach the top and place my hand on the scanner that’s smaller in size but similar in design to the one I installed for Mama Bear’s lab. After confirming my ID, the door opens and I crawl inside, greeted by the handmade Centerfold Lagoon sign that hangs above the entrance. Rusted holes litter the tank’s walls, allowing jagged streams of sunlight to pierce the vaulted room. I’ve only seen a spider once—long ago, before Mama Bear and I moved to the Stalks—but the light reminds
me of that dew-dripped web I gazed in awe at. Coated in yellow beams, I take a moment to acknowledge the silence, the peace, then remove the Corporate Perk from my jacket. This is a wicked thing, so I throw it on the floor and promise to check my artifacts before I see what evil it contains.
My artifacts are all I have to call my own. I get them everywhere, mostly on excavations by myself. Sometimes I make interesting discoveries in the Stalks, but it’s rare. The good stuff hides in the outskirts, in the brick caves and the abandoned train cars. Other times I find objects in the Bog during ghost hunts with my friends Vex and Zirou. On occasion people even bring me things because I’m the only person they know who’s interested in old junk from the past. But of course they never say it’s from the Before Times, since I made that phrase up so no one else could use it. If you’re going to study history and collect artifacts then it’s important to have your own language—stories are words and if you don’t have your own words then how can you ever tell your own stories?

Whenever at Centerfold Lagoon I greet my artifacts piece by piece to remember their unearthing. They’re all placed on little shelves made out of milk crates to resemble a museum—that’s another place I read about in an old picture story. All the crates are carefully positioned into straight lines, each artifact displayed with a paper plaque documenting important information such as excavation site, estimated age, and unusual features. It’s also important to make sure nothing’s missing. No one else thinks these are valuable but I know what my artifacts are really worth and there’s no telling what might happen even though this is the best hiding place around. I own:

• (1) *Aquajogger: The Complete Water Workout*: Viewing this requires a VCR, an elusive technological wonder I have yet to find.
• (1) **Curling Iron:** Something I always wanted because there is a Conair Geometricks advertisement in *Teen Beat* that promises “hundreds of hip hair designs.” Luckily Ahtu got his leg tangled with one during a joyride last month.

• (1) **Game Boy:** A beige rectangle with buttons and a tiny window. There’s a slot to feed it some sort of Corporate Simulation but I haven’t found anything it likes yet.

• (1) **Pair of 3D Glasses:** Similar to the ones I wear at my job, only these don’t work anymore.

• (1) **Picture of a Cartoon Woman:** She’s tall with black hair and has the letters WW on her chest.

• (1) **Polaroid:** A plastic container used to store things.

• (1) **Star Projector:** The nicest present Mama Bear ever gave me.

• (1) **Stone Elephant:** A Before Times animal that died a long time ago in some other part of the world.

• (1) **Teen Beat Magazine:** Dated December 1984.

• (1) **Toolbox:** A discovery from the Bog, its contents include a light stick and a screwdriver. It proves useful in fixing things.

• (1) **Toy Xylophone:** A top-five favorite, which I fished out of a river when I was fourteen.

• (2) **Samsungs:** Rectangular computer devices that remind me of the Game Boy but have no buttons. I’m still not sure of their proper function.

• (3) **Extension Cords:** Rope-like objects that powered up electronics before we used Generators.

• (7) **Christmas Orbs:** I have no idea what Christmas is but all of these stringed spheres contain silly slogans such as “Baby’s First Christmas!” or “I Visited Santa’s Winter Wonderland and All I Got Was This Stupid Ornament.”

• (15) **Keys:** These were used to lock doors before the development of ID scanners.
• (23) Pieces of Jewelry: Pretty and that’s about it. None are more beautiful than Mama Bear’s necklace, though.

• (48) Playing Cards: I find these everywhere—dirty slips of paper, all the same size, with red and black numbers and strange shapes and pictures of people in crowns.

After inventorying my collection I choose a single artifact to hold. I don’t have too many and unlike what The Owners send it’s important that I preserve their possibility. They are so old, so precious, and I must spread the burden between them all. I push the moon-shaped button on the star projector and listen to its sweet lullaby: dada, dada, dee, dee, da. I can’t see the stars unless it’s nighttime, but I still like the music, which I use to help make my pick—if I don’t decide by the end of the song, then I won’t handle an artifact at all. It’s a tough choice between the xylophone and the magazine but I finally settle on Teen Beat, which reads:

TOP TEEN HUNKS OF AMERICA!
WHO’S THE HOTTEST?
VOTE FOR YOUR FAVE STARS TODAY!
DETAILS INSIDE!

These words fascinate me, always have. “America” is the place I live but no one calls it that anymore. At first I assumed “hunks” refers to a type of food, like something you eat, but after reading the magazine enough I finally figured out that this is a kind of compliment—sometimes I even tell Ahtu that he’s a hunk but he hasn’t approved of the nickname too much.

“Hottest” is the weirdest word of all. That one took forever to decipher because the magazine mostly has pictures of boys and all the articles are about kissing them. Girls don’t kiss boys
nowadays. The only person who kisses me is Mama Bear and that’s because she’s my grandmother but nobody else has a grandmother so they don’t get any kisses. After a few years of reading *Teen Beat* I realized that kissing had something to do with babies—back when The Owners hadn’t made people sterile, at least—and that being hot meant you wanted to make a baby with a boy. Once I cracked this code the magazine lost its allure, less of a puzzle and more of a joke. So usually when I flip through it I just laugh.

Some of these Top Teen Hunks include John Stamos, Ralph Macchio, Ricky Schroder, Michael Jackson, Scott Baio, and Prince, just to name a few. My favorite is Michael Jackson because he was a musician that everyone called the King of Pop. My second favorite is Prince because, well, what is a King without a Prince? I read another picture story once in which Kings and Princes and other people with crowns ruled the world. So obviously these two were something special. But now they’re like most things from the Before Times. Instead of Kings we have The Owners and instead of Princes we just have everybody else.

But the most bodacious part of *Teen Beat* is the Teen Beat Times Tip Sheet, which is “keeping trax on the fax to the max” of all the world’s most popular people. The Teen Beat Times Tip Sheet of December 1984 features a picture of Daryl Hannah, a famous actress who played a mermaid named Madison Avenue in the movie *Splash* with Tom Hanks. I know this because *Teen Beat*, as promised, does an excellent job of keeping trax on the fax to the max.

Cyndi Lauper, Madonna, and Alyssa Milano are the only other girls in *Teen Beat* but Daryl Hannah is by far the most beautiful. When I see her picture in the Teen Beat Times Tip Sheet I pretend that I too am a mermaid named Madison Avenue. I am a beautiful woman of the sea. So beautiful that I am the real *Teen Beat* centerfold instead of that stupid hunk Ralph Macchio from *The Karate Kid*. The centerfold is the most important person in all of *Teen Beat*, the very heart that keeps
the magazine in harmony with itself, and so if it wasn’t for Daryl Hannah or Madison Avenue the Splash Mermaid, I never would have given my hideout the name Centerfold Lagoon in the first place.

Except here’s the thing I don’t understand: why does Madison Avenue the Splash Mermaid leave the ocean to live on land? Why would she want to abandon her freedom and her solitude and her independence for some dumb boy named Tom Hanks? Why would she want to come to a world full of pain and destruction and things that shouldn’t be? If I were Tom Hanks, I would tell Madison Avenue to go back home before The Owners modified everything in sight. But sorry, friend. I’m not Tom Hanks and it’s already too late to swim back.
I place *Teen Beat* back on its crate and turn my attention to the package. I always get nervous when I’m about to open one of these, and so it’s cold to the touch as it spins in my sweaty hands. I received my first Corporate Perk when I was only five or six, shortly after Mama Bear and I were shunned to live with the Exiles. At our kitchen table, Mama Bear watched me open a small box that contained a stuffed toy, some Before Times animal—a raccoon, lemur, something like that. In no time flat Mama Bear shrieked and ripped its head off and told me not to play with such things. I sewed the head back on myself and named it Rutabaga the Lecoon and hid him under my bed until he was rediscovered by Mama Bear and scorched in the oven.

I continued to get Corporate Perks and so did my grandmother. Most of the time Mama Bear just snatched them away but as I got older and she got sicker it became easier to open them in secret. I know I shouldn’t—I don’t even really like to—but sometimes these presents give me power. It’s refreshing to make my own choices, even if they’re banned. And yet I can’t figure these messages out. Are they from my family? Are they promises of love? Taunts? Riddles? Warnings? For shame. What would Mama Bear think if she knew?

I twist open the cylinder and a letter flashes upward in translucent blue text:

_Ms. Tezra Baine:

*Consider this a token of gratitude for your continued servitude.*

_*Forever Indebted,_

_Baxter & Baine, Inc._
The text disappears, replaced by the initials B & B sprouting leaves in the hands of an anonymous caretaker. The hologram spins slowly and after a single rotation morphs into the Baxter & Baine slogan: Food, Fiber, and Fuel for All. The phrase collapses in on itself with a small burst of light.

My heart beats as I stick my hand into the container. Whatever I’ve been given is soft and delicate. For some reason, it reminds me of childhood, but the thought disappears when I remove the contents—a small roll of golden fabric. It unspools to the ground, revealing the most beautiful dress I have ever seen.

I pull the Corporate Perk over my ragged clothes—tattered pants, a gray button-up shirt—and grab a Samsung from the museum display. I stand in the middle of the tank in just the right way so that the light hits the device and I see my own reflection. At first I can only see my face but the more I tilt the Samsung the more I can view the dress. It hugs my hips and hangs a mere inch above my feet—I think this is what *Teen Beat* “Fads and Fashions” writer Jennifer J. Papageorgiu calls a totally outrageous outfit.

The Samsung begins to glow and change colors. It must be a trick of the light but the more I twist and turn the device the more I realize that I *am* the light. My arms fall to the side and I crane my neck to watch the dress grow brighter and brighter. It shifts from gold to silver to bright purple, much like the modified birds that change tint as they fly. Tiny dots of matter float across the dress. It’s intoxicating, painting scene after scene after scene—a mountain sunset, a thunderstorm, a blooming flower, a star-covered night. And then: hands, sprouts, the awful letters B & B branded across my chest.

I rip off the dress and wad it back into my jacket. I am not anyone’s property, if that’s the message they’re trying to get across. They made Mama Bear sick and kicked us out of their family and forced us to live with the Exiles and yet they keep sending me presents—no rhythm, pure
impulse—like I’m their special little girl. It makes no sense. At the end of the day, I am just another worthless creature, so what good is this gift if I can only wear it as a private burden of shame?

Ahtu waits at the base of the tower. My cheeks are red and my face puffy so I try not to meet his eyes. I feel ashamed but I suppose it doesn’t matter much—Ahtu isn’t the best with recognizing emotions so he probably could care less what I look like.

“How long you been waiting?” I ask.

Ahtu blinks. “Four minutes and fifty-seven seconds.”

I laugh nervously. “Not like you were counting or anything.”

Ahtu blinks again—he never gets my jokes.

I check that the water buckets are full and secure, cover them for the ride back, and climb atop Ahtu, who sets off immediately. The wind blows in my face as I watch the sun sink toward the flat skyline. Usually I’m enamored with this portrait—the swirl of hues, the ingenuity of nature—but all I can think about is the dress burning against my skin. Barely able to view the surrounding wilderness, I wait as long as I can and finally tell Ahtu to stop. As I slide off, Ahtu digs his hooves into the ground. He doesn’t like what I’m about to do but always lets me do it anyway.

I run into the woods and find my spade hidden in the hole of a dead tree, untouched from where I left it years ago. I throw the dress on the ground and sink to my knees, stabbing with the spade, digging into the soil in order to bury my worries. It’s dangerous—forbidden, even—I know, but this is what I want. What I need. To dirty up the dress, taint it brown, stuff it away for no one else to find, let bugs consume it and animals defecate upon it. Finished, I stand up and admire the newly formed mound, only one of many in my graveyard of unwanted Corporate Perks.

But it isn’t enough. It’s never enough. I feel dirtier inside than I can ever muddy myself to be on the outside. I stick the spade back in its hiding place and walk deeper into the woods. The Snap Trap hangs upside down from a tree, swaying gently like one of my “Baby’s First Christmas!” orbs
on a string. The stalk is long, slim, attached to a large purple and yellow bulb. As children we are
told to stay away from such plants—another failed experiment—but I could care less.

I hang my jacket on a low-hanging branch, roll-up my sleeve, and place my forearm directly
below the Snap Trap. The stem curls upward so that the bulb becomes parallel to my face and looks
at me with drooping petals. These unfurl into a strange smile, revealing large jaws with jagged,
crescent-shaped teeth the size of corn kernels. The fangs pierce my skin and I wince in pain, grit my
teeth, moan, let the pipe-like suction steal my blood. A ritualistic punishment, it is all I can do to

Besides, I like the look of the scars.
Ahtu looks at me intently as I clean my bloody arm with water. “I sense something is awry. You appear to be hurt.”

I shake my head. “It’s not so bad.”

“I do not like lies, Tezra Baine,” Ahtu says, shaking his antlers wildly.

“Calm down,” I say, stroking his side. “I’m fine. Everything is, like, totally outrageous.”

“Yes,” Ahtu says, slowing to a halt. “I see now. Totally outrageous, indeed. May I at least help?”

I nod. When Ahtu offers aid, it’s never a good idea to decline. He gets angry, temperamental, and I’m in no mood to argue. My belly craves food, home, rest. It will be dark by the time we’re done but Ahtu has night vision so it won’t be a problem to get back to the Stalks in time for dinner.

He licks my arm; it stings but helps, as his saliva is a natural antiseptic engineered to withstand a number of diseases. He finishes and carries me on his back. The pain is still sharp, so I hold my arm close to my chest and hope that Ahtu doesn’t pounce too harshly as we make our way back home.

Soon enough, the Stalks materialize in the distance.

Once at the cabin, I climb off Ahtu and walk him to the side of the house. I hook up a hose to his back and the water winds into a special filtration system in Mama’s Bear lab—she doesn’t trust the water that’s pumped up from the city’s Maize-Made roots and says what’s beyond the Stalks will help ensure her experiment’s success.

I leave Ahtu to finish his task and walk into the nearby cornfield. The air is crisp, brittle, and I breathe deeply as I weave in and out of the overgrowth. The corn gives way to broken tracks that house the remains of several derailed train cars. Three are upended, while another remains perfectly
upright. Even in darkness, the fourth car shines jet black, a white pony brushed onto its side. I place my hands on a small box attached to one of the wheels. It’s warm to the touch, as are all of my wondrous padlocks. The sensation disappears and the train’s door swings to the side, revealing a bulging mound of yellow rice—hundreds of thousands of tiny grains sprinkled atop one another.

A burlap bag and steel cup hang by the door. I grab them and begin scooping up the rice. The air tastes chalky, smells like the Before Times. I revel in the scent, wrap myself in its aura. When I was younger, I would hide in here and pretend that I was swimming. Once I got locked in. It was dark but I wasn’t afraid. It smelled so nice. But Mama Bear was furious. “What if you had wet yourself?” she screamed. The next day she hooked up an ID scanner and didn’t give me access privileges for another seven years. Or rather, I learned as much as I could about computers and broke the code myself. Mama Bear changed the security block every time I got around it until finally she gave up and enlisted me as the senior technology specialist in her lab.

I fill the bag halfway, sling it over my shoulder, and whistle. The door slams shut behind me. I walk back to Ahtu and unhook him from the hose, sprinkle a handful of grains on the ground as reward. He licks up the rice and chews with rapid fire crunching. Even such a small amount of food will recharge him for at least another month. If only we humans could be so lucky.

“You’re free to go,” I say. “Thanks for everything.”

“Goodnight, then,” Ahtu says. He licks my arm and runs uphill to keep watch over the cabin.

I go inside, set the rice bag on a small table, and start a pot of boiling water on the stove. The water is tinged green from travelling through the cabin’s root system, full of additives and modifications pumped in by The Owners. This isn’t what I fetched earlier. No, that is too valuable for human consumption—it must be saved for the plants. “They are our future. Our only hope.” Or so Mama Bear says. It’s not like the plants are saving us yet. We still have to eat rice every meal,
every day, the task of its preparation etched deep within my muscle memory: scoop, cover, program to low. I could do it blindfolded.

Once finished, I place my hands on the floor-length mirror next to the stove. My reflection grows hotter against my skin. The mirror vibrates slightly and slides into the floor, revealing the passageway to Mama Bear’s nursery. I walk downstairs, covered in the faint glow of overhead light. The further down I go the brighter the space becomes. It’s soothing, familiar, reassuring. Soon I reach another door, which I knock against three times.

A computerized voice utters: *Access Granted.* The door opens to reveal a long, wide room—a high-tech, climate controlled, hydroponic laboratory. Tables are covered with greenery no longer found in the wild: peas and bananas and avocados and cucumbers and basil and leaves and branches and fruits and flowers and vines and so many others that Mama Bear rarely lets us eat—always in such sharp contrast to the bleak blanket of yellow that is the Stalks. Alongside the back wall, Mama Bear sits at her workbench, hunched over a microscope. To her right, a computer flashes numbers and beeps as it calculates a genotype. I smile, always proud of my creation—the computer was salvaged from parts I found during my excavations. I also discovered many of the other lab instruments scattered around Mama Bear: beakers, Petri dishes, tubes, vials, burners, scalpels, even a 3D printer.

“Dinner will be ready in a few minutes,” I say.

“You’re late,” Mama Bear says, her gaze still drawn to the microscope.

“Only a little bit. There was — ”

“No need for excuses. Just bring me sample 237.”

I walk amongst the rows until I find a tomato plant with a single medium-sized fruit, yellow and green striped, a small yellow bloom withering from its stem. If only I could eat it. Devour it. Let the juice dribble down my chin as I chew the striped flesh and its sweet, sugary innards. But this isn’t
for eating—not yet, at least. I pull the entire plant up with my hands and place the sample in a metal box by Mama Bear. A scanner descends from the ceiling, circles the tomato, and projects a replica onto the computer monitor. Mama Bear pushes away from the microscope and rolls her chair to the computer. She zooms into the replica, digitally severs a sample, and rotates it several times so we can observe directly into the root system. When she clicks another button, the 3D printer ejects a living model of the sample. A robotic arm seals it into a vial and locks it into a cooler.

Mama Bear makes a note in her green-skinned journal, claps her hands, and nearly falls out of her chair. “We are so close. So close. The root is finally devolving to its natural state.”

I nod my head like I know what she means. All these years she has been training me, teaching me, and yet I can’t embrace science in the same way that she does. Mama Bear insists that I dabble with numbers and genes yet I’m more interested in Teen Beat and the other artifacts in Centerfold Lagoon. But arguing does no good. Not anymore. I just have to grin and pretend to stay interested even when I know there are things she doesn’t tell me at all. Some secret code that only she can know. That’s the thing about science—unveiled truths only reveal more unknown doors.

Mama Bear rubs my arms. “This could change everything.”

I wince in pain. Mama Bear looks into my eyes and I pull away, stare at the floor. She pulls up my sleeve and stares at the scars. She doesn’t say anything for a long time. Finally she drops my arm and takes a step back.

“Shame on you, child,” she says, turning up the stairs. “So much pity and so little hope.”

Left alone in the nursery, Mama Bear’s words ring in my ears. I know I should have more faith in the potential for something better. But why bother in a world with so much already gone wrong? I tire of listening to myself and walk upstairs to find Mama Bear eating at the table. A jar of pickled green beans sits in front of her. The smell is fragrant, alluring, and I lunge toward it.

“Weren’t you saving these?” I ask.
“Not anymore,” Mama Bear says.

“But —”

“Just eat, Tezra.”

In a matter of seconds I pile rice into a bowl and layer the green beans on top and pour out pickle juice until it meets the rim and eat and eat and eat. Tart juice spiced with dill and peppercorn dribbles down my lips. The beans snap and squish against my teeth and slightly sting the insides of my cheeks. It’s been so long since Mama Bear brought out one of her jars. Even though she’s a righteous centerfold who can make anything taste like something, we usually don’t have much of anything besides rice. Most people lost the craft of cooking long ago but I still wish everyone could taste food like Mama Bear’s. And so these green beans are treasures unto themselves, the rare treat that makes me hope for more.
Mama Bear has already made breakfast by the time I get up—leftover rice with a dollop of applesauce on top.

“So you don’t have to eat that Corporate Coupon Crap-uisine,” she says, sliding the bowl my way as I sit at the table.

I eat ravenously, starving and dehydrated from the Snap Trap toxins that still linger in my system. I’ll need all the sustenance I can get, anyway—it’s the one day a week in which I am allowed to journey into the Stalks and interact with the other Exiles. After breakfast Mama Bear receives another shot. She smiles weakly and stops beside her mirror.

“Good luck,” she says.

“Bobbing for CCs?” I say.

“You know what I mean,” she says, disappearing into her laboratory. “Observe every moment!”

I stand by the door, scared yet exhilarated. I start sweating and bite my lower lip but must think confidently, powerfully. Out there, I am not Tezra Baine—merely T. No one knows who I really am. No one can know who I am. So here with Mama Bear I am one person. Alone in Centerfold Lagoon I am another. In the world of the Exiles, I am someone else all together, and when the door opens, I become her.

Like most people, I keep my head down while I walk through the streets. Though I do it to avoid recognition, the Exiles do it out of habit, as they endured years of poking and prodding in a Baxter & Baine research facility before being transferred to the Stalks. I turn a corner and wave to an
old man with a lizard tongue. He is always sitting there, swaying back and forth in his rocking chair, flicking that tongue and gazing out into space like he has nothing better to do.

The old man waves back and laughs. I can’t help but feel sorry for him. What did The Owners do to him? What went wrong? Why is he still around? After all, The Owners only send subjects to the Stalks that are deemed inconclusive—even though the old man’s experiment is finished, it doesn’t mean that The Owners won’t continue research on him in the future. His life is so different than mine and sometimes I wonder what my story would be like if we could switch places. But at all costs, I can’t let him or any other Exile ever find that out—there’s no telling what would happen.

Further up the street, modified animals scurry across the ground: Rat-Bunnies, Vole-Moles, the like. The creatures scurry away when several Ad Bombs suddenly appear in a rapid-fire barrage. They flash from nothingness, hover in mid-air, then disappear after a few seconds. Usually the messages contain slogans for new pills, fat-burning foods, but today they all display the same phrase:

WHO OWNS THE OWNERS?

Displaying this in public is unwise. Someone must have hacked the system. Found an anonymous way to share their manifesto of dissent. This happens occasionally, as the Bombs are more or less untraceable. They can float in the air for weeks, years even, before someone decides to detonate the message. And once a Bomb is gone, it’s gone—an easy way to spread information without facing retribution.

There are rumors that a group named the Green Thumbs has been planting more and more messages like this throughout the Stalks. It’s an interesting story but one with too many gaps for most people to actually believe. Still, I can’t help but think the messages are about me. And Mama
Bear. Receiving our secret packages when most of the Exiles hop around on one foot just to earn a Corporate Coupon or two. But right now I am not Tezra Baine. I am not one of The Owners. I am the Exile. At least that’s what I must tell myself to get by.

Soon enough I reach the building where I work. It is the largest structure in the Stalks, a tall Maize-Made behemoth with the words Baxter & Baine sprawled across the top. After entering through the double doors, I am immediately siphoned into a claustrophobic tunnel that spins me around as it beeps and pings. The machine slows to a stop and a computerized voice says: Generator 84111. Identity Confirmed. Mandatory Training Required.

I sigh—training is the worst. The tunnel disappears and gives way to a sprawling, brightly lit entranceway. The walls are covered with holographic images: windmills, Super Soi fields, cotton bushes, Water-Cows, dirt-covered hands. Overhead, at a sharp angle between wall and ceiling, hangs a thirty-foot monitor that seems to warn, “I’m watching you.” More pastoral images float across the screen: tractors, a revolving holographic globe, arm-crossed farmers, a majestic sunrise staring upon the land.

I’m then funneled into a testing pod where other Generators sit on small stools. Their heads are shaved like mine, and they all wear large, helmet-like goggles that cover their faces. Hundreds of hands flit about in the air, poking and prodding invisible buttons. When I sit on an available stool, the goggles descend from the ceiling and affix to my head. The screen flashes a message:

*Generator 84111:

Welcome to the Photo-Synthesis™ Center, where the Future of Farming has arrived.

A new era of agriculture is here in our very own hands: one that grows Food, Fiber, and Fuel for All.

Our corporation builds higher yields through innovations in agronomics, biotechnology, and on-site research.

Your role in producing renewable energy is invaluable as we create a sustainable world.*
The presentation rambles on and on, explains how scientists unlocked the secret of photosynthesis, then developed a way to create Energy Generators that convert human processes such as exercise, sunlight exposure, and food consumption into clean, renewable energy—mandatory propaganda bullshit that’s supposed to convince us that all of this is for the greater good. And maybe it is. At least that’s what I might think if I worked here day after day after day, had the same messages pumped into my brain again and again.

Once the lecture is over I answer the obligatory questions about Corporate Coupons, the Birdz and the Beez, immersion technology. I pass the test with 100%—it’s not hard when they never change the exam. For the Exiles, though, it can’t be easy to take an exam that gives zero credit to the countless failed experiments that built our way of life. If it weren’t for the Exiles there would be no Generators or Maize-Made skyscrapers, and yet they’ve never been given the freedom they truly deserve.

The desk descends downward and lowers me into a changing room. I disrobe and am sprayed with cleanser, hosed off with water, and dried with warm air. After I slide into a tight-fitting body suit, cybertronic appendages are affixed to my legs and arms, while energy meters are hooked up at the joints, which will be used to calculate my physical activity. It’s a simple system, really, one in which hard work and laziness are both rewarded—any and all caloric energy expended by the Generator is converted to the Grid, which in turn earns CCs for the participating Generator. The more you do the more you earn, and even if you do nothing but breathe you still earn something.

I tap the side of my goggles and consider my options: Renegade Cove…Population Builder…Maize-Made Labyrinth…Pharmapalooza…Mermaid Vacation. I stop, select the latter, and prepare for my escape.
I am a lady of the sea.

My green tail shimmers with golden flecks. Long red hair cascades down my back. Seashells cover my breasts. The sun warms my face while the water cools my skin, splashing over me as I sit on a small rock island, tail flapping, arms sprawled out on the sandy beach. A group of sea lions barks in unison somewhere in the distance. Even though I’m not as bodacious as Daryl Hannah and Madison Avenue the *Splash* Mermaid, I am still a total centerfold that could swim circles around Ralph Macchio and his karate-kicking legs.

What to do with my newfound freedom? I can jump over waves. Leap in and out of hoops. Ride on the back of a seahorse. Battle an octopus. Race against a pirate ship. Dive for treasure. Tame sharks. Play water polo with polar bears. Gather plankton in coral reefs. Escape from fishermen. Choreograph a synchronized water ballet. In *Mermaid Vacation* my possibilities are endless. Here I only swim and have fun and forget about all the chaos that awaits on land.

But first I need to get into the rhythm of moving in synch with my tail. I dive into the water and swim a few laps around the island. Fish follow closely then push past and disappear out of sight. Large, craggy rocks encircle the bay, with the occasional inlet path leading to some new adventure. The water is blue. Crystal clear. Even though I have never been to the ocean and know it doesn’t look like this anymore, there’s something strangely comforting in its recreation.

Daryl Hannah would especially like it here. Actually, everyone in *Teen Beat* would like it here, and I wish that I could have a fax to the max beach party with my BFF and Prince and the King of Pop. Even Ralph Macchio could come. The King of Pop would sing and dance while I swam with
Madison Avenue the *Splash* Mermaid. We would flick our tails and toss our hair as the Top Teen Hunks of America stood on shore and begged for kisses they’d never get.

An alert flashes in the upper left corner of my visor—a formal invitation to participate in an octopus battle with 36752. She’s a friend, I guess, even though I don’t know her real identity—there are so many Generators who work for The Owners that 36752 could be any number of people in any number of Baxter & Baine facilities scattered across the world. I wonder what she would think if she knew about my family. Would we still swim together or would she tell me to find a new mermaid companion?

I accept the invitation and instantly appear within spitting distance of a giant octopus. Eight suction-cupped tentacles—each at least a hundred feet in length—jut out from a black and purple body so large that I can barely make out its bulbous shape. The octopus is static, lifeless, and remains so until the clock counts down: 3, 2, 1. The octopus springs to life, its tentacles flailing so haphazardly that I immediately dive down to avoid being hit. I swim back up to the nearest tentacle and push a star-shaped button that glows bright yellow. My score counter increases to 1, and shortly thereafter, so does 36752’s.

The goal of the game is to locate and claim all eight buttons, each located on a different tentacle. The game ends after fifteen minutes or when a player claims all eight buttons, whichever comes first. In the event of a tie players battle it out in a sudden death round. Though each player earns CCs for their contribution to the Grid, the winner of the battle also earns a bonus wage, providing an even greater incentive to emerge triumphant.

I want nothing more than to beat 36752. Not because I need the CCs (I don’t) but because I like the taste of victory, even if it does come with the guilt of denying someone’s chance to earn extra credits. But that’s why we’re Generators—no matter how much has been taken from us in real
life, we still love to fight for our own prize inside the manufactured opportunity of Corporate
Simulations.

A tentacle strikes my tail and I spin and tumble far across the playing ring only to collide
with another tentacle. I quickly throw my arms around it and hold on for dear life. It shakes
violently, threatening to strike for penalty points, and yet I manage to shimmy my way upward until
I find another button. Still not good enough. The score’s now 2-3 in my opponent’s favor.

I swim toward the monster’s underbelly and find 36752 scoping out the territory. Her hair is
short and blonde, her ears flanked by sand-dollar earrings. She spots me and flees, silver tail
disappearing behind another tentacle. I chase after but she’s nowhere in sight. I then spot a flashing
button to my left. This one’s already been claimed but I strike it anyway—the two-minute penalty
has worn off and I can finally reclaim it as my own. The score flip-flops to 3-2, my favor.

I find two more buttons before the game is over. 36752 only finds one more, which means I
win 5-3. 36752 sends a chat request.

36752: u win. ugh. AGAIN

84111: what can i say? i like staying #1

36752: no shit

84111: hey at least we found all the buttons this time

36752: maybe next time u’ll let me win?

84111: later, 3

I log out of the chat session and leave the octopus battle. The victory is intoxicating, and I
feel the need to relish it alone. I swim further out into the ocean, past ships, past sharks, past
outcroppings, on and on until I am in nothingness. Only I am not Tezra Baine. I am not a
descendant of the The Owners. I am not floating in a chamber, hooked to robotics, lofted in mid-air
by a zero gravity machine, gathering energy for the Grid.
Here I am T the Mermaid, more famously known as Daryl Hannah’s BFF. I party on the beach with the Top Teen Hunks of America. And I am free.
CHAPTER 7
SLURRY

An alarm goes off in my visor as a warning to stop. After I log out, *Mermaid Vacation* morphs into clear glass walls, beyond which other Generators operate their own simulations, slicing the air, running around in circles, flailing upside down in *Extreme Bungee Blitz*. Robotic arms descend from the ceiling and remove my Generator equipment. Left in nothing but my gray bodysuit, I feel naked. Vulnerable. In-between.

I shake off these feelings, search for the strength I need as T, and head to the nearest Recharge Hub. It’s one of several scattered throughout the building, each a miniature replica of the Welcome Lobby. I turn a corner, walk past the familiar wallpaper—tractors, silos, arm-crossed farmers—and face another oversized screen mounted at a steep angle. The screen plays highlights from recent simulations, a barrage of random numbers winning random things.

“Check out that jump!” one Generator says, pointing to the screen with his tail. “Can’t get much higher than that.”

“You think that’s awesome?” says another Generator with striped skin. “Wait til you see what I did on *Roller Coaster Rodeo*.”

I wait for a replay of my victory against 36752. Nothing. Likely backlogged by countless other triumphs. I quit watching and continue working my way through the crowd of failed experiments—webbed feet, atypical heights, an ever-growing collection of strange physical features. My skin brushes against the cool touch of a Cyber-Pendage, and I feel sorry for the poor soul who’s had a device implanted in their skin so that anything—even sneezing—permanently generates CCs. A painful process. Or so I hear.
Most of the Exiles are also canvassed by Corporate Tattoos made with electronic ink that “shifts and changes for maximum efficiency,” as noted in the official training questionnaire. Or as I like to put it, you sell your body for CCs so that The Owners can promote the latest and greatest food products, Corporate Simulations, and mood enhancers for the rest of your long, lonely life.

Once at the Recharge Hub, I grab a paper-thin cone and stand in line. Eventually I make my way to the front where large Slurry machines dispense tubes of Surge, Typhoon, Adrenaline, other monstrosities of techno-flavor-wizardry. I choose Surge, which smells both repugnant and sweet as it coils onto itself like animal droppings, a lime green liquid flecked with dark bits of Pseudo-Protein.

Vex—or 79447, as I must refer to him within the walls of the Photo-Synthesis Center—waves at me from a corner table. A long black braid runs from the back of his head to well below his knees. A bare scalp and the blue scales lining his arms are the only places not covered with Corporate Tattoos. When Vex sees that I’ve spotted him, his hands form the letter T. I wave back and hold up my fingers in a V, as if to acknowledge what we can’t say, that to each other we are more than numbers.

“Any more bodacious victories?” Vex says as I sit across from him and a few other Generators.

“Totally,” I say, high-fiving Vex. Aside from the shaved head and the scales and the Corporate Tattoos, he actually looks a lot like Scott Baio, one of Teen Beat’s Top Teen Hunks of America. I smile and fidget, doing my best to fit in. Vex and the other Generators are total centerfolds and earn a lot of CCs from Corporate Sponsorships. They do it because they have to, which is sad in its own right, but their power and skill builds an impressive and intimidating reputation that The Owners want to buy.
“Last call to get sprouted,” 50509 says, waving a handful of Agili-Tee. The mood enhancer is one of the most prominent Corporate Sponsors in our Photo-Synthesis Center, which is why everyone always seems to have free supplies to share. “You want any of these or not?”

Vex reaches for the little blue pills and scatters several atop his Slurry. The other Generators follow. Their pupils grow twice in size, the Agili-Tee running through their bodies to increase vision, coordination, and stamina. At least that’s what the ads claim.

But I know better. I’ve heard enough bad stories about Agili-Tee’s chemical compounds to last me a lifetime. Mama Bear says it’s nothing but bad news. She tells me to stay away no matter what, which really isn’t so hard since Top Teen Hunk Kirk Cameron believes that we should “Just Say No!” to drugs. But Vex has never read Teen Beat and doesn’t know how to say no. I worry what might happen if he ever took too much.

50509 snaps back her hand. “Sitting this one out, 85111? Or you got something better?”


50509 bounces in her chair. “Your loss, superweed.”

The others keep talking but I don’t say much. 50509 can be a bully sometimes. Vex says she’s only teasing. And she is, I’m sure, because she’s too dumb to know any better. Better that than the truth. Still, I keep quiet. I never know what to say, what to do, how to be someone other than the wastoid they think I am.

It doesn’t help that everyone except me devours the Slurry. I used to never touch the stuff but I learned quickly that refusing to eat only raises suspicion about my true identity. I dismiss my disgust and take a bite anyway. The Surge-flavored Slurry is warm, gritty, peppered with crunchy bits that taste like rancid bark. It doesn’t want to go down my throat but I force myself to swallow. How can the others do it? Slurry is the only thing the Exiles have ever known. If only they could taste Mama Bear’s applesauce. A fresh tomato. Pickled green beans. What a shame…
An alarm echoes across the room, signaling for us to get back to work. 50509 and the others scatter, leaving Vex and me at the table.

“You’re coming tonight, right?” Vex asks. “To the Ghostbusters Club?”

“Yeah, sure,” I say, handing him the remainder of my Slurry. “I mean, if—”

“There’s always an if with you,” Vex says, downing the Slurry in one breathless gulp and wiping his mouth with both tattooed hands. “Come on, it’ll be a good one. I promise. There’s special new equipment I want to try out. High-tech stuff. So, I’ll see you, then? And Ahtu, too?”

“Yeah, maybe,” I say, dreading what I’ll tell Mama Bear. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Vex sighs. “Promise?”

Promises are hard to make. I try to make one anyway but all I can do is nod my head, shape a V with my fingers, and return to the safety of my simulation tank.
CHAPTER 8
FRACKING FLUID

After two rounds of *Mermaid Vacation* and a long, drawn-out game of *Pharmapalooza*, I’ve earned more than 1,000 CCs and produced three times that in energy for the Grid. It’s way more than my minimum quota and so I change back into my street clothes, exit the building, and head toward Fracture Lake, where I always meet Mama Bear after work. I know the path well and walk quickly, wondering how I will tell her about the Ghostbusters Club. I’ve done this many times before but for some reason it keeps getting harder and harder. Shouldn’t it be easier? I mean, I lie all the time when I’m with Exiles, but with my grandmother it’s always more painful.

Mama Bear will want me to help with the experiment. Science this, science that. Sometimes I wonder if I’m more a burden than anything. Constantly asking questions, needing clarification, watching Mama Bear grow increasingly flustered as she explains something for the seventeenth time. I’m not sure what’s easier—lying about the Ghostbusters Club or pretending to care about my grandmother’s research.

I’m at the lake before I even know it—my mind an endless debate between fiction and truth. Mama Bear waits for me on our favorite bench, her bunned-up hair washed out against the sun, her skin too pale, her body too slim, delicate and haggard from not getting out of the house more. It’s worrisome. She looks so much healthier in the nursery. I sit on the other end of the bench and Mama Bear shifts slightly. She knows I’m here but doesn’t look over.

“Beautiful and tragic,” she says, waving to the horizon before stroking the black cord of her necklace, which peeks just above her shirt. “Don’t you think?”

“Isn’t everything?” I say, not quite sure what she means.
We sit in silence and stare at the fracking fluid. Large trenches separated by dead patches of grass, lined by plastic tarps fraying at the edges. The water swirls gray, white and yellow as flecks of sand float to the surface, as if a frothing pot of soup. Modified birds hover in the sky. The Stalks are behind us—our view solely water, sky, clouds. Though it is strangely serene, I don’t think I’ll ever appreciate it as much as Mama Bear. I much prefer Centerfold Lagoon.

“So,” Mama Bear says. “How was work?”

“Fine,” I say.

“What games did you play?”

“I told you, they’re not games. They’re simulations.”

Mama Bears throws up her hands. “Well, then, what simulation did you play?”

“My favorite.” I smile and look out at the water. It’s uncomfortable, this in-between-ness. I do not quite feel myself but I am no longer T, either. Nothing more than a mermaid learning to walk on land, just like Madison Avenue when she left the ocean to find Tom Hanks. And here is Mama Bear, a great strong beast free from her cave. And what does she have to show for it? How much longer can she hold on? Perhaps I should just forget about Vex and spend the night with her. “But how was your day? Much success?”

“Oh, yes, my child. Much success indeed.”

And that is all Mama Bear can say. It’s not safe to talk about such things in public. There might be Robo-Bees, drones, any number of surveillance devices. Even though there is much I can’t say here, it’s nice. No science. No experiments. No shots. If only now I could bring up the Ghostbusters Club. I turn to glance at Mama Bear and see her grinding her teeth. This shouldn’t be happening, not here. She catches me looking and turns away.

“You need more medicine,” I say, taking her hand.

“I’m fine,” she says.
“You need another dose.”

“The hell with that, child!” Mama Bear says, pulling away her hand. “You gave me a dose yesterday and the next one can wait til morning. Besides, we have work tonight.”

“I can’t,” I say. It slips out before I can even think about it. If Mama Bear is too stubborn to take her medicine then she can forget about me helping her. “I have to go back to the Generator Station for a mandatory training session. Maybe it’s for the best. You can take a break. Rest.”

“I don’t need rest,” Mama Bear says. “I need to finish this and I need your help to do that.”

“I told you, I can’t,” I say. “I’m sorry.”

“But this isn’t about what you can or can’t do. This is about what you must do. What we must do. What we’re working on is more important than either of us.”

“More important?” I shout, standing up and kicking the dirt. What does that make me? And Mama Bear? Does our life mean nothing to her? “You’re so…whatever.”

“Is that so?” Mama Bear says, staring into the distance. “Nothing I haven’t heard before.”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

Mama Bear taps the bench. “Sit awhile longer, child. Watch the sunset with me. I’ll think about resting more, all right?”

After the Ghostbusters Club, while Mama Bear sleeps, I will shoot medicine in her arm whether she likes it or not. But for now I sit and stare at the water. Imagine what it would be like to be a real mermaid with a real tail and a real seashell top. I would forget who other people wanted me to be and I would swim and swim until I was in the middle of nowhere and then I would float on my back and stare into the sky, into nothingness, and there I would be at peace.
CHAPTER 9
THE GHOSTBUSTERS CLUB

The Bog. A boundary between the Stalks and the rest of the world. The air here is cool and crisp against my cheeks. Ahtu and I trot past trees, dead corn, Before Times buildings. Owl-Bats hover above, winged shadows in moonlit darkness. It’s forbidden, dangerous, full of strange beasts—just the way I like it. Soon I begin to hear voices as we inch closer to the gathering spot, and I can just barely recognize Vex and Zirou beyond the branches.

“Think we’ll actually find one this time?” Zirou asks.

“Better believe it,” Vex says. “Especially with this latest equipment. In fact, one’s coming right now.”

“Boo!” I say, dismounting Ahtu. “You found me—the Baroness of the Bog!”

“You came!” Vex shouts. “And you brought Ahtu! How you doing, big guy?”

Ahtu bows his head so that Vex can scratch him between the ears. Vex pulls back and laughs as his hand tattoo changes from a well-dressed woman to a banana-holding monkey, the electronic ink glowing slightly in the dark. On his back Vex wears a strange bag with two antennae sticking out the sides. All in all, he looks ridiculous.

“All right, why don’t you scope things out?” I ask Ahtu. He nods and dashes off into the woods.

“Hey, T!” Zirou says, waving so eagerly that he tips forward in his Lo-Ryder hover chair. Bloated and green-tinged from squid DNA, his doughy body wriggles out of the chair as he zooms closer, long hair flapping in the wind.

“How’s it going, Zirou?” I say. “Ready for the hunt?”

“Sure thing,” he says. “Brought my new goggles and everything.”
Zirou taps a button on the side of his head. A visor descends over his eyes, moves up and down, up and down. He smiles, flanked by large dimples. He then reaches into his bag and pulls out a strangely shaped object.

“I found this yesterday. Not quite sure what it is. Maybe you want it for your collection?”

I know right away what it is—a nine-volt battery charger. Gold and black with a silver base. Mama Bear’s eyed one of these for a long time. She likes using the rechargers for electrical testing, but she’s already fried the others. This is a damn good find, yet I contain my excitement, careful not to reveal too much as I take it from Zirou’s clammy hands and place the charger in my jacket pocket.

“Thanks, Zirou,” I say. “Looks interesting. I’ll see what I can figure out. You’re real sweet sometimes, you know?”

“Don’t listen to her,” Vex says, adjusting the antennae on his back. “I thinks everybody’s sweet.”

“As if,” I say, spitting on the ground.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Zirou says. “Something you read in one of those picture books?”

“Listen, you guys ready to get started or what?” Vex says, handing me a pair of goggles similar to the ones worn by Zirou. “Put these on so we can get going.”

I put on the ghost-hunting goggles, snapping them into place at the back of my head. My vision goes completely black until Vex pushes a button and the world turns amber and gray—the colors of night-vision. The Bog comes alive and I can see the countless droplets of water in the air, the leaves on each branch, the sticks cracking underneath my feet. A small red toolbar appears in the corner of my sightline, and I can see that it monitors various atmospheric conditions such as temperature, electromagnetism, radioactivity.
“Impressive, Vex,” I say. “You study the interface at work?”

“Nah, he stole it,” Zirou says.

“I didn’t exactly steal it,” Vex says. “But I didn’t study so much, either. Zirou helped me.”

“Set him back a couple of kilos in CCs, though,” Zirou says, dumping a smattering of pills into his hand. “Like that’s a burden for Mr. Generator of the Year. Agili-Tee, anyone?”

Vex grabs some and swallows. “T?”

“Yeah, sure,” I say. I don’t want to take any but still reach out for two pills. Maybe it will be fun? Maybe it will help me take my mind off Mama Bear? But what would Kirk Cameron do? I stare at the pills and move them closer to my mouth. Suddenly I hear Ahtu return from the woods. He walks up behind me and nuzzles the back of my head. I hide the pills in a fist, turn around, and rub Ahtu’s nose.

“Snack?” Ahtu says, licking my hand.

“Those aren’t for you,” I whisper, sticking the pills in my pocket. “You find anything?”

“Negative,” Ahtu says. “No alarming activity within a five-hundred yard radius.”

“Hey, kids, I got more party favors,” Zirou says, waving his hand in front of him. “It’ll make things fun.”

“Never know what you might see here,” Vex says, downing some additional Agili-Tee.

“50509 says there’s an old witch who runs around kidnapping kids like us.”

I smile, weakly, unsure if I should laugh or roll my eyes.

“Guys, I’ve got some weird activity going on over here,” Zirou says. He shoves his arms back into his chair and begins pushing buttons on his tiny keyboard.

Ahtu turns his head and bounces into the overgrowth. I look in the direction he vanished but see nothing, just the occasional movement of wind, an Owl-Bat hanging from a branch. Nothing
seems out of the ordinary until the censors in my goggles start going haywire. “I’ve got something, too.”

“No shit,” Vex says, pointing with both hands as the antennae on his back hum with a strange sound. “Let’s fan out. Zirou, you head that way. I’ll take the opposite direction. T, you follow Ahtu.”

We turn away from one another without hesitation. I dive deeper into the woods, meandering this way and that, digging my heels into the ground as it slopes downhill. Soon I see Ahtu. He trots along, nose to the air, before veering sharply to the left. I hear another set of hooves behind me and swirl around, only to see a branch fall to the ground. My deer is fast—but not that fast.

“Ahtu?” I whisper. I don’t mean to be so quiet but it is all the volume I can muster.

Someone whistles the signal to circle back as a group. I turn uphill and barely make a few steps before my goggles start to flicker. Black to amber, black to amber, until my vision is totally gone. I slow my run, push the goggles onto my forehead, let my eyes readjust to the moonlight. The overgrowth scratches my hands as I claw upward. The whistle comes again. And then grunts. A flash of antlers. My heart beats faster. We’ve been coming out here for years without seeing so much as our own breath—might this finally be the night?

Vex shouts something from the darkness. I run faster to the gathering spot. My excitement turns to horror as I watch Ahtu trample something to the ground. Hindquarters wrenching back and forth, antlers silhouetting the moon, a great tangle of branches and knobs and mangled pieces of fur. The ghost wrestles away from Ahtu and stands opposite him. They begin pacing in a wide circle, eyes fixed upon the other, huffing deeply with low, guttural noises. But the ghost is only a creature, similar in shape to Ahtu, merely smaller and without antlers. Its fur is dark and streaked with blood.

“Ahtu, stop!” I shout.
The creature runs away. Ahtu curls into a ball, knees under his belly, and licks himself as if nothing happened. Vex begins to scan Ahtu with an electromagnetic wand.

“It wasn’t a ghost, big shot,” I say. “It was a deer. A real deer.”

“ Might as well have been a ghost,” Zirou says, laughing and clapping his hands. “Most of the deer died out with the introduction of the Stagg3X. There can only be a handful left. Do any of you realize how rare this is? What could happen if — ”

“I’m getting something again,” Vex says. “And it’s stronger than before.”

In the distance, rumbling. Ahtu stops licking himself and stares forward, past me and the others, his ears flicking back and forth. Suddenly dozens and dozens of deer bound from the woods and sail over our heads. I duck down onto the ground and cover my head. I look to my left and see that Zirou has been tipped out of his chair. A hoof meets my back and I yelp in pain, everything nearly blinded by fur and dirt. I hear Vex wrestling with Ahtu, pleading for him to stop, only to be knocked to the ground between me and Zirou. Blood drips from Vex’s head but he looks up and nods like he’s okay. The deer begin to disappear into the woods and Ahtu follows until there is nothing but the three of us, bloody and bruised and scared shitless, piled atop one other like abandoned ragdolls.

“It’s okay,” Vex says, barely able to walk. “We’ll be fine. Go get Ahtu.”

My mind races. This was a bad idea. I never should have come. I pick myself off the ground and run into The Bog after Ahtu. I run and run until I feel as if there is no breath left in me. I scream and shout and cry, no idea if I am lost for a minute or an hour or more. I only know that I find Ahtu alone in a clearing, safe and sound. No deer, no ghosts, no danger. Exhausted, I climb atop his back and fall asleep as he carries me home.
I smell it before I see it. A rank, ashen odor. Smoke rises above the treetops, and as I get closer to the cottage, I can tell that the flames are coming from underground—Mama Bear’s nursery. I jump off Ahtu, run inside as fast as I can, unlock the mirror, and rush down the stairs, shouting my grandmother’s name. The smoke chokes me the further and further I go. I reach the nursery door and give the pass code. The heat is unbearable as I wait for the door to slide open. When it does, flames erupt from the corner. Mama Bear is collapsed over her computer, coughing and shaking. I lift her head and look her in the eyes and kiss her forehead.

“My notes,” she says. “We must get my notes.”

“What happened?” I ask. “Are you okay?”

“Over here,” Mama Bear says, pointing. I help her to a locked cabinet. She opens it with a hand-scan, pulls out her journal, and hugs it to her chest, one arm still firmly around mine.

“It doesn’t make sense,” I say, covering my mouth and hacking as I lead us to the door.

“Why aren’t the sprinklers working?”

“I don’t know, child.”

I look around the nursery frantically. “But we have to stop this! Your work, the plants!”

“We must go,” Mama Bear pleads, tears in her eyes. “Forget about this. I failed. You’ll have to start over on your own.”

“What do you mean, start over?”

“Upstairs. Please. We don’t have much time.”

I stare at the nursery one last time. The computer I took years to build bubbles in bright flashes of orange, shrouds of gray smoke. Most of the crops fall to the ground, sizzling and
crackling, though a single apple tree remains standing beside me. I pluck a yellow fruit from its low-hanging branches, stuff it in my pocket, and turn away for good.

We hobble up the stairs. The nursery door slams shut behind us, though it’s beginning to malfunction and likely won’t last much longer. We scurry towards the upper floor. The mirror gives way, lets us pass. Smoke fills the air. Mama Bear collapses onto the scalding-hot floorboards. I try to hold her weight but she starts to convulse, eyes rolling back into her head.

“No, not now!” I scream. I dash to the table but Mama Bear’s shots aren’t there. They should be. I run around the room, flipping things over, knocking objects off the shelves, anything I can do to find the medicine. I must save Mama Bear. I must.

“I told you,” Mama Bear says. “I don’t want that anymore.”

“Where is it?” I say. “We have to find it! I can’t just — ”

“Come here, child,” she says, motioning me closer, arms clawing toward the ceiling. “While I still have my wits about me.”

I obey. Mama Bear gives me the journal, which I stick in under my arm. She then removes her necklace and drapes it over my head. “Take these North. There, you will know what to do.”

Suddenly I hear a loud popping noise and the mirror to the nursery shatters, spraying shards of glass across the room, slicing my check. Flames pour into the room. My ears ring in pain. Mama Bear shakes more but I stroke her cheek and shush her.

“Start in the Field,” she whispers, fighting the sickness, the smoke, the gnashing teeth, her mouth moving in unfathomable ways merely to form the tiniest words. “Go! Save yourself, please, my little Sparrow.”

I pull the battery charger from my pocket and put it in Mama Bear’s hands. “Here. I brought you something. For the nursery.”
Mama Bear cradles the charger and closes her eyes. “How nice. Is Elwin here? Can we show him?”

“Yes, he’s here. Right beside you.”

She smiles and so do I.

My grandmother’s face turns purple. Foam rolls from her mouth and there is another loud cracking noise. A portion of the ceiling collapses and falls on Mama Bear. She screams in pain. I try to pull her from the rubble but the smoke is blinding. I pull and pull but the Maize-Made pieces are too heavy and already on fire. Soon Mama Bear disappears into the chaos, lost, though I can still hear her rolling around the floor, murmuring for my grandfather. I shout for her but the room begins to spin. My lungs feel as if they will burst. If I don’t go now then I will die here. I can’t stay much longer. I look down at the vial swinging around my neck and know that I must leave—it’s what my grandmother wants, even if it’s what I don’t.

I run out the door and turn back to see the entire cabin on fire. The Maize-Made walls creak and groan before sinking into one another. I collapse to the ground, sobbing, knowing that this is all my fault. If only I hadn’t gone ghost hunting, I could have stopped this. I should have been here. Mama Bear deserves better.

This can’t be happening.

It can’t.

But it is.

Ahtu nudges me in the back. “It is not safe here, Tezra. The Orphan Operators will likely be here in three minutes and nine seconds.”

“Yes, yes I know,” I say, looking back at the cottage one last time. “Time to run.”
PART II

THE FIELD
I push a button on the star projector and lean against the rusted wall of Centerfold Lagoon. Solar systems dance across the ceiling while a shiver cuts past my shirt, runs up my neck, squirms into my eyes. Yellow dots scatter into pink droplets, blue specks, pulse and prod with the lullaby’s sweet rhythms: dada, dada, dee, dee, da. Usually it calms me, soothes me to sleep, at the very least quiets my mind. Now it only summons tears as I hug Mama Bear’s journal closer to my chest. Dada, dada, dee, dee, da. The stars fade, the music follows. I ram my big toe against the button and travel into the past once again.

We sit at the kitchen table on my twelfth birthday. Mama Bear smiles, removes a package from underneath the cabinet, and places it in front of me. Careful, she warns, it’s fragile. My hands shake as I slowly reach into the old seed bag and search for its secret contents. The smell of musty corn fills the air, the sack likely scavenged from Mama Bear’s experiments, and I peel away the burlap to reveal a paper cylinder covered with polka dots. It sits on a plastic base and hides a glass orb—a light bulb from the Before Times.

I gasp. “What does it do?”

“Flip it over,” she says with a wink.

I discover a small battery compartment engraved with a bright green apple and frown. “We don’t — ”

Mama Bear pulls batteries from her apron pocket and drops them in my hands. “Or do we? And I know what you’re thinking. Don’t even ask where I found them. I have my ways. Well, go ahead, turn it on.”
I nod enthusiastically, insert the batteries, and take Mama Bear’s hand in mine. Together we push the moon-shaped button on the cylinder’s base. Nothing happens before Mama Bear turns off the lights. For a moment, darkness, until suddenly the room swirls with glimmering sparkles as music serenades our ears. We watch in awe, enamored with my new artifact. We sit for what seems like hours, on and on until Mama Bear coughs and crumples over in her seat, cutting our party short.

“Always remember,” she says, wincing as I stick a syringe into her arm. “When in doubt, follow the stars.”

But now I’m left with even more of Mama Bear’s presents, if that’s what I should even call them. Some dumb book and a necklace and a plea to go North? What joy do they really hold? And what am I supposed to do, carry on Mama Bear’s wishes and trudge into some unknown land without her? I mean, I don’t even know what her wishes truly are. Half of the time she was too cryptic, burdened by her secrets, while the other half she was so hard on me I could barely stand to learn a damn thing. But I always knew this was coming, didn’t I?

Maybe I should have tried harder to prepare.

Maybe this is my punishment.

_Dada, dada, dee_… The lullaby fades before it should. The lights flicker away. I tap the star projector with no response, prod it again and again with the same failed results. Carefully flipping over the artifact, I remove the bottom compartment and find white fluff smothering the batteries.

“Bogus!” I shout, stomping my feet so forcefully that the hideout vibrates with a faint hum.

I try to gain composure and walk to the shelf where I store screws, spare parts, other odds and ends. Unfortunately there’s only one extra battery, and so I wipe away the bits of sulfuric-stenched corrosion with my shirt and switch the battery with the others, one at time, trying to see if it might make a difference. I grunt in anger. How could I have been so stupid? I should have been cleaning the star projector more frequently. I shouldn’t have left a pile of batteries in my bedroom
just so that they could catch fire. And to think how hard they are to come by. Why didn’t I store them here? Why didn’t I? Why?

Could.

Should.

Why.

If.

These are dangerous words, especially when writing history. I want to rid my vocabulary of them but no matter how hard I try it seems impossible. I take a breath. Mama Bear would tell me to be inventive, to make it work. A solar panel could do the trick but it’s already dusk. I could rewire the hardware, work around the circuit—but there I go again. Would and could can’t do a damn thing for me now.

I stick my hands in my pockets, find something smooth and round buried deep in the seams. Agili-Tee. Not one but a pair. I had nearly forgotten that Vex gave them to me, which means that I haven’t changed in days and probably smell like it, too. I hold the pills in my palm and stare at them, then they’re in my mouth and down my throat before I even know what I’m doing. What a wastoid—I totally forgot what Kirk Cameron would say. But Vex always promised this would get me sprouted, and maybe that’s what I need now, to just sit down and wait for something to happen in a world without Mama Bear and her star projector.

A harsh vibration rushes across my back. I try to ignore it until another arrives and then another. I crawl to the entrance and open the main latch, wincing as the setting sun pierces my eyes. Ahtu stands by a pile of branches, his body wearing the same concerned stance he’s held for days, maybe weeks. He catches my eye and jerks his head toward me, a warped bough still jutting from his mouth.

“You must stop this,” he says. “Do you remember what your grandmother advised?”

“It is not whatever. It is your duty.”

“And what’s your duty? Throwing sticks at a grieving girl?”

“I shall do whatever it takes, Tezra Baine.”

The branch leaves Ahtu’s grasp, soars through the air, and smacks my arm. A streak of blood runs down my skin as the branch falls against the ladder and clangs to the ground.

“We need to go,” Ahtu pleads. “This has gone on long enough.”

“As if!” I yell, my voice louder than it’s been in days. “Go North yourself.”

Another branch sails toward me. I duck and hear it crash into the hideout. I hear my sweet *dee, dee, da* and turn around, find the branch sizzling with flames. The burning limb grows hot in my hand as I try to blow it out, yet the fire only spreads across the frayed bark. I heave the branch out the door and it falls into the mud below. Wind-whipped, splashed with dirt, the flames dwindle into nothingness. A faint line of smoke floats into the air, disappearing into a sky filled with pink and purple ribbon-streaks, and I gasp at its striking beauty.

Something tickles my leg. It floats across my skin and I catch the delicate dandelion seed head in my hand. Mama Bear called them fairies, said if you made a wish on one it would come true, and I want to wish for Mama Bear even though I know she can’t come back. I wish for it anyways, crumbling the seeds in my hands. They blow away and dance into a field blanketed by more dandelions, poppies, other prairie flowers. Had they always been there, bordering Centerfold Lagoon, or had they blossomed while I was watching the star projector?

Mama Bear calls my name. I can’t tell if it’s really her or just another memory but I close my eyes and sink deeper into her voice. I burst down the ladder and jump head first into the flowers, roll around until my whole body is covered in dirt and grass. Ahtu follows and bounds onto a nearby incline, chasing after bugs that flutter about his antlers. I feel no more than nine, as if I’ve only lived
in the Stalks for a year or less. Somewhere in my mind Mama Bear carries a large sack in her arms and throws prairie seed every which way, encouraging me to follow.

“Isn’t this illegal?” I ask.

“No, my child,” she says. “This is freedom. Stomp harder.”

I ram my swollen feet more forcefully into the half-frozen ground. “I don’t get the point.”

“You must be like the bison.”

“What’s a bison?”

“Like a Water-Cow with brown fur that walks on land.” Mama Bear points at me without even looking back. “And keep stomping. This way we keep out invasives. Which, before you ask, are things that don’t belong here.”

“Like us?”

“Oh no,” she says. “We belong here. But they don’t. And so in a few months, we will watch this all burn.”

Burn. The word echoes in my mind as smoke fills my nostrils. I sit up and see bursting reds and yellows on the horizon. Ad Bombs erupt all around me: BURN. BURN. WHO WILL BURN THE PRAIRIE? Ahtu runs circles around me, keeping back the flames. The fire grows closer and closer, surrounding the hideout’s perimeter. Mama Bear screams from inside Centerfold Lagoon, pleading for help. I run toward the ladder and climb up. The rungs burn my hands but I don’t care. I must save Mama Bear. I must. I must. Her body lies crushed under a log, her journal on fire. I pull it from her singed hands but it immediately crumbles to ashes.

With the flames close to my neck, no hope for the future, I curl into a ball and resign myself to death. Only I am not dead, I am lying in a puddle of drool that smells like Bog water and my whole body is sore and Mama Bear’s journal is just fine in my arms and I want nothing more than to see the sun and eat some food and find the Field.
That Agili-Tee was a terrible idea—all the things it made me see, relive. How can Vex do that so many times a day? Are he and the other Exiles just numb to the visions? How pathetic… I should have listened to Kirk Cameron. But now the memories have worn off and I feel antsy, sprouted, vulnerable. My body aches and my head throbs. I’m exhausted, haven’t slept all night.

Ahtu was right. Maybe the Orphan Operators really are after me. No way I’m spending another night in Centerfold Lagoon. I’ve got a half-assed plan and I’m getting out of here as soon as I purge my artifacts.

Well, most of my artifacts. I promise that I’ll keep no more than five for the journey ahead. The first decision is simple—the toolbox, which I open in order to store my other artifacts. Surely I’ll need to take some things apart, or put things back together. I suppose I could stab someone with the screwdriver if I needed, but I don’t linger on that thought too long.

Next I take the extension cords. A bit antiquated, sure, but I have three. Not only do they harness energy, but they are nearly indestructible, can even tie things up, and I’ve seen Ahtu do wonders with these things. I plug all of the cords into a single strand, wrap tightly, and place inside the toolbox.

Two out of five. Okay, this isn’t fun. Whether I like it or not, I identify artifacts that I don’t need. I still have the ghost hunting goggles, so taking the light stick would be a waste of space. Mama Bear left me her necklace, so the jewelry can go, too, and I don’t even know when I’d get to use the toy xylophone—it’s like an alarm bell that screams, “Hey, Orphan Operators, I’m over here!”
Discarding as many artifacts as possible, I delicately place them into an empty crate, thank each one with a gentle pat, and take down the accompanying paper plaques. Each one I remove feels like killing a piece of myself. Every artifact hurts worse and worse and worse. It’s as if I might break apart and never see beyond Centerfold Lagoon again. But one step at a time, I remind myself, rolling up my sleeves and focusing on the three yet-to-be-chosen.

Easy—the curling iron. It’s the newest item in my collection and it took so long to find that there’s no way I’ll let it go this quickly. I’ve already lost so much. After all, as much as she complained about my hobbies, Mama Bear knew what it meant to have objects dear to your heart. She would want me to keep this. I pick it up, let the cool metal spin in my hands, and see my grandmother’s face as I place it inside the toolbox.

My next keeper is *Aquajogger: The Complete Water Workout* VHS. I’ve traipsed all over for a VCR, and perhaps I might finally find one beyond the Stalks. *Aquajogger: The Complete Water Workout* is probably a lot like *Mermaid Vacation* but since the copyright is 1996 I think there’s a much better chance that it guest-stars Daryl Hannah or a Top Teen Hunk of America.

Okay, that’s four out of five. I place my hand on the Game Boy. Pick it up, hold it. Heavier than it looks. I tap the buttons, imagine that I am a mermaid swimming through the ocean. One button makes me jump. Another makes me spin. When I push them at the same time, I flip in the air and win bonus points. I laugh. Staring at the tiny screen seems so barbaric, so trivial, especially compared to the Corporate Simulations of today. Still, what I wouldn’t do to find a cartridge to put in the back and play. I remember the house where I found it, hidden in a box with ragged animals and plastic figurines.

But what about *Teen Beat*? It has taught me so much. So many amazing words and pictures. Michael Jackson. Prince. Scott Baio, who looks just like —
Vex. I haven’t thought about him in days. Sure, his name’s bounced around my mind, but I haven’t really focused on what he might be up to. How long has it been since the fire? Have I missed work yet? Does he know what happened to Mama Bear? The Owners wouldn’t want to cause alarm, especially since they claim that the Stalks are fully disaster proof, but Vex knows me better than anyone. Even worse—I still have his goggles. There’s no telling what lengths he had to go to get them and what he might risk to get them back.

That settles it. I’m taking Scott Baio. And Prince. And the King of Pop. And my BFF Daryl Hannah. If I take all of *Teen Beat* it would likely crumble apart—it’s already lost a few pages since I first found it—and so I tear out Scott and Prince and Michael and Daryl, one by one, careful not to rip an eye or a curl or a perfect set of lips, and set them into a small pile.

And then I add the cartoon woman with WW on her chest just because I can. She’s a good luck charm that reminds me of Mama Bear’s strength and so perhaps she will protect me as I set out into the great unknown. Out there, I’ll need all the luck I can get.

Okay, so maybe I cheated a little.

Whatever. Six is still fax to the max.

If I can’t actually keep the artifacts, I can at least hold onto their memories, so I decide to bend the rules a little more and keep all the informational plaques. I open Mama Bear’s journal and find it half-full with notes and drawings and soil-stained fingerprints. One page has my mother’s name on it, which I can’t even deal with right now, so I just skim ahead to the blank pages. When I touch them it’s like touching her, then I remember the fire, that terrible Agili-Tee nightmare, and all I can do is glue the plaques into the empty spaces in hopes that I might distract myself.

It feels like I’m defiling Mama Bear’s work, but in other ways I’m making it my own. She’s not here to tell me what to do so what other choice do I have? I always wanted to see inside her journal, always yearned to know what stories it contains, always hoped it might help me understand
my family and my past and all the terrible ways they intertwine. But now that I have it in my hands I can’t even listen to its full experience. The power is too much and I’m not sure if I’ll ever be able to unearth its history.

I turn to the star projector. I’ve spent most of the night rigging it to a solar panel so that I can watch it one more time. If it could survive then I would take it in a heartbeat. But it’s too delicate, too fragile, and surely it would collapse bustling around in Ahtu’s pack. I turn it on one last time, watch tiny dots spin around the room, and place it on top of the other discarded artifacts. I close my eyes and think of Mama Bear. Dada, dada, dee, dee, da. With gratitude and sorrow, I paste the final plaque into the journal:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Name: Star Projector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B. Catalogue Number: SP.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Date Found: Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Excavation Site: Unknown; birthday present gifted by Mama Bear on 12th Birthday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Dimensions: 5.71” x 5.71” x 14.32”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Weight: 10.9 ounces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Estimated Age: 200-250-years old; “Made in China” Era; design shows modern features suggestive of mass reproduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Function: Projects lights; plays music; likely used to calm small children and animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Unique Features: Small green apple engraved into battery compartment; moon-shaped power button</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After taking in the view of Centerfold Lagoon once last time, I gather the toolbox and the overflowing milk crate, send them down via a pulley system, and climb down the ladder wearing Vex’s goggles to help combat the dark.

Ahtu runs over and licks my face. “Is it time?”
I nod my head. “Yeah. I think so.”

“Very well,” Ahtu says, bending his knees forward, as if bowing, his giant antlers nearly level with my face. “The Field?”

“Sure,” I say, piling my keepers into Ahtu’s pack. I climb atop his back, the other crate still in my arms. “You know what’s up there?”

“Many things, Tezra Baine. Many things, indeed.”

Ahtu sprints off. I feel numb as I ride on his back. Rather than look at my surroundings I can only hug the crate closer and closer to my chest, poking myself with wires and sharp points and shiny knobs. The toy xylophone clangs, barely audible as its multi-colored keys bounce and mingle with Ahtu’s clomping. Bits of paper from Teen Beat fly in the air and into my mouth. I should have sealed the crate before we left Centerfold Lagoon, but I like it this way. I can see it, smell it, hear it, feel it, even taste it for as long as I can.

Via night vision, my spot in the woods seems more alive than ever before. An Owl-Bat hangs off a nearby tree limb, freshly made droppings splattered underneath. The place where I buried my dress is still there, the goggles just barely showing my dig marks. I grab the trowel from its secret spot and begin clawing into the dirt. Usually I only do this when I’m angry but today is different. Rather than bury something I hate, I’m burying artifacts that I love. That I have spent years collecting. That I want more than anything to keep. Maybe they shouldn’t even rest here, tainted in the same field as these terrible Corporate Perks, but it’s the only safe place I know of besides Centerfold Lagoon, which maybe isn’t even that safe anymore.

I make the hole as deep as I can without having to climb in myself. My arms are stained brown, but with the goggles it looks slightly different, like I’m covered in thick moss. The Owl-Bat wakes up, hoots, watches me with interest. I wonder what secrets it holds, what it has lost, what disasters it has faced at the expense of Corporate Sorcery. I want to take out each artifact again, hug
it, caress it, but it would only make things worse. I must rely on their memories in hopes that someday I can return to Centerfold Lagoon and begin an even grander museum.

I pat dirt overtop the buried artifacts, remove the goggles, blink my eyes several times to readjust to the darkness, and lean forward to kiss the mound. The ground is moist to my lips, a deep aroma of musk and earth, much like Mama Bear would smell after working in the lab. Tears fall from my face. I wipe them from my cheek, smearing brown stains everywhere.

“I’ll come back,” I say, picking myself up off the ground and tossing the goggles over my shoulder. “I promise.”

I walk away and stop at the Snap Trap. It lifts its bulbous head towards me. I stare at my arms, caked in dirt, the scars on my right arm barely visible. I run my hand across them, feel grains of silt against rows of scar tissue. Trowel still in hand, I lift my arm to the Snap Trap just as it reveals its terrible teeth. The Owl-Bat hoots. I pull away and the Snap Trap recoils its head like a serpent, strikes, slices my ear, and grabs onto the goggles. I swipe at it until it releases, then shove it against a tree and push against the trowel with all my force. The Snap Trap hisses until a barbed head falls into the dirt and is fed to Ahtu for a snack.
The landscape is flat and full of life. The Stalks are behind us, a great city of corn and light and modified beings. We creep further and further away, move past the edge of the Bog. Perfectly mowed grass juts against wild brambles, creatures buzz around my head, while the smell of fracking fluid wafts into the wind. I can’t imagine there are many places like this left—but what do I know? It’s a strange sight to see the Bog again. The last time I was here was the night of Mama Bear’s death. Somehow I don’t feel as sad as I should. No tears, just emptiness. Maybe I could be making a huge mistake. But maybe not. Onward and onward is all I can do, into the great unknown, no idea what is in store or what I will find.

Ahtu stops abruptly and sniffs the air. I feel his knees lock as he stares across into the Bog. Surely we haven’t run into trouble already.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, patting his neck.

He pauses. “Do you think we will ever see another one?”

“What do you mean?”

“The deer?”

Ah, yes, the deer. I had barely thought about them since the ghost hunt. “I’m not sure. I’ve never really seen anything like that.”

“I have,” Ahtu says, shaking his head and continuing on his way. “A long time ago. When I was younger. Before I inhabited with you.”

“Really? At Headquarters?”

“Yes. I think so.”
I’m not sure what to say. Ahtu rarely speaks about Headquarters. “So what do you remember?”

“Mostly how they smell,” he says. “Like bananas.”


Ahtu slows his pace. “I do not understand.”

I laugh even louder. “No, it’s just…I can’t explain it. I’ve been around you when you’re wet, and trust me, you don’t smell anything like bananas. Not fresh ones, anyways.”

It’s not what I mean to say. Ahtu sprints faster and faster, nearly throws me off. I grab his fur and my knuckles turn white as he charges ahead. Air stings my face. I can barely catch my breath. I realize that Ahtu’s not just showing off, he’s trying to invigorate me. I feel different. Present somehow. Awake. It’s a brief moment without complaint or a constant reminder of loss. To keep this feeling, I push myself off Ahtu’s neck, correct my posture, and open my arms wide. I sit down on Ahtu’s back and look up at the sky, watch the moon glow and the darkened clouds pass.

My view abruptly fades to leaves that block the sky from view. I pull myself into the upright position. On both sides, corn, everywhere, stacked like perfect fencerows, fronds moving in the wind. It’s not Maize-Made but a different variety, shorter and a different shade than what’s in the Stalks. Are we finally in the Field? I’ve only heard about this from Generators who have friends working there. They made it sound awful and terrible but for some reason I find the anonymity amongst symmetry oddly comforting.

I feel exposed on the edges of the Field and would rather hide inside it. “Can we move more that way?”

Ahtu changes direction and enters the matrix of corn. Stalks crumple under his feet. I gasp, having never seen such a thing. Ahtu dives deeper and deeper into the Field with a sense of urgency
that I lack. Hours pass. Corn, on and on and on. Every time I think it will stop it just keeps going.

Every now and then we pass posts: BB.MK41G78; BB.CQ39P15; BB.TB72W96, each a marker for a
different breed of corn. Whenever we pass one I hear something click inside Ahtu, like he’s
recording where we’re at—that’s my guess, at least, and hopefully it’s not something else recording
us. To pass the time I play a game by counting numbers, citing the alphabet, forming poetry in my
head.

But games only last so long. My thighs burn and my belly grumbles. Ahtu can practically go
forever but I need food, water, rest. “How long have we been traveling?”

“Five hours, forty-three minutes, and seventeen seconds,” Ahtu replies.

“Let’s stop,” I say.

“Here?”

“Yes, why not.”

Ahtu speeds up, as if he isn’t listening. “It would be best to reach the other side.”

“The other side? This thing could go on forever!”

“Eighty-eight miles to be exact. That would take us two hours, twenty-six minutes, and forty
seconds if I continue at a rate of — ”

“Enough, data head. I can’t go that far without stopping. Besides, who knows what we’re
even looking for?”

“And what are we looking for, Tezra Baine?” Ahtu slows to a stop. “Perhaps I will give you
time to think.”

I step off Ahtu’s back. I’m not sure I’ve ever ridden so far in a single trip. My legs shake and
feel like soggy green beans. Ahtu paces a few feet away and I dive into the corn to pee. It’s nothing
he hasn’t seen before, but still, it’s nice to have some privacy. Something whacks me on the back. I
jump up and drip all over my legs. I feel like a total wastoid—it’s just a piece of purple Liv-Corn. I
pull it from the stalk with a firm snap and smell it. Mama Bear once told me it’s used as livestock feed. Animals or no animals, it looks delicious. How bad could it be? I take a bite. It’s sweet and tough, nothing like Mama Bear’s heirlooms.

I immediately feel sick. I’ve barely gotten my pants back up before I puke everywhere. I see the chewed-up kernels and purple saliva swirl into the dirt. I heave again and again until there is nothing left in my stomach. I stumble back to Ahtu. His eyes grow bright and he runs to me.

“What is wrong?” he asks. “What has happened?”

“Nothing, nothing. I’ll be fine. At least I think I will be.”

Ahtu sniffs me. He moves in closer and I can feel his cold breath on my cheeks. He runs off and I turn around to see him lick up the contents of my empty stomach.

“You will be fine,” he says. “And you should stop eating so much salt. You have a sodium imbalance.”

“Show off.”

“Lightweight.”

“Don’t want to hear it. I just need a nap, okay?”

Ahtu nods his head and lies on the ground. I collapse beside him and curl onto his furry chest, cover myself in a blanket I pull from his pack. Ahtu goes into alert mode. He is distant from me even though I know he is protecting me. I fade in and out of consciousness, try to ignore the bugs crawling on my body. Whenever I think I might fall asleep I keep seeing images of Mama Bear, then I throw open my eyes and look at the stars until I grow tired and wake again and run off to puke. When I get up for the third time, the sun begins to rise above the horizon as a sound emerges behind me. I turn around and see a large machine with barbed spikes rolling through the corn. It moves closer and closer, tearing apart cornstalks as it heads right toward me.
CHAPTER 14

PRECISION TECHNOLOGY

The mechanical log with sharp teeth makes another threatening noise as it barrels toward me. I can jump over it, get away from it, or at least I think I can until blades extend from the contraption’s sides, spinning as stalks disappears behind it. What I hear isn’t the machine itself but the sound of corn shooting into the cylinder and tumbling inside. I run in another direction but it follows as if it’s tracking me.

I panic. Maybe it’s the Orphan Operators. Or an Eye-Spy Drone. Or maybe this is another hallucination. A residual effect of the Agili-Tee. A symptom of extreme hunger. My stomach is certainly emptier than it’s ever been. But I don’t even know what’s real or not. What is wrong with me? Am I losing my mind?

Ahtu swoops past me. I grab onto his antlers and swing upward. “What are those things?”

“I do not know,” he says. “I have never seen such machines.”

The ominous device takes another turn and moves into an empty passageway. I sigh with relief—it’s not following me, or Ahtu, but follows its own path. My relief doesn’t last long as I hear another one coming from a different direction, and perhaps there are even more already on the way. I tell Ahtu to move faster and soon the cornstalks grow shorter and shorter until we are no longer amongst corn but bean plants—Super Soi, to be exact. The bushes reach my shoulders, the tops of Ahtu’s antlers. I feel unprotected, as if I’m nothing more than a head floating above a sheet of leaves. I could jump down, disappear amongst the crops, though I know I’m safer on Ahtu’s back.

Holes and lines and corridors are carved out amongst the Super Soi. I feel like I’m trapped in a maze as the rumbling machine inches closer and closer behind. Only now the sound is softer, the beans more delicate than the corn. The noise disappears and the horizon moves downward into an
open valley. I tap the back of Ahtu’s neck and he stops at the top of the slope. Below us are a dozen
or so people standing atop large stumps, their bodies hooked into Photo-Synthesis converters.

“They’re Generators!” I shout louder than expected. I can’t believe I actually miss the
Photo-Synthesis Center but I do. Vex. *Mermaid Vacation*. Even the terrible Slurry. Perhaps I could
work here. Perhaps they have a place for me. But is that crazy? What if someone finds out who I
am? What if I’m being watched?

“This is Energy Outpost 701-Z,” Ahtu says. “As precaution I have blocked all security
devices identified in the local area. I estimate that we have fifty-three minutes to travel through the
outpost safely.”

It’s as if Ahtu reads my mind—sometimes I wonder if he actually can. I prepare myself to
ride again when he suddenly jerks his head toward the left. “I detect life forms. Two of them.
Approaching from north and south.”

I grip my fists and prepare for the worst. A few seconds later I hear whispering, though I
can’t make out what the voices are saying. Maybe it’s only a few Generators on break. But what if
it’s not? Two small children emerge from opposite rows and run to Ahtu, their hands outstretched
with food. I haven’t seen anyone so young since before I moved to the Stalks.

“Snack?” Ahtu says, sniffing the children’s offering.

I pull on Ahtu’s horns to stop. The children look up. I gasp. Not because each child has
three eyes, but because they are identical in everyway—Duplicates. I only saw Duplicates back at
Headquarters. Rarely do they stay together at this age, though, even when Duplicates already have a
bad reputation for disobeying Corporate Protocol. I move closer to Ahtu, not knowing what trickery
might be at play.

“Why isn’t he eating?” one of the Duplicates asks. He is a young boy with tan skin and
shaggy blonde hair that covers most of his face. Each of his three eyes blinks in unison.
“Because he isn’t hungry,” I say.

“But it’s good,” the other Duplicate says. “You can eat it, too. Want some?”

Food. Real fax to the max food. Ahtu sniffs the Duplicates’ hands again and nods. “Do not worry. It will provide the sustenance you desire.”

I take their offering and eat ravenously. It’s bland but enjoyable. I could eat twenty times as much but immediately feel better. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” a Duplicate says. “Are you a Green Thumb?”

I bury my impulse to laugh. The Green Thumbs don’t exist, and if they did I certainly wouldn’t admit to being one. But the boy is so small that perhaps he doesn’t know any better. What if he really does know something? I can’t reveal any cracks in my secret—if the Green Thumbs despise The Owners so badly then the last thing I want is to meet one of them.

“Excuse me?” I say. “What’s a Green Thumb? You one?”

The boy shakes his head. “No. I just want to meet one. But that’s okay, you’re still nice.”

“What about work?” the second Duplicate says. “Do you need work?”

I straighten my back, searching for the right thing to say, trying not to give myself away.

“What kind of work?”

“Oh, all kinds,” the first Duplicate says. “You don’t have to be from around here, either.”

They know. Just play dumb. “Why would you say that?”

“Lots of people come here from different places,” the second Duplicate says.

“They do?”

“Yes,” the first Duplicate says. “If you’re looking for work, we know where to take you.”

“We take lots of people there,” the other adds.

Ahtu runs some sort of scan, most likely a heartbeat monitor. “You can follow them.”
It’s hard to believe Ahtu even though I know I should. I’m not sure what the Duplicates get out of this or where they want to take me. Is this their job? Or are they just being nice, offering some form of protection out of the kindness of their hearts? Surely they want something, even if it’s only leading me to certain doom. No matter, I think, hearing my grandmother’s advice. Trust Ahtu. Always trust Ahtu.

“All right,” I say. “Let’s go.”

The Duplicates move in front of us and we follow down the slope, walking past one of the Generator Hubs. The stump is much larger than what it looked like from above. Up close, I can also admire the Generator’s intricate work. A girl my age runs around the stump in circles, pumping and prodding her arms in different directions. I wonder if she’s playing *Mermaid Vacation*, although it’s not really that important—I want to join the fun no matter what Corporate Simulation she’s chosen.

“Don’t look up like that,” one of the Duplicates says. “People will know you’re not from here.

“Yeah, they drive all the machines from up there,” the other says. “Just pretend like you’re used to it.”

I snap my head back immediately. I suddenly feel ridiculous—a young girl riding a Stagg3X flanked on each side by three-eyed Duplicates. I hop off Ahtu and walk alongside the children.

“Can we ride him?” the boys ask in unison.

“Absolutely not,” Ahtu says. Aside from Mama Bear and Vex, I’m the only person he’s ever given the privilege to.

The Duplicates frown. “What if we — ”

“Try and I will toss you into the dirt,” Ahtu says.

The Duplicates laugh. “No you won’t. You’re nice.”

“You’re nice, too,” one of the Duplicates says, holding my hand. “You’ll like where we’re taking you. Everyone likes it there.”

“What is this place, exactly?” I ask.

The second Duplicate takes my other hand. “Well, it doesn’t really have a name.”

These children certainly like being vague, that’s for sure. We keep walking, hand-in-hand, wandering throughout the Field. Soybeans are much different than the corn I’m accustomed to—especially the smell, which is more pungent, though I’m sure you could get used to it after awhile. The sun feels warmer, too. More intense. Ad Bombs erupt just like they do in the Stalks, only these are more direct:

AGILI-TEE IS THE SPICE OF LIFE!

GENERATE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION!

BUILD MUSCLES 2 BUILD ENERGY!

DON’T DELAY—GENERATE TODAY!

We encounter tents and greenhouses and makeshift businesses, though no one seems to be working in them. As the structures grow in number, we enter some sort of town center. The Duplicates let go of my hands and point to a Before Times brick building.

“It’s over there,” they say together. “Downstairs.”

I shake my head, confused. “Aren’t you coming with me?”

A loud bell echoes from above. The Duplicates eyes grow wide. “We have to go now. Remember to ask for the special.”

Before I can stop them, they run in opposite directions and disappear into the crop rows. The bell continues to ring. I look to the sky, trying to find the source of the sound, then quickly
remind myself not to. People swarm the town center. Though they no longer wear their visors, the
Generators still have on their outfits, which are much more out-dated than those we have in the
Stalks. As the alarm fades into music, everyone bends their knees and drops to the ground. Ad
Bombs explode, revealing several Baxter & Baine logos that now hover in the sky.

“Food, Fiber, and Fuel for All!” the Fieldworkers chant all at once. “Food, Fiber, and Fuel
for All!”

They chant louder and louder and louder as dread forms in my stomach. It’s only a matter of
time before I’m found out, before someone knows that I’m one of The Owners. This place isn’t
safe. I tell Ahtu to hide and move to the brick building as the Fieldworkers continue their strange
ritual. I run downstairs and stop, staring at an etched sign. The Duplicates were wrong. The place
has a name after all: Tattoo Parlor—Get Inked to Earn More!
The parlor is cold, cave-like, lit only by holograms projecting from the walls. On display are all sorts of Corporate Tattoos: slogans and simulations and hybrid animals and products no one but The Owners can afford. The ceilings hang low. I feel claustrophobic and uneasy but force myself to take a step, then another and another until finally I’m mere inches from a holographic Kutter-Fly that flaps in midair. I lean in closer, stare into the tiny membranes of its fluttering wings. Its beauty haunts me yet I can’t shake the feeling that there’s something wrong with this place. Unnatural, even.

Why did the Duplicates send me here? I don’t want a tattoo. It’s a mark of shame back in the Stalks, turns people into walking Ad Bombs. I shouldn’t be here and need to leave before I’m made into a piece of merchandise. I turn to go but am stopped by a tall woman who blocks the door. Her beautiful black skin is covered with neon-colored tattoos that glow and shimmer in the dim lighting. Blue highlights streak her otherwise long dark hair cut at a severe angle directly above her eyes. She taps a computerized clipboard with her pointed nails and smiles. Tattooed clouds float across her neck and disappear, while her face becomes friendly and welcoming, a strange contrast to her outward appearance.

“Can I help you?” she says.

I should ask about the special but perhaps it’s best to feel things out, make sure this isn’t a trap. “I’m just looking. Thanks.”

“This your first Brand-Marking?”

“Excuse me?”
“Your first Corporate Tattoo?” the woman says, dropping her smile. “Obviously it’s your first.”

I nod my head.

“Sometimes I miss being a blank canvas,” she says, looking me up and down. “Well, the tattoos of today are much easier to apply than what we had a few decades ago, so don’t worry about that silly old rumor that it’ll hurt. We have a completely painless process. Now, what are you thinking?”

“Oh,” I say. There’s no way I’m Brand-Marking my body. It would be the ultimate disgrace. But I can’t let on just yet. I simply need to put on a smile and act interested. I can do that. Happened with Mama Bear all the time. “I’m not sure.”

“Common issue,” she says, taking my face in her hands. She cups my cheeks, looks into my eyes, examines my skin, lets go, and walks around me, tapping her clipboard even louder. “What’s your favorite color?”

I think of the most outrageous outfit on the cover of Teen Beat—Top Teen Hunk Scott Baio’s sleeveless Nike shirt. “Red.”

The woman cocks her head. “Unexpected choice. I can work with that.” She leads me by the shoulder to a nearby corner and pushes a button on the wall. Several dozen tattoos appear before us. “How about one of these?”

I shrug my shoulders. “They’re nice, I guess.”

“You don’t like them.” She taps her clipboard once again. “Let’s see…might you consider something from this collection?”

The holographic images morph into new shapes and words. My eyes move across them, trying to pinpoint details, but they all seem like one big blur. “I — ”
The tattoos disappear and the woman looks away. “Perhaps you’re not the tattoo type. What about a Cyber-Pendage? It’s efficient, practical, and stylish. I could see you with a wonderful shoulder panel. In red, perhaps?”

I’m not sure I like her suggestion. Cyber-Pendages are just another form of Brand-Marking. A lot of the Exiles have them back at the Generator Station, and I’ve seen too many of my co-workers struggle to recover after their surgeries. But in a weird way, I guess I’ve always liked them. 36478 has a leg brace that looks totally bodacious. I can’t believe I’m actually thinking that but I am. And when I was younger, my uncle had one at Headquarters. Or maybe it was a cousin? Like most memories from back then it’s just a feeling more than a concrete image. But memories aren’t what I came for. I take a deep breath and look the woman directly in the eyes.

“Do you have anything else?”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” she says.

“The special?”

The woman stops tapping her clipboard and gives me another once-over. She turns around and walks away. Not knowing what else to do, I follow her into a narrow hallway. We walk by several rooms, all of which are empty except for one that contains four young men strapped to chairs. They bang their heads against the wall, their skin a translucent blue—a tell-tale sign of Agili-Tee overdose. I’ve heard of halfway houses like this, always worry what might happen if Vex ended up in one, but never thought I’d see it with my own eyes. It’s just as bogus as I imagined. Too bad Kirk Cameron couldn’t talk to those poor boys before they ended up here.

We end up in a back room that reminds me of Mama Bear’s nursery without all the plants. Instead it’s filled with tubes, vials, and other strange devices, including a rusty tattoo needle in a glass case that would have been a particularly great artifact for the Centerfold Lagoon Museum of Before
Times History. The woman shuts the door and motions for me to sit down. I obey and move into an oversized chair.


I’m not sure what to say. It’s like my body is on an experiment table. How is any of this supposed to help me? And why would anyone here want to alter themselves? Back in the Stalks, a tail is a sign of disgrace. Sure, they wear it with honor but still know that they’re nothing more than failed experiments.

But what if I just got something small? How harmless is that? “What can you do to my eyes?”

“To be clear, I don’t perform the procedure,” the woman says. “We have more experienced Brand-Markers for that. But together we offer many options for your eyes—add a few, take some away, change the color, alter the shape, insert an animal accent. Ever seen a frog’s eye? That’s quite popular right now. A little edgy, too. Might suit your facial structure.”

I shudder at the thought of 56431 with his goat-like pupils, the Duplicates with three eyes. I could never do something that extreme. But what about something that could change my retinal patterns? “I think I’d like to change my color.”

“Red? That’s rather bold.”

Not red, I’d look ridiculous. And evil. What about a nice blue the shade of Ahtu’s fur? Yellow like the Stalks to remind me of home? Or something for Mama Bear? “Green. Like leaves.”

“Stunning and timeless,” the woman says. “What shade?”

She pushes another button on the wall and hundreds of green-hued dots appear before me, each marked with a tiny code. I begin to second guess my decision, then remind myself that this isn’t a Corporate Simulation. This is real life. “It’s just, I’m not so sure about this.”
The woman taps her clipboard as rain streams down her neck. “Little girl, ask for the special and you get the special. Otherwise you leave with or without staff assistance.”

She smiles, obviously not kidding. No. I can’t leave. Not yet. But I need more information. “How does this affect my ID number? I’m a Generator. I mean, I want to be one, so how does that work?”

The woman still smiles but it’s different, warmer, like when I first saw her. “Simple. Your Brand-Marker will link your new retinal pattern with your preexisting Baxter & Baine account.”

“But what happens if there’s a glitch?”

“A glitch?”

“Yeah, like, somehow the wrong ID number gets linked.”

“That would never happen,” the woman says, standing up straighter. “Our facility is fully authorized and regulated by the Baxter & Baine Corporation.”

It’s weird to hear those words aloud, especially when the Exiles refer to The Owners with such disdain. “But what if something happens? What if there’s an accident? Could your account get switched with a different one?”

“What you’re asking about is illegal. You know that, don’t you?” I don’t know what to say so I just pretend to know what I’m talking about and nod. The woman smiles again. “Of course, with the right price you can do anything you want nowadays. Might you be interested in adding a generous tip to your bill?”

“I’ve got lots of CCs if that’s what you mean.”

“And if an accident were to happen—which it most certainly won’t—would you like those CCs to be linked to a new account?”

I nod my head in agreement. Am I really doing this? Am I really about to get a new ID? If this works, I could be a new person. There’s no way The Owners could trace me. Then again, what
if the woman works for The Owners? What if the Duplicates are on their side, too? I still haven’t ruled out the possibility of a trap. Considering this is illegal, though, why would the woman and her staff put themselves in danger if they weren’t telling the truth?

“Very well,” she says. “I’ll see what your Brand-Marker can do about satisfying your request. Now, what else?”

What else? What else? Did she really just ask what else? Isn’t this already enough? What else is there to do? “I think the eyes will be just fine.”

“The special is a two-for-one-deal. It proves useful for clients in your unusual situation. Might I suggest something more…radical?”

“I am not getting a tattoo!” I scream at the woman. For a moment her face goes blank and I curse myself—I just gave myself away, didn’t I? But then her face changes and I can tell she’s shaken it off, that this isn’t the first time she’s heard such a thing in such a way, that I’m not the only one who hates The Owners. The woman pushes another button and a solar-paneled leg brace floats in front of me.

“An extreme choice, sure,” she says. “But this means a new you. Shockingly different. Most of our clients find that aspect particularly appealing, though this procedure’s recovery process is more, shall we say, complex than most.”

New eyes. A Cyber-Pendage. What am I doing? Mama Bear would never approve. But Mama Bear isn’t here. And really, wouldn’t it look awesome? Maybe it would be a new me. Even if it brands me as Corporate Merchandise, it doesn’t matter. The Owners have already branded me. It’s in our shared blood. No matter how many times I try to rid myself of their DNA, it’s still there, haunting me, reminding me that deep down some little piece of me is terrible. But this could really work. It could make me someone else. The Tezra I’ve always wanted to be.
“Let’s do it,” I say. Before I even finish the words, a device descends from the ceiling, scans my eyes, and extends a mechanical arm holding a crescent-shaped pill. I stare at it and remember the Agili-Tee nightmare. “This won’t make me see things, right?”

The woman laughs. “Probably not. Just takes the pain away.”

I reluctantly swallow the pill and immediately fall back into my chair. I try to pick up my arms but can’t. My body feels like water, like I’m bobbing in the ocean with Madison Avenue the Splash Mermaid. My vision begins to fade, as does my hearing.

“I’m going to get your Brand-Marker,” the woman says, her voice sounding miles away.

“You’ll be asleep when we return, so thank you again for visiting. We deeply appreciate your business.”

She leaves for what seems like hours. I keep expecting to fall asleep but never do. Or maybe I’m already asleep and I don’t even know it. I look around and fear grows in my stomach. Needles surround me, inching closer and closer, like a field of Snap Traps. I drift in and out of whatever state I’ve been put in as that woman taps her clipboard some place far away.

Slowly I hear something else, like a door opening, or a chair moving, and then something buzzes and moves closer and closer until someone is standing over me, and I recognize the eyes staring downward and I swim and swim and swim until I realize my Brand-Marker is Vex. I shout only no one hears me. I keep looking at Vex and blink and blink until everything disappears.
I wake up with the sun in my eyes and Ahtu curled into a ball around me. I’m not sure what time it is or where I am. My best guess is early morning, somewhere still near the Field. I try to stand but can’t. A searing twinge shoots down my leg but my vision is too blurry to see what’s happened. I rub my eyes and stop just as quickly from the pain to give them a few moments to readjust on their own.

I get a good look and freeze in place. I don’t know if I want to scream or throw up or celebrate. My clothes have been replaced by a white wrap that drapes over my torso and right leg, while the Cyber-Pendage remains exposed, covering my left. Solar panels wrap around my ankle and calf. A round hinge revolves around my knee. A silver plate lines my thigh, sprouting wires that disappear just below my hip.

I bend over to touch the vein-like strands but snap back from even more pain. Some sort of terrible noise emerges from me and I collapse backward onto Ahtu, who lifts his face to inspect me. Memories flood back unexpectedly—the tattoo parlor, the woman with the clouds on her neck, the two-for-one deal. But really I can only focus on Vex’s face. Ahtu nuzzles me with his cold nose and I pull away from him, look around frantically, snap back to reality.

Ahtu blinks. “Perhaps it is best that you continue to rest.”

He looks at me with confusion but I cut him short before he can investigate further. “Vex? Did you see him?”

“I found you like this,” Ahtu says. “No one else was present.”

“I’m telling you, he was here.”
Ahtu turns to face the opposite direction. “Vex lives in the Stalks. Would you like me to calculate the distance?”

“No, he’s here in the Field, I saw him!” Right? Didn’t I? But how could he be here? Had he followed me? No, that doesn’t seem possible. He wouldn’t have time to track me, not unless he found his own Stagg3X. Maybe this is just another hallucination. Maybe those pills really did make me see things. But what about those three-eyed Duplicates? It was so odd to see them together. I can’t remember Vex ever mentioning anything about people like them, but he doesn’t remember when he was transferred to the Stalks, either, so it’s not impossible that he was a product of the Duplicate Program.

And what if he is? Should I think any less of him, even though we were told at Headquarters to never trust a Duplicate with our own life? Vex can’t help who he is, even though it would crush him if he ever found out the truth. The Exiles have a hierarchy and Vex is on top—outing himself as a Duplicate would put a sharp end to his popularity.

I try to get up but only manage to rise onto my knees before the pain becomes too much. “We have to go back. We have to find him.” If the Brand-Marker really is Vex’s Duplicate, perhaps he might be willing to help me. On the other hand, he might also be more likely to turn me into the Orphan Operators.

“You can barely move. Where will you go?”

Ahtu is right. The pain’s unbearable. It might take days for this to fully heal, and after that I should try and find work, mingle with the Generators until I can get more information out of them. But what about Ahtu… Should he really come back to the encampment? “Help me up.”

“Tezra, I do not like what you have done.”

“Just help, okay?” I’m in no mood to argue. Ahtu doesn’t push me to talk, merely lays down in front of me. I drape my arms over his back and he stands up, lifting me with him. My knees lock
into place and I scream in pain. My eyes water but I fight the urge to cry. Unexpected warmth suddenly pulsates into my leg. The Cyber-Pendant makes a small noise, as if it’s just turned on, and I stretch out my leg in relief. “Thank you.”

“Your heart rate is steadying,” Ahtu says.

Breathing heavily, I take Ahtu by the horns, hobble to the right, and turn to look him in the eyes. What will I do with my beautiful blue deer? “Listen, maybe you need to stay on the edge of camp for a few days. The Generators probably won’t mind having you around but it might be weird if you’re living with them.”

Ahtu pulls away and trots backward. “You want us to stay here?”

“I told you, I have to find Vex. Or whoever that was. Maybe he can help us.”

“Tezra, what about the journal? What about the task given to you?”

“This is the task now, okay!”

Ahtu shakes his head. “Perhaps you are not that serious about your journey.”

I would kick the ground if it weren’t for the giant metal contraption on my leg, so I point to it instead. “Would I really do this to myself if I wasn’t serious?”

Ahtu looks at me for a long time until he takes a step toward me. “It seems we are both serious.”

I laugh. Ahtu lowers his neck and I hug him, wrapping myself around his antlers. “See, this is why I need you to stay away. But it won’t be for long. Just until I can figure things out. I’ll visit you as much as I can. Promise. Besides, you can blend in more out here than you can in there. Go explore, see what you can learn about this place, okay? You can take care of yourself.”

Ahtu pulls away and licks my face. “I will succeed at data collection if that is your wish.”
I look around and gauge my bearings. Glimpse at the sun, mark a trio of Generator Hubs in the distance, stare back at camp, form a mental map. “I think this is a good place for us to meet. I’ll see you around, you big bodacious hunk.”

We stare at each other, neither wanting to take the first step. I think of Mama Bear, of being forced to say goodbye against my own terms, and I decide to take control. I turn my back to Ahtu and hear him shift into high alert. And so I stand there, waiting for him to leave. It’s terrible, listening to his confused breaths, and I want to hug him forever and promise that I’ll never leave. Finally he turns away and I walk in the opposite direction.

The warmth in my leg pulsates again and I sigh in relief. Each step I take feels better and better. I can’t tell if this is an effect of the solar panels or some temporary form of pain relief from the Cyber-Pendage. It still hurts, that’s for sure, but it’s much less intense than those first few moments with Ahtu.

I want to turn around but I already know there’s nothing there for me to see. Whatever sadness I feel soon turns into courage. Mama Bear is dead. Ahtu might already be collecting data. I have a new Cyber-Pendage. My altered eyes should make my ID number untraceable. I am no longer in the Stalks, even though Vex—or someone like him—might have followed me. Nothing feels the same. And maybe that’s not such a bad thing. Maybe this really is a new me. I take a few more steps forward, and for once, things seem as if they might finally be getting better.

I’m starving by the time I get even halfway to camp, can’t stop daydreaming of Mama Bear’s pickled apples. I remember savoring the moist texture, as if they had been baked, then drinking the sweet briny juice until every drop was gone. There’s no telling how long it’s been since I’ve had a meal that wasn’t feed corn or pills. I hate to think about how much muscle I’ve probably lost, as I stopped eating after Mama Bear’s death and barely ate before leaving Centerfold Lagoon. Nice job, Tezra—you really thought that one out. And with the added pain in my leg, I’m finally starting to
see the damage I’ve done to my body. My arms are scratched from all the leaves and branches and blossoms Ahtu and I ran past. My vision’s still blurry. My back throbs from sleeping on the ground too much.

I’m used to pain like this, even craved it whenever I visited a Snap Trap after a grueling day in the nursery. But now the excitement I feel inside is at odds with the wounds I carry on the outside. One moment I feel sprouted and the next I feel exhausted and famished, constantly second guessing myself, wondering if I made the right decision, if I should turn back and get Ahtu before I do something even more dangerous and stupid than what I’ve already done. But this is the decision. I remind myself of that over and over again. There’s no more time for second-guessing. I’m a hungry half-machine orphan and that’s just the way it is now.

The smell of food wafts in the air, and the pain in my stomach is greater than the pain in my leg. I feel animalistic, savage, and know that I have to find that smell. I weave past buildings, Generator platforms, retail stands. People rush past, moving towards the smell, as well. My impulse is to run—I know I can move faster than them—but my leg makes it impossible.

Soon enough I turn a corner and find a large, open-air tent made of Solar-Sew fabric. Hundreds if not thousands of people eat at long tables while others wait in line. I worry about standing out, not fitting in—there are many others with Cyber-Pendages, though most everyone has dark skin and dark hair, either by design or nature. I look at my pale arms and feel incredibly vulnerable, but know there is nothing I can do but keep moving and hope for the best.

The smell is too much, overpowers me, and I take my place in line, pretend like I’ve been here many times before. As I inch forward, I see that a machine scans everyone’s retinal pattern. It’s a cruder version of what’s in the Stalks, which fits my sense that everything is outdated here. My heart pounds as less and less distance appears between me and the scanner. I look around, wondering if this will work, if I really have a new Generator ID, if this will backfire and I’ll end up
dead, but then I remind myself to act normal, stand up tall, keep my head straight. Still, I consider running away, leaving this place and these strange people so that I can find Ahtu, ride back to Centerfold Lagoon where I can stay forever with the star projector, my Game Boy, the delicate arrangement of all my artifacts in their entirety, but before I know it the machine’s in my face and blinds my eyes with a flash of red.
A voice from the machine utters: *Generator 62013-B. Identity Confirmed. Proceed.*

62013-B has a nice ring to it, though I wonder what the B’s for. Not my last name I hope. What if it is? What if people will know? Did this really work or is it all one big joke?

62013-B. 62013-B. Is that what the machine just said? Is that really who am now instead of 84111?

“Some of us are starving here,” a voice behind me says. “Move it, kid.”

I mumble a half-hearted apology, take a few steps forward. A strained smile moves across my face, the nervousness of moments ago now replaced with the excitement of food. I grab a large yellow bowl made of light-weight Maize-Made, stand on my tip-toes, and try to look over the heads in front of me to see what’s being served. The closer I get the louder things become—rumbling bellies, excited whispers, the mechanical groans from a machine that dispenses food labeled Soi Surprise.

I put the bowl underneath a spigot and my meal comes out slowly, building on itself, layer after layer, each one a different color: a base of tan, stripes of brown, yellow, and orange, a final glaze of red. At first it reminds me of the Slurry fountains back in the Stalks, but that’s not quite right. I realize the machine’s a 3D printer like the one I made for Mama Bear’s nursery. I want to stand here and admire it but the hunger is too much. It’s hard not to stuff the entire printed casserole in my mouth and be done with it, though I make note to mind my manners among strangers and wait until I find a table.

A new sense of dread washes over me—where do I sit? I don’t know anyone except the Duplicates and the people from the tattoo parlor and I doubt they’re here or would want to dine with me. Various groups sit with one another, laughing and telling stories. It’s intimidating, like I’m
on Slurry break. Only it’s different—these aren’t just young people. Sure, some are my age, but most are old folks like Mama Bear or little kids who probably shouldn’t even be working. For the most part people seem grouped by generation, but every so often there’s a group that looks like a make-believe family of some kind. As I weave in and out of tables, the desire to shove the food in my mouth becomes stronger. Finally I see several seats facing the edge of the tent—looks like a place for all the loners.

I sit down, pick off a piece of the casserole, and nearly spit it back into the bowl. The taste is revolting, worse than Slurry, like it’s rotten and full of rocks. I force myself to swallow—I need the sustenance, can’t afford to not eat anymore. Whatever the hell I’m consuming still smells enticing, likely a trick of chemicals or genetics, but the taste is the exact opposite. I keep eating, though, horrified that this is likely what I’ll be eating for the foreseeable future. I better get used to it. Or else maybe there’s still time to get out of here.

As I eat, I overhear a discussion about the Green Thumbs. Amongst so many people it’s hard to find the source but I concentrate as best I can, let it distract from the awful paste in front of me. After some difficulty I pinpoint it coming from two tables behind and slightly to the left.

“You think the Green Thumbs eat this stuff?” a voice asks.

“Probably not,” another says. “I hear they all have their own house.”

“Yeah, but who says they’re even real? You actually seen one?”

“Plenty. Those piles of manure think they’re better than us. Prancing around like they’re something special. I’d love to see one of them become a Fieldworker, find out what real work is like. But if you ask me those Exiles still got it best.”

The voices laugh and I hear something collide, like bowls smacking the table. I’m confused—are they actually jealous of the Exiles? I mean, I guess when you’re eating this crap everyday, anything’s possible. But why would anyone actually want to be an Exile? They’re locked
away, spied on, lost to the world forever. I didn't even realize people knew about the Exiles. I always thought they were kept secret from those beyond the city. Yet perhaps others really do know, or at least think they do from whatever rumors pollinate the wind.

Besides, I’m here, encountering things I never knew possible, which means I have to stay alert. Even though I fooled the machines and the system, it doesn’t mean I can fool actual people. I need to watch what I say, what I do. It’s all about playing a part, which I’m already good at.

While most everyone’s finished eating, I have several more bites and force myself to finish just as the bell goes off. The Owners’ logo floats in the sky as people drop to their knees and chant in unison.

“Food, Fiber, and Fuel for All! Food, Fiber, and Fuel for All!”

Despite the painful volume, I ignore the sound and keep eating. I look at the surrounding buildings, trying to identify the tattoo parlor. I think it might be to the right, though I can’t quite be certain. When something pulls at my clothes, I look down, confused. At my feet, a girl my age stares up from bended knees. Her long brown hair falls to the ground, covering her scarred face.

“What’s wrong with you?” she whispers. “Put your head down! Do you want to be Defogged?”

The urgency in the girl’s voice cuts to the bone and so I take the last bite of Soi Surprise and bow down until my forehead hits the dirt. This is a new position for my leg and I cry out in pain. Worried and embarrassed, I look around, but it’s too loud for anyone but the girl to hear me. Relieved, I mouth the chant in unison with the others, though there’s no way I’m actually saying the words aloud. I might bow down, pledge my so-called allegiance to The Owners, but when I think about Mama Bear, the Exiles, everything that I’ve seen, I can’t pretend to fully admire my family.
The bell stops. I wait a moment to see if the others stand up. When they do, I follow, only it’s not that easy. I try to get up and can’t—pushing off the ground is something my leg can’t handle right now.

The girl who spoke earlier sees me struggling and helps me up with a smile. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

I knew this question would come about but haven’t fully thought about how to respond. What should I say? Something like, “Oh, I’m a secret descendant of The Owners who lived with the Exiles until my grandmother burned alive?” As various fictions circle my head, I look down at my chest and find Mama Bear’s necklace swaying against my white wrap. I haven’t given the necklace much attention in the past few days, but now that it’s exposed my heart beats rapidly. Fearful that somebody might see—or already has—I plunge it behind the fabric and then scratch my ear like nothing happened.

The girl realizes that I’m struggling for words and answers for me. “It’s okay. Most of us move to the Field for work. Is that why you’re here?”

I nod. “I want to be a Generator.”

“Yeah, well, good luck. We’d all love a job like that, but there’s only a few spots and you’ve got to try out so most everybody just ends up doing maintenance on the machines. I’m Pistil, by the way. Came here a few months back. What’s your name?”

Again, I haven’t given this much thought. Rather than concoct something from scratch I blurt out the first word that comes to mind. “Sparrow.”

Pistil laughs. “Where are you from, anyway?”

This girl is too chatty. Part of me wants to tell her to shut up and mind her own business. The more she asks the more I put myself in danger. She’s nice—or at least seems to be—but I really
need to get to the tattoo parlor and see what I can dig up on Vex’s Duplicate. This girl might know something, too, though I’m not even sure I can trust her yet.

“Sore subject, I get it,” Pistil says, uncomfortable with my silence. “Say, a lot of us newbies are bunking together. We still have a spare cot if you want to join us.”

I’d be an idiot not to accept her invitation. If looking for a place to eat was this bad, I can only imagine what finding a spot to sleep would be like. Still, I need to get back to the tattoo parlor without anyone knowing. “I’ve got a few things to do first. Might explore a bit more, then I’ll meet up with you?”

The girl smiles again. “Great. We’re at Q-42 on the west end of camp. See you there?”

“Yeah, see you there. Thanks again.”

Pistil leaves. A few people still eat but most chit-chat or wander about. Even though I’ve only been here a day or two, the Field is alive in a way that I haven’t seen before. I could wait and go to the tattoo parlor at night, or in a few days, but now seems as good a time as any. People dart in and out of buildings, play games in the streets—this is likely the least suspicious time of day to do things, and surely I’m not the only one who might want a new tattoo. I take a deep breath, feeling for once that I am full, and walk towards the direction of the parlor. At the moment, I am not Tezra Baine. I am 62013-B, Sparrow from the Field, and this is my new home, whether I like it or not.
Pistil screams into the darkness, wakes me up with her typical strings of no’s and don’ts and stops. She mumbles about a boat, someone trapped inside, and the screaming starts again. I feel sorry for her, knowing what it feels like to have nightmares rooted so deep they consume everything you are. Besides, I can’t be that angry with her—night after night, half-awake on my Q-42 cot, I can only think about that wastoid at the tattoo parlor. The cloud-necked woman wasn’t there, replaced instead by a nose-ringed man that didn’t know anything about anything—not Vex or his Duplicate or the two-for-one special. When he finally kicked me out, though, the look in his eyes disturbed me, like he was threatening me, like he knew something he wasn’t telling. Like I wasn’t safe.

Everyone here gives me weird looks, watching and sizing me up. I don’t sleep much. Ahtu keeps begging me to leave, or at least he did before the three-eyed children finally won him over with affection and scraps of food. He doesn’t complain as often as when we first parted, though I’m still skeptical of why the Duplicates keep him company. In his position, I certainly wouldn’t be so quick to trust them. Vex is a Duplicate, though, and he’s one of the best people I know, so maybe I shouldn’t judge the two boys too harshly.

Too bad Kirk Cameron can’t teach me how to “Just Say No!” to all the bad things my family has said about Vex’s kind.

Even worse, I still don’t what I’m looking for in the Field. Maybe there isn’t anything despite what Mama Bear said. Yet something deep down tells me there is, that if I just keep looking it will come. I read the journal in a desperate search for answers, the pages filled with research notes instead of information directing me where to go. It’s all nonsense no matter how many times I study
it, and I feel totally bogus for disregarding Mama Bear’s experiment. How could I have been so stupid to think we’d have more time together?

The only thing of interest is a Corporate Memo between The Owners, though it still doesn’t tell me what to do with the necklace or where to go in the North. When Pistil first warned me about being Defogged it triggered a fuzzy memory of my great-grandfather, the Chief Defogging Officer. As a child I never understood what he did, only knew that he travelled often and always looked stressed. Might he be the reason that we were shunned from Headquarters? Or might he be the person I need to find? After all, why would Mama Bear still have this if it wasn’t important?

TO: Director of Research
FROM: Chief Defogging Officer
SUBJECT: RE:Sustainability

ADDENDUM TO “PRODUCING LIVES” — Our work with farmers must be portrayed as a mutual partnership. A recent poll shows that only 18% of the population believes that B&B is an trustworthy company. Push for the notion that we “get more from every acre of farmland” until we can discuss alternative strategies in private.

ADDENDUM TO “CONSERVING LIVES” — Our projection of double yields by the end of the year seems misguided. Though far from complete, the Ivory Coast research suggests that a drought similar to the American Midwest’s might not be far off. Our CEO seems to assume otherwise and I think it needs to stay that way.

ADDENDUM TO “IMPROVING LIVES” — The Board has voted to eliminate “relationship” from all communications. We must now use “partnership” to reinforce that our products help farmers rise from poverty to prosperity. As such, I can’t stress how important it is that you take this seriously—remember the “Post-Millennial” fiasco?

FINAL NOTE — I will be travelling on Monday the 17th. Do not bring your brother. Mr. Gable will be waiting for us at the usual spot.

I can look at it a millions times and always come up with more questions than answers. Luckily I’m about to get a break from this routine—in a matter of hours, I will finally take the Generator Exam. Another day of waiting would probably kill me since returning to work is the only thing that gives me hope. When I’m not eating or resting or skimming the journal or talking with
Ahtu, I watch as the Generators push and prod and pull to complete their imaginary tasks, wondering if they are aboard a spaceship, hovering above the stars, or battling an octopus in an underwater arena. On the whole the Generators lack the skills we have in the Stalks, but a few have real potential. One can do an amazing cartwheel, while another moves slowly, purposefully, like an otherworldly creature. Another Generator is the highest jumper I’ve ever seen, and I wouldn’t be surprised to see his high score replayed in the Recharge Hub while Vex and the others ate Slurry.

Pistil screams again, and I want to run to her, stroke her face, tell her it will be okay, just as I did with Mama Bear. She’s a nice enough girl, but like me, I can tell Pistil comes from a dark place. No one with a happy childhood screams like that. She doesn’t talk about her past but neither do I. Some of the other Fieldworkers are a bit more open—one old man won’t shut up about a fracking fire, what his pesticide job was like before the drones took over. Still, it’s hard to tell what they think about The Owners here. Only a handful speak openly of hatred but they don’t exactly offer praise either.

I’m clearly not the only one who dislikes the food, though, which makes me wonder what other lands might be out there, what other foods might be canned or cooked, what other knowledge has been passed on by aging grandmothers. Might there be a place in which I can eat pickled green beans for the rest of my life?

I put my hands around the necklace. Ever since my first meal here I’ve worried who might have seen it fall from my clothes. Mama Bear always carried the necklace with her and so even as a child I felt it had immense power. But now it feels special. Alive. I wonder if I should even wear it or if I need to leave it with Ahtu. He stands a better chance of protecting it than me, and perhaps it’s best to keep the journal and necklace separate in case something happens.
Hands clasped around the necklace, I turn on my side and fall back asleep, only to dream of the tattoo parlor and that menacing nose-ringed man. Pistil wakes me in the morning, this time with whispers instead of fearful noises.

“Rise and shine, Sparrow. We need to make sure you’re first in line for breakfast, okay? You don’t want to be late for your test.”

I nod my head and push myself upward. Pistil tries to help but I refuse. The warming sensation in my leg is more or less gone, and I finally feel comfortable moving around. The era of being doted on is over, especially on a day like this. “Maybe we’ll have something besides Soi Surprise today. I don’t know, like, Soi Supreme?”

Pistil laughs. “You want a million free CCs, too?”

I shrug my shoulders. “Keep that for yourself. I’d rather have the food.”

Of course, there is no Soi Supreme, no pickled green beans, no pot full of rice, just the same old Soi Surprise. It isn’t so bad, though. Maybe I’m getting used to the flavor, maybe I’m just in a good mood, but today it tastes better, heartier, like it wants me to get sprouted and conquer the Generator Exam. I finish quickly and wave goodbye to Pistil, who’s not even halfway done.

“Good luck,” she says through a mouthful of paste.

“Don’t worry,” I say, nodding my head. “I got this.”

“I know, Sparrow, but — ” Pistil wipes her mouth and pauses. “Working in the warehouse isn’t so bad.”

I take a step back. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s just… It’s okay if you don’t pass. I believe in you, I really do, but that test is harder than you realize. I failed it three times. Most of us did.”

I turn away from the table, furious that Pistil doesn’t think I have what it takes. I start to walk away when the bell goes off. Everyone stands up from the table, moves to their knees, and
shouts the Corporate Slogan. I sigh in frustration but follow suit and move to the ground, though I still refuse to say the words. I look over at Pistil, who leers at me with disapproving eyes. She knows that I don’t chant, that I never will, but she never asks why, just urges me to honor the CDO. It’s nothing but a waste of time—there’s no way my great-grandfather is still alive, and so whichever relative is now the CDO should be avoided rather than bowed down to. I glance at my chest to make sure the necklace is still hidden, and it is. When the chant is over, I stand back up, brush the dust from my clothes, and walk away.

“Sparrow, wait!” Pistil cries, placing her hand on my shoulder.

I stop and reply without even looking back. “I know what you said about the CDO. I don’t care.”

“No, it’s not that,” she says, though her tone indicates otherwise. “It’s just, most of us aren’t modified, but you are. You’ve got a big advantage. Good luck, okay?”

“Thanks,” I say, continuing my stride. “But I don’t need a big advantage.”

I was never a centerfold like Vex, but I was good at what I did. Still am. I’ll show Pistil. I’ll show everybody. I form a story: I am strong. I am smart. I will work in the Field. I say it over and over again. My heart beats faster, my muscles tighten in anticipation, and soon I’m at the testing center, waiting outside a small building adorned with a simple sign:

GENERATORS WANTED

NO EXPERIENCE REQUIRED

APPLY HERE

I open the door, step inside, and immediately cover my nose. The smell is horrendous, reminds me of Mama Bear’s compost pile. The room is covered in dust and dirt and neglect—
perhaps so many fail the exam that the drones don’t even clean the place anymore. I take another
step forward and a scanner descends from the ceiling, blocking my path. It flashes into my eyes and
beeps. 62013-B. *Testing Required. Proceed to Examination Station.*

The word *required* echoes in my mind, a bad memory connected to The Owners and their
training sessions for the Birdz and the Beez, the company’s mission statement, all that rhetorical
bullshit. I stand up straighter, try to avoid letting it tarnish my confidence, and step toward an
equipment-filled table in the middle of the room. I put a simple headset on, leaving the visor up.
With my eyes closed, I take a moment to feel its weight, let it become one with my mind and body.
Since my hair has grown into stubble, the helmet is itchier than any I’ve ever worn and prevents me
from finding the headspace I’m used to operating in.

I adjust the headset repeatedly but eventually give up on trying to make it comfortable.
Converter bracelets and anklets also rest on the table. I snap the bracelets to my wrists and place an
anklet onto my right leg, though the other anklet won’t fit around my Cyber-Pendage. After
fidgeting with it for a few seconds, I laugh half-heartedly, remembering what a Cyber-Pendage is
actually for—if I was covered in them then I wouldn’t need the facility’s equipment at all. The
technology here is too outdated to include a full bodysuit, but I couldn’t wear it even if I wanted.
I’m not sure if I’ll miss it, though. It was like a second skin, but in other ways it just weighed me
down. With more of my body exposed, maybe I’ll feel more power that I ever thought possible.

I flip down the visor. As the system loads, my palms sweat. I remember my mantra. I am
strong. I am smart. I will work in the Field. And then doubt creeps in, telling me I was good but
never *that* good. I’m beat-up, bruised, out-of-shape, haven’t done any physical training with my
Cyber-Pendage aside from walking. And with a constant diet of Soi Surprise, well, I’m not exactly in
top form. I stretch out my arms, my legs, roll my neck, wonder if I can actually do this. Am I strong?
Am I smart? Can I really work in the Field?
An alert goes off in my visor: 62013-B. Welcome to Farm Frenzy.

It’s now or never. Time to win.
I am an old man.

My face tingles as I stroke the curly gray beard that hangs to my bellybutton. Hair lines my arms, pokes out from the rolled-up sleeves of a brown flannel shirt. Overalls cover my chest and legs while a piece of straw juts from my mouth. I try to pull it out but can’t—a permanent feature of the simulation, much like the seashells braided into my *Mermaid Vacation* hair. My right hand, meanwhile, holds a pitchfork. I let go and it drops to the ground. When I pick it up, grass tickles my fingers, and I can see dirt underneath my nails.

A tractor lies ahead. I haven’t seen one in real life but know they were used in the Before Times. I move closer, circle around, admire its bright green tint and yellow accents. The small deer insignia affixed to the front of the machine reminds me of Ahtu, and I touch it, calling upon the power of my Stagg3X. I step onto the tractor and a pillar of air shoots up from the exam room floor, enabling me to squat down and rest in mid-air as if I were actually sitting. I place my hands on the wheel and wait.

The entire farm suddenly comes into view. All around, corn sways in the wind, and for a moment it’s as if I’m back in the Stalks. Only there is so much more, things I’ve only known from Mama Bear’s stories or Before Times books. An aluminum chicken-coop glistens in the sun, surrounded by hens that cluck and peck the ground. Horses run past a wooden stable that groans in the wind. Spotted cows roam an open pasture, spewing drool as they munch grass. A silo made of red brick lingers behind the animals. A creek runs alongside the right-hand view of the screen, and I can see fish jumping from the crystal-clear water. The sun hovers slightly above the corn, rising
slowly to fill the day with warmth. It’s beautiful enough to display in Centerfold Lagoon, certainly not like any farm I’ve ever seen, just another extinct enterprise driven off by The Owners.

Above each area of the farm hovers an icon in simple white text: *Milking Madness…Big Billy’s Barn Dance…Rotten Egg Relay*. I’ve never encountered this simulation before, and it doesn’t seem like it’s even on the same network as the Stalks. Maybe it’s just a beta version of a more sophisticated simulation offered elsewhere on the Grid. There’s no option to check your heart rate or CC status, no way to chat with another Generator, nothing from the system I’m used to.

My mind drifts into excitement as I stare into the swaying corn, realizing it’s possible to contact my friends if I had access to a chat function. I can’t believe I hadn’t considered this sooner. There’s obviously no need to chat with another Generator in an exam, but I’m sure I’d have access to that feature once I got the job. I could actually contact Vex and Zirou. I could tell them I’m okay. I could ask for help, for answers. But what would I actually say?

62013-B: hey V i know my id and name are both completely different

62013-B: but im really your friend T

62013-B: some1 who looks just like u gave me a cybr-pndg

62013-B: any help with this bogus journal?

62013-B: also i miss u

62013-B: and so does abtu

Yeah, right. Besides, The Owners might be watching. They might find me, even with a new ID. No, I’d have to create a way around the network for this to work. But I could do it. With the right tools and Ahtu’s help, it might just work. But what if it’s not so easy? What if it just puts them in danger? Or what if the truth about my grandmother has spread and they refuse to help me at all? I’m not sure what would be worse—never talking to my friends again or admitting to my family’s true nature.
A voice interrupts: 62013-B, please indicate your examination choice. If no selection is made in thirty seconds, this training session will end.

I force myself to stop thinking and focus on the task at hand. I sit back down into the driver’s seat and reexamine my options. I look for something near the creek but there doesn’t seem to be any games on that part of the farm, so I select *Wet ‘n’ Wild Weather*, which hangs above the cornfield. If it’s anything like *Mermaid Vacation*, this will be an easy victory.

My right foot is pulled forward so that it presses down on some sort of lever, and the wheel in front of me spins in my hands. The tractor sets off in the direction of *Wet ‘n’ Wild Weather*. I pass by the roaming cows, envision their modified counter-parts, the Water-Cows, and think how strange it is to see these animals walking on land, flicking their tails back and forth. Bugs fly around their nostrils, green-tinted drool dribbles from their mouths. I’m a bit baffled, really, as rarely do The Owners make Corporate Simulators about food and agriculture. Why would they design something like this?

When I get closer to the floating text my tractor suddenly stalls and a five-minute countdown appears in the upper right corner of the screen. Another icon flashes beside it:

*Howdy, Farmer 62013-B!*

*It’s time to get a waterin’. Drive yer tractor to each thirsty plant to quench its thirst.*

*Water as many as ya’ can before the countdown ends. Just remember—don’t water the weeds!*

**GOOD LUCK!**

The timer moves to 4:59. A green arrow appears a few feet away and I drive toward it, underneath which rests a withered, dying plant. A button appears on the steering wheel: WATER? I push it and a massive stream shoots from the tractor’s front end, leaving with such force that the
tractor rolls backwards. A giant cloud appears in the sky. Rain pours onto the plant, which quickly perks up and turns into a beautiful sunflower. I want to stare at it, admire it, but pull myself away to continue with the game. This is work, not playtime.

Another green arrow appears to my right. I turn the wheel and chase after it, encounter a rogue cow skipping across the field. I swerve around it, nearly turning the tractor on its side to avoid collision. Two more cows run in front of me before I actually reach the arrow—avoiding random obstacles must be a key part of the game. Under the arrow I see a slightly different looking plant, though it remains pathetic, crumpled, brown. I fire the WATER button. Another cloud emerges in the sky and releases its watery innards onto the plant, which blooms into an apple tree bulging with fruit. My point count increases to two.

Three more arrows appear in three different areas. One is green, two are red. I’m not sure what to do, if I should try to reach all of them, perhaps even in a specific order, or none at all. I move toward the red one, which is closest. My gut tells me I should avoid this since I’ve only watered green-arrowed plants. Perhaps red indicates a weed, but what if it marks a secret level or bonus points? There’s no way to know for sure if I don’t try, and the green arrows are farther away, so I fire the water button, stare up at the cloud, and hold my breath to see what happens. Rain beckons the carnivorous plant to life, shooting out a tentacle that wraps itself around the tractor’s front tires. The tractor inches forward, closer and closer to the plant’s barbed leaves.

Another button appears on the steering wheel: REVERSE? I push it but the plant’s grip is so tight that it pulls the tractor even closer. I hit the button over and over and over until the tentacle snaps in half and rolls under the front tires as the tractor backs away. I drive toward the green arrow, cursing myself for a rookie mistake. I’m an idiot for watering that weed. I knew it was bad news and now I’m back to one point. I can’t afford to make any more poor decisions.
I pass underneath a cloud on way to the next arrow. The water droplets tickle my neck as mud splashes off the tires and onto my overalls. I look up at the swirling underbelly and a bright yellow orb flickers in the middle—it’s like a vortex of power, its very own heart, and I wonder if that’s what summons rain to shoot from the tractor.

After I water the next plant, nine arrows pop into sight. I’m overwhelmed by options but know that some arrows should be avoided. I count four green ones, at least, though there are enough rain clouds darkening the sky that I can’t quite tell if those farthest away are red or green. Once I round up the first four, though, the arrows are replaced by twenty or thirty more. I’ve got five points and a little less than half my time left. This game is way too easy, so The Owners must be looking for ridiculously high scores. If I want any chance of securing that job I’ll need to double my points and then some. Camouflaged by arrows and clouds and rain, the sky looks unnatural, broken, like it’s bleeding. The unsettling vision haunts me in a way I don’t like but I charge forward anyways, the soil so damp that it proves difficult to maneuver the tractor.

I’ve gathered nine more points by the time I get stuck just shy of another green arrow. It’s useless to get out and push, plus I’m too far away and don’t even have a full minute left. But if I adjust my aim maybe I can shoot a cloud from here and hit my target on the nose. Of course, it’s more likely that I hit a weed and lose a precious point instead. It’s a risk I’m willing to take. Rather, it’s a risk I have to take. Playing it safe won’t guarantee me this job and access to Vex, but doing something crazy just might.

Close to the tractor lay several muddy logs, likely the remnants of a knocked-over fence. I roll one log until it juts up against the front tires, and then roll another and another. I quickly hop back into the drivers seat and guide the tractor onto the logs so that it sits at an upward angle. I line up the wheel with the green arrows as best as I can, then take a moment to close my eyes, steady my breath, imagine that I am in Mermaid Vacation. My mission is to dart forward as quickly as possible so
that I can slap a star button, only instead of pushing off with my tail I am shooting outward with the simple flick of my finger.

I open my eyes and fire. The cloud explodes into formation and rains down onto the plant. The green arrow disappears and I gather another point just as the timer stops. I jump out of my seat, clap my hands in excitement, and rub my necklace for good luck, though the visor makes it look like I’m scratching at my chest hair. An icon flashes:

CONGRATULATIONS 62013-B!

You have passed the Generator Exam—please report to work after tomorrow’s breakfast.

- B & B -
CHAPTER 20
CORPORATE REVIEW

As I walk through town before sunrise, the Fieldworkers wave in congratulations. It’s been awhile since they’ve last seen a Generator added to the workforce. My celebrity status is a small blip in otherwise mundane lives, yet in the days since I first got the job fewer and fewer people seem to care. And that’s a good thing. I don’t want to draw too much attention to myself and become the subject of speculation. After all, it’s prime gossip—Generator disappears after mysterious fire in the Stalks, reappears in the Field with new identity. But it isn’t like that here, as I’m merely a distraction from the blur of corporate work and bowls of Soi Surprise.

Soon the voices disappear, the buildings become sparser, and I reach the creek-side meeting place with Ahtu, who hasn’t yet arrived. The night after I first got the Generator position, Pistil held a small party. Our bunkmates shared a special drink they made as we danced and sang for hours. People I had never seen smile actually seemed happy for once. However, I left the party early to present Ahtu with a plan to hack into the Grid so I could reach Vex, and we’ve been meeting every day since.

Cattails bob back and forth, their reflections barely visible in the creek, its contents more a mix of fracking fluid and waste than anything else. The water bubbles like it’s sitting on a stove and has the faint odor of Water-Cow droppings, which likely means that a breeding factory is somewhere nearby. A blue spot appears, followed by a set of horns poking above the cattails. Ahtu trots across, hopping from rock to rock. I know he can hold his own, has crossed many creeks throughout the years, but I still hold my breath, hoping he doesn’t fall in. As he gets closer, I notice that he moves more quickly than usual, almost aggressively so, a look of concern in his eyes.
Ahtu makes it across the creek and I hug his neck. His fur tickles my arms and I immediately feel better, safer, like I’m home. “So, did you get into the Grid?”

“It is done,” Ahtu says. “I have rewired the access code and uploaded the data that you requested.”

“How long will it take before I can enter the system?”

Ahtu twitches his ears. “Seventy-two hours.”

I stamp my feet. “Three days! Three days! How am I supposed to wait that long?”

“I am sorry. There is nothing more I can do. But there is more important information for you to—”

Three days isn’t good enough. There has to be a way we can push up the timeline. “What about the mainframe portal? Were you able to find a way around it?”

“All has been taken care of,” Ahtu says. “Now really, you must—”

“And did you double check the hack address?”

Ahtu rises on his hind legs and kicks the air, blocking out the half-emerged sun to cast a great shadow across my face, then brings himself back onto all fours and snorts. “Even with that new leg, Tezra Baine, I am still more machine than you. Do not doubt my ability to fulfill a request for technological assistance. Now listen to me. You are in grave danger. There are rumors in neighboring lands that the Chief Defogging Officer is visiting your encampment to conduct a Corporate Review.”

My heart sinks. The CDO is the last thing I need right now. What if the CDO knows me? What if I won’t even have the chance to hack the network at all? “What about the plan?”

Ahtu shakes his head. “I do not know. But we should leave. Now. We must get away from here before you are recognized.”
“We can’t just abandon the plan! Don’t you think it would be even more suspicious if I just randomly disappeared before the CDO’s arrival?”

“Yes, but you would you be safe elsewhere. Must I remind you that the Chief Defogging Officer is a leading supervisor at Baxter & Baine? There is a strong likelihood that you are kin.”

I have a strong impulse to consult the journal and smell the lingering perfume left by Mama Bear’s soil-stained hands. “How do you even know that the CDO is really coming? Didn’t you say it was only rumors? Who told you?”

“The children, of course.”

“Well, where are they, then?” I still don’t like how friendly Ahtu’s become with the Duplicates and certainly don’t know if I can fully trust them. “Why didn’t they come here to tell me in person?”

“They would not leave for fear of the CDO’s arrival. Tezra, I intercepted a satellite transmission confirming his imminent arrival. If you do not want to leave, you must go back. Do not draw suspicion, if that is what you desire, but be careful. This is a dangerous person.”

“Fine,” I say. “I’m going back. But you stay here. And be careful, too. If the CDO sees you, it could be bad news.”

Ahtu looks at me blankly. “Do not worry. I will be fine.”

I nod my head. “I’m not missing my window to contact Vex. We’ll get through this somehow.”

Ahtu and I say our goodbyes. No matter how many times we do this, it never gets any easier. I run back to the center of the Field as quickly as I can, my mind racing with alert. What if this is all some trap? What if I’m Defogged? Maybe Ahtu was right. Maybe we should leave if our time here really has come to an end. But I’ve fought too hard and sacrificed too much to give up now.
The bell rings out and I stop. Something in the back of my mind tells me to bend down and look at my Cyber-Pendage. As I pretend to chant, I open the charging portal that is located on the upper portion of my calf, take off the necklace, and place it inside. When the bell stops, I close the latch, stand back up, and shake my leg to make sure the necklace isn’t rolling around and making noise. I can’t hear a thing and move closer to the town square. I encounter more and more Fieldworkers, some chatty, some with numb expressions, others in various stages of excitement, anxiety, resentment. I move to the left and quickly take a detour to the bunk. I find Pistil on her bed, staring at her arm. When she spots me, she rolls down her sleeve and stands up.

“I must have lost track of time,” Pistil says. “He’s here, isn’t he? The Chief Defogger?”

“Yes,” I say. “We need to go, meet everyone else.”

Pistil nods her head and walks toward me. She grabs my hand and squeezes. Her eyes dart back and forth. “Everything will be okay, won’t it?”

I nod my head but don’t say anything back. Pistil squeezes my hand again as we move closer to the lines of people waiting for the CDO. I glance down in hopes that I might loosen Pistil’s grip and instead find a new tattoo seared into her beautiful brown skin. A Water-Cow swims across her arm before transforming into a bottle of Agili-Tee.

“What did you do?” I whisper.

Pistil looks at me, then looks at the growing crowd. “Do you like it?”

After a long pause, I unwind myself from Pistil’s grasp. “Does it hurt?”

Pistil shakes her head, hugging herself with her arms. “It itches more than anything.”

Pistil and I wriggle into the line, standing shoulder to shoulder with each other. Everyone stares straight ahead, and another line stares straight back at us, the space in between covered with a green carpet. In the middle, far away, stands a circle of men and women wearing business suits. A ring of drones floats above their heads.
I can’t believe Pistil Brand-Marked herself for The Owners, for *these* people, the ones who line us up and parade us around like animals. “Why would you do that to yourself?”

“I like your modification, okay? We all do. But I can’t afford a Cyber-Pendage so I went with the tattoo. It’ll pay off in the long-run if I get more CCs.”

Another bell goes off and we all bow.

“I can’t believe you did this.”

Pistil punches the ground. “Shut up, Sparrow. Do you want to be Defogged? This isn’t one of your Generator games. This is real.”

She looks down and chants with the others. I can tell I’ve disappointed her, haven’t said the right things, but there’s no time to deal with that now. We stand back up and the holographic Baxter & Baine globe revolves in the air directly above The Owners and their drones. A video projects from the logo containing the expected images of cornfields and microscopes and Maize-Made skyscrapers. The images continue to loop, ending with the final promise: Food, Fiber, and Fuel for All. The crowd applauds until a deep voice echoes from the revolving globe and everyone once again falls silent.

“Greetings, Fieldworkers. I apologize that as your Chief Defogging Officer I cannot attend today’s Corporate Review. I hope you understand that the world of business is often chaotic, multifaceted, and unpredictable. Other duties regretfully keep me from your company, but my diligent staff is more than capable of conducting today’s proceedings. As always, Baxter & Baine deeply appreciates the labor you accomplish in our Fields. Each of you contributes to our mission of maintaining a sustainable world in which we all have the resources essential to prosperity. We are eternally grateful for your service and will continue to maintain our long-held Corporate Values by any means necessary. May there always be Food, Fiber, and Fuel for All.”
A tiny wave of unrest spreads across the crowd as the CDO’s staff disperses. The drones fly above them and deliver individual questionnaires to every Fieldworker in line. We are told to return to our bunks and await further instruction. Pistil and I follow orders and walk back to Q-42. Others are already sitting on their beds when we return. We complete our questionnaires. No one speaks. Perhaps we are silent for minutes. Maybe hours. It’s like we’re lost in a time loop. My palms grow cold, clammy. I rehearse in my head what I might say, who I am, what I do for work, over and over again, until a young man in a suit and thick-rimmed glasses appears at the entrance to our tent.

Everyone stands up. A drone hovers above the man’s shoulder, flies into the bunk, checks all of our IDs, and zooms back. It projects a chart that I can’t make sense of. The Owner waves his hand and the drone flies away. A suitcase lies by the man’s feet, which he picks up. He then steps into our bunk. Something in the air changes, puts people on edge, almost like the temperature is ten degrees colder.

The Owner walks up to Pistil. “Q318M, correct?”

She exhalles loudly, straightens her back, and nods.

“Tell me,” The Owner says. “What do you think are the primary drivers of success in the Baxter & Baine Corporation?”

Pistil looks at me and immediately returns her gaze to The Owner. “Everyone. Everyone drives our success. We all contribute to the Grid.”

“Very well.” The Owner turns to me. “And what about you, 62013-B? What drives our success at Baxter & Baine?”

I stare into The Owner’s eyes and see my own. Not the eyes I have now, but the ones I had before, my eyes, Mama Bear’s eyes. He is one of me. I nearly shit myself but refuse to give any indication that I am anyone other than 62013-B. “You do.”
The Owner stiffens and looks at my chest, directly in the spot where my necklace normally hides. “Elaborate.”

“People like you—people who wear suits—drive the success of Baxter & Baine.”

The Owner smiles and points at Pistil. “Take her.”

Two men enter the tent. I bite the inner part of my cheek to keep from screaming—one of them is another Duplicate that looks like Vex. He walks right up to Pistil, grabs her hair, and pulls her to her feet. Tears well in Pistil’s eyes but she refuses to struggle. Another one of our bunkmates stands up in protest. Before she can say anything, The Owner snaps his fingers.

“That one, too.”

The other guard takes her. Unlike Pistil, she screams and kicks her legs. She tries to shout something but the man covers her mouth. He reaches into her jacket and pulls out a piece of paper that he immediately hands to his supervisor. The Owner unfolds it and reads, his face expressionless, his eyes blank, though I nearly pass out from shock—the back of the paper features the same bright green apple symbol that’s on the bottom of my star projector.

“The CDO will be most displeased,” The Owner says, slipping the paper into his pocket as he turns to leave the tent. “Propaganda is a form of Corporate Sabotage that will not be tolerated.”

Pistil looks at me. I can sense the fear and disappointment in her eyes. As she’s taken away by Vex’s Duplicate the tattoo on her arm morphs into a cone of freshly-swirled Slurry. And that is exactly how I feel—cold and numb and bitter as I melt into a pile of nothingness.
Dinner is a sad, somber, lonely affair. The food is worse than usual. Supposedly there was a jam in the printer. At least that’s what people say, even though we all know that the Corporate Review has thrown everyone—including the machines—off their game. I poke at the Soi Surprise, concerned for Pistil and the other woman from our bunk. I have no idea what’s happening to them, what ideas The Owners are putting into or pulling out of their minds.

As I walk to the bunk, I desperately hope that Pistil’s already back. I want to apologize, tell her I’m sorry for criticizing her Corporate Tattoo. But of course she isn’t there and I sleep in silence. In some sick way I miss her screams—at least when she was having nightmares I knew that she was safe.

The silence makes me think of other horrors: did I really see that apple in The Owner’s hands? Can it actually be the same one that I’ve observed so many times on the star projector that Mama Bear gave? And if it is, how can a tiny little symbol be a form of Corporate Sabotage? What ideas make it so dangerous? Does it have anything to do with the Green Thumbs? Was Mama Bear one of them?

If only Pistil were here to answer my questions. She isn’t back in the morning, though, and fails to show up for lunch or dinner. But the next day my wishes finally come true when she returns to the bunk after dinner.

“Are you okay?” I ask, hugging her. “What did they do to you?”

Pistil shakes her head, her eyes dark and bloodshot. She’s lost weight, too, and her clothes look baggier than normal. “Nothing.”

“Nothing? Of course they did something! Did they — ”
“Our bunkmate,” Pistil says, staring at the ground. “I think they’re going to keep her. Some others, too.”

I help Pistil underneath a blanket and place my hands on her shoulders. “Just get some rest.”

Pistil pulls the blanket up to her neck. “It wasn’t so bad, really. You don’t remember much.”

The tone in Pistil’s voice concerns me, like this isn’t the first time she’s been Defogged. “Try not to think about it, okay?”

“I won’t,” Pistil says, pulling the blanket even tighter. “But I think something bad might happen.”

I cock my head. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. I guess maybe it was the questions they asked, like all this stuff about apples and people with funny-colored fingers.” Pistil closes her eyes and turns away from me. “It’s just a feeling, though. Like we should prepare.”

“So they asked you about the Green Thumbs?”

Pistil twitches nervously. Her silence confirms my suspicions—the apple could be a symbol for the Green Thumbs. But why would the group have anything to do with my star projector?

Suddenly I hear my grandmother’s voice: “When in doubt, follow the stars.”

Stars. As in constellations. As in directions.

The star projector is a map to the Green Thumbs. Of course—it’s all starting to make sense now. Mama Bear was trying to finish her experiments without The Owners knowing and so the Green Thumbs could have helped. In case something ever happened, she left the star projector as my guide. And so if Mama Bear was working with the Green Thumbs then that’s who I need to find.

Although what if I’m wrong? What if I’m just filling in too many gaps with ideas that lack meaning? Maybe I still don’t have the right vocabulary for this newly discovered story. But that’s
what I do. I’m a historian. I collect experiences and gather artifacts and decipher the past. If I can’t even trust my own Before Times instincts than what else have I really got?

I’ll have access to the Grid tomorrow morning and can finally contact Vex after three long days of waiting. Up until this point I’ve not really known what to say but now I can instruct him to find the star projector—I’ll just need to come up with some lie about any Corporate Perks he might find buried nearby. But is it really a coincidence that the CDO’s staff arrived just as I finalize my plan?

What if The Owners really are planning something? And what if it involves me? Am I the one they really want? I wouldn’t be surprised, not with the way that staff member stared at me like he knew the necklace wasn’t where it should be. His eyes still haunt me, they way he saw through me, like he could see who I really was. But maybe I’ve got it all wrong. Maybe I’m the one who could see through him, and when I did, I could only see myself staring back.

“I’m sure we’ll be fine,” I say. “Sleep, Pistil. Don’t worry about a thing.”

Pistil tosses and turns in bed, finally sits back up and looks straight ahead. “Sparrow, if you could do anything you wanted, what would it be?”

The question gives me pause. There is a sense of urgency in Pistil’s voice, and I immediately feel pressure to answer in a way that will give her the comfort she desperately needs. I think about Mama Bear and finishing her mission. I think about Centerfold Lagoon, how I still need to find a VCR to play *Aquajogger: The Complete Water Workout*. I think of swimming in the ocean, forever flicking my mermaid tail. But is any of that what I really want? And why do I even need to choose? Can’t I have it all?

“I think I just want to see more of the world,” I say. “Go North, maybe.”

“What if it’s gone before you get there?” Pistil asks. “What if The Owners take it all away?”

“Then I’ll go anyway,” I say, pausing. “What about you? What do you want?”
“You don’t want to know,” Pistil says, biting her lip.

I take her hand in mine. “Yes I do.”

“No, you don’t,” she says, lying back down on her pillow. “Some things are too frightening to share. Maybe I’d just stop the bad thing from happening.”

Pistil falls asleep. I unspool my hand from hers and crawl into my own bed. I wait for the nightmares to overtake Pistil but they never come—perhaps The Owners exhausted her to the point of numbness. I try to sleep but can’t, not just because of Pistil’s disturbing silence. I’m worried about the network hack. There is only a matter of hours left. I hope it will work. I mean, of course it will work. It has to. Ahtu and I have scrambled many satellites before. But what if it doesn’t work? What if I’m the bad thing and I’ve brought all of this upon us?

The bad thing, the bad thing, the bad thing… I dream of Mama Bear’s cottage. My grandmother screams and shakes in bed. When I run to her and pull down the blanket covering her face she is no longer my grandmother but Pistil. She is dying. I know she needs medicine but the drone is late, too late to really matter. I hold Pistil’s hand, comfort her, until finally the delivery alarm buzzes. I open the door and find a drone holding a package, only the drone is merely the head of a man in a suit. It scans my retinal patterns and disappears, leaving behind the package and a set of eyes hovering in mid-air. My eyes. His eyes. Mama Bear’s eyes.

The delivery alarm rings again. Louder and louder, again and again, until I come out of my dreams and realize that what I hear exists in reality. I’m confused—is it time to bow down? It’s just barely light out, and rarely do we chant this early in the morning. Besides, shouldn’t that ritual be over if the CDO’s staff just visited? Only what I hear isn’t the bell. It’s different, more abrasive, more threatening, and mixes with the sound of screaming. Water droplets splash my face and I sit up to find out what’s going on.
Pistil sits on her bed, cross-legged, rocking back and forth. “The bad thing. I told you. The bad thing was coming.”

Half-confused, I stumble in the direction of her voice. “What bad thing? What’s happening, Pistil?”

“It’s happening again. But it can’t. It can’t.”

“What can’t happen again?”

Pistil stops rocking and points toward the entrance of our tent. “The flood.”

A rolling clap of thunder booms so loudly that I’m forced to cover my ears, followed by a bright flash that nearly blinds my eyes. I step out of the tent, look to the purple and black horizon cut in half by far-off lightning. The wind whips my clothes and tickles the skin under my Cyber-Pendage. I gasp, shocked by the sensation against an area of my body that for so long hasn’t felt touch.

“Sparrow, we need to find shelter,” Pistil says. “Let’s go to the nearest warehouse. We can stay in the basement, where the machines are stored. It’s disaster-proof down there.”

Pistil’s face is marked by fear. I believe her, know deep down that what’s coming is terrible. But I have to make it to a Generator Hub, have to get in touch with Vex about the star projector. After that, I have to find Ahtu, have to get out of this place. And if I make this choice, I might never see Pistil again. I embrace her and don’t let go for what seems like eons.

“I have to do something on my own,” I finally whisper. “I’ll meet you at the warehouse, okay?”

“But there isn’t time!” Pistil yells over the increasingly deafening alarms. “You have to come with us! Please, Sparrow, I’ve been through this before. You’ll die!”

All around us, people run to the nearest warehouse. The rain falls harder and harder. Lightning cuts the sky into jagged pieces. I pull the journal from my pocket, flip to the page pasted
with the cartoon WW woman, rip it out, and hand it to Pistil. “I’m sorry, I have to go. But she’ll protect you. I promise.”

I run as fast as I can in the direction of the nearest Generator Hub. Pistil screams for me to come back but the rain drowns out her cries. People run past, bumping my shoulders, telling me I’m crazy for running in the opposite direction. My heart beats against my rib cage. It’s as if the world is falling apart. Dirt rips from the ground. The mud becomes thicker and thicker, making it harder to unglue my feet from its grasp, and a moment of fear sets in. If I don’t want to die here, it’s not too late for me to turn back, find the warehouse where Pistil and the others wait in safety.

But what about Ahtu? Hopefully he detected the storm miles before it arrived and sought higher ground. After all, he’s survived worse. When I was a young girl, right after we moved, he became confused, unnerved, and disappeared in the middle of the night. Soon a blizzard—the one and only I’ve ever experienced—coated the Stalks in a white sheen. For days I sat by the front window, staring out into the snowy haze, worried that I might not ever see Ahtu again. Mama Bear held me tight, whispering reassurances into my ear. On the eighth day, he finally returned, as big and blue as ever. He had persevered and survived with no damage to his system. It was then that I knew he was invincible. Except I was a little girl then and have seen much worse happen since—perhaps invincibility is only a story I told myself to pretend that death isn’t a fact of life.

I reach a Generator Hub and grab onto the ladder. It’s wet and slippery, so I struggle to keep grasp as I climb to the top, higher and higher above the Field. I pretend I’m taking the ladder to Centerfold Lagoon, as if I know every rung and don’t even need to look where I’m going. Once on the main platform, I hurry to put on my visor and log into the system: Generator 62013-B. Identity Confirmed.

I reappear as my flannel-clad counterpart and select the chat option. Rather than enter the name of the person I’d like to contact, I type my hack code. The system flashes. I’m not sure if the
hack’s working, or if the system’s bugging out. Or worse, the Grid might be losing power from the storm. But that’s impossible—The Owners promise that we will always have power.

The screen freezes completely. I hold my breath—I can’t have wasted all this time for nothing. I can’t have abandoned Pistil only to have this fail. Finally the screen returns to normal, though a small asterisk marks my chat ID. I smile wider than I thought possible. The hack worked. It actually worked. I now have the freedom to get in touch with whomever I want without being traced or recorded. But my breach only lasts three minutes, and I have to wait twenty-four hours before doing it again. I have to make this count.

62013-B*: ghostbuster here
62013-B*: still have your goggles
62013-B*: please find something for me i buried
62013-B*: @ 43.1486 N 93.1997 W
62013-B*: look 4 the moon button
62013-B*: will reply when i can
62013-B*: don’t wor —

The connection’s lost, the screen goes blank. My three minutes was more like three seconds. I can only hope it went through. There’s no more time to reenter the system. Rain pours, piercing my skin like Robo-Bee stings. Wind threatens to whip me over the edge. As I scramble down the ladder, lightning hits the antennae of the Generator Hub. Sparks fly everywhere, showering me in so many gold embers that I become one with the storm’s heat, its power, its fear. I scream from the pain in my Cyber-Pendage, which pulses against my leg and sends adrenaline pumping into my body.

I force myself to keep moving. The sky above me swirls and stirs with rage. I look into one of the clouds and see a glowing orb much like the ones I encounter in Farm Frenzy. The more I look at the cloud the more I see its unnatural shape. Is this really a product of nature, a random spawn of
air and temperature, or just another manufactured experiment, manipulated and modified, just as I have been?

With a terrible groan, the creek spews upward and outward. Water rages toward the Field, spilling open like a bag of rice. People scream as buildings crumble. I try to scramble down the ladder so I can reach the ground and run for the nearest warehouse but the water is too much, too fast. I would hit the swirling floodwaters and meet whatever fate might await me. I could climb back up, risk being incinerated by another lightning bolt and blown right back into the water. Or I could cling here, stuck in between, hoping that somehow I won’t be lost to the storm.

All around me is devastation. It’s too much to bear. Do I really want to wait here, a helpless bystander, forced to watch everything waste away? Lightning strikes the Generator Hub again. I turn my head, wince. When I open them, Fieldworkers wave from a nearby rooftop covered by a large Solar-Sew canopy, and my heart aches for shelter and company.

I let go and fall. For a moment, I feel more freedom than I ever have before, safe in the arms of empty space. This must be what Madison Avenue the Splash Mermaid felt like every day. And then I hit the water. Cold. So cold. My lungs seem to burst, and I realize I can’t swim. But I do swim when I’m a mermaid, only instead of a tail I have a Cyber-Pendage and when I kick I go down, down, down and then I hit something and my side pounds with pain and I rise to the surface, gasping for air, fighting for life as my vision fades into blankness.
CHAPTER 22
YOU MEAN YOU EAT THOSE?

My back rests against something hard, though I can still hear the storm and its thunderous battle cries. When I open my eyes to the splashing, stinging rain, Ahtu licks my face. I wrap my hands around his neck, breathe in the comforting perfume of mud, sweat, fur. The surface underneath us lurches forward, and I realize that I’m floating on a Maize-Made wall panel. Ahtu struggles to balance on the bobbing raft and lays down beside me. Behind him stand the three eyed-Duplicates, one at the wheel, the other twisting a sail back and forth.

“Don’t worry,” the one driving says. “You are our friends.”

The other Duplicate readjusts the sail. “We always protect our friends.”

We glide across the water, dodging mutilated bodies, crops, bowls, beds, who knows what else. I want to rescue people, collect whatever I can find, but it all seems hopeless. No one in sight seems to have survived, there’s not much room left on the raft, and we’re moving too fast to stop. A Generator visor floats past and I grab it from the water, one hand tightly latched around Ahtu’s horns. Lightning flashes, striking a nearby Generator Hub. I nearly fall into the water but Ahtu pulls me backwards. The platform above us sways back and forth as if it were being spun on a string. It leans right as it spins, inching closer and closer to our raft, until finally it has nowhere else to go but down.

“Hold on!” the Duplicates cry.

We surge forward, faster than I thought possible. Lightning strikes again, giving way to a thunderous ripple and a great retching sound. I bury my eyes in Ahtu’s fur, certain that we will be crushed by the falling platform. I can feel it above me, the threat of immense weight that will butcher me into pieces of swirling wreckage. The wind changes tone, whistles, groans. And then it
falls, only not on us but behind. The raft rises at an angle so steep I fear that we’ll roll on top of each other and into the river. We rise and rise and rise, flying in mid-air, until with a splash we settle back onto the water.

I have so many questions for the Duplicates that just saved my life but am too exhausted to even open my mouth. I haven’t felt this much pain since my Cyber-Pendage surgery. I move closer to Ahtu, who is still curled into a ball, and rest my head against his belly. I hug the Generator visor and rub the cool metal against my cheek, and I can only hope that Pistil found safety before it was too late. Her face hovers in my mind until I fall asleep.

In the morning, I hold my hands over my face and look through the cracks in my fingers. It’s no longer raining but the storm still lingers on the horizon, dotted by bits of yellow and orange. Giant wind turbines stand on the river’s shoreline. Normally I am awed by their stature, find great beauty in their power, but now I fear being crushed by large objects. Strange plants circle the windmill bases. The water underneath us bubbles and pops, a clear sign that we are finally away from the Field.

I crawl to the space in between the Duplicates and stand up. “I’m Sparrow. What about you two?”

I’m shocked that the name Sparrow comes out of my mouth again. It was a necessary alias in the Field, a stupid name that only brought up bad memories of Mama Bear. But I suppose I’ve grown into it. Besides, maybe there’s great value in continuing to keep my identity a secret.

“Barley,” says the one driving.

The Duplicate working the sail waves. “And I’m Beans.”

If they weren’t doing different tasks there’s no way I could tell them apart. “Where do you come from?”

“Well, we were by the creek,” Barley says.
“And then the flood came,” Beans says. “Now we’re on the river.”

“That’s not what I meant,” I say, shaking my head. “Where’s your home?”

Beans shrugs. “We don’t have one. Do you?”

“Used to,” I say. “Are there others like you?”

Ahtu nips my ankles. “You are being rude to our saviors. Perhaps your inquisition can wait another time? After all, the children kept me company when you would not.”

I smack him on the nose and take a step back, removing the journal from my pocket. Thankfully the pages are unharmed—water-proof paper is certainly one of the more miraculous Baxter & Baine modifications. I flip to the Teen Beat two-page spread and point to the photo of Scott Baio, the one in which he has shaggy brown hair and big brown eyes and a sleeveless red Nike shirt and short white shorts. “Do you know anyone who looks like this?”

Barley shakes his head. “No.”

“You sure?” I move Scott Baio closer to Beans. “He works at the tattoo parlor?”

“Sorry,” Beans says. “We never helped him.”

“But I’m sure he’s happy,” Barley says.


Ahtu twists his head and stands up. “We are entering the proximity of a Baxter & Baine facility. Scrambling satellites now.”

The Duplicates both laugh.

“What’s a satellite?” Barley asks.

Beans laughs again. “And how does it get scrambled?”

“To rephrase,” Ahtu says. “Machines will no longer detect our presence.”

“But a person still might,” I say, digging my nails into the mangled raft. The Owners are the last thing I want to deal with right now.
“Don’t worry,” Beans says. “We won’t see any people here.”

A stench wafts in the air, reeking of ammonia. I cover my nose. Ahtu flinches, while the Duplicates barely notice. “What is that?”

“What is what?” Barley says.

I feel like I’m going to vomit. “That smell.”

Beans shrugs his shoulders. “I don’t smell anything.”

I can’t believe the Duplicates’ response. They really don’t smell that? Are they just used to it? I don’t know whether to feel envious or sad—a smell this vile should never be fax to the max with someone.

The Duplicates turn the raft to the left. A massive factory looms on the horizon. Large pipes run from the river to the Maize-Made building that shoots several stories into the air. We take another turn and encounter an old wooden sign. The paint is so worn that I can barely read the text:

WARNING:
AQUATIC HERBICIDE APPLIED.
DO NOT USE WATER FOR
SPRAYING, IRRIGATION, LIVESTOCK
OR HUMAN CONSUMPTION
-IA. DNR-

The raft nearly bumps into a giant cage that floats in the water, half of it submerged below the surface, half of it looming above. The enclosure is empty save for dozens of tubes that run into a larger pipe jutting from the shoreline. We pass by several more and turn another corner. A large gray blob swims past, diving below the surface only to reappear inside one of the cages. I’ve never seen a Water-Cow this close up before. It has the same face and the same black and white spots as a cow in Farm Frenzy. But it’s nearly twice the size, has no legs, no fins either, just a head affixed to a bulbous body.
The Water-Cow flips over, revealing a bulging sack of udders. The tubes descend from the cage, clicking and whirling onto the Water-Cow’s teats. A sludge-like liquid moves into the tubes then disappears into the larger pipe that leads to the factory. The Water-Cow makes a terrible noise that sounds like a gargled cry as it bangs and beats against the enclosure. We pass by more cages, each now occupied. Ahtu darts to the front of the raft, extending his neck so far over the water that I fear it might break in two. He rakes his front feet, scratching against the surface. For a moment, the world becomes a sad, desperate symphony—Ahtu’s hooves, the Water-Cows’ moans, the lonely meandering of the river.

I grab Ahtu by the horns and try to pull him back to the middle of the raft. “Calm down.”

Barley lets go of the wheel and runs to Ahtu’s side, petting his leg. “Don’t you like Water-Cows?”

“I do not understand,” Ahtu says. “Why do they disgrace themselves?”

“They do good things,” Beans says, twisting the sail in a new direction. “Like cleaning the water.”

Barley nods. “And giving us meat.”

I gag on the thought of having Water-Cow for dinner. “You mean you eat those?”

“Yes,” Beans says. “Don’t you?”

Do the Duplicates even see what is coming out of the Water-Cows? This is the reason Mama Bear warned me to never use water from the Stalks—it’s passed through the body of a living filter that will later become someone’s dinner.

“They don’t live there all the time, though,” Barley says. “Didn’t you see? They play in the water and then they come back to be milked.”

“They like it at the factory,” Beans says. “That’s why they’re always here.”
“Or perhaps they have been modified to think they like it here,” Ahtu says, returning to the middle of the raft. “Sometimes the truth lingers much deeper than you might imagine, children.”

Ahtu doesn’t say anything, merely beeps and settles into alert mode as his eyes go blank. I crawl onto his back and rest my head against his horns, cradled by them. The moans of the Water-Cows disappear, and the sun gives way to darkness. I put on the night vision goggles and stare into the distance, water and sky forever, though further out stands a tiny concrete bridge. The closer we get, I can see that it’s set into a hillside, and the tributary we float on ends there.

Beans taps the top of my head. “This is where we stop.”

“What’s past that bridge?” I ask.

“A place we don’t go,” Barley says.

“The Owners used to work there,” Beans says. “There’s only one way in.”

Beans nods. “And only one way out.”

“Please, come with us,” I say. “Where would you go instead?”

“Back down the river,” Barley says, poking Ahtu with a stick retrieved from the water. “Why won’t he wake up?”

I prod Ahtu with my finger but it’s useless. He’s still in alert mode and won’t wake until his system recharges. “Sometimes he just does this. But it won’t be long. He can only stay like this for a couple of hours.”

Beans pulls at Ahtu’s horns. “But we have to say goodbye.”

Barley joins in. “Yeah, we have to say goodbye. Bye, Ahtu. Bye!”

The Duplicates look like they’re going to cry. But we’re stuck on the raft until Ahtu wakes. “Why don’t we just rest under the bridge for the night? And then you can say goodbye to Ahtu in the morning?”

Beans shakes his head. “But we don’t go there.”
Barley hugs Ahtu’s neck. “Tell him to wake up.”

“I told you, I can’t,” I say, placing my hands on the Duplicates’ shoulders. “We won’t go past the bridge. We’ll just sleep under it. Besides, even when Ahtu’s like this, he can still detect danger. Do you trust me?”

The Duplicates look at one another, each blinking his three eyes in strange patterns. Beans puts his hands in the air as if he were pushing against a wall. He places his hands against Barley’s and they move their faces closer to one another. They cock their heads from side to side and smile. “Yes. We trust you.”

Barley returns to the wheel and steers under the bridge. I rest against Ahtu’s chest and the Duplicates lay beside me, one on each side. I hear them fall asleep and quietly retrieve the journal. With the night vision goggles, I spread open the pages and begin reading in hopes that I find something useful about Mama Bear, the Green Thumbs, the apple symbol, anything that might help me make sense of this strange, awful world.
PART III

THE ROOTS
It’s hard for me to sleep, so I stay up late, look through Mama Bear’s journal, and remove the necklace from my Cyber-Pendage. I need it for safety and comfort, to give me my grandmother’s strength. I’m excited to see what lies beyond the bridge but also scared what truth I might find, if any. Hopefully The Owners are long gone and I can figure out a new way to contact Vex about the star projector.

As my mind wanders from the journal’s pages, I see another sign poking up from the water close to shore. While the sign near the Water-Cows was made of faded wood, this one is slick white metal, a round yellow light on top, its black lettering riddled with bullet holes:

**BARRIER IS ACTIVE**
**WHEN LIGHT IS ILLUMINATED**

I pry myself away from the Duplicates, grab my toolbox, and quietly step off the raft to investigate. The ground is wet and mushy, as if I might be sucked down into muck at any second, but I reach the sign safely and walk around it several times. Wires run from the light, down the post, and into the water. A concrete ramp lined with small fish bones juts from the water’s edge at a slight incline, similar to the type of invasive species trap we had back at Headquarters. An unwanted creature swims near the wire—and boom!—it zooms off in the opposite direction, confused yet unharmed after triggering an electrical pulse.

I push a small button marked TEST but the light fails to turn on. That either means the machine’s not working or it’s off the Grid completely, which might be a good thing—perhaps The Owners really have forgotten about this place entirely. The Duplicates warned me that there’s only
one way in and only one way out. If anyone like the Chief Defogger is close behind then something like this would be incredibly useful. I dig my feet into the soggy ground and find another set of wires that runs to a control box about two hundred yards away. By the time I get there my friends are too far away to be seen. I panic briefly but have my goggles and trust that Ahtu will wake if anything dangerous appears.

I begin to rewire the control panel so that it can remotely draw power from the energy stored in my Cyber-Pendage rather than the Grid. It’s a relief to tinker with my hands, feel the twist of a screwdriver against my fingernails, the buildup of grit inside the grooves of my palms. Aside from the faint Water-Cow smell, it’s a beautiful landscape to lose myself in—the splashing water, the slowly rising sun, the strange comfort of solitude. It’s been ages since I’ve actually been alone. Hell, it’s been ages since I’ve even liked being alone. There’s something strangely comforting in the independence here, and so I work and work, refusing to let my mind think about other things.

Before dark completely leaves the sky, a flash of yellow emanates from the sign. Smiling with pride, I run back before anyone can accidently trip the barrier, but the Duplicates and the raft are already gone. Ahtu rests under the bridge, and I feel a twinge of jealousy that Barley and Beans didn’t feel the need to say goodbye.

“Looks like it’s just the two of us again,” I say, stating the obvious in hopes that it might make me feel better. “You detect anyone else?”

“I can only track the children,” Ahtu says. “But they are far away now. Tell me, why did they leave us?”

“I guess they wanted to go back to the Field.”

“There is nothing left for them there. It is all gone.”
I think of Pistil, the cloud-necked woman, Vex’s Duplicates, have no idea who survived, who didn’t, who still floats amongst mangled Super Soi and broken Generator Hubs. “It’s where they want to be. Besides, they refused to go past the bridge. Said they didn’t like it here.”

“And what if I do not like it here? What if I would rather be somewhere else, too?”

I look at the sky, confused. Does Ahtu want to go back to the Field? Has he bonded that closely with the Duplicates in my absence? “Maybe it’s best you stay with me, don’t you think? I mean, there’s nothing left for us in the Field, either.”

“I do not care about the Field,” Ahtu says. “I only pine for the Bog.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“No. I have been thinking of those creatures we saw yesterday. They remind me of the deer we saw during our ghost hunt. And. It is just…” Ahtu dips his nose into the river and lifts it back out so that the water splashes against his reflection. “I do not understand why I am the only one.”

“You’re not,” I say, scratching Ahtu’s back. “I’m right here.”

Ahtu takes a step back, moves away from my touch. “Tell me, Tezra Baine, when is the last time you saw another like me?”

I can’t remember the last time I’ve seen another Stagg3X. Maybe back at Headquarters, but Ahtu remembers those days much more clearly than I do. “It’s been awhile, I guess.”

“See?” Ahtu says. “I am the only one.”

I scratch his back again. “Ahtu, you’ll always have me. We’re in this together.”

“How can you be so sure? At the Field, those children kept a closer eye on me than you ever did. Had it not been for them, you would have perished in the water only to become absent like your grandmother.”

Ahtu’s words sting to the bone and I immediately snap my hand back, clutch it to my chest. It’s as if the world pauses and all I can see are my mistakes. I feel the overwhelming guilt of
abandoning Ahtu, the true effects of my brush with death. And that flood was far from the only
dangerous thing I’ve encountered since leaving the Stalks. What if I really had died? What would
Ahtu be left with then? I couldn’t stand to leave him like Mama Bear abandoned me.

“Every choice I made was for Mama Bear, whether you realize it or not.” I hug Ahtu around
the neck, my eyes watering. “But I’m sorry, Ahtu. You’re everything to me. We’ll be fine, yeah?”

“Will we?” Ahtu says. “Flesh rots but the machine inside me does not. What will happen to
me when you are gone? Will I be like those Water-Cows, caged up for the needs of others? Left here
to deal with whatever mess you and The Owners make? Or will I be just as I am now? Alone.
Forever.”

I’ve never heard Ahtu ask such questions. Everything he says is true—if I don’t die soon,
won’t it happen eventually? But it’s too much to dwell on right now. There is nothing I can say or
do to make him feel better and yet I want to say everything to him. I want to stay here forever if
that’s what it takes. But I have no idea how to do it. Death, loss, grief, it is too much to bear, even if
it is the unspeakable thread that ties Ahtu and me together.

“Why don’t we take a ride?” I ask.

Ahtu takes a few moments to reply, and his silence hangs in the air, a thick cloud of
awkwardness. “Yes. That would be fax to the max.”

I climb onto his back. Without a moment’s hesitation, Ahtu bounces over the wire trap and
bounds up the hill. Dozens of buildings come into view, large stone structures encircling smaller
wood cabins. Riding Ahtu is blissful. Wind whips my clothes and tickles my stubble-like hair. But it
also hurts, as the Cyber-Pendage makes it awkward to sit atop Ahtu, who’s obviously uncomfortable
from the sting of metal stabbing into his side. He doesn’t complain, though, merely pushes along,
weaves in and out of the buildings until he slows to a halt in the middle of the facility.
We stop at a tall sign that looks similar to The Owners’ ever-present logo, only it’s not a hologram, merely a random assemblage of Before Times materials. It features the famous name BAXTER INDUSTRIES bookended by two large cornstalks. It’s strange, seeing the name Baxter separated from its equally powerful partner. As a Baine, I wonder if I’m welcome here, what lengths the Baxter employees of long ago went to keep my family from stealing their well-researched secrets.

I look around at the stone buildings, each labeled with a different title: ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE, LIBRARY, WATER TREATMENT, etc. I tell Ahtu to move closer. He circles the buildings individually so that I can see inside the windows—a ransacked hodgepodge of desks, turned-over chairs, dirty boxes, off-white rectangles where pictures once hung on walls, all the rooms rifflled through by someone who either left in a hurry or scavenged more valuable artifacts for themselves.

At a windowless building marked HATCHERY, I tap Ahtu with the side of my heel and he pauses so I can step off. I pull open the door and move into a large foyer. Painted fish swim around the cornstalk-flanked Baxter Industries logo imprinted into the floor. The high ceilings meet at a steep point and slope downward at a dramatic angle. Giant stone hearths sit at opposite sides of the room, each leading to the interior of an equally massive chimney. The arch is so large that Ahtu steps inside without even moving his head, and I follow suit to stroke the cold rock and feel the rough edges against my skin. We both look up at the same time and see a tiny tunnel of light, a gateway to the outside world that promises power and dread.

A hallway between both hearths leads to a large black curtain, and I feel the immediate urge to see what lies on the other side. “Are you sure no one is here?”

“Yes,” Ahtu says. “Most certain.”

“Then let’s go in.”
I pull aside the curtain. The fabric is coarse and dirty, not nearly as lush as it looked from afar. We move past it and the curtain falls back into place, enveloping us in complete darkness. I wave my hand in front of my face but can’t detect any movement whatsoever. I retrieve my night vision goggles and turn them on to discover a series of concrete boxes lined up in endless rows. The room reminds me of a cafeteria with no seats, and for a moment I feel as if I am back in the Field, waiting in line for a bowl of Soi Surprise. Each box is large enough to climb inside but I don’t dare. The empty tubs are crusty and stained, obviously well-used. A light bulb hangs on a string about each one and a small drain lies at the bottom. Snakes are painted along the back wall, flicking their tongues toward the ceiling.

This place fascinates me, and in the days ahead, I flip through Mama Bear’s journal, see what clues I can discover, if there’s any equipment to reach Vex. I work tirelessly, though it feels nice to have Ahtu around, circling the property. I take breaks when I can to ride upon his back. At night we sleep in the hearth. I walk around the research plots, taking notes, making observations, reading through old books. In a way, it almost feels like home. The only thing missing is Mama Bear.

Though I don’t find any Generator equipment, I discover an echolocation machine in a dirty old office and know immediately that it might reveal what secrets the necklace contains. The machine is tall and skinny and made mostly of glass. I give it power from my Cyber-Pendage and successfully test to see if it works. Once the machine is warmed up and ready for its primary function, I gently remove the necklace and roll it around in my hands, unsure what I will find. I want to know, I must know—but what if I don’t like what’s there?

I muster the courage and place the necklace in a small bowl at the base of the machine, which scans and locks into place. The bowl spins slowly, vibrating in barely-visible circles. As the machine beeps, a yellow-hued picture slowly projects into midair, moving from a tiny dot into a wide triangle into a fully-formed image. For the first time I see that the pendant is divided into three
equally-sized compartments: the top seemingly contains nothing, the middle holds several tiny dots, and the bottom is made up of nothing but blackness.

I zoom in on the image. The middle layer is a collection of seeds, some of which I recognize—sunflower, pea, apple, milkweed—and others I’ve never seen. What looked like black before is actually a layer of soil and I can just barely make out the silty loaminess of its tiny pores. The top layer still looks like empty nothingness, so I zoom in even further. The machine shakes more and more but finally reveals the tiniest sliver of air between a clear liquid and the pendant’s inner walls.

The liquid is most likely water but without testing on a different machine there’s no way to tell for sure. I grab the journal and immediately sketch what I see, taking note after note of each layer, estimating proportions, making a list of every seed I can count. As I work, the machine shakes hideously and the necklace shoots across the room, smacking against the far wall. I drop the journal and run to the cherished artifact, praying that it hasn’t broken open, shattering Mama Bear’s dreams and scattering her life’s work all over the place.

I fall to my knees and pick it up. Rocking back and forth, I clutch it to my chest and roll it around in my hands. I close my eyes, shaking even more furiously, and even though I can feel the pendant whole in my hands, I’m still worried shitless.

I begin to sob uncontrollably. So this is what Mama Bear gave me—seeds, soil, and water? What am I supposed to do? Plant them? Deliver them to the Green Thumbs? Conduct further research? Do nothing but watch over them until I shrivel up and die? Tears stream my cheeks, run down my neck, and trickle in between my hands and the pendant. It all comes back—the fire, the Field, the flood. Mama Bear coughs and coughs. Deer stampede over my head. Pistil screams out for protection. Battery corrosion boils up from the bottom of the star projector. The taste of Agili-Tee
forms on my tongue, followed by Slurry, pickled green beans, Soi Surprise, my mind like rapid-fire Ad-Bombs.

“It appears you do not like it here,” Ahtu says, nuzzling me from behind. “Perhaps it is time we move on.”

“No!” I say. “This is the spot I have to be. This is where the answers are. We have to stay. We have to make Mama Bear proud.”

“It appears you do not like it here,” Ahtu says, nuzzling me from behind. “Perhaps it is time we move on.”

“No!” I say. “This is the spot I have to be. This is where the answers are. We have to stay. We have to make Mama Bear proud.”

“Is that what you call your tears now? Pride?”

“I don’t need your help. I have to work.”

Ahtu pauses. “You wish to banish me again?”

“No, of course, not, it’s…” I fight back more tears as I place the necklace back on. “I just want to work, okay?”

Ahtu nudges me with his nose again. “I have been working on something, too. Will you come with me?”

I repeatedly refuse but Ahtu won’t back down and finally convinces me to follow him to the hatchery’s darkroom.

“Do not wear your goggles,” he says, running past the black curtain.

I walk inside the room and hear music. *Dada, dada, dee, dee, da* — the star projector’s lullaby. Certainly Vex isn’t here. How is this possible? It’s upsetting and confusing, a reminder of what I’ve lost, but it also draws me toward its comforting chant. Though I can’t see anything, it’s fairly easy to navigate the wide aisles between the concrete tubs as I move closer to the source of the music.

Whenever I’m almost in the right spot, Ahtu bounds off to another section of the room. The darkness proves harder to maneuver as the sound grows more and more haunting.

“Ahtu, this isn’t fun anymore,” I say. “If this is your idea of an adventure, it’s not going so well.”
I continue to stumble through the darkness, throwing my weight at different concrete tubs, until the music is so close I can finally reach out and touch Ahtu’s skin. *Dada, dada, dee, dee, da.* The music stops for just a moment and then the room fills with swirling stars that project from Ahtu’s eyes. I look up, all around, lost in the mesmerizing light. It’s as if I’m back at Centerfold Lagoon and Mama Bear is still alive. All her loving guidance returns to me. I can feel her power in every star, every lullaby note, every fiber of Ahtu’s fur, and no matter how painful my memories of her might be I will never let them go.

Mama Bear always said: “When in doubt, follow the stars.”

If that’s true, why did I find it so important to contact Vex if Ahtu had stored a replica of the map all along? Or what if I was wrong—what if the star projector was just a toy and nothing else? Did I really abandon Pistil for nothing? I’m such a wastoid. But then again, if I hadn’t left the Field I wouldn’t be here looking at the very thing I need most. I wouldn’t know what the necklace contained. Maybe this really was the right choice and I’m just afraid to admit it. But that still doesn’t mean I wouldn’t change it if I could.

I glance around the room, searching the swirling galaxy for any pathway to the Green Thumbs. I suddenly feel a ticklish pulse from my Cyber-Pendage. It takes a moment to look away from the stars and realize that what I’m hearing is an alert—the invasive species trap’s just gone off. Before I can even tell Ahtu, the stars disappear and he lowers his neck to the ground. I hop on and ride out of the darkroom, over the Baxter Industries corn-and-fish-bordered logo, past the stone buildings and wood cabins, and down the hill toward whatever danger awaits.
At the bridge, an old man lies facedown in the water, moaning and gasping for air, a brown pack beside him. When I turn off the barrier, Ahtu bites down on the intruder’s shirt and pulls him to shore. Bald, skinny, dressed in thread-bare clothes and covered in age spots, the man looks pathetic and fragile. He’s far older than Mama Bear, though she was the oldest person I ever knew. Still, looks can be deceiving, and there’s no way of knowing yet if he’s a threat.

The old man’s eyes widen. “Are you one of them?”

I look behind me, as if someone or something else might be on its way. “One of who?”

“The Owners?”

I don’t know what to say. Even though he speaks the truth, the old man doesn’t seem to have his full mind with him. Part of me wants to laugh—no, of course not, how could I be one of The Owners? But I am what he says and always will be no matter how far I run from it. My worst fear is that terrible moment when others learn the truth about all the pain my family has inflicted upon them. But this old man is weak. What can he do that I can’t do to him first? The man starts coughing uncontrollably, and I realize he’s more afraid of me than I am of him.

“Help him up,” I say.

Ahtu approaches the old man, who continues to shake and moan and cough. Maybe he’s sick like Mama Bear or maybe he’s just on Agili-Tee and thinks this is a figment of his imagination—who the hell knows. Ahtu gets closer and tries to help the man to his feet but he refuses and smacks Ahtu on the horns. Ahtu blinks several times and begins to make a low pitched hum. The man grows quiet and looks at Ahtu, who peers in closer and closer as his eyes light up.
They move their heads side to side in unison until the old man splashes into the water and doesn’t move.

I run to the old man, worried that he’s dead. “What did you do?”

Ahtu doesn’t respond, just looks at me like he’s in a haze. I bend down to the old man and lift him from the water so that he doesn’t drown. I twist my head, lean it towards his face, and listen for breathing. When the tiniest mist of warm air presses against my cheek, I quickly prop the old man against a rock and turn to Ahtu.

I stare in anger, appalled by his actions. I’ve seen Ahtu fight but only unless there’s no alternative. He’s changed—obsessed with the deer, unnerved by the Water-Cows, and now this. Why’s he so aggressive, so distant from his usual self? Or am I the one who’s aggressive and distant? It’s almost as if the Field turned us both into completely different beings, and perhaps that is what happens under the combined weight of guilt and distance and time.

Ahtu bows his head. “You are safe now, Tezra Baine.”

I kick water in his face. “But you nearly killed him! What is wrong with you?”

“I do not understand,” Ahtu says. “We are clear of danger. This pleases you, does it not?”

“He could have died!”

“It is only a trick. I made the man fall asleep.”

“What are you talking about? You did that with your eyes?”

“Yes,” Ahtu says, nodding with pride. “I learned it from the children.”

I remember the Duplicates’ strange dance with one another when I asked if they trusted me during our last night on the raft. There was something odd and enchanting in the way they looked at each other but I never thought it could do something like this. “So he’s not dead? Just napping?”

“Correct,” Ahtu says.

“Well, let’s hurry up and get him somewhere warm.”
Ahtu lies down in the river and I drape the old man over his back. I grab the brown pack—much heavier than it looks—and walk beside Ahtu as the old man bobs up and down, his feet on one side, his face and arms dangling across the other. We make it back to one of the wood cabins and I wonder if I should tie him up—the electrical cords would work well. But I realize the old man is harmless. Besides, Ahtu can always lull him to sleep if things get crazy. I clean the mud from his face, wipe down his clothes, dry him off as best I can. It’s strange to take care of someone again, and I feel both comfort and pain from tending to the old man.

Once finished I open the brown pack and am met by the unexpected sight of Before Times artifacts. Hyperventilating, I touch everything in the bag, excited to find so many fax to the max relics, each with its own unique history: a glass bottle, a book, a stuffed puppy dog, a squirt gun, a Rubik’s cube, two watches, some folded up pieces of paper. I recognize the Rubik’s cube from *Teen Beat*—if you could solve the multi-colored puzzle in ten seconds or less, you could write Meredith McMillan at 510 S. Fulton Ave., Mt. Vernon, NY, and enter to win a T-shirt signed by the entire cast of *The Karate Kid* (including Top Teen Hunk Ralph Macchio).

When the old man wakes he panics again but in a more calm and controlled way. Wondering who he is and where he gets all these Before Times objects, I offer him some food in hopes that he might talk. “Here, eat.”

“So you want to fatten me up after you’ve already stolen all my things?” he says. “You going to kill me, too?”

“What?” I say, looking to the pack. “No, I was just admiring.”

“You sure you’re not an Owner?”

“Please, eat. You need to get your strength back.”
The old man reluctantly takes a bite without taking his eyes off my necklace, which apparently I forgot to place behind my clothes before running off with Ahtu. “Where’d you get that from?”

I grab it with my hand, then let go, knowing that my desire to protect it might have just revealed its secret power. “This old thing? Oh, I just found it.”

The old man’s panic moves into a smile and he begins to laugh. “Well, hot damn! We got ourselves another Collector!” I don’t know what to say, though the old man cuts me off before I can even respond. “That’s why you were sifting through my stuff—wanted to see what you could score for yourself.”

“I told you, I was just looking.”

The old man waves his hands in the air. “Eh, take what you want. Won’t last me much longer, anyways.” He pulls aside his jacket and points to a rectangular name tag with a Baxter Industries logo. “Name’s Stevus.”

I snap back—maybe he really is trouble after all. “You used to work here?”

Stevus recognizes the look of concern on my face. “Ah, don’t worry, I ain’t no Owner, either. Just a Collector, like you. This is one of my most prized possessions. They don’t make many of these anymore.”

“And they made it for you?”

“That’s right. Say, where’d you get that necklace, anyway?”

I don’t like his questions. I need to pretend like the necklace doesn’t matter, that it’s just another trinket like his Rubik’s cube. “Like I said, I just found it.”

“Oh, I get it. Being coy, are you? Don’t want to share your secret spot? Well, trust me, your secret’s safe with me.”
Trust? I’m not sure I could, not when I know he used to work here. It’s best to keep talking about the Before Times. “What was this place like back in the day?”

“I can show you.”

Ahtu would alert me if he noticed any signs of deception, so I help Stevus to his feet and follow him to the hatchery, where he stops at the hearth and acts as if it’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen. He rests his hand against the rock and strokes it. “I built this.”

“You mean you made this place?” I say. “By yourself?”

Stevus chuckles. “No, no, I had lots of help. We heated the stones and poured cold water on them until they cracked. Then we shaped them with our tools and wedged them together with mortar.” He coughs uncontrollably. “It’s just nice to see something I made again before it’s too late.”

There’s pain in his voice, and even though I want to comfort him there’s no way I can handle any more grief today. “So is that the only thing you built?”

“Not exactly.”

He pulls a rolled paper from his bag and unravels it, revealing a large rectangular blueprint labeled as THE ROOTS. It features various lines and symbols, some of which I remember from Mama Bear’s journal, though the markings are more or less gibberish. BAXTER INDUSTRIES, which Stevus circled in red pen, sits in the lower left corner. I scan for clues about the Green Thumbs but the blueprint’s so detailed that I would likely need to spend hours deciphering it.

“What is all this?” I ask.


“And you helped build them?”

“Well, I didn’t build the pipes themselves—those were already there. They drained the soil and moved water elsewhere. Then it stopped raining and so the pipes grew more or less useless. At
first, people had all sorts of ideas about what to do with them, maybe even convert them into some sort of public transportation system. But of course more important things started happening and so people forget they were down there.”

I move closer to Stevus, entranced by his story. “If you didn’t build the pipes, what did you do?”

“Built labs—Black Boxes, they called them. Took much longer to build than the hearths. We worked day and night—even lived down there for awhile. And then when the Baxters and the Baines merged, well, I lost my job. Most of us did.”

“So what did you do?”

“What everyone did—got a new job at a Generator Hub, helped keep the machines running, even had a wife… But that all went away after that damn Birdz and the Beez disaster, so I went off the Grid, found a couple of other folks like you and me, started finding stuff and trading it for CCs. Haven’t looked back since.”

There he goes again, saying there are others like us—as in the plural. Like there are other people out there who find artifacts, too. I never knew you could sell your discoveries, or that there was even a market for them in the first place. But the world is big and full of stories. I try to contain my excitement even though I want to know everything about Stevus and his friends. Besides, I already have a task—to go North, find a way to open Mama Bear’s necklace, do something with the seeds and soil and water.

But what has following Mama Bear’s advice got me so far? I’d much rather work as a Collector, begin my own journey—maybe Stevus can be my guide?

“I’d like to see what artifacts are down there,” I say. “Why don’t you come with us?”

“Down there?” Stevus says, shaking his head. “I don’t think so. There are things down there you don’t want to find.”
I pause, not sure what to say. “You mean you want to stay here?”

Stevus laughs again before he coughs terribly and struggles to regain his composure. “No, no, there are many other places I wish to visit. With this cough probably got a couple more weeks, at most. I just wanted to see what I built before I die.”

I can’t believe what he’s saying. “So you’re just going to leave? Waste away in some other old factory? Come with us—one last excavation—who knows what we’ll find.”

“I do,” Stevus says. “Trust me, you won’t like it.”

If this is my only chance to be with Stevus, I have to take advantage of it—observe every moment, as my grandmother would say. “Won’t you at least stay the night? And then we’ll part ways in the morning?”

Stevus nods his head in agreement. We shake hands and spend the rest of the day looking at his things, sharing their stories, their secrets—like when he found the Rubik’s cube inside a metal box that he cracked open with an ax. Stevus tries to teach me how to solve it in ten seconds or less so that I can be just like the people who write to *Teen Beat* for an autographed T-shirt from Top Teen Hunk Ralph Macchio and the rest of *The Karate Kid* cast.

I’m not that great, though, and instead introduce my own artifacts—the curling iron, the toolbox, *Aquajogger: The Complete Water Workout* VHS. I ask if Stevus has ever seen a VCR. He remembers one being here and we go on an excavation but most of the equipment is gone, either destroyed by The Owners or picked off by others before us. The only thing we find is a magnifying glass, which we use to look at each other’s fingerprints and burn holes into the 4-Ever-Green Grass.

I find it hard to sleep, so I stare at Stevus and think about my grandmother. Like him, did Mama Bear know she was going to die? Did she want it to happen, wishing to be relieved of her pain? Was there any place beyond the Stalks she wanted to see? Did she even consider leaving me, running away in the middle of the night and returning to Headquarters no matter how terrible the
consequences? I can’t imagine what Mama Bear must have thought in those last moments. And what about Stevus? How does he prepare for such a terrible thing? We all die, that is a fact, but what happens when you dangle just above it, waiting for the cord of life to snap?

When I wake up in the morning, Stevus is gone. He has left his Rubik’s cube and the blueprint, which is signed in red pen: “Thanks for the company—even if you did try to kill me.”

My heart nearly beats out of my chest—right below the message is an apple symbol marking a place called JOHNNY APPLESEED’S FANTASYLAND BOARDWALK. I panic—was Stevus a Green Thumb, or perhaps looking for one? Or is this a simple coincidence, some Before Times relic he just didn’t know the full story to? Either way, this is a lucky find. The symbol is there, right there, and so now I either follow the northbound path set out on the blueprint or stay here to decipher the star projector and hope something else might happen.

That’s it—I gather my things, retrieve Ahtu, and go to the hatchery darkroom, where on the back wall hangs the same snake mural marked as ENTRANCE on the blueprint. I run my hands over the rough, dusty surface and find a switch hidden in the snake’s eye, which I push to reveal a code panel. Without hesitation, Ahtu steps up, stares at it, and begins working his way into the system. Random numbers flash across the screen until the panel utters a familiar refrain: Access Granted.
Terrified and excited, I move down the first flight of stairs and quickly retrieve my goggles. The Roots are dark and dank, smell of must and mold. Cobwebs and decorative snakes cover the walls, following along as our steps echo off the pipes. It’s odd to see Ahtu trot alongside me, as the stairs are certainly more of a balancing act for him than someone with two legs. Soon we come to a flat landing where the path splits into three more—one straight ahead, one to the right, one to the left. The map is a bit hard to interpret but I carve out a path by tracing my finger to the nearest Baine lab.

“All clear if we go left?” I ask.

Clicks and whirls come from Ahtu. “Yes. But are you sure this is a good idea?”

“What else am I supposed to do? You know the mission—go North. Well, this is North. And now that I know what’s inside the necklace, I need to find a way to open it.”

“What if you merely need to keep it safe? What if this is a trap?”

Ahtu doesn’t understand—I’ve already asked myself that a million times over. “How long will it take us to get there?”

“Walking?” Ahtu stares at the blueprint and yawns. “Thirty-six hours minimum.”

“There’s no time to waste, then.”

We press on. The snakes follow, coil onto and around themselves, winding their way along the walls and ceilings. I long to ride Ahtu but he struggles to keep his horns from hitting the ceiling. The space reminds me of something I once read about in a book—places in France called catacombs where they buried their dead in stone tombs. I hope we don’t run into any of those, as I’ve had enough death recently to last me a lifetime.
After several hours the snakes disappear, giving way to new pieces of art. Large metal circles contain Before Times animals broken apart into severed pieces—legs, torsos, heads, horns, tails, wings—only the last ones feature strange creatures that have been chopped apart and pieced back together into something else entirely. One of the creatures is featured as a designation marker on the map, and I wonder if its flesh-and-blood embodiment awaits for us around another corner.

“Tezra, do you hear that?” Ahtu says, stopping in his tracks.

Why would I? Ahtu is the one with super senses. I step closer to him and place my hand on his soft fur. “It’s probably nothing, right?”

“Something is coming. I know it.”

And that’s when I hear it—a high pitched chirping that forces me to cover my ears. Something moves in our direction, a barrage of darkness flickering and fluttering so fast that it seems the walls are collapsing in on us. Suddenly the charging blackness bursts apart into thousands of Kutter-Flies. Ahtu tries to fight them off but the sound of the swarm deafens his clomping legs.

I run the opposite way but the insects block that direction, too. They surround me, swarming my face, cutting my arms, stinging my legs. I duck into a ball and try to swat them away, hoping that I don’t die here. But from the darkness, I see light, and the bugs scatter away from Ahtu when he turns on the star projector, transforming the Roots into its own galaxy.

“This is an unusual and dangerous place,” he says. “Perhaps we should turn back, find another way.”

“There is no other way,” I say. “We press forward. And keep those stars on.”

My heart races at a thunderous pace. There’s no telling what else might be down here, human or otherwise. All I can do is trust the blueprint, trust Ahtu, trust that Mama Bear is leading me in the right direction. I want to look in every room, take every path, see what sorts of artifacts
might hide here, but I force myself to focus and stick with the plan at all costs until finally I collapse in exhaustion and nap for as long as Ahtu allows me.

Somewhat rested, I continue on and stride across a mosaic of amoebas, proteins, the letters T, C, A, and G swirling together in a large pool. The amount of artwork contained within the Roots is staggering—in another section, dozens of large black-gloved arms extend from the ceiling like stalactites, threatening to grab and pull us upward. Ahtu struggles to weave around them so I lead the way. It’s useless, though, and he keeps knocking them with his horns, chipping away a finger, a thumb, entire hands, spreading about appendages like it’s a battlefield. I pick up a severed finger and place it in my pack. A bit morbid, sure, but it’s interesting and unique, a story just waiting to be told.

Several miles later we turn another corner and I stop, shocked at the sight of a hideous female statue. The woman wears a large, uncomfortable-looking suit similar to the kind of container that Mama Bear’s medicine was delivered in. Her face is cold, numb, emotionless, her eyes marked by giant Xs. One arm holds an ear of corn, the other a microscope, both outstretched like a perfectly-balanced scale. A snake curls around her feet, inches its way up her legs, around her torso, breasts, chokes her neck, wraps around her head, and descends downward, eating itself. But the most impressive part are the horns that spread like branches from her head, ones even more massive and intricate than Ahtu’s, covered in birds and bugs and a multitude of other small creatures.

Beyond the statue lies a door, which Ahtu runs to and paws. “We must go in here.”

“But that isn’t where we’re headed,” I say. “It isn’t even on the map.”

Ahtu disobeys and the door slides open to reveal another tunnel. It is too small for him to stand and so he gets down on his belly and pulls himself forward with his horns. It makes a sound like sandpaper—nothing but carnal grit, pure determination, the instinctual urge to go inside.

I shake my head and follow after him, scooting along on my knees. My Cyber-Pendage bangs against the pipe, vibrating my leg and rattling my teeth. I can’t help but think that Kutter-Flies
will consume us or some terrible monster will pull Ahtu away, but the stars continue to shine, tiny dots scattered across the pipe.

Ahtu stands up and disappears, forming shadows that morph into panicked noises and an eerie silence. As I crawl closer to the room I begin shivering from how cold it is. Soon I emerge to find a beautiful sight that stops me in my tracks and takes my breath away. Hundreds of flowering plants tinted the same shade as Ahtu fill a large underground dome. Ahtu runs around and sniffs the plants, stars bouncing off of them as if they are glowing. It makes me feel like I’m inside an ice castle.

A rack on the wall holds several jackets. I grab a hooded lab coat and look for a logo or name but it’s free of markings. I put it on, slide my hands into mittens affixed to the sleeves. The Cyber-Pendage warms my leg and the heat begins to spread throughout the rest of my body. More comfortable now, I look closely at one of the plants and see thousands of tiny hairs made of blue fur. The stars aren’t making them glow at all—somehow the plants are radiating by themselves. It’s strange and wondrous and makes me feel like I could stay here forever.

“Tezra, you must look at this,” Ahtu says, calling from the farthest part of the dome. I follow the sound of his voice and find him pointing at a plant with his noise. A tag on the stem contains the words Stagg3X Variant M92-3G. “What does it mean? Please. Tell me. What does it mean?”

I rub the tag between my mitten-covered fingers. “I don’t know.”

“I am Stagg3X,” Ahtu says, scratching at the walls and sniffing the ground furiously. “Why have they left?”

“Do you remember this place?” I whisper, reluctant to find out the answer.

“No. Only Headquarters. But memories can be changed. Altered. Implanted and manipulated for unspeakable reasons. Do you think it is possible that I was born here?”
“I don’t think so, but part of you, maybe.” I feel terrible telling him that—part of you. How awful. How stupid. I’m only making things worse.

Ahtu begins furiously digging again, intent on finding something that isn’t there. “A living being should not be made in bits and pieces.”

There is no calming Ahtu, so I let him have it out. I feel terrible for him, this creature stuck between worlds. I look closely at one of the plants, and even though it could be toxic, poisonous, I am drawn to it, can’t resist, feel its magic working, calming me as if I’m speaking with it, to it, and it is telling me all its secret, hopes, dreams, fears, and we are one together. I pluck a flower and put it in my breast pocket so that it can accompany me for the rest of the journey.

Ahtu calms down after what seems like a lifetime. He sighs heavily in a way he’s never done before. He shakes his head and approaches me, numb. “It is time to go. You were right. We never should have come here.”

I follow him through the tunnel, lab coat still on. Ahtu turns on the stars but they look sad, at least in comparison to the frozen room. We make it out of the pipe and the doors close. The statue leers at us, the giant X eyes still unmoving, and I want to rip the horns from its head and never come back. We leave in silence and take another turn to the right. I look down at the flower but it’s already withered away and droops from my pocket, staining it the color of Ahtu’s fur.
Ahtu and I don’t speak as we continue through the pipes. Some awful distance now exists between us, a box I don’t want opened. And I feel for him, I do—the need to know one’s history, where you come from, who shaped you to become the being that you are. I know minor details about my family’s past but there are still so many unanswered questions. Yet if given the chance, do I really want to know the answers? The truth isn’t always welcome, and so I compartmentalize my desires like I do everything else.

A beautiful mosaic tree marks our final destination in the Roots. The large and expansive artwork features apples bulging from the wall. I touch one and it’s smooth, life-like, almost good enough to eat. It even smells like the apples Mama Bear used to pick and bake into delicious pies. The aroma is odd and unsettling, strange and enticing, and I must see what’s on the other side. I have no idea what waits there but it calls forward with every passing breath and I can no longer resist its pull.

Ahtu licks one of the apples before his eyes go blank. “The entrance is here.”

The doors unlock to reveal an underground lab branded with a logo—the words Baine Pharmaceuticals atop a corkscrewed strand of DNA. I could care less about the lab equipment, too distracted by a bounty of Before Times artifacts: balls and toys and little cars and throwing darts and snow globes and giant foam fingers. I run around and touch everything frantically until I notice Ahtu staring at me. My heart sinks, as he had just been doing the same thing, sniffing around like nothing else matters, only to encounter an unspeakable thing from his past.

“Let’s go up and see what this place is,” I say.

“Are you sure that is wise?” Ahtu says. “If something waits for us, we need to be prepared.”
“I don’t mind going by myself,” I say, hands on hips.

“But you really don’t want to stretch out those legs?”

Ahtu nods. “A ride? That would be most outrageous, Tezra Baine.”

As I move towards Ahtu, I notice something sitting in the corner. It’s a medium-sized rectangular device with a slot on the front. On top a white sticker reads in black lettering: BE KIND PLEASE REWIND. I push open the slot with my finger and look inside at two small prongs hidden by wires and metal plates. My knees suddenly shake uncontrollably and I feel as if I might collapse.

“Ahtu! It’s a VCR! A genuine VCR!”

I ramble on about *Aquajogger: The Complete Water Workout* VHS, pacing in front of the VCR in excitement. All I want to do is watch the video and swim in the ocean with Daryl Hannah and wave to the Top Teen Hunks on the beach. And yet the more I think about it the more I shake and pace and take shallow breaths—my mind desires one thing and yet my body won’t obey.

Ahtu steps between the VCR and me. “You have been looking for the device quite some time, have you not?”

“What’s your problem?” I yell, failing miserably in an attempt to push him aside. “Get out of the way!”

“I understand that you are excited. But perhaps I am not the only one who needs sunshine and fresh air to clear the mind. You promised a ride, remember?”

“Whatever,” I say, turning my back towards him. “But we come back and watch *Aquajogger* as soon as we’re done exploring. Deal?”

Ahtu agrees and follows me to an elevator. It takes a bit of rewiring but with some patience and Ahtu’s help the machine finally starts working. Ahtu can barely fit inside so I crawl underneath him and curl into a tiny ball as the machine pulls us upward.
When the doors open I slowly inch into a dark room. Small holes in the ceiling illuminate a strange hall of mirrors. I see myself and thousands of Stagg3X deer. Ahtu leaps at one and his reflection shatters, sending shards in different directions. He tramples the tiny bits under his feet in a symphony of clomping and cracking. He shakes his head, confused, glass wedged into his face. “These are not real?”

“No,” I say, pulling a shard from his nose. “Just reflections.”

We keep walking amongst more and more copies of each of us. I look awful—my hair is coming in as stubble, I’m beat-up and bruised, muddy from the flood, the Cyber-Pendage twice the size of my other leg. Each reflection is different: Tezra Baine. 84111. T the Ghostbuster. Mama Bear’s apprentice. Daryl Hannah’s BFF. Mermaid. Collector. Sparrow. Which one is the real me? I’ve taken on so many names that none of them seem to fit anymore. Have I finally spent so long looking for something so unknown that I’ve lost the words to tell my own story? I zip up the lab coat and pull the hood tight over my head so I don’t have to look at myself—I don’t like that girl in the mirror and pretend that she isn’t the person I’ve become since leaving the Stalks.

After escaping the hall of mirrors, we enter an area labeled FOOD COURT. All the buildings are empty, though the tables and chairs make me think of the cafeteria tent from the Field. I pull out the journal and begin taking notes as I walk: What is the story of this place? Who lived here? What did it look like during its heyday? How did it function? What role did it serve? My first major clue is a sign near a gate that reads:

JOHNNY APPLESEED’S FANTASYLAND BOARDWALK
FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT FOR ALL
RIDES • GAMES • MUSIC
HOME OF THE WORLD FAMOUS APPLE-SPINNER
I often read about a place called Disneyland in *Teen Beat*. Disneyland was built for a big talking mouse named Mickey, and I know this because three different Mickey Mouse watches were highlighted by *Teen Beat* “Fads and Fashions” trend-setter Jennifer J. Papageorgiu. In *Teen Beat*'s visit to Disneyland with Top Teen Hunk Michael Jackson, the King of Pop also talks about his love of roller coasters, how someday he wants his own because it makes him feel like a kid. Because of that I’ve always enjoyed the Corporate Simulation *Roller Coaster Rodeo* but now I can ride a real roller coaster just like Michael Jackson did.

*Teen Beat* never wrote about Johnny Appleseed’s Fantasyland Boardwalk, at least not in the issue I had, but obviously this place was like Disneyland—a fax to the max party where all the Top Teen Hunks gathered to laugh and ride things. I look around at all the attractions and imagine Ralph Macchio on the DNA Splicer, Scott Baio in the Propagation Planetarium, and Kirk Cameron at the Soil Science Bungalow. It would be a totally bodacious time.

As I walk though a garden of fake trees and metal contraptions and strange shapes that seem as if they’re meant to be climbed on, I wonder who Johnny Appleseed was, who his friends were, what he did to get a place like this. The garden path leads to a statue of a man with a backwards pot on his head and bag of seed draped across his shoulders. An informational plaque stands near him, similar to the ones I created for Centerfold Lagoon:

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**John “Johnny Appleseed” Chapman**  
September 26, 1774 – March 18, 1845

John Chapman—a.k.a. Johnny Appleseed, the legendary character of American folklore—was a real figure whose story has captivated generations. Before his great-great-great grandsons co-founded Baxter & Baine, Chapman was a complicated man driven to settle the edges of the Westward frontier. His deep appreciation of nature prompted him to collect apple seeds that he spread in nursery plots up and down the Ohio River, though he was not concerned about what varieties these seedlings became—they always had a use, whether for eating, cooking, or making hard cider. While Chapman’s methods of propagation were important to the many settlers who prospered from his trees, they are now more important that ever as Baxter & Baine continues to advance Chapman’s ground-breaking techniques in genetic modification.
And then I see it! The World Famous Apple-Spinner—a beautiful wood roller coaster, humped and curved around the horizon like a snake eating itself along the walls of the Roots. I inspect it closely with Ahtu, the cars mangled and the chain that pulls them forward broken. There’s no way I can repair it since this was built way before Grid technology—I can fix a computer but not a Before Times gear system like this. We explore the perimeter of the coaster and agree that it’s solid. Well, solid is a bogus term. It’s safe enough, I suppose. And yet I still want to experience the coaster and all the dipping and swirling and exhilaration that the King of Pop felt at Disneyland.

“Ready for the ride of your life?” I ask, scratching Ahtu behind his ears.

He inspects the coaster one last time. He’s nervous but knows it can still be done. I leave my toolbox inside the ticket booth—the last thing I want is for Aquajogger: The Complete Water Workout to accidently fling over the side of the World Famous Apple-Spinner and break apart. We climb to the highest hill and try not to fall in the cracks on the way up. One board breaks beneath my feet, falling to the ground below and crumbling apart. I feel a sense of danger and adrenaline. Even though this is partial stupidity, when will I ever have a chance to do this again? Besides, it’s been a long, long, long few days—I can afford to have some fun.

When we make it to the top, Johnny Appleseed’s Fantasyland Boardwalk emerges in all of its glory, with other Before Times buildings surrounding it and the river snaking past. In the distance I can just barely see the Field. It’s incredible, all the other things I’ve seen recently—the frozen flowers, the Kutter-Flies, the labs, the flood, now Johnny Appleseed’s Fantasyland Boardwalk and all the magical and mystical surprises it contains. Stevus is missing out—I understand why he refused but this is a totally bodacious excavation site.

“This will be fun,” I say, hopping on Ahtu’s back.

He takes off down the first hill, picking up speed, running at such a steep angle that he might as well have wings. Wind whips my face and then we’re going up again, around a curve, like we’re in
the mountains and not flat corn land. The boards creek and groan under Ahtu’s weight, vibrating to
the core, rattling my teeth as if they might fall out. Ahtu stays focused, every turn and step precisely
mapped out, every risk assessed far ahead of time. We run past more rides and I smile gleefully—
this doesn’t even compare to Roller Coaster Rodeo.

We go around several more times until I feel dizzy. The thrill wears off and I ask Ahtu to let
me down. I get off at the highest hill, pull out the journal, and take more notes as he runs around the
coaster. He lets out his frustration, invigorated by the challenge of navigating the track. Every few
minutes he dashes past, shaking the supports, and I stop what I’m writing or sketching, watch a flash
of blue whiz by and disappear downward before returning to my work.

A terrible noise takes over the coaster. I stop writing and look up, expecting to see Ahtu, but
he isn’t there. The shaking becomes more and more violent and I fear that the structure might be
collapsing beneath me. Far away on the opposite side of the tracks, Ahtu jumps off and bounds
away.

I stand up and wave my arms. “Ahtu! Ahtu! Come back!”

My cries are drowned out by a huge group of Stagg3X stampeding past, swallowing Ahtu
and Johnny Appleseed’s Fantasyland Boardwalk whole. The World Famous Apple-Spinner pokes
above the blue creatures like a great typhoon rising from the ocean. The coaster shakes and shakes
and shakes. I grab onto the edge and hold on, praying that I don’t fall as I frantically search for any
sign of my best friend.
I hold onto the coaster until the shaking stops. I want to jump down, land on the back of
one of the Stagg3X, ride off until I find Ahtu, though surely I’ll fall off if I even try to move at all.
Once the thundering disappears, I stand up and take a moment to gain my footing—I feel wobbly
and woozy and the world spins around me. After a moment to gather my strength, I run down the
hill and make it onto flat land. I run and run and run, desperately hoping that I might catch Ahtu
before it’s too late.

Even though we encountered a herd of real deer at the last Ghostbusters Club, the
reappearance of the Stagg3X unnerves me. I wonder if their presence has anything to do with that
frozen flower room we saw in the Roots. Ahtu was so desperate to meet his kind that perhaps he
manifested their appearance. Maybe they were just close by and heard his secret call. Maybe even his
reflections from the hall of mirrors sprung to life, just as desperate to be with Ahtu as he is to be
with them.

Surely this has nothing to do with the Green Thumbs, right?

But I have to do more than think right now. The deer are far out of sight so I follow the
muddy hooves left behind on concrete. I run past rides and stands and Before Times relics I’ve
never seen before but there is no time to stop, no time to dabble in the past. I must only press
forward. Soon the concrete gives way to pasture. The deer markings are pressed into the ground,
trampled into dirt and grass. I follow them for at least a mile before they merge with something
else—human footprints and tire tracks from a massive vehicle.

As I approach, clomping and banging arises from a stand of Merry-Maple trees. I move
closer and hide behind a wide trunk. I search for Ahtu but it’s impossible—the Stagg3X are caged,
banging and grunting and knocking their horns together. Three humans poke them with large electric sticks. I’ve heard about men who roam the wilderness for rogue animals developed by The Owners, though I’ve never seen one of their roundups in person, just always thought it was some myth created to keep us from wandering away.

“Good thing they migrate up here,” one of the men says. “Only happens once every few years. Nice tip we got, huh?”

“Damn right,” another says. “You have any idea how many CCs we’ll get for these ugly bastards?”

“Enough to make us rich,” the third man says. “What time are we meeting up with The Owner who contacted us?”

My heart sinks. The men captured these beautiful creatures and now have every intention to sell them. I pick up my feet and begin to run toward them—to do what, I don’t know, but I have to do something—and just as I gain momentum a Stagg3X leaps at one of the men, threatening to trample him to the ground. Before the deer can do any damage the man thrusts the electric stick into its abdomen. The animal crumples to the ground, twisting and shaking as if having a seizure until it stops moving completely.

Something taps me on the shoulder and I whip around, fists raised, ready to face whatever fate has come my way, only to find Stevus staring at me with a confused expression.

“What are you doing here?” he Whispers. “You have to go!”

“I can’t,” I say. “They took Ahtu.”

“These men are dangerous,” he says. “They will beat you and rob you, maybe even worse. Leave, now!”

“But this is wrong! Help me, please!”
“Stevus, where you’d go?” one of the men shouts from the other side of the trees. “Come help us get this dirty-ass thing in its cage.”

I leer at Stevus with rage. “You mean you work with these men?”

“I’ll be right there,” Stevus shouts, waving his hands between us before lowering his voice again. “It isn’t like that. You have to go.”

“Why would you do this?”

“You don’t know what it’s like for someone like me. I have to make a life for myself, too. Now get out of here before you get hurt.”

“Maybe I should say the same thing,” I say, shoving Stevus against the tree. “What’s stopping me from killing you?”

“Stevus, get over here!” another man shouts. “You got about thirty seconds before the bounty’s ours. This cash wagon ain’t gonna wait forever.”

Stevus twists his head towards the men, looks back at me, and pushes an electric stick into my Cyber-Pendage. Searing pain shoots into my leg and I fall to the ground. It takes all the strength I can muster to keep from screaming. I clutch my knee and look up at Stevus. “You’re pathetic.”

“I know,” Stevus says, patting my shoulder. “Shit like that happens when you’re dying.”

I slap away his hand. “Still doesn’t give you an excuse.”

“I’m sorry, I really am. But if I were you, I’d be more concerned about yourself than that stupid deer.”

Stevus disappears beyond the trees and I’m left in the bushes, crying and cussing and overwhelmed by the moment at hand. The vehicle moves past, hauling the Stagg3X trailers behind. I can’t move but stare at the cages, hoping I might see my beloved deer before it’s too late. Finally I find him crammed in the middle of one of the trailers. He presses his way forward and sticks his nose past the bars.
“Tezra!” Ahtu shouts. “What are they doing? Where are they taking us?”

Before I can respond the vehicle zooms off at a high speed, disappearing out of sight. I smack the ground, still unable to move my legs, sobbing and screaming until my lungs have no more air or energy to do anything but rest. I have no idea where they are taking him, what they will do to him, how I might break him free. I could die here—what else is left for me if Ahtu is gone? First my grandmother and now my best friend…

I claw my fingers into the ground and pull myself forward inch by inch until my dirt-covered fingers begin to bleed. Slowly but surely I move closer to Johnny Appleseed’s Fantasyland Boardwalk in hopes of retrieving my things and figuring out a plan, though when I’m able to stand again I immediately want to run to Ahtu, to hold him in my arms and free him and every other Stagg3X. I want to beat those men and cage them up to rot in misery. I want to wrap my hands around Stevus’ neck until every inch of life is gone from him. But I no longer have a Stagg3X to guide me through the wilderness, to warn of danger, to break codes and play music and store my memories—how can I ever deliver this necklace North without Ahtu?

I reenter Johnny Appleseed’s Fantasyland Boardwalk and pause outside the Propagation Planetarium, a large domed building decorated with swirls that shimmer against the sun. To my surprise, three star projectors identical to my own sit inside a window display. Without hesitation, I form a fist and punch against the glass until it breaks. As blood runs down my hand, I pick up one of the star projectors and turn it over to find a bright green apple symbol. I flip the other two and find the same thing before picking up all three, heaving them to the ground, and stomping until there’s nothing left but mangled bits of plastic.

I wish I could be Michael Jackson or Daryl Hannah or Jennifer J. Papageorgiu or anyone that isn’t Tezra Baine. I want to be in the Before Times. I want to be free of this pain. I want to live in an era when The Owners don’t control everything and everyone they want. But I can’t go back in
time. I can’t be the King of Pop or Madison Avenue the *Splash* Mermaid. I am only me and I was duped—the star projector isn’t a map. It’s just a stupid toy from a stupid place. The Green Thumbs are just a story I told myself because I didn’t have any other choice but to trust in something impossible. And Stevus isn’t a Collector, only a manipulative wastoid who led me into a trap. Ahtu and I never would have come here if I hadn’t been so eager to enter the Roots. All of my choices were worthless, leaving me with nothing more than a life of lies and make-believe.
CHAPTER 28

STARLIGHT

Hidden away in the underground lab, all I can do is stare at the VCR and remember my promise to Ahtu that we would watch *Aquajogger: The Complete Water Workout* together. But I can’t do it without him. I can’t do any of this without him. I might go forever without finding another VCR but if it means holding out for Ahtu then I don’t have any choice but to wait. All I can do now is protect the necklace. It is the only thing in my control, the only way that Mama Bear and Ahtu can live on, even if I fail.

And I’m doing just that, completely at a loss. Everything I thought was right is actually wrong and I have no idea what to do next. Days—maybe weeks, months, years, cons—pass by. I am awash in my own grief and hate myself for not helping Ahtu. His absence in my life feels worse than losing Mama Bear. I despise saying that. Like one was better than the other. Both were amazing, beautiful, wonderful in every way. But Ahtu hurts more. It is double the pain. Double the guilt. Double the everything. Sometimes I wish *Teen Beat* had a “Grief and Guilt” section instead of a “Fads and Fashions” section. It’d be a hell of a lot more useful.

The one thing I keep hearing is Mama Bear’s voice: “When in doubt, trust the stars.” I might have been wrong about the star projector being a map but it still has to mean something. I scour the journal for clues, looking for something that I might have overlooked. Nothing seems to give me explanations. But what if the answer isn’t the star projector itself but simply Johnny Appleseed’s Fantasyland Boardwalk? My theory about the star projector did lead me here, after all, and maybe there’s something that I need to find beyond Mama Bear’s advice.

Trusting my instincts in a way I haven’t been able to do since Ahtu was abducted, I grab the night vision goggles and the toolbox and head toward the Propagation Planetarium. On the way, I
see the twisted remnants of the stomped star projectors, though most have blown away in the wind. I pick up one of the apple-etched battery compartments and place it in my toolbox for good luck—even if it’s useless, it can’t cause any more harm than what I’ve already created myself.

I open the large squeaky doors to the Propagation Planetarium only to be greeted by another statue of Johnny Appleseed, his backwards pot sitting atop a space helmet. Following directional arrow signs, I wander down a hallway with constellations etched into the wall: the Big Dipper, Ursa Major, Hydra, Orion’s Belt, Cancer, countless others. A cartoon Johnny Appleseed stands underneath each one, explaining the history of Baxter & Baine’s investment in space technology and other interstellar advances in climate control technology. With the night vision goggles, the constellations seem to glimmer in the darkness, and I feel like I’m actually in outer space.

Soon I reach the innermost room. Underneath a perfectly curved dome, numerous seats encircle a large mechanical device. I walk around until I find a control booth with hundreds of tiny buttons. I push one and nothing happens, so I rewire the power from my Cyber-Pendage until I am able to turn it on. Lights and sounds swirl across the room while galaxies and constellations and shooting stars glisten in unison. The projection is like an ancient ancestor of the Photo-Synthesis Center’s large screens, and it strains my neck to look up at such a severe angle. When I sit down in one of the seats a plume of dust emerges, and I sneeze so loudly that it echoes off the walls of the dome. It’s strange and lonely and beautiful, much like *Mermaid Vacation*, only instead of water I float in blackness.

When the dome fades back to nothing, I return to the control booth. A light in the lower left corner flashes, emitting a strange sound when I push it. I try once more but nothing happens. Just the sound. I push it again and again—*dada dada dada dada*—until I recognize it as the opening notes of the star projector’s lullaby. I press nearby buttons for a similar sound. The stars repeatedly appear, disappear, and reappear as I search for the right combination. It takes some guessing but I finally
find the proper tones: dada dada dee dee da. At first nothing happens but after several seconds of silence a noise emerges from behind. I turn around and find a small door that wasn’t there before. Cold air blows from it and a shiver runs up my spine—what did I just do?

I grab my toolbox, turn on the goggles, and enter. The air grows colder as I follow a winding staircase. Soon I find myself back in the Roots, the arched walls etched with more sprawling snakes. Assuming it will lead back to the lab with the VCR, I weave in and out of the passageway but keep getting lost and running into dead-ends. I consult the blueprint but can’t find this segment anywhere; only the entrance under the hall of mirrors is labeled. My breath quickens as I sense the mysterious power of what has just happened—that door opened for me. Might this finally be the path to the Green Thumbs?

Not knowing what else to do, I wander the Roots, hoping I might find something useful in this unmarked territory. I study the words left behind by Mama Bear over and over again, flipping through the pages of the journal, searching for clues, burying my self-loathing in work. I wonder if Mama Bear felt this way, too—driven by guilt and shame and the need to correct her errors—yet all I can do is press on. I follow the path northward, passing strange symbols and disfigured masks. I fight off Kutter-Flies and learn to scare them away using a sonic pulse from my Cyber-Pendage. My eyes grow tired and my skin grows pale. I haven’t seen the sun in a lifetime. I’m nearly out of food. I become a creature of the darkness, cold and remote and cut off from my inner most self.

After several days of searching, I see the light. I cover my face with my hands and walk toward it. Water splashes my feet, warmth coats my body, wind blows against my skin. I breathe deeply and a jolt of energy shoots through my nostrils. The Roots dead-end into a small stream hidden by a bridge. For a moment I worry that I have circled back to the old Baxter facility but notice different trees, different rocks, and I press forward. Something about this place smells different. The air is sweet and intoxicating. Perhaps I have just been underground too long but there
is a quality here that I have never encountered. I climb up to the bridge and see a fence so tall that I can’t see over the other side. I knock on a small door that stands in the middle of the fence, then knock again and again with the same repeated result—silence.

“Hello, anyone there?” I say. I knock again. I knock and knock until I begin throwing sticks, kicking, hurling myself at the door. Nothing. My body aches and I want rest. Why did Mama Bear send me here? Have I really come all this way only to be locked out? I pull the necklace from my clothes, slip it over my head, and thrust it into the air. “Is this what you want? Huh?”

The door slowly squeaks open, revealing a path flanked by the fence. I still can’t see over the barrier and have no idea where it goes other than in. I swallow my fear and take a step inside. The door shuts behind me and I snake my way forward. I feel as if I’m walking in circles, like the fence is looping in on itself and working towards something at the center. When there can’t possibly be any more space to move, I stop at the sight of a short, round woman dressed in overalls and flannel. She drops a pitchfork by her side, jogs toward me, glances at the necklace, and looks closely into my eyes.

“Tezra, Tezra Baine?” she says, cupping my cheeks with her hands before pulling me into a hug. Her soft arms seem to choke me. No one has ever said my full name out loud—how can she know who I am? If I haven’t found the Green Thumbs then surely I’ll be dead in a matter of seconds. “Oh, you did it. You really did it. I knew you would. Some of the others doubted but I never did. We have been waiting such a long time for you. Here, come in."

I’m not sure how to take the woman’s words. Part of me feels comforted, safe. But part of me is unnerved—have I been tracked? Have The Owners led me here? I take a deep breath and remind myself to trust Mama Bear, trust the journal, trust my intuition. Besides, what do I have to lose anymore? Both of the people I care most about in the world are gone. If I die here, at least I tried my best.
When she opens the door, I nearly fall to my knees at the sight of a huge, open field. Vines and flowers and trees and fruit and vegetables and grains and every other plant imaginable rise from the ground. Spotted cows frolic in the distance. Chickens chase each other from a coop to a greenhouse. A silo with a green apple painted on its side climbs into the air. I rush past the woman to touch orange-striped sunflowers and lie down in a patch of rye and rub my back against the bark of a pear tree. It’s just like Farm Frenzy come to life—deep down, I know I’m where I need to be.

“I’m sure it’s been a long journey, and the others will be so happy to see you,” the woman says, chasing after. “But you stink, sweetie. And I work with manure every day, so that’s saying something. Better take a bath before you meet the Honey Queen, all right?”

My stomach tightens. “The Honey Queen?”

“Yes, my dear.” The woman laughs. “Don’t you know where you are? This is Green Thumb Valley.”

I nearly fall back to the ground, my mind so frantic that I can’t even form my thoughts. “You mean…”


She takes my hand, helps me to my feet, and leads me to a small tub at the back of a beautiful red barn. When she leaves, I disrobe and lather myself with soap. I feel vulnerable and awkward, my entire body exposed, but there is something comforting in my own touch. My muscles begin to relax and I close my eyes, feeling safe for the first time in ages. Like the woman said—I did it. I really did it. I found the Green Thumbs. And for a moment all that I have sacrificed—Vex, Pistil, Ahtu, even Aquajogger: The Complete Water Workout—fades away. As the water soothes my skin, I sprout a tail and swim and swim and swim, waving to the Top Teen Hunks as Daryl Hannah splashes beside me.
“The Honey Queen is excited to meet you,” the woman says once I emerge wearing the flannel and overalls left for me by the tub. “We have been waiting many moons for this day.”

She leads me to a large canopy made of flowers and vines. Bees buzz around the structure and a masked figure dressed in a white suit stands amongst them, a smoking cylinder in hand. The Honey Queen looks at me and steps forward, taking off the mask to reveal herself as an old woman. She smiles and breathes deeply as bees whiz around her head, crawl on her arms, glide across her shoulders. Her face is so similar to my grandmother’s that I take a step back—what if Mama Bear had been a Duplicate?

“Come, Tezra, sit beside me,” she says. I hesitate, fascinated by her appearance and unnerved by the bees. The Honey Queen notes my apprehension and whistles so that the flying insects scatter. “Don’t worry, these are gentle creatures. In time, we will teach you how to care for them, if you wish. But let’s save that for later. Shall we catch up?”

I nod my head and follow the Honey Queen to a nearby bench. She takes my hand and says nothing for a long time. There is something powerful in her touch that makes me feel alive. “How do you know who I am?”

“I know your grandmother well,” she says. “Adelaide’s my sister. We worked together long before you were born.”

I bite the inside of my cheek and begin to slide away from the Honey Queen. “You’re my aunt?”

“Great aunt, technically,” she says. “And don’t worry—I’m not one of them. Adelaide married into the Baines while I chose a different path. We lost contact over the years and only recently has she been back in touch. But if you are here, she is gone, no?”

“There was a fire…” I say, my eyes watering. There is so much I want to ask her about my grandmother, The Owners, the Green Thumbs, but I don’t even know where to begin.
The Honey Queen squeezes my hand tighter. “And her sacrifice will live on, I can promise you that. But what about your deer? Where is he?”

“The men, they took him, I don’t know where.” I shake my head, tears streaming my cheeks, unable to finish.

The Honey Queen pulls me closer and places my head on her shoulder. “Don’t worry, child. This place is only one of many—I will contact my fellow hive leaders for aid. They will find him and bring him back. But you are safe and at home here. Now show me, do you have the necklace?”

I pull the pendant from my shirt. “I wasn’t sure if I would ever find you.”

“Yes, dear, I know,” she says, pausing and letting go of my hand as she looks into the distance. “Did Adelaide ever tell you what the necklace contains?”

“No,” I say. “But I figured out that they’re seeds. She was always working on something, trying to devolve the genes, but I have no idea why they’re so important.”

The Honey Queen rises from the bench. “Those seeds are our future.”

I shake my head, confused. “So? They’re just seeds.”

“Yes, but they will make more seeds and more seeds until we have enough to free you and me and everyone else from The Owners. Then we can all have a taste of something delicious, like those apples Adelaide always made. But we can save the logistics for later. For now, why don’t you get some rest? Tomorrow I will show you our greenhouse. We shall celebrate after.” The Honey Queen takes the necklace and kisses my hand. “You have done well. She would be proud. And so am I.”

Once my aunt walks away, the other woman leads me to a smaller canopy and I fall asleep in the grass, which is softer than any I’ve felt in my life. I dream of nothing but bees. No pain. No grief. No death. No Slurry or Soi Surprise. My mind is blank, comforted by the sweet perfume of the Honey Queen and her court.
In the morning I meet the remaining Green Thumbs. Aside from my aunt and her assistant, there are many more, each with a unique code name—like my own, the Seed Speaker—assigned to protect one’s identity. After introducing themselves, we share a breakfast feast, the likes of which I’ve never seen: scrambled eggs the color of the sun, fruit cut into heart shapes, potatoes tossed with spices, sweet cakes drizzled with syrup, and jugs of tart orange juice. I have never seen so much food in my entire life and worry that we might not finish. But we eat and eat and eat. I have seconds and thirds and fourths until the entire table is wiped clean.

After breakfast the other Green Thumbs scatter to various corners of the farm, leaving me alone with my aunt. She takes me by the hand and stands up. “Would you like to take a look at what you’ve brought us?”

I nod my head wildly and follow her to the greenhouse. It’s several times bigger than Mama Bear’s nursery and contains more crops than I ever thought possible. As I follow the Honey Queen down a narrow aisle, my arms brush against wildflowers and bulging pumpkins and soft strands of rye. Whatever the Green Thumbs are working on, it’s at a size and scale much bigger than Mama Bear ever dreamed of. Soon we come to a long work table that runs along the back wall. Individual seeds are placed in tiny trays, each labeled with a few hand-written notes.

“I opened the necklace as soon as you went to sleep yesterday,” the Honey Queen says. “Do you like your grandmother’s collection?”

“This is totally bodacious,” I say, running my hands along the rough edges of the table. With each seed displayed so clearly, it reminds me of my museum in Centerfold Lagoon.

“These heirlooms can reproduce many times over, unlike those modified monstrosities The Owners developed. And all of these will need further testing, of course. But I believe you and I are both anxious to see the fruits of your grandmother’s experiments. I think it’s fair to go ahead and plant one—just one—don’t you think?”
I shrug my shoulders in agreement. “Which one should we plant?”

My aunt smiles. “That, my dear, is for The Seed Speaker to decide. Choose one and choose wisely. I trust that you will make the right decision.”

I pace along the edges of the table, looking closely at my grandmother’s cornucopia. Each seed is labeled with its scientific name: *Rudbeckia fulgida; Capsicum annum; Brassica oleracea; Ocimum basilicum; Allium ampeloprasum; Physalis ixocarpa*. I feel an immense pressure to choose wisely, and stop at a small black seed I recognize as a bean:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. Name: Phaseolus vulgaris</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>II. Variety: Provider Bean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Origin: United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Planting Depth: 1”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Germination: 3-6 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Maturity: 50-55 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. Uses: Steaming; roasting; canning; freezing; pickling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I think of Mama Bear’s delicious pickled green beans and know that this is the one. I pick it up in my hands and my aunt claps in excitement.

“Excellent choice,” she says, leading me to the center of the farm. The other Green Thumbs circle me and my aunt places her hands on my shoulders as the others close their eyes and hum a familiar melody: *dada dada dee dee da*. The Honey Queen gives me a small trowel and I dig a hole in the ground. “Adelaide worked hard to bring these to us, as did you and your deer. We thank all three of you, as does our farm.”

The Green Thumbs begin to hum again. I plant the bean in the ground, cover it with soil, and sprinkle it with water. Perhaps I really can start a new life here. Perhaps this really is a new
home. Mama Bear would love it here. So would Ahtu. And so would Pistil and Vex and Michael Jackson and Daryl Hannah and Jennifer J. Papageorgiu. I wish I could bring them all here. I wish I could travel through time and space and the earth itself to have everyone I ever loved right here with me. But the Before Times don’t exist. I only have the present, and now I wait to see what will grow.
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