

PEACEWAR

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I would say "This is a work of fiction, and any similarities to actual persons are coincidental" like most authors do, but that probably wouldn't be true. Any similarities to actual persons that were not intended by the author are coincidental.

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*To everyone who holds on to hope.
The light is coming.*

*This is the dark before the dawn.
– Andrew Peterson, “Dark Before the Dawn”*

*Let the waters rise,
I will stand as the oceans roar.
Let the earth shake beneath me,
let the mountains fall.
You are God over the storm,
and I am Yours.
– Laruen Daigle, “I Am Yours”*

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PART 1

1

When I got home from school, my mother was sitting on the couch, staring into space. I found her like this when I came home from school some days. After my father went missing, she almost starved herself. She finally got up when the government told her if she didn't get a job they would take me away.

That was ten years ago. Now she works part time at the Plant Conservation Center. She had been one of the lead botanists in Section Four – the southern part of what used to be called New Mexico – but after my father's death, she quit. When she went back, it wasn't the same.

It happened a lot in the Republic. People went missing. No explanation was offered by the government, but everyone knew they were kidnapping people. No one knew why. Most people just accept it, but those who had lost friends or family were different.

When I opened the the cooling cabinet to look for something to eat, my mother looked up. She had been very beautiful once, but now she looked old, haggard. The thing I noticed most were her eyes. They had once been a beautiful shade of blue, but now they looked gray. Maybe it was only my imagination, and maybe it was not.

"How was class, Gale?" my mother asked.

"Fine," I answered.

"What did you do today?"

"Just the regular," I said, "all except for sports class. They removed it over the weekend." A gust of wind from the open window pushed my long, golden hair into my eyes. I moved it back behind my shoulders and walked into the living room.

"That's too bad," Mother answered. "What about history? Anything interesting today?"

"Hmm... not really. More propaganda about how they saved all the people in this area when America fell a few hundred years ago. Odd that they still talk about it so much."

Mother glanced at the transmitter, a small device on the wall that picked up anything said in the room and played it in a government office somewhere. It was off. "They talk about it so much because it didn't fall hundreds of years ago. It's only been ten years."

"What?" I exclaimed. *They're not only kidnapping people, but always lying to everyone as well?* "Why do they lie about it?"

"Because they want people to think that the Republic has been around for decades. They want us to think that they know what they're doing, and that everyone has always accepted their government." I started to speak, but she raised a hand to silence me. "I know. Most of the adults remember, but if they keep lying to all of the children, and the adults aren't allowed to talk about it, eventually...."

"I see." I needed to talk with someone, but it was dangerous to talk too much inside, because the transmitter could reactivate at any second. Just as I had the thought, a small green light began to glow on the transmitter. "Well," I said, trying to keep my voice steady for the transmitter, "I told Xander I would go over to his house after I dropped my stuff off. Is that okay if I go now?"

"Yes, that's fine," Mother said as she got up. "Just make sure you are on your way home before sunset. You don't want to get arrested for being out after curfew."

"Okay," I said, heading for the door. "See you later."

During the walk I couldn't quit thinking about the government. They were lying, stealing people, and who knew what else. No one could speak freely. *What kind of a life is this?* I wished I was free, wished I had never heard of the Republic. Or at least I could live somewhere else. In Sections Two and Three they had climate control. They never have to walk to school in temperatures below freezing with nothing warm to wear. They didn't have it in Section Four because parts of the forcefield were deactivated sometimes.

The government tried to hide the fact that they could deactivate the forcefield, because it contradicted what they had said about the radiation. They said that everyone outside had to wear special suits and the hoverplanes have radiation-proof coverings. But there were a few people who knew the truth, including Xander, who told me.

I turned left, towards the looming government buildings that stood in the center of the city, and continued on to Xander's house. I looked up at the gray-blue sky and saw a hoverplane fly over, the word 'Republic' written along the right wing in bold, white letters. I shivered. The hoverplanes had security cameras which watched us all the time. I wished again to be out of the Republic and able to live without fear.

When I got to Xander's house, I suggested we go for a walk. He started to ask why, but then I gestured toward the transmitter and he understood that I didn't want to be overheard.

"So," he said, his dark gold hair ruffling with the wind and his dark blue eyes looking intently into mine, "what's up?"

"They're lying," I answered. "Lying about everything." Xander and I had been friends long enough that he could usually understand what I meant when other people might not.

"I know the government is lying about a lot of things," he replied, glancing around to make sure no one was listening. "What did you find out today?"

"America fell ten years ago, not hundreds."

"Yes, I knew that," he said.

"Then why didn't you tell me?" I asked, annoyed.

"To protect you," he answered. "The government does terrible things to anyone that knows things that they don't want them to know. The only reason that I told you about the forcefield is that it's fairly common knowledge."

We turned right onto another street.

"But they have to catch you before they can do anything to you, right?" I ignored his comment about the forcefield.

"Yes, but think about the transmitters. It's hard to find a place to talk."

"But what about what we're doing right now?" I asked. "It's easy enough just to talk outside."

"There are transmitters outside, too. I know where all of them are, so I've been avoiding them while we walk."

"Oh," I said. I had never thought of the possibility of hidden transmitters. It added to the feeling of overall insecurity – or rather, oversecurity from the Republic – that had been growing throughout the day. "What are we going to do? I mean, we can't just let them control us like this."

"For now, we have to," he answered.

"What do you mean, 'for now'?"

"Nothing."

"So then we multiply sixteen by pi, and...." The teacher had been droning on about geometry for the last twenty minutes, and I was bored. The school did let us skip grades, but no more than two, so math was easy. I busied myself with sketching aircraft designs on a piece of paper. Slanted wings, forked tail–

"Gale?"

"Huh?" I said, startled.

"What's sixteen times pi?"

"Um..." I closed my eyes for a moment, thinking. "Fifty point two-six-five-four–"

"That's plenty," said the teacher, trying her best to look annoyed, "I just wanted you to round it to the nearest whole number."

"Okay." She left me alone for the rest of the class, and I went back to my sketching.

"Hey Gale," said Xander, walking fast to catch up with me after school. "Do you want to come over again today?"

"Sure," I answered.

"Race you home!" Xander yelled over his shoulder as he sprinted off down the street.

I won by about six inches, but only because he slowed down to let me catch up after he got a head start. We went into Xander's house, dumped our school bags on his bedroom floor, and came right back out to talk some more. We sat on a small rock, looking west. Xander said there was a mountain range out there, as well as the one to the east, but the shield that covered all of the Republic distorted the view enough that anything too far away was hard to see. The eastern mountains were close enough that I could make out a dim outline of the tall peaks.

"So, you said you don't think we can do anything to stop the government?" I said softly. Xander said the nearest transmitter was about twenty feet away. Close enough to hear us if we spoke too loudly.

"I don't think we can do anything to stop them, but we might be able to get out. And after we escaped, who knows what we'd find. There might be people out there, outside. Maybe they could help us overthrow the government and free the people here."

"That sounds like a fool's hope to me," I replied.

"Maybe it is, but it's better than nothing." He shifted his feet.

"I don't think so. I'd rather be hopeless than deceived."

"I'm not sure you have to be either," Xander said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Another hint that he knew something that I didn't. That there might be some possibility of escaping.

A guard approached and told us we had better start home if we were going to make it by dark.

All night I wondered what Xander had been going to say. The thing that gave him hope. I wanted it, whatever it was. I didn't see how you could live in the Republic and have any kind of hope without being deceived, but I believed Xander. He was trustworthy, and had proved himself a true friend several times.

Most notable was the time when I had been caught out of my house after curfew. He had been able to forge the handwriting of one of the guards so well that everyone believed us when we told the officials that I had written permission. The guard was reprimanded and his pay was reduced. I felt sorry for him, but I could well have been given a year in prison for that small offense. Punishments were very harsh.

He was a good friend, but he had been holding out on me. Why didn't he tell me everything he knew? He wanted to protect me, but I didn't want to be protected. I wanted to be informed. How many other secrets might he have discovered and not told me?

Maybe he was right, though, and it was best for me not to know too much. Now that I thought about it from his point of view, I agreed with him. I would do the same if I were in his position. But it was still annoying.

Another thing that Xander had done for me. He was almost like the brother I never had. Mother says she would've wanted another daughter, but I definitely would've wanted a brother. A brother like Xander... but come to think of it, what had I done in return for his kindness? I was startled when I realized that our friendship mostly ran one way. I strangled the thought, and tried to forget it. After a few moments, I was successful.

In my mind's random wanderings, the word family came up again. I had often wondered if I might have a cousin I'd never met, since we weren't allowed to travel anymore. Of course, Mother would've told me if he was, but still... *No*, I told myself, *that's just a daydream*. Xander's parents weren't related to mine.

I closed my eyes, and my thoughts moved back to our conversation earlier that day. I wanted the hope that Xander possessed. I had to have it. I was fed up with living in hopelessness. Each day slogged by and then dragged into another, with no relief from the monotonous routine under the control of the Republic. *I have to know what he was going to say*, I thought again.

The next day, I forgot about our conversation.

"The teachers say Xander and I are the best students they've had in quite a while, and we'll almost certainly be advanced to the third stage," I said the next day when my mother asked how the testing had gone.

I walked out of the kitchen and into the living room, running my hand along the glossy wall. All of the houses were very clean and well made. The Republic may not take good care of its people, I thought, but it did take care of the buildings.

"The third stage?" Mother looked startled. "I don't think you should go. Gale, I need you to fail the final second stage quiz."

"On purpose?" I asked, incredulous.

"Yes," she said, "the Tests are designed to produce government officials, and much of their training is geared towards making you as submissive and acceptive of government ideas as possible. You see, they..."

Mother was still talking, but I wasn't listening. I was terrified, angry, and confused all at the same time. Kidnapping adults was one thing, but if what my mother said was true, they were corrupting children's minds. Lying about history was one thing, but this...

"I'm sorry to spring this on you so suddenly," Mother said, "but I needed to tell you about..." She trailed off and focused her attention on the transmitter on the wall. I could tell by her face that she thought it had been off, and was horrified to find that it had been activated.

I cast an uneasy glance at the transmitter. It beeped, crackled for a moment, and then a voice came out of the speaker: "Do not move or speak until ordered otherwise. Law Enforcement will arrive in two minutes."

I lunged at the transmitter, knocking it off the wall, then kicked it repeatedly, my mind racing. Would they take her to the Correction Center? What would they do to her? I stopped kicking the transmitter, realizing that I was probably just making the situation worse.

My mother leapt from the couch and ran towards me. At first I thought she was going to run into me, but then she veered away and headed for the closet. She took out a book and stuffed it in a small case – waterproof from the look of it – and handed it to me. Then she started walking quickly towards the back door. When she reached it, she flung it open, and then turned to face me.

"Do not let anything happen to this," she whispered, looking into my eyes intently. "Go to Xander's house, his parents will hide the book. I'll pretend that you went there

right after school. You might make it; I'm not sure when the transmitter came on. You will still be the main suspect, but you have a small chance." Someone banged on the door. "Go," Mother said. "And Gale, don't believe anything they say in the third stage of training. If they advance you again, run away. Go to the mountains."

"I thought you told me to fail the end of the second stage," I replied quietly, matching her volume.

"Plan changed," said Mother. "You'll be caught for sure if you do that now."

There were dozens of questions buzzing through my head, but a crash in the front of the house signaled that our time was up. "I love you, Gale," Mother said, tears standing in her eyes. "Now run," she said, shoving me out the back door. "Run!"

I ran.

When I got to Xander's I punched the doorbell and flattened myself against the wall. Xander opened the door. When he saw me and what I was carrying, he yanked me inside and slammed the door.

"What is going on?" yelled Xander's mother, Kate, as she hurried into the room. She stopped short when she saw me lying in a heap on the floor. Xander quickly unzipped the case and looked at the book. Kate gasped when she saw it. She scooped it up and ran for the back of the house. She had only just finished hiding them in the closet when a furious pounding began on the front door.

"Open up," shouted a man from the other side of the door. Xander calmly walked to the door and opened it.

"Good afternoon," said Xander, smiling pleasantly. "What can I do for you?"

I was now standing up and trying to act as casual as possible and to stop breathing so hard. If the guards knew what I had heard and done I would certainly be sent to prison, or worse.

The man studied both of us for several moments, then grunted and stalked away. As soon as Xander shut the door I collapsed again. I had run almost a mile at full speed to get to Xander's house in time.

"What were you thinking?" Xander practically screamed at me. "You could've got yourself killed doing that!"

I sat on the floor, shocked. Xander had never spoken to me like that before. I sat silently for a while to give him time to cool off.

"I'm sorry," said Xander much more quietly this time. "What were you thinking, anyway?"

"They're taking my mother to the Correction Center," I said, now standing, but still gasping a little from my run. "She said something in the third stage of the Test was

bad and the transmitter picked it up." I slid down the wall I was leaning against until I was sitting on the floor again. "Can we get her out?"

I think Xander wanted to comfort me, to tell me that everything was okay. But it wasn't. There was no going against the government. "I'm sorry, but there is no way..." Xander started and then trailed off.

Kate lifted me up and helped me to the guest room.

The next days were a blur. I didn't eat unless Xander or one of his parents made me. Now I understood what had happened to my mother, and I had put a name on the feeling. Total despair. I knew I should fight it, but it was hard. Sometimes I tolerated the depression because I felt like I deserved it. I had betrayed my mother, said the voices in my head. I should have done something.

I would lie in bed for hours, sometimes, my mind wandering in aimless circles. Part of me, the good part, wanted to push on, to fight government, or at least try. The other part told me that there was nothing I could do but give up. But something in me would argue back. Why? Why shouldn't I try to do something to help my mother? The good part won sometimes, but the dark voices of despair were much more persistent.

As the days passed, I began to settle into the new routine, or lack thereof. Laying in bed all day long, fighting with myself mostly, and hearing the occasional updates on the guardianship process – Xander's parents were trying to get the officials to let me live with them.

One afternoon Xander came in to tell me the latest news. "The officials say that you can stay with us, at least until they have time to consider it more carefully. They say they've had more important things to deal with recently."

I rolled over and pretended to go to sleep. Xander sighed.

"You can't lay there forever, you know," he said. "If you don't eat something soon your going to starve."

"Who cares?" I snapped. "What's the point anyway? I have no mother and father, I'm living in a country so evil and oppressive that you can hardly even talk about politics without being killed, and there's no way to escape! Why should I want to keep going?"

Xander was silent for a moment, and then glanced up at the transmitter. It was off. I realized that I should've checked before I started ranting, but I didn't really care what they did to me anymore. "What if I told you that I had a plan to get back your mother and escape from here?"

I propped myself up on one elbow and looked at Xander. "What's your plan?" I asked.

"I don't have one yet," Xander said. "I was just wondering."

The dark voices returned, and I wanted to scream at him. Why had he done that? I jumped off the bed and slapped Xander across the face as hard as I could and then flopped back on the bed. I knew it was wrong, that he was only trying to help, but I was angry anyway.

I sunk into my brooding again, going over things I had already thought about a thousand times before. But there was something new. Though I had been angry with Xander, he had lifted me up out of my despair a little. Maybe, there might be a way to get Mother back.

The next day I got out of bed. I went into the living room to find all of my belongings stacked in neat piles around the room. Then I realized that this meant my mother wouldn't be coming back anytime soon. I sank to the floor with my head in my hands. I had known that she wouldn't be returning, but it was hard to accept it when it actually happened.

"They dropped it off yesterday," said Xander, walking into the room. I noticed a faint mark on his cheek and winced.

"Sorry about last night," I apologized. "I know you were only trying to help."

"That's okay," answered Xander. "Are you coming to school today? The officials say you have to start coming by the start of next week."

"Yes." I said, knowing the transmitter would be listening, "I'm coming." I wanted to scream at the people who were doing this to me, but since the president was not there to hear it, I stood up and started gathering my supplies.

School was torture. I could hardly stand going to a place run by the people who had stolen both my parents. I was very careful with the study material now, after the warning that my mother had given me. Xander and I talked a lot after school; about the lessons, about the government, and mostly, about the outside.

The outside, the area outside our tiny country, was mostly a mystery. The Republic is a very small section of what used to be America. The government said the rest of the country is too radioactive to live in, but Xander didn't believe that, because he knew that they open the forcefield without any problems. He told me a lot of secrets now, but sometimes I still got the feeling that he is holding things back.

He had pieced together a map of some parts of the surrounding area from some things that the teachers let slip in class, and a few other sources he wouldn't tell me about. Section Four is mostly surrounded by mountains, but there are openings to the north and the south. The pass to the south leads to the capital. I thought that the northern pass would be guarded, but Xander said it's almost impossible to escape the city, so the government probably wouldn't bother putting guards that far out.

One day, while we were poring over one of Xander's homemade maps, he sat up suddenly and started talking so fast I could hardly understand him.

"Slow down," I said, slightly annoyed, but desperate to hear his plan.

"The river!" Xander said, slowing down to catch his breath. "There's a small hole in the shield that they open every day to let the river run through. It would be perfect."

After a quick glance at the transmitter to confirm that it was off, I answered him. "I don't know. It only runs for an hour or two every day."

"It's enough," he answered. "I have a plan to get us all out of here."

Xander's plan was dangerous, but I thought it might work. I was desperate enough to try anything, even a plan that depended so much on luck. Xander said he had a friend in the Correction Center who would help us. He also said he had caught and tied up an old log he had seen floating down the river one day, and he thought it could fit a few people. There was still the matter of getting past the guards in the street, all the other guards at the Correction Center, and the guards at the river. Then, if we made it through that, we would have to try and get our log out of the city before they shut off the river water, and get into hiding in the mountains before they could find us.

"I know it's risky," said Xander, "but it's our only chance."

"Risky?" I laughed. "It's the most dangerous thing I've ever heard of! I'll try it though. Like you say, it's our only chance."

"Good," Xander said, looking relieved.

Suddenly I thought of something, "Why are you doing this for me?" Up until now I had just been feeling sorry for myself and trying to think about some way to get my mother free, but now I realized that Xander would also be risking his life to help me with this. My suspicions about our friendship's one-sidedness crept back into my mind.

"Because I'm your friend," was his answer. "Anyway, I've been waiting for an excuse to get out of here for a long time."

I wondered if there was another reason, but I didn't ask.

At school the next day I couldn't concentrate on the lessons. It's hard to think about the Base Angles Theorem when you're wondering if you are going to be alive the next morning.

The street guards weren't very numerous during the day, which was when we would be escaping, so we didn't have to worry about those. The river guards were another matter. Xander said that he knew when they changed the guard and had

slipped out a few times before, but by the time we got there news of our escape would probably have spread, making it much more difficult.

"Gale?" someone said, making me jump. It was Xander. "Class is over."

"Okay," I answered.

"What were you doing?"

"Just thinking."

"Well," said Xander, "how about you save thinking until after math tomorrow."

I wasn't sure why he said that – he knew that we wouldn't be at school tomorrow – until I saw our teacher approaching.

"Gale, you weren't paying attention very well today, is everything all right?" she asked, looking worried. I resisted the urge to shout that no, everything was not all right, that we had an evil oppressive government who had stolen both my parents.

"Yeah," I replied, "I'm fine."

"Good," said the teacher. "I want you to pay better attention tomorrow, okay?"

I nodded as I got up to follow Xander out of the room.

In order for the plan to work, we had to hurry. The Correction Center was about a mile from Xander's house, and we couldn't move too quickly in that direction without attracting unwanted attention. The water started running in an hour. It ran for two hours every day, Xander said, so if all went well we would be out about twenty minutes before the water shut off. Water was scarce here in the desert, so they collected most of it from the spring, but they let some of it pass so it could power the water wheel that generates some of our electricity. The water wheel was above where we would be entering, so it wouldn't be a problem.

The sky was gray that day, even with the tinge of blue that the forcefield added, and I couldn't see the sun. It contributed to the sense of dread rising in my stomach. We ran back to Xander's house and got there a few minutes after we left school. Xander's mother knew what was going on, so she was waiting for us with backpacks full of food and some other things. I noticed the case that my mother had given me was in the pack too. I felt a little guilty that I hadn't even bothered to look in it yet.

"Good luck," Kate whispered. "Xander, your father and I will meet you at the north mountain in a week or so if all goes well."

I didn't mention that hardly anything ever goes well for anyone except the government around here. Xander hugged his mother, then turned towards the road. We walked at a fast pace, but not fast enough to draw attention.

"You scared?" asked Xander.

"Terrified," I replied, sneaking a glance at him to confirm that he was nervous too. "I'm excited, though. I can't wait to—" I stopped talking as a guard approached. He stopped and looked at us for a few seconds. We froze, but he finally shrugged and continued walking.

"Let's go," whispered Xander, and started off again.

The walk was tricky. After our encounter with the guard, we kept to the alleyways, trying to avoid being seen. We ran now, even though it was dangerous; time was ticking away. I tried not to, but the whole way I couldn't help but think about what they were doing to Mother. Were they hurting her? Torturing her? What if she was dead? The thought pulled me up short.

"Xander, what are they doing to her? They wouldn't kill her, surely. Would they?" *Isn't it enough that I don't have a father?* It surely wasn't beneath the Republic's government to kill anyone. They stole people all the time. But still....

"I don't think so. I'm not exactly sure what they do there, but I have seen people leaving on several different occasions. Actually," he said, pausing to think, "they look quite well when they come out."

After a while Xander said we should slow down. The Correction Center was close. It was a huge building, towering over the city with two other skyscrapers that were in the same area. The other two buildings near it were the Section Headquarters and the other was the Town Hall.

Xander slowed to a walk as we approached. I had only been in this part of town a few times and the houses all look the same, but the huge buildings in the center of the city made it fairly easy to tell where you were. We had arrived in good time. We left the alleyway and walked towards the front of the glass monstrosity, but then Xander veered and we snuck around to the back, where there was a small door. There was no guard posted in front of it, but it was locked.

"No problem," said Xander as he pulled out a couple metal tools and started to pick the lock. On about the fifteenth try I started to wonder if he knew what he was doing, but then it gave a small click and Xander opened the door. We inched down the hallway, being careful not to make any noise, until we came to another door. Xander pulled out a knife and whispered, "This one's wired to an alarm. I'm going to have to cut the wires. Can you boost me up?"

Xander was not particularly short, but he was fairly light, so I nodded and knelt down so he could climb on my shoulders. I rose slowly, and as soon as I was standing straight he started cutting a hole in the ceiling. I heard a small electrical shock, and then Xander motioned for me to let him down.

"Is this where your friend helps us?" I whispered.

"No, we won't see him. He's just keeping the elevator clear."

"The elevator?"

"Yeah, all the cells are on the top floors, and they don't use the stairs except in emergencies," Xander said, still whispering.

We opened the door and stepped into the elevator. Instead of clicking a button, Xander motioned for me to lift him up again. After I did, he pulled out a pen and

pointed it at the ceiling. When a red beam shot out the hole where the tip should have come out, I realized that what he was holding was definitely not a pen. I had seen a laser once before, but that was on a video in class about the testing ranges outside the city. *Where on earth did he get that from?* I wondered as he cut.

Once he was done, he pushed up the piece that he had cut out, making a hole in the ceiling. He grabbed the edges and pulled himself up, then motioned for me to do the same. It was a little harder, since I wasn't standing on anyone's shoulders, but I managed to jump up and snag one of the edges.

When I emerged from the hole, I saw a ladder running up and down the shaft. Xander gestured towards the ladder, so I went to it while he replaced the piece he had cut out. Since he had cut it at an angle, so that it would fit back in, he had no trouble with it. When he stepped onto the ladder, he slipped and almost fell, but I caught his hand.

"Thanks," he said, grabbing a rung.

We climbed up the ladder at a good pace, but we were cutting it close. We would have to hurry on the way out. After a few minutes, we reached the door that led to the prison area that my mother was in. Xander heaved himself up onto a small ledge and pulled a crowbar out of his backpack. He pried the door open and stuck the bar in the opening so it couldn't close back. I climbed up to the ledge and ducked under the crowbar.

"Nice work," I whispered.

"Don't celebrate yet, but we're almost there," Xander whispered as he started down the hall. We stopped at the second to last door on the right. He motioned for me to help him up again, and I did. A moment later he hopped down and opened the door.

Nothing could have prepared me for what happened next. I had still expected Mother to be weak, or hurt, and to slow us down, even after what Xander said, but she looked fine. I was right about her slowing us down, though. But instead of slowing us by being hurt, she slowed us down in a different way. She called for the guards.

Xander acted before I could even process what had just happened. He slammed the door to muffle the sound, and then dragged me towards the wall opposite the elevator. Then I realized it wasn't a wall; it was a window. He pulled a large rope out of his backpack, tied it on a door handle, broke the window, and threw the other end out.

"Slide," he said, pushing me towards the rope. I was too shocked to think, so I did what Xander told me. The rope burned my hands as I slid towards the pavement below. Once we had dropped to the ground and gotten a safe distance away, I collapsed into a corner in an abandoned alleyway.

"Come on," he hissed. "Every guard in the city is going to be after us."

I allowed myself to be dragged along again. Finally I reached the conclusion that the best thing for my mother would be to get out of here, so I started sprinting. I could work on a plan later.

After a couple of minutes, I realized how desperate our situation was. I saw guards running down the big street to our right every time there was a gap in the row of houses. Xander noticed too, and he started running on the side of the alley, staying in the shadows as much as possible.

Then we ran into a guard. Literally. The guard fell down and then quickly picked himself up, raising his gun to aim at Xander's face.

"What are you doing?" questioned the guard.

"We were just racing home," replied Xander casually. "Now, if you will let us by—" I was expecting him to spring, and I think the guard was too, but he moved so quickly that for a second neither one of us knew what had happened. Then the guard was pinned to the ground by Xander's boot and Xander was holding the gun.

"Come on!" he yelled as he started running again. I followed after him as quickly as I could. I could hear the guard gaining on us, but then Xander darted into another alleyway, and another, throwing him off. We ran through too many small streets to count, and finally we were within sight of the river.

"Wait," said Xander. "We need to plan our approach quickly and carefully." He paused for a moment, looking into my eyes. "You okay?"

"I'll make it," I said, panting. "Wouldn't it be better just to make a dash for it than to wait and risk having more guards come?" I wasn't sure why Xander wasn't using the gun he was holding, but I was still too dazed to ask.

"Maybe," Xander replied, "but there is a guard walking along the shore right now. If we wait one minute he will be out of sight, and the other one will be a few minutes in coming, because this is when the guard changes. All that weaving around through the city cost us some time, but we did arrive right when I wanted to."

"Okay, sixty seconds," I answered, fearing that the river guards would be reinforced, but Xander was right. It was our best shot.

"Now!" Xander shouted as soon as the count reached sixty.

We hurried down the steep, gravelly bank of the river, which was really more of a creek. Xander was untying the log we were going to use, so I jumped up on top of a rock to get a better look. To my horror, I saw three men hurrying along on the top of the bank, looking right at us.

"Hurry!" I yelled. "There are guards coming!"

Xander finished untying the log and pulled me on. As soon as we got on, we both realized we were in trouble. The river was slow and the guards were sprinting now. As we pulled into the middle of the river, the log started to go faster, but it still wasn't fast enough. Then a bullet whizzed over my head.

"Get down!" Xander screamed, dropping behind a branch stump. I did the same, and the guards stopped firing. After a minute or so, I risked a glance over the top, and relief flooded through me.

"They're gone," I said.

"Look ahead and you'll see why." Xander's face was pale.

I looked downstream and my blood went cold. The guards had activated the forcefield, which meant that the log, and us with it, would be chewed to bits when we passed through it. The water burned where the forcefield touched it.

"What are we going to do?" I asked frantically.

"Hold on," Xander answered as he leaned to the side.

"What? I—" my protest was cut off as my head plunged beneath the water. Xander managed to stop the log from rotating as soon as we were fully submerged. But the shield burned the water, didn't it? That's why they deactivated that part of it when they let the river go.

I opened my eyes and saw Xander waving his arms at me to get my attention. When he was sure I had seen him, he pushed off of the log and swam as close to the bottom of the river as possible, I followed, but not before glancing ahead. The water was an unnatural reddish-green color under the shield, but I did notice that it seemed to get weaker towards the bottom. I followed Xander to the bottom and swam as fast as I could. I hoped for Xander's safety as he swam under the shield. He recoiled as soon as he touched it, but then swam through. I hesitantly let the river carry me forward.

The pain was like nothing I had ever felt before. My whole body felt like it was being shocked and burned at the same time. I lost control of my limbs and thrashed wildly, trying to get out.

Then it was over and I surfaced on the other side.

It was beautiful. The jagged mountains in the distance stabbed upward towards the huge blue sky dotted with puffy white clouds. At the base of the mountains was a long area of whiteness, which looked like snow. I think Xander had told me it was a huge plain of white sand.

Xander was sitting on the bank, staring into the north at a huge, snow capped mountain.

"Hey," I said. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. You?"

"Okay." We sat quietly for a few seconds, looking into the distance.

"Why didn't you shoot any of the guards?" I asked, looking down at his gun.

He didn't answer for a while, but finally he said, "I just can't. They're people. No matter how evil they are, there's still a chance that they'll... change," he looked earnestly into my eyes. "Realize how evil they are and want to stop." I wanted to ask how he knew that, but we needed to get moving. We didn't need any lengthy conversations slowing us down.

"Is that where we're going?" I asked, still looking at the huge mountain, trying to brighten his mood.

"Yes," he answered, "but I'm not sure exactly how we'll get there. It would be easiest to travel on the level ground, but now that the government knows we're gone, I think it's likely that we would be caught if we went that way. We should probably start by hiking to those eastern mountains. Then we could go north through the foothills."

"To the mountains it is, then," I said, smiling. It felt good to be free.

Then the ground beside us exploded into flames.

Xander threw himself on me, knocking us both to the ground and shielding my body from the explosion. The next moment he was up, dragging me forward. I could tell he was hurt, but I couldn't see how badly.

Once we were a safe distance from the smoldering pit the explosion had left, I scanned the sky for a hoverplane.

"Don't bother," said Xander, coughing. "They aren't coming from the sky, they're land mines."

Remembering he was hurt, I rushed over to Xander, hoping it wasn't too bad. It was. His left leg was burned, and there was a piece of metal embedded in his right shoulder.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes, but you're not. Where did that piece of metal in your shoulder come from?"

"The mines have a metal casing around them. Do you think you could pull it out?"

I sat down for a minute looked at his shoulder, trying not to gag. "I don't know. I've never done anything like this before, and I've never seen anyone do it either."

"Just pull it out," he said.

"Okay," I answered. I reached over, grabbed the metal, and pulled. My fingers slipped off because of the blood and Xander winced. I ripped off a small piece of my shirt and wiped it clean. Then I pulled again. It came out that time, but the hole it had left was gushing blood.

"I think there's a first aid kit in my pack," Xander said, gasping from the pain.

"That might have been nice to know earlier," I commented, looking down at my shirt while I hurried over to the packs. I found the little red box that was the first aid kit and grabbed the bandages. I walked back over Xander and tried to figure out how to attach it. Finally, I wrapped it tightly under his arm and then over his shoulder, and the bleeding slowed.

"Can you walk?" I asked.

"I think so," Xander answered, getting up.

Our pace was too slow. We both knew it. They would know by now that we weren't dead and would soon be after us again.

"You need to run, now," said Xander. "I'm too slow. They'll catch us for sure like this."

"No," I answered flatly. "I won't leave and let you to get killed."

"You have to go," he said, more urgently this time. "If you stay, we'll both be killed for sure. Please go."

"No! I'll think of something, there's got to be some way—" I looked around desperately, and then I realized that we didn't have to run. We could hide, too. "You just need to make it to the eastern mountains like we planned," I said, pointing ahead. "We can hide in the forest."

"Fine," Xander replied. "But if they find, us, you run for the foothills and forget about me."

"Okay," I lied. Anything to make him agree to let me stay with him.

We reached the bottom of the mountains by dusk and headed up them, leaving the red dirt of the flatlands behind. We walked through a small canyon until dark and then found a pile of rocks that would hide us fairly well. I wanted to keep looking, but Xander's strength was waning fast.

We got out the sleeping bags from our packs, but because of the daytime heat we lay on top of them instead of inside. It would be cold enough to need them that night.

"You should eat," Xander said, chewing on an apple.

"Okay," I answered, pulling a piece of fruit leather out of my backpack and nibbling on it. I still felt a little sick from pulling that piece of metal out of his shoulder earlier. "So," I asked, "what do we do now?"

He thought for a long time before saying "I don't know. We've been so busy trying to figure out how to get away that we didn't give too much thought to what we would do when we actually got out. The only thing we have to do is get to that mountain there," he said, gesturing at the huge mountain towering above all the others. "That's where my parents are supposed to catch up with us. After that, we just get as far away as we can from here and try to find some other people."

"But if there really is another country out here, why hasn't the government attacked them?" I asked.

"Maybe because the government can't find them. Or they're too powerful to attack."

"In that case, they should have come to free us a long time ago."

We sat silently for a while, and then Xander said, "We probably need to stay up. The government probably knows we escaped by now, and they will be looking for us."

"I'll take first watch," I offered. Xander protested, but since he could hardly keep his eyes open he finally had to let me do it. I settled down in a fairly comfortable spot near the mouth of the cave and tried to stay awake. I was successful until what I judged to be about midnight, when I had to wake Xander because I kept dozing off.

The next morning Xander and I sorted through our supplies. We both had enough food for a few days, and I had the book that my mother had given me, which was undamaged because of the waterproof case. It was quite large, and I considered leaving it because it was so heavy, but it had been important to my mother.

"Come on," said Xander, "we've got to get moving again."

"I don't think so," I said, looking at his bandage. I had pulled it off and looked at it while he was sleeping, and I was fairly sure it was becoming infected. "You're too sick."

"Who cares if I'm sick. If they find us, we'll both be dead." He was right, and I knew he was, but I didn't like it. If there is anyone else out there, we need to find them fast, I thought. Or maybe they will find us.

As I was thinking, the first hoverplane flew over and dropped a bomb thirty feet away.

That time it was me who jumped on Xander to shield him. Gravel shot everywhere, but the pile of rocks offered enough protection to keep either of us from getting seriously injured. Two more fell right next our camp site, blasting dirt and gravel into the sky and showering us with debris. As they started getting further and further away, Xander and I decided that they didn't actually know where we were.

For the next two hours we huddled together at the back of the cave and listened to bombs fall. When they finally stopped, we peeked out of the cave to see if there were still any hoverplanes flying around. I spotted one, but it was several miles away and not likely to see us.

"Well," said Xander, "we'd better get moving. They don't know exactly where we are but they seem to suspect we are in this area." We both put our packs on and stepped out of the cave.

The going was rough. The floor of the canyon we were in was made up entirely of rocks, and it was impossible for Xander to climb out. After an hour of slow walking, we found a place where Xander thought he could get out.

"Once we make it out of here, we head north," he said, as he slowly made his way out of the canyon. "I'm not sure what we'll find, but we will have a good view of the surrounding area once we get to that big mountain."

"What about the bombers?" I asked, looking around at the sparse vegetation. "Won't they see us?"

Xander considered this for a moment, and then said, "We'll head east to the forest first, and then go north."

Since we knew what we were doing, we found another canyon with sides that weren't quite as steep and climbed down into it. We decided that the tent was too easy to spot and tried to find a cave. After about an hour we gave up and stopped next to a boulder that offered some protection. I took the first watch again while Xander slept.

The next morning there was no sign of the hoverplanes, so we left the boulder and continued traveling north. Xander was feeling a little better, so we were able to walk faster than the previous day. We stopped for a meal at what we judged to be about noon.

"I still don't understand why you didn't shoot the guards," I said.

"I just can't," he answered, "They're people."

"Yes, I know that."

"So why don't you understand?"

"They were trying to kill us!" I yelled, stomping my foot for good measure. "We could have died because you didn't use that gun!"

"So... murder is allowed if you are defending yourself?" Xander asked, still calm despite my outburst.

"It's not murder if it's self defense."

"Why not?"

"Because it's either you or the person attacking you. You don't kill him, he kills you."

"But we got away, didn't we? Isn't it better to take a chance than to murder someone?"

"I already said, it's not murder if it's self defense." I kicked a rock and sulked, knowing that I had lost the argument. I wasn't sure if it was because he was right or because he was smarter than me. "What about the hoverplanes? You could shoot one on the wing and bring it down without killing the pilot. They have parachutes."

"But there's a chance that I would miss and hit the gas tank. That would make it explode."

"You're hopeless."

We finished the meal in silence. After a few minutes of resting, we packed up our supplies and started hiking again.

"So," I said, trying to change the subject, "if there were people out there, where do you think they would be?"

"If they're smart, they'll have built a underground community in the north side of that mountain," he answered, pointing towards the snow capped giant in front of us. It was easy to see now, because we weren't in the thick trees yet. That also meant we were easy to see. I quickened my pace slightly. "It has a commanding view of the surrounding area, and it would be hard to attack. Most bombs don't penetrate deep enough to hit an underground bunker. They are possible to make, but who knows whether or not the Republic has any? Also, it's hard to get an army up a mountain."

"So we'll meet your parents and then look for the people up there?"

"If they really are there."

"If they are? We based our whole plan on the existence of those people. After all the trouble we went to, they'd better be there."

"Gale, wake up."

"What?" I slurred, propping myself up on one elbow.

"Get into that tree, now."

We had been hiking two days without incident, but by the tone in Xander's voice I could tell there was something wrong. We had gotten out of the scrubby bushes and into the forest, so it took me a minute to figure out which tree he meant. Finally I spotted one in the general direction that he had pointed that had low branches.

"What is it?" I asked as I hauled myself out of the sleeping bag. The air was cold now that we were higher up, and I quickly became alert. Had someone found us?

"Mountain lion," he whispered. "Now go! I'll distract it and come when you're safe."

I didn't like the plan at all, but I decided to obey Xander. I started moving slowly towards the tree. Then I saw the gun sticking out of his pack and changed my mind. I ran to the pack and pulled the gun out. By that time the mountain lion had spotted me, and was running faster than I thought possible towards our camp. Xander was screaming something, but I flipped the safety off and pulled the trigger.

As soon as I did, the gun slammed into my shoulder and a spray of bullets hit the mountain lion. The gun stopped firing when I dropped it, which was good because the spray of bullets had been getting dangerously close to Xander.

"I told you to climb the tree!" he yelled, exasperated.

"Sorry," I said, picking up the gun to put it back in Xander's pack.

"It's okay," he answered after a moments hesitation. He stood still a moment to catch his breath. "Actually, I think I'm the one who should say sorry. I forgot about the gun." I smiled at him and he smiled back. "Next time, though, switch it to semi-auto so you don't blast the animal to pieces."

I looked at the mountain lion and almost gagged at the sight. It was riddled with bullet holes and there was blood everywhere.

"You can lay down now," I said. "I don't think I'll be able to go back to sleep."

"Actually," Xander replied, "It's almost morning. We should eat and get started."

I glanced to the east, but didn't see any light peeking over the mountains. "How do you know?"

"The birds are singing."

"Oh."

We sat together for a few minutes and listened to the birds. There weren't any animals back in Section Four, but we had learned about them in school. None of the classes or pictures had done them justice though. They were beautiful, especially by the surprisingly bright starlight.

"Time to go," said Xander, and I realized I had been dozing. The sun was rising now, so I decided to climb a tree and get a good look at our surroundings.

"It looks like we're about a quarter of the way to the mountain," I called down to Xander.

"We better hurry then," he answered. "My parents will be expecting us to be in that area in four days."

I looked at the distance and then at Xander. I shook my head. "We've got to take it slow. They can wait."

"I'm going to go as fast as I possibly can," he replied stubbornly.

"You'll kill yourself."

"No I won't. Better keep up," he said as he started jogging north. I scrambled down the tree and started after him. He stopped jogging, but he was still walking more quickly than I thought he should.

After a while, I got an idea. Then I wondered if it was worth it. Then I wished I hadn't had the idea. Xander wasn't going to slow down for himself, so I would have to give him another reason to slow down.

"Can I see the gun in case I see any animals?" We were low on food, so Xander pulled the gun from his backpack and handed it to me. After about ten minutes, I switched the gun to semi-auto, pointed it at my foot, and fired.

It hurt even worse than the forcefield had a few days ago. Xander looked around to see what I had shot, and then realized I was screaming.

"What happened?" he asked, his eyes showing his concern.

"I saw a squirrel over there, and I missed."

"You're a bad liar," said Xander as he got out the first aid box.

"I guess I am," I said as he took off my shoe and wrapped my foot tightly with a strip of white cloth. "You wouldn't slow down, and you were going to hurt yourself. You're a bad liar too. I can tell how bad your shoulder hurts."

Xander blushed and put my shoe back on. I stood up and walked around. I could do it, but it hurt. A lot.

"Look at this," Xander said, holding up a bullet. "It went all the way through your foot."

"Can I have it?" I asked. I held it in my hand and looked at it, imagining it ripping through my foot. I grimaced and threw it back onto the ground.

"You shouldn't have done that, Gale."

"Well I did, and I'm glad I did."

He insisted that we wait an hour before continuing, so we found a comfortable spot and sat down. Xander started making a crutch for me out of a few branches he found, and when it was finished I tried it. It didn't look nice, but it did its job well. Later I saw a squirrel and asked him for the gun. He looked at me warily, and then laughed and tossed it to me.

"You don't think I'd do it again to you?" I said, laughing along with him.

I missed the squirrel, but a few minutes later a rabbit walked by and I hit it. Xander thought that for now, at least, we were out of danger, so he started a fire and cooked the rabbit.

"What was your dad like?" he asked as we were eating. The question caught me off guard. Back in the Republic no one ever asked about him.

"I don't remember him very well, but he was nice," I answered. A tear made its way down my cheek. "I miss him so much." I hid my face in my hands and cried.

Xander came and put his arm around me. "Why did they have to take him? He hadn't done anything against the rules."

"I can't relate to your case exactly," he said, "but I know what it's like."

"What do you mean?" I asked, looking up. Xander had a father, and a good one, too.

"Nothing," he said, brushing the question aside. He had obviously said something he hadn't meant to. "We'll get him back, if he's still alive, and your mother, too."

When my eyes were done spilling saltwater, I stood up and asked if we could go.

We walked slowly now, since we were both injured, so we didn't get far that day. Xander was still annoyed with me, but he was walking slower. I really was hurt quite badly, and I could tell from the way Xander's face looked when he changed his bandages that his shoulder was worse than he had thought at first. I had checked the first aid kit to see if there was anything to prevent swelling, but there were only bandages.

"That day before my mother was taken, you were going to tell me something. What was it?" I asked as we trudged along. I was still trying to get used to the crutch, which was starting to rub through my shirt.

"I got a note four years ago," said Xander, looking up from the ground. "It just appeared in my room. I don't know who left it, but it's one of the reasons I think there are people out here."

"How could they get a note into your room?" I asked, a little amused.

"No idea," he answered. "Maybe they have connections inside the Republic. Anyway, it basically said that there was an army out here, and that someday they were going to come and free us."

"What?" I laughed. "You're putting all your hope in a random piece of paper that showed up in your room one day?"

Xander looked offended, so I stopped laughing. "I think it has something to do with that case your mother gave you. May I see it?"

I handed him the case. He pulled out a large, leatherbound book and flipped through it randomly. Somewhere towards the end of the book he stopped and blinked several times.

"What is it?" I asked, walking over to look at the book.

"Here it is!" he said. "This is something my— something someone told me several years ago. 'And now abide faith, hope, and love.'" He was a little sidetracked from the story about the note, but he seemed excited over what he had found so I didn't press the issue.

"Hmm," I said. "I wonder what that's supposed to mean. It sounds old, though. I've never heard anyone say something like *that*."

"Whatever," said Xander, "But look at it. Hope. It's been a while since anyone has had hope, but I think this is something we can hope in."

I started walking again. "I'm all for hope, but if I'm going to hope in something I want to know for sure that it is reliable."

"Wait," said Xander, "I want to read some more."

I rolled my eyes and turned around. "It's just a bunch of old sayings! Why are they so exciting to you?"

"Just because it was written long time ago doesn't mean it doesn't apply to us."

"You can read as much as you want after we meet your parents, but while you're with me I want to keep moving." Xander humphed, put the book back in its case, and handed it to me.

We walked in silence for a while, and I tried to forget about our argument.

The forest was thinner here and we could see a fair distance. I loved gazing out across the empty plain towards the jagged mountains in the west. A branch snapped somewhere to my right. I stopped walking and spun around.

"Xander, look," I whispered, pointing. Xander followed my finger and then he saw it, too. Standing about forty feet away was a huge elk. "Can we shoot it?"

"We could," he whispered back, "but there's no point. There's no way we could carry all that meat. Actually, I'm worried what he's going to do when he sees us."

When it finally did turn its head and see us, though, it took no interest and went on standing in the same spot, so we continued on.

That night we slept in a tree. Xander wasn't sure whether or not mountain lions could climb trees, but it couldn't hurt to be cautious. He also said that he thought this forest had bears. I had a lot of trouble getting up into the branches because of my foot, but we found a big branch that would hold us. After we spread out the sleeping bags, it was actually quite comfortable, except for the spiky twigs that sometimes fell from the branches above.

"Gale," said Xander.

"What?"

"I still have the letter. Do you want to read it?"

"Sure," I answered. I had been itching to ask him about it, but I was afraid it would remind him about the book and he would stay up reading all night. I took the letter. It was getting dark, but there was still enough light to read.

Alexander, we're going to attack the Republic soon and get everyone out. Be ready. If you find a way to escape, come find us. We'll use all the help we can get. Never lose hope.

"So... why didn't you tell anyone about this?" I asked. "And why weren't they more specific? And if you got this, why did you keep talking like there might not be people out here?"

"It might be a fake," he said.

"Why on earth would anyone fake a letter like that?"

"I don't know, but the government has their reasons. I didn't tell anyone about it for the same reason that I wasn't sure I believed it."

"And my other question?"

"If it isn't some kind of fake they wouldn't want to put in more information than they had to, just in case it was found by someone else."

"But why would they send it to you? I mean, I know you're smart, and if I were going to send something like that I would send it to you, but how could they know that? You're just a kid."

A quick shadow passed over Xander's face. "I don't really want to talk about it."

I wasn't sure what to say. Why was Xander important? And why wouldn't he tell me anything? I yawned. It was too late to try to figure anything out tonight.

"Good night," I said.

"Good night."

I wasn't sure, but I think before I fell asleep I saw Xander holding a flashlight and writing something in a small book. I watched him for a while, but then he turned off the light and went to sleep. I would ask him about it in the morning.

When I woke up, Xander was gone. At first I panicked, but then I saw a thin wisp of smoke drifting up through the branches. I looked down to see him sitting by a fire, cooking one of the rabbits that I had shot the day before. The temperature had dropped dramatically the night before, as I had hoped it might, so it had not gone bad.

"Good morning," I said, climbing painfully down out of the tree.

"Sleep well?" asked Xander.

"Mm-hm. What were you doing last night?"

"I was writing in my journal."

"May I see it?"

"Not now. Want some rabbit?" I grabbed a leg and ate it while Xander – who had already eaten – gathered his things.

"Can we wait a little while this morning?" I asked. "I want to watch the birds for a while."

"Okay," Xander answered, "but not for too long."

After we had watched the little creatures flit about for a few minutes, Xander got up to go. I grabbed the crutch and he helped me up to my feet.

All through that day, and the next day, and the next, I kept wondering what Xander's secret was, and why he wouldn't tell me. What was he hiding? Finally I gave up and decided to look at the scenery instead. It was beautiful. The leaves were chang-

ing color, so the forest was full of reds and oranges and yellows. Xander was admiring them, too.

The light drifted through the branches of the trees and made a criss-crossing pattern on the leafy ground. The birds sang and the squirrels played. They were so carefree. Suddenly I wished that I were a bird without a care in the world, soaring above the trees and ignoring the business of humans.

"This is beautiful," whispered Xander, trying not to disturb the peacefulness.

"I wish we could show everyone this. I wish that people could just stop fighting and live together peacefully and enjoy life."

"Sounds like you're hoping for heaven on earth."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been reading that book some more."

"I don't want to hear about it." I wondered if I should be listening to what Xander said, or reading the book for myself. It was important to my mother. I owed it to her. But no, I didn't have time. We had to try to find Xander's parents and the senders of the letter, if they existed.

"Let's go find your parents," I said gruffly, picking up the pace even though my foot was loudly protesting. Then I remember that Xander was hurt too, and I slowed back down.

We had been hiking for seven days now, and were still less than halfway to the huge mountain looming in the distance. I was responsible for the hold up, but Xander was recovering even more slowly than I was, so I was still glad I had hurt my foot. To pass the time, I asked Xander to give me some kind of a summary of the fall of America and the rise of the Republic. A version that wasn't a lie from beginning to end like the version the teachers had given us.

"What actually happened," said Xander, "was, as you can imagine, quite different from what we were told. America used to be the most powerful nation in the world. Roughly twenty years ago, though, they decided to conquer everyone, so that they could have real authority instead of strong influence. England, France, Israel, and several other countries allied themselves with America, and many others, though they refused to help, surrendered. The Air Force was destroying Russia when a hundred fifty-two hoverplanes went missing, and then a few days later a quarter of the land army, which was preparing to sail to China, disappeared also. About the same time a large forcefield went up in the southern parts of New Mexico and Texas, and nuclear missiles started falling. All of the continents except for North America became too radioactive to live in. That last part isn't certain, though, it's possible that some people survived, if they were prepared."

"Why didn't they destroy North America too?" I interrupted, ignoring what he had said at the end. I wanted to settle my own issues before I started worrying about anything else.

"Because if the forcefield failed and this area of the world was radioactive, everyone would die. They destroyed the rest of America in a more traditional way, so that it wouldn't be radioactive."

"They killed everyone?" I asked, my throat tightening.

"Yes," said Xander softly. His face showed he was feeling the same thing I was.

"Unless your letter was right," I pointed out.

"It's possible they hid and the Republic never found them."

After the history lesson, we walked for a few hours without talking. I began admiring the forest again. The animals were so innocent, unaware of the evil that was so near. Well, maybe not so innocent after all, I thought, as I watched a hawk catch and kill a sparrow.

"The whole world is broken," I said. "Even here in the forest the animals kill each other."

"That's why we need someone to come fix it," Xander answered.

"Who?" I yelled, suddenly angry. "Who can fix it? No one! If there was ever a time that everything lived together peacefully, it's gone. Gone forever."

"Someone can bring it back," Xander said, stopping.

"What?" I spun around and stared at him. "Who?"

"Well, not totally. Only the Creator can do that, and he won't until the end."

"End of— never mind. Who can fix it partially?"

"Me."

"What?" I said for the second time.

"Not totally, like I said, but I think I can help. It's that quote from your book. Faith, hope, and love. If I can bring down the Republic and show the people those, I think they might follow."

"What makes you think you can do it and no one else can?"

"Well... my family has a history of, um..."

"Are you trying to say you're all geniuses?"

"I guess so."

I laughed, trying to keep the bitterness away. Why was I angry because he was going to help? Was I jealous? Certainly not. Or was I? Maybe.... Whatever. He was right, of course. Xander is smarter than everyone I know.

"You're not all that dull yourself," he said.

"I don't know," I said, blushing.

"Actually, I've been meaning to ask you if you know much about your parents."

"They're both orphans," I said. Surprise flashed across Xander's face and he muttered something about being right.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Nothing," he answered. "Let's keep going."

"No, let's not, I'm tired of all of your secrets. What's going on?"

"I told you already I don't want to talk about it."

"I'm not going anywhere until you tell me," I said, stubbornly leaning against a tree. He looked at me, and then at the mountain, and sighed.

"Look," he answered, "if you'll go the rest of the way to the mountain I'll tell you when we get there." He obviously didn't want to tell me anything, and was hoping I would forget about it. But if he wasn't a liar, and I didn't think he was, all we had to do was get to the mountain and then he would tell me.

"Fine," I snapped. "Let's go."

On the fourteenth day of our journey, we were nearing the mountain. I had asked Xander if it had a name, but he said he didn't know it, so we just kept calling it 'the mountain'. The weather was getting colder, but we kept moving and the sleeping bags kept us warm at night.

"Do we have a specific meeting place?" I asked Xander as we surveyed the mountain. It was huge, and the smaller mountains around it went on for miles.

"Yeah. We're meeting at the top. It'll be a good place to observe, and also to find out if we're being searched for. Especially since I have this," Xander said as he pulled a small telescope out of his pack and held it up.

"Wow," I said. "Why don't we see if your parents are up there yet?"

"That's what I'm doing," he answered. Someone else might have been annoyed, but I also disliked being told to do something that I was already doing, so I ignored his comment. Xander set up the telescope and pointed the lens towards the mountain, steadying his arms on a fallen log.

"I see someone up there with a pair of binoculars," said Xander. "I can't tell who..." he trailed off, still squinting into the telescope. "Get down, now!"

"What is it?" I asked, after I dropped to the ground behind the log.

"There's someone in a military uniform up there watching the area. I accidentally caught the sunlight with the lens of the telescope and he looked right at me. I'm not sure how good the binoculars are, but we didn't move fast enough."

"Sorry," I said.

"Not your fault, I was trying to drop without breaking the telescope."

We sat for a minute, and then Xander pulled out the gun.

"I thought you didn't believe in self defense."

"I do," he said. "But not the kind you're thinking of." He pulled out the clip and emptied it onto the ground.

"Well, you could at least let me use it."

"I don't believe in helping other people commit murder either. It crossed my mind that you might try to grab the gun if someone came and tried to catch us. The other thing is, if someone attacked us, they wouldn't know the gun wasn't loaded so we might be able to use it to escape."

"You're risking my life, too, you know."

"I'm sorry, but it's a chance I have to take."

We waited for a few more tense minutes for something to happen. They felt like hours, and my frustration with Xander was continually growing.

"Could you please get out your telescope again and see what's going on?"

"Too risky. If they haven't seen us yet—" Xander's words were cut short by the roar of a hoverplane engine. We froze, and after a few seconds it faded away into the distance. I peeked over the log to see two white things that looked like plastic bags floating down out of the sky.

"Parachutes," said Xander when he looked over the log. "Go!"

Neither one of us could actually run, so we set off at the quickest pace we could, which was not very fast. My crutch made so much noise that the animals scattered when we came near. I risked a glance over my shoulder and saw the parachutes touching down.

"They've landed!" I wheezed. We both tried to quicken our pace, but I fell over and Xander stopped to help me up.

"Stop!" yelled one of the parachuters, but Xander and I kept running.

Just before they caught us, Xander hauled himself into a tree. I tried to follow, but one of the men caught my bad foot as I was pulling myself into the tree.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" Xander said, pointing the gun at the man who had my foot. He was right, the men had no idea that the gun was empty.

"Wait," he said. "We're not from the Republic."

"What?" I stopped struggling.

"We're actually getting ready to attack them right now. Who are you?"

"We escaped Section Four two weeks ago and were trying to find you. And trying to figure out if you existed. I'm Alexander, and this is Gale."

"Alexander," the man said. "Are you the one we went the letter to?"

"It was from you!" Xander exclaimed.

"Yes," the man answered. He helped me down from the tree and then turned to his partner. "Signal the hoverplane, please."

"Yes sir."

The hoverplane returned, and five minutes later we were flying to the resistance base. The hoverplane was larger than the ones that we had seen the last few days, because it was made for transport and not combat. I looked at Xander.

"We made it," I said, smiling. He smiled back. We walked to the window and watched as the forest sped by.

The resistance base was, as Xander had predicted, a bunker in the mountains. It was not very large – the population was exactly one hundred and seventeen people – but it was packed with weapons. Machine guns, bombs, grenades, even a few hoverplanes.

"How long have you been working on this?" I asked.

"We started as soon as the Republic started bombing everyone. There were a few people who had gotten wind of the plot, and were prepared to do something. It was finished just a few years ago, and we've been manufacturing weapons. The hoverplanes we had from the beginning, so they're a little outdated. Still, they're better than nothing, and I've heard rumors that the tech department is working on faster engines." The men who had met us in the woods escorted us further and further into the bunker.

"This place isn't as small as I thought," I said as we walked down another corridor.

"Yes," said the man who had grabbed my foot. "Our population used to be larger. We've lost so many trying to break through the forcefield."

The man who grabbed my foot – *I should stop calling him that*, I thought – scanned his palm on a pad and led us into a final corridor.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Colonel Saunders," he replied. "Here is the president's office." I instinctively winced at the word. "No need to worry," Colonel Saunders laughed, "he's a real one, not a dictator in disguise."

As soon as I saw the president, I glanced at Xander, then back at the president. They looked so similar. As a matter of fact, I looked a lot like Xander, too. Then I remembered that he was going to tell me his secret when we got to the mountain. The president looked up. A flicker of recognition crossed his face when he saw us.

"Hello," he said. "What are your names?" His voice was kind, and I had a vague feeling that I had heard it before.

"I'm Alexander," said Xander. I was getting used to hearing him say his full name. He always did when he introduced himself, and there had been plenty of people to introduce himself to in the last hour. "And this is Gale."

The president dropped the pen he had been holding. "Gale?"

Then I knew why he had seemed familiar. I glanced at Xander again, and knew I didn't need to know his secret either. "Hi, Dad."

My father – it felt wrong to think of him as the president – rushed from behind his desk arms open. I stepped into them without hesitation.

"How did you get here?" we both asked at the same time, and then laughed.

"You go first," Father said.

"Wait, first I want to introduce you to," I paused a moment, letting the suspense hang, "your nephew."

Xander grinned, and Father just smiled. Apparently, he already knew, and that's why he had sent the note to Xander. "I've been wondering if you were my cousin for a long time," Xander said, "but after you told me about your parents, I was almost certain."

"What a pleasant surprise," commented Father. "I had no idea you two would've.... You were going to tell a story, Gale."

"Yes," I answered.

I told him the whole thing. About Mother being taken, trying to rescue her, getting bombed by hoverplanes, and shooting mountain lions. At the end we were crying and laughing at the same time, happy to be back together but grieved over the circumstances that had caused it.

"Will you tell us your story now?" I asked.

"In good time," Father answered. "I have some work to attend to, but meet me in my room this evening and I will tell you. Room number twenty-three. Oh, and Xander, your... guardians are here." What? Maybe there was more to this secret than I thought.

"Thanks," Xander said. "Goodbye, uncle."

"Goodbye. See you two tonight." The Colonel ushered us out to the office and showed us to our living quarters. After giving us a quick tour of the small room, Colonel Saunders left the room. After we had both showered and put on clean clothes, we sat across from each other on the bed.

"You have some explaining to do," I told Xander. "How did you guess that we were related before I did?"

"Well," said Xander, moving over so he could lean against the head of the bed, "the first thing was how smart you were." I blushed. "Come on, how many kids in the world can there be as smart as us? Anyway, that tipped me off, and the fact that you looked so much like me. After you told me that your father was an orphan, it was a little too much to be coincidence."

"So what's our family history?" I asked.

"Our grandparents had two sons, my father and your father. When our parents were five – they were twins – our grandparents died in a hoverplane crash. A few people speculated that it might not have been an accident, since they two of the most respected people in the world, and they were considering trying to bring Ameri-

ca down before they could start taking over everything. As you know, they were right, and America did try to take over the world. Our fathers were put in an orphanage, a very bad one where they couldn't get much of an education, but they educated themselves. They, like their parents, became very outspoken against America. So much so, in fact, that my father was killed by the FBI three years after I was born."

"The FBI?" I asked.

"Federal Bureau of Investigation. They had orders from the president. I was adopted by the people that you know as my parents, since my mother died at my birth. I do love my new parents, though." The last piece of the puzzle fell into place.

"So much so that I wouldn't have guessed that they weren't your parents. Until I saw my father and realized how much you looked alike."

"Yes. That's what I intended." Xander paused for a moment, and then launched back into the story. "Your father was still alive when America fell, but he was taken because he was working against the Republic."

"I can't wait to hear his story this evening," I said.

"Me either. Let's go eat."

We walked to the dining hall, my crutch tapping the floor. Colonel Saunders found us at our table and told us that a doctor would come to see us tomorrow morning. We thanked him and then finished our meal.

We found my father sitting in his room, reading a book.

"Come in," he said when we knocked. "I'll just give you a quick summary of my escape, since it's so late." We settled down on a couch while Father sat in a chair across from us. "I suppose you both know I was taken by the government nine or ten years ago. They took me to the Correction Center and tried to brainwash me. It was a new technology then, and it didn't work. When it failed, they decided to kill me. The day before they did, though, I discovered that one part of the ceiling was not solid."

"Must have had something to do with the alarm system," Xander said.

"Yes, it was an alarm activator. I broke it, crawled to the elevator shaft, and escaped. They were looking for me everywhere by the time I got out. I made for the river, and was lucky enough to find it running. After that, my escape was about the same as yours. I swam under the river, made for the mountains, and eventually got here. After a year, they got tired of me running the place through suggestions and decided just to make me president, so as to save everyone a lot of trouble."

"Wow," I said. His story was amazing and his summary was short.

"Yes," Father answered, "It was quite an escape. I was very lucky, though. If I hadn't decided to escape right when the river was running, I would have been caught for sure."

Seeing he was done, I asked Xander to tell him what he told me about our family. Most of it, of course, he already knew, but the part about Xander's adoption was interesting to him.

"There's one more thing that I haven't told you yet," Xander said, hesitating. Father and I looked at him expectantly. "I have an older brother."

"How is that possible?" Father said. "I never heard of him."

"He was stolen at birth. Apparently someone wanted to use him because of his mental skills."

"What did they use him for? Do you know?" I asked.

"Yes." Xander answered. "He's in the capital of the Republic."

"You don't mean—"

"Yes, I do," said Xander flatly. "My brother is the dictator."

Father and I froze for a moment, unsure what to think.

"I guess it fits," I admitted. "The reason no one ever sees him is because of his age. He doesn't want everyone to know that a teenager is ruling the Republic. Wait a minute, he would have been, what, seven? How could a seven year old plan a rebellion against the most powerful nation in the world?"

"When you're as smart as he is, being seven isn't a problem."

"True. There's no way he could have pulled it off if he wasn't related to you, I mean..." I trailed off when I remembered that we were related. I didn't like bragging.

"How has your brother not found you? You two are the most advanced students they've ever had," Father said "and I figured out who you were."

"He doesn't know I exist. And as far as doing well in school, that's the cover. If he somehow found out that I existed, he knows that I would never show how, uh... What I mean is he would catch me if I showed that I was different, so he knows I wouldn't. But I did, and it worked."

"You are so funny," my father laughed, "both of you. You keep avoiding talking about how smart you are. You are geniuses. Get used to it, and please stop avoiding it. It makes our conversations awkward."

Xander and I both apologized, and we continued talking for a while. When it got late, we went back to our room and had a pillow fight – an easy pillow fight, since he had a burned leg and an infected shoulder and I had a foot with a bullet hole through it – but it was fun. Afterwards we relaxed, taking in the comfort of furniture, and then fell asleep.

The next morning we were awakened by the sound of a large alarm clock. We went to the dining hall and had breakfast, and went to see the doctor afterwards. He said that Xander's shoulder was infected, and gave him something in a tube for that and his leg. I got a pair of crutches.

"I was told to send you down to the armory after you were done here," the doctor said. "I think both of your fathers are down there."

"Thanks," Xander and I said.

When we arrived, Xander hugged his parents – *I think I will still call them that, since they did adopt him*, I thought – and greeted my father.

"I wanted to show you around and let you get a feel for the weapons. If you are well enough you may be joining the invasion in two weeks."

"Two weeks?" I said. I was glad and disappointed at the same time. Part of me wanted to stay peacefully in this place forever, but then I thought about Mother. "Can we start now?"

"Yes," said Father, leading us towards a wall lined with guns. I noticed Xander was looking a little uncomfortable. He wasn't sure exactly how to tell Father that he won't be using a gun. I decided to talk for him.

"I don't think Xander will be using a gun," I told my father as he was starting to hand one to him. "Do you have any, um, knockout gas or smoke grenades?"

Father raised an eyebrow.

"Actually," said Xander, shifting his weight, "I was wondering about piloting. Do you have someone who could teach me?"

"Usually the training course takes three months, but I don't suppose you will be an ordinary student." He stood and considered for a moment. "I'll have Colonel Saunders teach you. You've met him, right?"

"Yes," Xander replied, looking relieved. "Thank you."

"What looks good to you, Gale?" my father asked.

I walked over to the wall and surveyed the weapons. I selected a small machine gun with a shoulder strap.

"Good choice. I was just going to suggest you take that one." Father looked at me and smiled. "You can go to the shooting range and practice, or you can go with Xander to the piloting classes. Whichever you choose."

"I'll go to the shooting range," I said. If I was going to have a weapon I should know how to use it.

"See you later," called Xander as he walked away. I waved and then followed Father down to the shooting range, where I spent an hour shooting at various targets. After getting the hang of the still targets, Father had me practice with moving targets. Those were harder, but I could do them. He told me I didn't need to do the obstacle course since I was on crutches.

"See you later," Father said. "If you and Xander want to, you can talk and work in your room, but we'll transfer you to my room and Xander to his parents' room at night."

"Okay," I answered, and then headed back to my room.

Xander got back a while later and told me that his flying lessons had gone well. They didn't actually fly during training, for fear of being detected by the Republic, but there was a simulator that worked just as well.

"How was your training?" He asked.

"It was fine," I answered. "The targets were good, but I couldn't do the obstacle courses because of my foot."

"Too bad. Hopefully it gets better soon. My shoulder was bugging me during the flight lessons also."

After a few days we settled into our routine. During the mornings we trained, in the afternoons we went to strategy meetings, and then we had free time during the evenings. The strategy meetings were the most interesting, trying to figure out ways to get people or hoverplanes into the Republic, or other ways to defeat them.

Xander, though, made them a little hard. He kept arguing against the best of our strategies because they included killing guards.

"This is a World War Two-type situation," I shouted at him. A couple years earlier, we had discussed World War Two, and whether or not fighting the Germans had been justifiable. Back then, Xander had agreed with me. "We're saving hundreds of lives by taking a few."

"You haven't read that book your mother gave you, have you?" Xander asked.

"Why are you basing everything you believe in that *book*?" I snapped.

"If it's true, then that's the only thing that matters."

"But won't you listen?" I yelled. "We are saving hundreds of lives."

"By taking other lives."

I stomped out of the room.

I didn't understand him. Why couldn't he see that we were coming out ahead? We kill a few people and free a nation. But what if he was right about the book? What if.... No. I wasn't about to put all my faith in an old book.

At breakfast the next morning I couldn't bring myself to look at Xander. Father had told me that he thought I was right, but that I should be more polite. That would be hard. Xander is the smartest person I know, but he was totally taken in by this thing. Why?

The argument raged for a week. I quoted extensively from several different books and essays – most of which I had found in the library on the second floor – written in protest against pacifism, but Xander was not impressed. "I'm not a pacifist like that," he said. "I'm going to try to stop you from killing people, but I will help you overthrow the government."

"It's not that different," I retorted, rolling my eyes.

"Yes it is."

Father and the other council members, including Colonel Saunders, mostly listened when Xander and I fought. They were all on my side, but everyone except me admitted that he had some good points, that if the book he was reading was correct,

then he was right. I refused to talk about the book. It was doing something to Xander that I didn't want to happen to me. If I got like him, I wouldn't be able to help rescue Mother. But then again, Mother was the one who had given me the book.

I hardly slept at all that night, trying to decide what to do. Finally, I realized that I was being an idiot. I couldn't argue against Xander when I hadn't even read that book. I picked it up and opened it.

It was handwritten by Mother, so at first I thought it was a journal, but then I decided it must have been copied from another book. Nothing was connected, it was as if she had been taking notes from another book, and had written down the things that were important to her. The more I read, the more interested I became. I felt tempted to automatically dismiss everything it said because I didn't agree with it, but I didn't.

The more I read, the more believable it seemed. Maybe Xander wasn't so crazy after all. Maybe we could agree to disagree. Whatever. I needed to sleep.

My mind was no clearer in the morning. I still didn't want to believe in Mother's book. It was going to make it hard to rescue her. But wouldn't she rather me follow what she believed than save her? These thoughts buzzed around my head as I ate breakfast. Xander trudged into the hall, looking more tired than usual.

"What's wrong?" I asked, staring at the dark circles under his eyes.

"What?" he said, looking up from the floor.

"You look tired."

"I just couldn't sleep last night." He stepped into the food line as I tried to figure out what he had been doing. Then I noticed a red splotch on his arm and smiled. A few days before I had heard one of the pilots complaining about g-measles – which come from flying aircraft at extremely high speeds – and showing them to another soldier.

"It's dangerous to fly alone at night," I whispered to Xander. He quickly covered his look of shock and stared at me with his eyebrows raised.

"Have you been spying on me?"

"No, and if you hadn't flown so fast I wouldn't have figured out what you were doing." I gestured at the spot on his arm.

"Oh," he said. It wasn't normal for him to overlook something like that, but he was tired. "I guess I'll wear a sweater today."

"Why were you practicing?" I asked.

"Tell you later," he replied as a soldier came and sat down next to us.

The rest of the day was torture. I hate knowing that someone has a secret that I can't figure out. I waited it out all through the morning training sessions, but as soon as they were done I went to find Xander. I eventually bumped into him.

"Hey," he said. "I was looking for you, too."

"Let's head back to my room and talk."

"No, we'll go to mine. I insist."

It was an odd request, but I followed him to his room. He shut the door and then reached for something in the pocket of his sweater. While he was fishing it out, I asked him why we were meeting in his room.

"Because," he said, finally finding what he had been looking for in his pocket and pulling it out, "my room is not bugged."

"What?" I felt dread mounting in my stomach. I stared at the tiny transmitting device. Had we escaped one dictator's domain just to enter another's?

"It's possible that your father did not authorize this," he said. "There may be spies."

"It is turned off, isn't it?" I asked, looking closely at the tiny device.

"Yes," he answered.

"Okay," I said, taking a deep breath. I still wanted to know what Xander had been doing. "Why were you flying?"

"I'm practicing so I can get out of here before your father's army attacks. I want to see if I can do this myself. I'd save a lot of lives if I pulled it off." He looked at me for a moment. "You're not going to tell anyone this, are you?"

"No..." I said, after hesitating for a moment. "How do you plan to bring down the entire government of the Republic by yourself?"

"If you pull out the base, the whole tower falls."

"You're not planing on killing your brother are you?"

"Of course not. But I could capture him. I don't think anyone under him knows enough to hold the Republic together for long."

"Xander, it's impossible."

"Not if you help me."

I sat for a moment, taking in his request. I went over everything I had learned in the last couple of days. Xander was not crazy, someone was placing bugs in the rooms here, and Xander was planning to bring down the Republic by himself. It was crazier than his escape plan, but we had pulled off the escape.

"Yes," I said, almost more surprised than he was at my answer. "I'm not sure if I agree with you, but I did read some of the book, and I realize that you might be right, so I'll come with you. Anyway, I think you're just as likely to succeed as they are."

Xander looked at me and smiled. "Let's do some planning."

The attack was taking place in five days. Xander and I still went to the strategy meetings, and I did my best to argue against Xander like I had been, so no one would catch wind of our plot.

After two more days of debate, they settled on one of the better of the strategies, which despite Xander's protests included killing several guards.

"It doesn't matter anyway," he told me afterwards. "In a few days they won't need any strategy at all."

"Or we'll be dead." *I guess I am a little bit of a pessimist*, I thought, *but it's better to expect the worst so that I'm disappointed when things don't go the way I planned.*

"Let's hope not," Xander replied.

That night Xander and I snuck out into a hall that he had carefully examined and certified bug-free.

"I don't see how we're going to get our supplies," I told Xander. "That book says not to lie or steal."

"I forgot to tell you," Xander said, grinning. "I *happen* to have become very good friends with Colonel Saunders, who *happens* to be second in command, and has control over the weapons chamber, the supply room, and the hoverplanes."

Obviously, Xander had been planning for a while. "Well," I replied, "what else do we need to plan?"

"Not much," he answered. "Actually, tonight we're telling the Colonel about our plan. I'm fairly certain that whoever planted the bugs had no association with him, so he will probably help us."

"Let's go then," I said.

Ten minutes later, we were in Colonel Saunders' office explaining our plan to him. His brow furrowed and un-furrowed so many times that it looked like a wave rising and falling in the ocean.

"Fine," he said, after we had finished, "I'll help you, but you need to stay in communication with me so I can get you out if you have trouble."

"It wouldn't work," Xander answered, "the forcefield blocks all radio waves."

Saunders looked worried. "I'm not sure. I don't want to put you in danger."

"They were planning on letting us fight anyway," I pleaded. We had to have him on our side.

"Fine," he said again. "When do you need the supplies?"

"Have the hoverplane packed and ready to fly by 0200," Xander answered. I was about to ask why we were leaving so soon, but then I realized that the people here would be preparing, also. It would get harder and harder to get all of the supplies together.

"I won't be able to stay to see you off, but the supplies will be there."

We thanked him profusely and left while he muttered something about crazy kids and secrets. We went to Xander's room. His parents were both asleep, so after Xander left them a note and packed his things, we hurried off to my room. My father was

at a long, late night meeting, so I also left a note in a place where he would find it in the morning, since he was sure to find us out anyway. It's hard to borrow a hoverplane without anyone noticing.

We walked around until we found a deserted nook near the hoverplane hangar. We waited for three hours and then snuck towards the door, being careful to tread lightly. Father would not be happy if he found us trying to sneak away.

I thought I heard footsteps behind me, but I figured it was just my imagination. A few seconds later, they started getting unmistakably louder. I spun around and saw a large, shadowy form coming towards us. When he noticed that I had seen him, he quickened his pace.

"Run!" I yelled to Xander. He jerked his head around long enough to see the big man charging towards us and then ran. The doctors had been working on our wounds some more, so my foot was fully operational. We sprinted to the hovercraft sitting nearest the entrance of the hanger and Xander hopped in. I started to follow, but he yelled for me to open the hangar door.

I looked around frantically for a lever, and finally spotted one near the huge door. I ran for it as quickly as I could and pulled it. Just after I did, Xander got the hoverplane's engine started and took it up a few feet into the air. As he slowly glided by through the entrance, I dove for the open door and landed inside. After I shut the door I looked back to see where the man who had been chasing us was. I didn't see him, but then I noticed something else. One of the other hoverplanes was rising off the ground and gliding out of the entrance.

"Go!" I yelled at Xander.

He glanced at the mirror above the windshield and then yanked the throttle back. The hoverplane's engine choked for a few seconds, and then accelerated so fast I was thrown into the wall at the back. After a few moments I carefully made my way back up to the co-pilot's seat.

"Can you turn on the tail camera?" Xander asked.

After examining the buttons for a few seconds I found the one labeled 'Tail Camera' and pushed it. A small holographic image materialized over the button. At first I couldn't see much, but as the holo brightened, I made out the shape of a hoverplane rocketing through the air behind us.

"He's gaining," I told Xander, who looked over at the holo to confirm what I had said. "Is there anyway to make it go faster?"

"There is," Xander said. "But it's only been tested twice. Fortunately, one of those testers was me."

Xander took one last look at the holo, pushed a few buttons, and then got out of the pilot's seat. Autopilot was among the buttons he had pushed, so I followed him to the back. He examined the boxes that the Colonel had packed. Finally he opened one, pulled out two bulky flight suits, and tossed one to me.

"These are anti-pressure suits. They help decrease illness after flight and keep you from getting these," he said, gesturing to his arm. We both put them on and headed to the front again. The other hoverplane was still behind us, and getting closer.

"What does he plan to do if he catches up? We're going two hundred miles an hour."

Xander ignored my question and sat down in the pilot's seat after. "You might want to strap yourself in."

I sat down and fastened the straps. After Xander switched off the autopilot, he yanked a plastic cover off the side of the chair and typed a combination into the keypad under it. A small button emerged near the throttle, but Xander ignored it.

"Why haven't you pushed it yet?"

"We're going to swing around so we're facing north before I hit it. We don't want the Republic's anti-aircraft guns aiming at us." As soon as he finished talking, he swung the hoverplane around a hundred and eighty degrees. The pilot behind us

swung around as well, slightly less smoothly than Xander had, but he was still close behind.

"Okay, get ready," Xander said, positioning his finger over the button. I braced myself against my seat and waited for him to push it.

"What are you waiting for?" I asked.

Xander wasn't moving, he was just sitting and staring at the button. "It didn't work." He looked at me with fear in his eyes. I started to panic. We were going to be caught.... I slowed my breathing and tried to relax. There had to be something I could do. Then I remembered Colonel Saunders parachuting out of the hoverplane.

"I have an idea," I said. "Where were you planning on parking this thing?"

"I was going to fly it to the capital. They have a hovercraft entrance in the roof of the dome there."

"Okay," I answered. "Turn around and fly us there."

Xander raised an eyebrow, shrugged, and spun us around again. I got out of my seat and went to the back of the hoverplane. I searched through all the compartments and finally found the parachutes in lowest one on the right. There were four, two white and two dark grey. I chose the dark ones so we wouldn't be easy to see. Then I gathered all the supplies we would need into two backpacks and brought them to the edge of the hatch in the floor.

"Thirty minutes to target," Xander said in a monotone voice. We both laughed.

"Hopefully the pilot behind us doesn't get tired of chasing us and start shooting." Xander nodded as he banked right to avoid a low, thick cloud. As he did, I glanced at the holo just in time to see the hoverplane in the image explode.

Our hoverplane shook with the impact and pieces of shrapnel pounded the back and the wings.

"What happened?" Xander yelled, looking at the holo.

"Ground-to-air missile," I answered. "The pilot didn't have time to eject." Even though the man had been trying to catch us, I had to feel sorry for him.

"Turn off the normal lights and turn on the darklights. They'll be good enough for us and they're extremely hard to spot at a distance."

While I was up, Xander suddenly increased his speed and swerved to the left just before a missile roared through the empty air where our hoverplane had been two seconds before. I flipped the LEDs off and the darklights on and quickly ran back to my seat.

Instead of increasing our speed, Xander slowed down. "Grab a smoke grenade out of my pack," he said. I climbed out of my seat and got one. "I want you to open the door and throw it at whatever they shoot at us next. If you hit in on the tip it will be heavy enough the detonate the missile."

I moved over to the door the hoverplane. Our speed was slower now, but we were still going at least a hundred miles an hour. I forced the door open and then held it with my knee while I prepared to throw. I waited for two minutes, and then Xander swerved to the right. I saw a blur of steel hurtling towards us and threw.

As soon as I did, Xander accelerated, I jerked my leg out of the doorway. It slammed shut as the explosion rattled the hoverplane. I heard a few debris slam into the hoverplane, but not enough to do serious damage. Xander was now flying full speed, hoping that when the smoke cleared we would be far enough away to confuse the missile launchers into thinking they had hit us.

We flew for another fifteen minutes, and then saw the sprawling city of El Paso, the capital of the Republic, looming beneath us. I couldn't see it well since my vision was distorted by the dark and by the forcefield, but I could tell that it was much larger than Section Four.

"You see the opening yet?" I asked Xander.

Xander pointed ahead and a little to the right. It took me a minute, but I finally saw the chink of empty space staring out of the force field.

"I think this would be a good place to ditch the hoverplane," I said.

"That's what I was thinking, too," Xander said. "Get your parachute on."

As I attached the parachute to my flight suit Xander messed with some settings on the control panel. When he was satisfied, he maneuvered the hoverplane into a spot directly over the hole, and then put his parachute on.

"We have ten seconds, then autopilot turns on and takes anyone who sees it on a wild goose chase," Xander said, and then grinned. "Here we go."

We slung on our backpacks and threw open the hatch. I jumped first, then Xander, pulling the hatch shut behind him. Xander had placed us well, and we fell right through the center of the entrance.

As we fell I surveyed the city. It was like Section Four, except for that there were seven large buildings in the center of the town instead of three. The tallest one was ringed by the six others. Xander had told me that one was the Command Building, where the president lived and worked, and also where the armory was. That's where we were going. We would be landing about four miles from the building, so we would need to hurry if we expected to get done before morning.

Just as I heard the hoverplane engine roar as it took off by itself, Xander opened his parachute. I did the same and we glided slowly down to earth. As we landed we saw an explosion in the distance.

"That was faster than I thought," Xander said.

"Well, at least now they think we're dead. Again."

Xander unstrapped his parachute and stuffed it in his bag. Then he smiled at me again and said, "Let's go."

While we jogged on, Xander pulled a small radio out of his backpack and switched it on. It crackled quietly and then a voice slowly faded in.

"What's that?" I whispered.

"Radio," he answered. "It picks up the government's private wavelengths."

"—escaped," the voice was saying. "They must have gotten out of the hoverplane and put it on autopilot. We didn't find any bodies." Xander quickened his pace.

"Or they had it on autopilot the whole time," said a new voice. I looked at Xander.

"Did you say something?"

"No," Xander said. "That was my brother."

"I didn't realize that you would sound so much alike."

The voices on the radio continued. "All the same, we'd better keep an eye on the area. Send out a few hoverplanes to survey the area. Silencers on. If they're in here, we don't want them to know we are looking for them."

Hoverplanes with engine silencers? That was dangerous. It was dark and hard to see anything very far away, so noise was the main thing that we would have relied on to tell us if a hoverplane was coming.

"What are we going to do about that?" I asked.

"Pay attention and stay away from open areas," Xander whispered. "We're going to be fine." He didn't sound very sure of what he had said, but I didn't mention it.

We walked in silence for another few tense minutes before the first hoverplane buzzed overhead, only about ten yards above the street. It was about as loud as a gnat. The only good thing was, even though darklights lights are invisible at long distances, we could see them easily.

"Back against that house and stay low," Xander said just before another hoverplane flew by. "How many do you think there are out here?" I asked.

"Probably somewhere between three and five. The cameras are very good, so they don't need to use too many of them."

We ducked under the eaves of a house again as a third hoverplane flew over. Under normal circumstances it would have taken an hour or so to get to the buildings. At this rate, though, it would take about five.

Hoverplane after hoverplane flew over and then circled back to buzz the city again. "This isn't working," I said to Xander, "what are we going to do? Could we ask someone here for help?"

"The people in the capital aren't the same as the ones we know," Xander whispered. "They are treated better and they dislike the government less. We would be lucky to find one who would turn us out instead of sending us to the guards or killing us on sight."

Everything we had planned and all the possibilities of escape seemed to be falling apart. We should have just stayed where we were.

Suddenly another hoverplane flew over, so low it almost grazed the rooftops. As soon as it did it circled back around and slowed its speed.

"They've seen us," I said to Xander, starting to panic again, "what do we do?"

"See that house across from us?" Xander said calmly, subtly pointing with one of his fingers. "It's empty. We're going to run into the alley behind the houses and then break into the back door."

I didn't see how he could know it was empty, or what this was going to do besides delay our capture a few minutes, but Xander seemed to have a plan. The hoverplane poised in the air over the street, and then started descending.

"Now!" Xander yelled, and we ran. He made for the area between the two houses to the right of the empty one, and we ran through it. As soon as we were in the alley he changed directions and sprinted to the back door of the house, where he started picking the lock. The hoverplane behind us had landed in the street and the soldiers that had been inside were now chasing us.

"Hurry!" I whispered urgently. "They're almost in the alley."

After a few more seconds Xander popped the lock and opened the door. As soon as we were inside he relocked the door and slung off his backpack.

"There's a gas mask in your pack," he said as he pulled out his own. "Put it on."

I found the mask and secured it on my face just as the soldiers started pounding on the door.

"Ready?" Xander said, pulling a small tube of knockout gas from his pack and securing some kind of nozzle on the top.

"Ready," I answered.

After trying to beat the door down, the soldiers gave up and blasted the lock with their machine guns. After the lock was demolished, they swung the door open. As they did, Xander let loose the knockout gas. As soon as the soldiers entered the room, they dropped to the floor.

"Let's go," Xander said. We ran back out into the street, but found the hoverplane gone. Evidently there had been another soldier flying it. Xander stomped in frustration and then headed back into the alleyway and we headed south. After we had been running several minutes another hoverplane flew overhead and we pinned ourselves against the wall of a house. A few seconds after we did, a holoscreen inside flickered to life.

The window was too thick to hear anything, but we saw them showing a picture of us.

"That picture isn't from tonight," I said, "which means they've identified us as the kids that escaped from Section Four. Not that it makes any difference."

"Now everyone in the whole city is after us," Xander said, frowning. "Got any ideas?"

I scanned the sky for another hoverplane. My view was obscured by the roofs of the nearby houses, but I didn't see any. "They must be deploying ground troops now that they've located us." I glanced up again and noticed how small the distance between the roofs was. Xander saw what I was looking at and nodded.

We looked around the house until we found a window ledge that was low enough to get onto but high enough that we could snag the edge of the roof. Xander and I ditched our packs and our flight suits, carrying only a few smoke grenades and cans of knockout gas in our coat pockets. When we were finished we climbed up the gutter pipe and started running along the roofs.

The houses were all close together and the intersections were few and far between, so it would be hard for anyone to see us. We ran for almost an hour, dodging air conditioning systems, jumping gaps, and climbing down to stealthily cross roads.

Just as we were climbing up another roof after crossing a street, Xander's radio started crackling again.

"Send out a notice," the voice said, "tell everyone to secure their houses before we drop the sedative."

Xander glanced at me, looking puzzled. We held each other's gaze for several moments, both trying to figure out how they were going to cover an entire city with sedative, and what we were going to do about it. "How are they going to...?" Xander began to wonder out loud, and then trailed off, looking towards the armory where five hoverplanes were taking off.

"Have you notified them?" Said the same person on the radio.

"Yes, sir," said another voice.

"Ten seconds," said the first voice. "Nine, eight, seven..."

Xander dropped off the roof of the house and started trying to pick the lock on the back door. I followed, wanting to slap myself for not bringing the gas masks.

"Four, three, two..." Said the voice as the hoverplanes spread out over the city.

"One, zero."

Xander jiggled the lock frantically, but it wouldn't pop. I looked at the sky again. A green mist was coming down from the hoverplanes and settling over the city.

"Hurry," I slurred. Then my knees gave out, and I dropped to the ground.

I woke up with a boot pinning me to the ground. I panicked and tried to scramble away, but the boot wouldn't move.

"The girl's awake," said the soldier who was holding me down.

"Knock her back out and get some handcuffs on her," another voice replied, evidently whoever was in charge.

"Yes, sir," said the soldier. He opened a small tube, dropping some of the same green mist on me that had knocked us out before. I was dimly aware of some handcuffs being fastened around my wrists as I lost consciousness.

When I woke again, I had a headache. It was fairly dark, but there was a little light coming from what seemed to be a small lamp in the ceiling. I was alone. Where was Xander? I started to panic again but then I realized that they obviously wouldn't let us share a cell.

The question now, of course, was how to get out of here. There was a small chance that my father would find us and rescue us, but it would be almost impossible. By failing, we had definitely made the rebels' plan more unlikely to succeed. The Republic would be on the lookout.

I started thinking back to our escape. Who had been chasing us in that other hovercraft? I could think of two possibilities. One, someone in the resistance had seen us and was coming to try to stop us because they thought we would get killed. Two, the person was a Republic spy, as I had originally thought. Thinking back, I didn't think I was right. If he had been a spy for the Republic, he would have blown us out of the air.

Who was it then? The man was big, possibly Colonel Saunders or.... I froze, a sense of dread building in my stomach. Was it possible? I thought back to my memories from the last week. Yes, the shapes matched, there could be no doubt about it. I curled up on stone floor and cried. It was Father. He had tried to protect us, but he was dead now.

Gone. Forever.

Would it never stop? The Republic was going to kill a lot of people before this was over. Everyone who died was someone's father or mother or child. Maybe I had been right. Maybe it was better to kill as many people associated with the government as possible. But Xander....

Never mind about Xander! I almost screamed at myself. *I don't care what he thinks or what that book says. I'm going to....* My thoughts trailed off as I remembered that most of the Republic soldiers had families. *Would it be right to....* It was all too confusing. I tried to sleep.

I woke to an insistent shaking on my shoulders. I opened my eyes.

"What?" I said with shock when I saw Xander kneeling next to me. "How di—" my words were cut short as he clamped a hand over my mouth. When I stopped trying to talk, he moved his hand and motioned towards a hole in the roof. Apparently, even though the floor and the walls were stone, the roof was only wood.

I let Xander get up on my shoulders and crawl up into the hole, and then he reached down and pulled me up. He replaced the boards as well as he could, and then we crawled off.

"How did you get out?" I asked.

"Not here," he whispered back.

There was no light in the ceiling so I followed the faint sound of Xander's legs dragging against the ground. We crawled for some time before Xander stopped. He held a finger to my lips and then started removing something from the roof below us. I felt it again and found that it was now some kind of tile. After Xander had pried one up, he dropped to the floor as quietly as he could and motioned for me to do the same.

As soon as I had dropped, I looked around. There was a solid wall on one side, and a window in the other. The window overlooked six other huge buildings. Five were the same, symmetrically surrounding a larger building in the middle. I stood looking until I felt Xander pulling at my pant leg. He was frantically motioning for me to get down. I dropped down next to him.

"Those are windows," he said with some annoyance. "You can see into them as easily as you can out of them."

"Sorry," I said, embarrassed.

We stayed low but moved as quickly as possible. Finally we came to a turn and walked into a different hall, where both walls were lined with doors. Xander stood and tiptoed down the hall until we came to an elevator. We both got into it and Xander hit a button. No lasers and crowbars this time. The elevator glided smoothly upward.

"Aren't you worried that someone will see us?" I whispered.

"Yes," he answered, "but we don't have any other option."

We were lucky enough not to get caught on the elevator, and Xander led me into a bridge with glass sides and roof. Soon I realized that the six buildings were connected by the bridges, and that in the middle of each one, there was another one

connecting it to the main building. It was quite similar to the arrangement in Section Four. As we reached the end of the bridge, I realized that it led into the Command Center.

So, we were still following the plan. It had been delayed, but it was going along quite nicely again. As soon as we were across the bridge, Xander started running.

"Aren't you worried someone will hear us?" I questioned as we ran.

"No," he said, louder than he had been talking before. "The only person here is the president, maybe one guard, and he lives on the top floor. The rest of this is military storage, and they have a machine that can bring any of it down to the bottom floor."

"How do you know all this?" I asked.

"I did some reading last week," he answered. "They had a lot of stuff about it at the resistance headquarters." We came to another elevator and Xander got in. "You're going to need to be quiet again," he said. "We're going to come up on his floor, and he probably does have a guard."

"How are we going to deal with the guard?" I asked.

In answer, Xander pulled a tube of the Republic's knockout gas from his pocket. He'd been busy.

The elevator slowed to a stop and the door opened. Xander winced as it let out a chiming noise to notify the president – Xander's brother, I should say – of our arrival. Xander turned left, which was the only way we could go since there was a wall on the right, and we walked down the hall. The curved walls made it impossible to find anywhere to hide.

We had walked about halfway around the building when we heard footsteps in front of us. Xander motioned for me to stop and kept going forwards. I heard a quiet scuffle, and then Xander returned, holding the guard's gun and waved for me to follow. He broke one of the windows and emptied the gun's clip into the hole. Then he replaced the clip and we continued down the hall. Twenty paces later we spotted a door to the left.

Xander stopped and listened. Then he moved towards the door and slowly turned the handle. We walked in, Xander holding the empty gun. We turned slowly around and saw nothing.

I heard a rustle of movement from behind us. I nudged Xander and we both turned in time to see a black blur flying towards us from behind the door. It slammed into Xander and grabbed the gun.

The boy – he couldn't be older than eighteen – picked himself up off the ground. He pointed the gun at Xander. "You're not as smart as you think, little brother."

Xander picked himself up and looked at the president.

"I have cameras spread through all the buildings," Xander's brother said, "I've known where you were for a few minutes now."

I tried to edge closer to Xander's brother to see if I could grab him, but he swung the gun point towards me. I stepped back and tried to come up with some kind of solution. I couldn't think of anything. The only thing going for us was that Xander's brother might not know that the gun wasn't loaded, if he didn't have any cameras in his hall.

"What's your name?" Xander asked.

"That's no business of yours," answered Xander's brother.

"Yes," said Xander, "It is. I'm your brother, and Mother and Father—"

"They're dead, and I'm glad they are. I've been raised well here, far better than they could have done."

Xander shook his head and sighed. "How could you say that? Our parents were—"

"Enough!" yelled Xander's brother. I had been scanning the room for an escape while he was distracted with Xander, but I hadn't seen anything. "I want you both to walk over to those chairs right there and sit down."

We obeyed, and the President walked over to his desk where a radio was sitting, gun still in hand. As soon as his back was turned, Xander nodded to me and we began following him. The room was large, so we were able to catch up with him before he reached the desk. Apparently he wasn't paying close attention because he thought the gun was still loaded. When he was about five feet away from where he was headed, I accidentally stepped on a piece of paper which had been lying on the floor.

Xander's brother spun around and pointed his gun at me. "I told you to go sit in the chair." I didn't budge. He stood still for a moment, considering, and then pulled the trigger. Nothing happened, of course. He paused for a moment, staring at the gun. In the split second that he was still, Xander leaped onto him, knocking him to the floor.

The boy was about eight inches taller than Xander was, so it wasn't a fair fight. I realized that even if I helped, he would overpower us both in a matter of time. So instead of following Xander I ran to the desk and grabbed the radio, then bolted for the nearest window.

"No!" Xander's brother yelled, freeing himself and running after me. I threw the radio at the window, which exploded into a hundred tiny pieces as the the radio passed through it. The President didn't slow down, though, he kept sprinting straight for me. Just before he reached me I realized that he didn't intend to slow down. He wanted to knock me out of the window. I sidestepped him and he skidded to a halt just before he crashed through the remaining glass. I looked back at Xander to see what he

was doing. While his brother and I had been busy, he had locked and barricaded the door.

"Gale!" he yelled, starting towards me, "Get the gun!" I wasn't sure why he wanted me to do it, but I trusted him, and it was possible that his brother still thought the gun was loaded, and it had only jammed.

I altered my course and sprinted towards the gun, Xander's brother hard on my heels. Xander had picked up the base of a holo and was apparently preparing to throw it at his brother. I reached the gun right as Xander's brother was reaching out to grab me. As soon as I had it in my hands, I dove to the floor and Xander threw. The holo-base smashed into his brother's head and he fell over unconscious.

I sat on the floor, regaining my breath, and then stood up and walked over to Xander. "What do we do know?"

"First thing is to gas him," he said, gesturing towards his brother, "so he'll stay out for a couple of hours. Then we try to get down to the hangar."

Xander pulled out another tube from his pocket and walked over to his brother. He unscrewed it and let the green mist fall over his brother's face. I started to follow Xander so I could help him carry his brother, but I stepped on the piece of paper again. I picked it up and read it. Some sort of legal document. Then something caught my eye.

"Xander," I said, "here's his name."

"What is it?" Xander asked, recapping the tube and tossing it onto the floor.

"Edward."

"That sounds about right," Xander replied. "Or, it would if he wasn't like this." He stared sadly down at his brother. "I wonder who kidnapped him?"

"We can try to figure that out later," I said. "Right now we need to get down to the armory and find a hoverplane."

I walked over to Xander's brother and we each took one arm over a shoulder. We dragged him to the door and then Xander moved the chair that had been blocking it, and then we started to drag him into the hall.

"Wait a second," Xander said, and rushed back into his brother's room. While he was gone the lights went out.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I cut off all the electricity to the buildings," Xander said. "It might create enough disturbance for us to get into the armory without being seen."

We had to cross over to another building, use the stairs to get to the ground floor, and walk to the Command Center because the armory didn't connect with his office. There were more people in the hall than usual because of the power outage and we were almost spotted several times. When we finally got down to the armory, though, we found it empty. Xander used the computer – which thankfully had a different pow-

er source – to call down a hoverplane. We were barely able to hoist Edward into it, and when we did we had even more trouble trying to figure out where to put him. Finally, we settled him down behind Xander's seat and tied him to it using a coil of rope we found in the back. Xander drove the hoverplane to the entrance of the hangar, which opened automatically when we approached.

Xander lifted the hoverplane off the ground and through the door. We flew over the city for a few minutes, unchallenged, and then lifted through the hole in the top of the forcefield. As soon as we were out, Xander shoved the throttle forward and we sped towards the mountain in the distance.

After an hour of flying Xander applied another dose of the knockout gas to his brother and then climbed back into his seat.

"That was too easy," he said, glancing around nervously.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"They didn't fire at us or send anyone after us. Nothing."

"You took out most the power supply, so unless their other weapons had a different power source like the computer in the armory, they probably can't use any of their missile launchers or radar."

"No, someone must have figured out what happened pretty quickly and fixed the problem. I expected to have to be dodging missiles within the first fifteen minutes, but it's been half an hour and we haven't seen a thing."

I looked out the window to see Section Four speeding by below us. After that I happened to glance out Xander's side window towards the western mountains. I sucked in my breath.

"That's why," I said, gesturing towards the west. Xander looked, too, and swerved east. Coming from the west was a fleet of drones, hundreds strong.

I had seen drones before in some videos that they shown during school, but I had never seen one in real life. They were small, not much bigger than a human, but they were packed with weapons.

"Gale," Xander said, "we're going to have to do something crazy."

"Okay," I said hesitantly. Crazy was starting to become normal life.

"I don't know what this button is, but it seems to be a speed boost. If it is, we have to use it. There's a good chance that we'll both black out."

"I don't care as long as we get away from those drones," I said, glancing out the window again.

"Okay then," said Xander, "strap yourself in."

I fastened the several sets of straps that were hanging from the seat and then told Xander I was ready. He placed one hand over the speed boost and one hand over the autopilot.

"As soon as I boost the speed I'm going to hit autopilot so we don't crash if we both go unconscious," he explained. He adjusted our course slightly, pointing the nose of the craft to the left of the mountain, and then hit the booster.

It was, as he had thought, a speed booster, but it was much more powerful than either of us had expected. My eyes went dark and I hoped that Xander had been able to hit the autopilot before he blacked out as well. Then I lost control of everything, and slipped into the black hole of unconsciousness.

I woke up confused. Why weren't we moving? I looked out the window and saw that it was night. I couldn't see much besides that because it was cloudy.

"Xander," I whispered. "Xander, wake up." He didn't hear, so I shook his arm. He stirred, and then sat up.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"No idea," I answered, "but at least we're not dead."

Xander rubbed his eyes and then punched a few buttons. A spot light shone out of the front of the hoverplane.

"Apparently autopilot landed us," Xander said, surveying the ground on which the hoverplane was now sitting. "Which can only mean we're out of fuel. And the only way that we could be out of fuel is if we flew very long way."

I stared out at the landscape in front of us. A lot of open area covered with yellow grass, and a few scrubby trees. For some reason it felt familiar. I got off of my seat and headed for the door. "I want to look around."

I hopped down off the hoverplane and scanned the area. I saw pretty much the same thing I had seen out of the windshield of the hoverplane. Except for the house standing right next to one of the hoverplane's wings. I walked over and looked through a window. It had obviously been deserted for several years. The landscape told me we were in Texas. I'd seen some pictures of different states at school and in the few books that had been available to me in Section Four.

"Hey," I called to Xander, who had just gotten out of the hoverplane. "Look at this."

We both walked around to the front door, and I turned the handle. Surprisingly, it was unlocked. We walked in, and suddenly I knew why the area had looked so familiar. A flood of memories which I had not known I had until this moment, rushed forward and all vied for my attention.

"Xander," I said, "how does autopilot work?"

"Well," he said, stepping forward to examine a shelf full of books, "it just keeps going in the direction that you last steered it, and keeps the hoverplane from crashing. Unless you program it. Then it will take you to a specific destination. Why do you ask?"

"Because," I said, "This is my house."

"What?" Xander spun around and looked at me. "That's impossible, the autopilot couldn't..."

"I know. No one in the Republic would program it to come here."

"What if the people back at the mountain hacked the system when they found out we were in there? Your father could do it."

I slumped down to the floor and leaned against the wall. He didn't know. "Father's dead," I said, my voice cracking. "He was the one behind us in the other hoverplane."

Xander sat down next to me. I put my head on his shoulder as silent tears flowed down. "We've got to stop them," Xander said.

"How?" I asked. "We probably aren't even going to survive ourselves. Our hoverplane is out of fuel, and we have no food or water."

"We still have one day until the attack. We still have time to stop this war." Xander stood up and dusted off a painting I had noticed on the wall. He smiled faintly, took it off the wall, and handed it to me. It was a painting of Father and Mother. I had only been looking at it for a few seconds when I was interrupted by a grinding noise coming from the floor a few feet away.

I jumped up, stilling clutching the picture. "What's that?"

"That," said Xander, "Is my plan."

A large portion of the floor was descending, and I noticed the wall to our right was lowering to the ground and the roof was opening. Something had changed places with the floor piece that had gone down into the hole, and it was now coming up. A small hoverplane rose out of the hole. I looked over to where Xander was standing and saw a small lever where the picture had been.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"I didn't. But I figured that in your father's house, there was bound to be something like that. I just happened to look in the right spot."

The metal plate the hoverplane was sitting on locked into place. Xander stepped forward and examined it. "It's old," he said, "but it will work."

We went back to the other hoverplane and grabbed all of our things. Xander used some more of the knockout gas on Edward, who had woken up and was trying to free his wrists, and then we hauled him to the other hoverplane. I picked up the painting, which I had left on the floor.

Xander opened the door and then turned around and looked at me. "You still with me?" he asked.

"Of course," I answered. I walked to the hoverplane and stepped in.

"Let's go stop a war," he said.

An hour later we were cruising over the Texas landscape towards the dim outline of a mountain range – our mountain range – in the distance. We hadn't talked much since we left my house, so I had been thinking.

"Can the Republic fight without your brother?"

"That's easy," Xander said. "No one ever actually sees the president, so the high-ups just pretend like he's still there and give orders like they're from him. There are going to be a lot more casualties if the war actually happens. Your father and my brother were both master strategists, and they both realized that the human race is in danger. There are only about fifty thousand people left. Though they were willing to take life, they wouldn't do it unnecessarily."

"But their subordinates," I answered, continuing his thought, "won't think about that. Correct?" I felt a dull ache at the mention of Father.

"Yes," Xander replied.

I was even more determined to help Xander now than before. It hadn't occurred to me that a large scale war could kill off everyone. The outline of the mountain range was beginning to take on more three dimensional qualities as we flew closer. The tops of most of them were now blanketed in white.

"It snowed last night," Xander said.

"It's beautiful," I whispered. I looked out the windows, watching the mountains get nearer until I was watching the snowy forest rush by under us. Once in a while I even saw a deer running through the snow.

"I wish we could show this to everyone," I said. After we settled the Republic, I planned to do just that.

"So," I asked, turning my thoughts back to more pressing matters, "What's the plan?"

"We're going to try talking to him first," Xander said, gesturing behind his seat.

"A lot of good that will do," I answered, rolling my eyes.

"We've got to try it," Xander said. "If we can convince him to help us than it will make things a lot easier."

"Fine," I replied, "I'll wake him up." I got out of my seat and walked over to Xander's brother. I nudged his shoulder with my boot, none to gently. Edward opened his eyes and strained against the ropes, trying to stare out the windows. I shoved him roughly back against the seat.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Flying over the southeastern part of New Mexico," Xander answered, not taking his eyes away from the windshield. "We need your help."

Edward laughed. "Why should I help you?"

"Because you, better than almost anyone else, know the risk of extinction. You are gone, and someone else will be leading the battle when the Republic is attacked. Gale's father," Xander said, with a look of apology towards me, "was killed by a Republic missile. Not many with the resistance understand the problem either. We need you to help us speak to everyone."

Edward considered this for a moment. "No," he said. "There will be losses, but my side will win in the end. There are too many of us for your people to defeat." He was lying, trying to make us think he didn't care.

"Your side may win," I answered, "but you won't."

"What do you mean?" A small flash of panic crossed his face. I smiled inwardly. This was something I could work with. "If you were planning on killing me, you would have already."

"We know places to hide you," I answered. "If we were killed and the Republic won, you would never be found." Xander shot me a warning glance, but Edward didn't see it.

"Fine," he said, sulking. "I'll do it. Whatever you want."

"Thank you," I replied. Xander shot me a look of disapproval, but then he shrugged and smiled. I smiled back.

"Do you know how to get into the override broadcasting system?" Xander asked.

"Yes," Edward answered. "Just give me the holo and I'll do it."

Xander rolled his eyes. "We're not that dumb," I said. "You aren't going to touch the holo, you're just going to tell us how to do it."

"Just pull up the command prompt and type 'sdiq212' and the broadcast will start," he answered, looking defeated. Xander frowned. I knew what he was thinking. That could send a message to the Republic, telling them that their leader was in danger. But it was worth the risk. If Xander's brother actually intended to cooperate, he could save hundreds of lives.

"What's two hundred twelve for?" I asked.

"Not two hundred twelve," Edward replied, "February twelfth. That's the day I took over."

"Exactly ten years ago today," I said, glancing at the date on the holo to confirm the date.

"Let's see if we can give this date some new history," Xander said, pointing the camera on the holo stand towards Edward and quickly typing the code. "You're live."

"Citizens of the Republic, and anyone in the resistance movement who is listening," Edward said, "this is your president speaking. I am here to tell you that we should avoid war at all costs. There are approximately fifty thousand people left in the world, and we could easily go extinct if a large war was to take place. I will now give a few instructions in case a war does occur." Here, for some reason Edward began speaking in a rather odd tone of voice. "Help any wounded people. In the Republic, open the hospitals free of charge. Hoverplane rides should be given by the military to anyone in need of urgent help. Mountains are not an option, even if the forcefield is breached, stay where you are."

Edward nodded to Xander, and he switched the broadcast off. Xander appeared satisfied, but I had an uneasy feeling. What was it about that second part? The first words didn't quite belong, it was almost like.... I played his message back over in my head. I was right, there was something in there, the first words of every sentence. Help. In. Hoverplane. Mountains. Soon every hoverplane in the Republic would be scouring the mountains for rebel aircraft.

I walked over to Xander and put my mouth to his ear. "There was a message in his speech. 'Help in hoverplane mountains.' We're going to have company in an hour or so."

Comprehension flashed across Xander's face. Apparently he had been thinking the same thing I had.

"We need to knock him out again and get out of here," Xander whispered back.

"We're out of knockout gas."

"I found some more in the back."

Edward was obviously worried about our whispered conversation. Xander walked to the back of the hoverplane and pulled out a tube of gas. Edward groaned.

As soon as Xander had done his work he got back into the pilot's seat and accelerated.

"I want to help him," Xander said.

"Why would you want to? From what I can tell, the thing he wants most at the moment is revenge."

"You're right," Xander answered, "but I still want to help."

"Where are we going?" I asked, changing the subject.

"To the capital."

Up to this point, Xander's plans had come out all right in the end, but this one seemed like suicide.

"Are you crazy?" I asked, louder than I meant to. "We have your brother with us. If he gets loose again, this whole thing has been for nothing!"

"I probably am crazy," Xander said, "but I'm guessing that everyone who isn't searching for my brother is at home cowering in their bedrooms, since the buildings in the city center would be the obvious main target for any attack."

"So it would be safe to blast them," I answered, finally understanding.

"Right," Xander said, "and all their weapons are in that center building."

"Only one problem though," I replied. "For some reason this thing is only equipped with long range missiles, which would go right through the buildings and destroy the houses beyond. And you can't do it from above, the forcefield is too low in that area. And those drones are still out there. There's no way we'll get past them."

"I know," Xander said. "That's why you aren't coming."

Before what he said had time to sink in, he had his gas tube out again, and I was losing consciousness.

I had no recollection of what happened next, but the security camera, which transmits its video to a cloud service somewhere, did. As soon as I was out, Xander fastened a parachute onto me and then put one on his brother. He then brought the hoverplane around and headed towards the resistance base. As soon as he was directly over the entrance, he opened the hatch and pushed me and his brother through the hole. We drifted to the ground, where we would almost certainly be spotted later by a guard coming out for duty at the lookout post, if we hadn't been seen already.

Xander made a big loop so as to come at the capital from a direction they wouldn't expect, and then took the hoverplane up as high as possible. When he was over the capital, he brought the hoverplane down through the opening and flew to the center. He had been using the radar to keep an eye on the missile launchers, and one opened while he was approaching the buildings. He stopped his hoverplane and parachuted out just before it was blown to bits.

Around that same time, I woke up. A guard was helping me inside. In a few seconds I remembered what had happened, and realized where I was. I broke free of the guard and raced through the halls, ignoring the shouts from behind me. I found the hangar, opened the large door at the front, and got in a hoverplane. I hadn't ever flown one before, but I had seen Xander fly and had the basic idea. I turned it on and pulled out, a little too quickly, and almost slammed into a rock wall. Before I did, I pulled the nose up and rocketed skyward. As soon as I got my bearings, I headed straight for the capital.

The waiting over the next hour was sickening. I had to dodge a missile once, and barely avoided being seen by a patrol of drones which had moved away from the main fleet, which was still in the west by the mountains. I got to the forcefield in time to see Xander's parachute was drifting to the ground. His roundabout route had cost him time. I kept the throttle on full, and climbed into the sky. As soon as I was high enough, I put the nose down and dived for the entrance. I made it through, but not without scraping my right wing on the forcefield. I leveled out as well as I could and made for the buildings in the distance.

It soon became clear that I could not keep flying like this. The wing was burning now, and the fire was slowly creeping up towards the body of the craft. I turned on autopilot and rushed to the back. I grabbed a parachute and opened the hatch. I jumped out and landed while my hoverplane spun out of control and finally was incin-

erated as it hit the force field on the south side of the city, thankfully missing all of the houses.

I ran as hard as I could, not bothering to use the roofs. I could barely see Xander approaching the cluster of buildings. He was opening the door to the armory when I burst out of the rows of houses and into the open area surrounding the government buildings. He shut the door before he saw me.

I got to the door before the building exploded. That was good. I opened it and started to rush up the maintenance stairs, but then I saw Xander at the computer.

"Xander!" I yelled. "Wait!"

He spun around and saw me. "What are you doing here?" he answered, "You're supposed to be safe!"

"I don't want to be safe," I said, "I want to be with you."

"You can't. It's too dangerous. I'm not sure if there will be time bombs, and—"

"I don't care!" I screamed at him. "Anyway, we have a better chance if we work together."

Xander wavered for a moment. "No. You're getting a hoverplane and leaving, now."

"I can't fly very well. I have a better chance here."

Xander was more frustrated than I had ever seen him. "Fine," he finally said, "but you do exactly what I say."

"Okay."

I was instructed to stay where I was while Xander got down the bomb he needed. When he finally selected one, it was lowered by a mechanism reaching up higher than I could see to the top of the armory. Xander carefully removed it and set it on a desk. He typed a few things in on a keypad and then pushed the chair back from the desk.

"Gale, open the hoverplane door. I'm going to call one down," Xander said, walking over to the computer. I found the lever and opened it while the hoverplane descended to the floor.

"Get ready," Xander said. "We're only going to have sixty seconds to get out of here before the whole thing blows, and I'm not even sure if the time mechanism will actually work. If we make it, the drones won't be a problem. The control computers are in here, so they'll all fall out of the sky as soon as the building blows up."

The mechanical arm that had been lowering the hoverplane set it on the floor, let go, and started rising back up to the top of the building. Xander nodded to me and then clicked a button on the bomb. We both bolted for the hoverplane, threw open a door, and jumped in. Xander turned it on and piloted it out as quickly as possible and headed straight for the top of the forcefield. I watched behind us to see the explo-

sion. Suddenly, Xander threw the engine into reverse and the hoverplane shot downwards. He righted it and we sped forwards again.

"What happened?" I asked.

"They closed the hole," Xander said. "We're going to have to try to explode the generator."

"You mean the force field generator?"

"Yes," answered Xander.

"Wait a minute," I said, starting to doubt our plan. "If the bomb goes off in there, it will set off all the other bombs. Won't it blow up everything?"

"The wall is bomb proof," Xander replied. "There will be a hole in the ground a few hundred feet deep, but no other damage outside of the building."

To prove his point, the bomb went off. The ground shook and the air rumbled, but nothing outside the building exploded.

"Almost there," Xander said, pointing at a large, boxy, metal object in front of us. It was about three times the size of a house, and there was a line on the top and on two sides where the force field was projected. "There are four," Xander told me, "But if we take out this one there will be a significant gap in this side."

Xander fired a missile and the box exploded, throwing pieces of shrapnel everywhere. The force field flickered, and then the section in front of us disappeared. Xander flew through.

"We did it," I said, smiling at Xander and then looking back at El Paso. "With all the Republic's weapons and their leader gone, we should have an easy time of it." I had never been so wrong in my life.

PART 2

I sat at a table across from Xander. We had been named the leaders of the revolution after my father's death, and since we were the only ones who believed in Mother's book, we didn't allow anyone else into the strategy meetings.

The last month had been dull. Hours of trying to figure out what to do with Xander's brother and how to defeat the Republic. We had destroyed their weapons supply, but there had been thirteen hoverplanes deployed at the time that we blew up the armory, and all of the soldiers still had their guns. The fleet of drones had gone dead when we blew up the armory, as we had predicted.

The obvious thing to do was use Edward as a hostage, since he was the president of the Republic and currently a prisoner of war, but no one seemed interested in getting him back.

"I don't understand it," Xander said. "The whole thing will eventually fall apart without him, but they won't give anything for him."

Whoever was running the Republic at this point apparently thought that either he could win the war on his own, or that the army would be able to rescue Edward. Either way they were stupid. Even though they still had some hoverplanes, weapons, and a numerical advantage, they knew that we were running the operations here. We told them that during the negotiations.

"Gale?" Xander said.

"Huh?" I answered, startled. "Oh, sorry, I was thinking about something else. What did you say?"

"I was just talking about the possibility of bombing their hoverplanes while they are on the ground. It's a while since there's been any action, and their security is starting to slack off."

I thought for a moment. "The problem is, they will figure out that we won't kill anyone, and as soon as they do they're going to have people in them all the time, on the ground as well as in the air."

"I was thinking that we could at least do a few, though. They keep about half of them in the air at all times, but the others are sitting mostly unguarded in the open area near the government buildings."

"Is the forcefield still down?"

"Yes, they're still working on repairing the generator. Our scouts say that they're almost done, though, so we need to move quickly if we're going to move at all."

"Okay," I answered, "let's do it tonight."

Xander looked down at the clipboard sitting in front of him. "Oh," he said. "Intelligence reports are in, we can't detect any irregularities of any sort in any of the sections. I think it's safe to assume that they don't know what happened to the Republic's weapons. All of the people in the sections know that we are out here, of course, because of my brother's speech, but I don't think they will try anything without us."

"We have to let them know that the Republic's weapons are gone," I replied. "They would help if they knew what was going on. At least the people in one, two, and four would."

The people in Section Three and El Paso were more favored by the government. All the officials and soldiers were chosen from among them. The living conditions were better, and people were stolen less often. I wasn't not sure how many of them would help.

"I think some people from three and the capital might," Xander said, "but you're right that the others are more likely. We need to get the word to them. The problem is, we can't use my brother's broadcasting system again. They'll just cut them off."

"Can we get our hoverplanes in there?"

"No, the passages are too small. There's only room for trucks."

The passages were small roads which are covered by the forcefield. Only the government was allowed to use them. The reason for their existence was to make the people believe their story about never being able to open the forcefields. *The people in El Paso must know it's false by now, I thought. I wonder if that would change anyone's mind.*

"Where can we get a truck?"

"Are you serious?"

"It's the only way to get in," I answered. We had found out two weeks before that the forcefield also runs underground when a digger had been electrocuted while we were trying to get into Section Four. We had decided to try all our ideas there, because it was the closest.

"Maybe we should just get the capital out of the way and deal with everything else later," Xander said.

"The longer we wait the more chance that the government will be able to get it into these people's heads that we are trying to kill them, not free them."

"That won't be much of a problem since they are low on weapons. Even if the people did believe them and want to fight they wouldn't be able to. The sections have hardly any weapons in their supply rooms."

"Even if they're unarmed, they—"

A head poked through the door. "Gale, Xander, we need you down in the hangar," Colonel Saunders said.

"Another escape attempt?" Xander asked. The Colonel nodded. Edward had already tried to get out twice in the last week. He was clever enough to have come quite close to succeeding both times.

"We're coming," Xander said, and then sighed. "We've got to figure out something better to do with him," he muttered as we trudged down the hall.

Edward was sitting on the floor of the hangar, hands cuffed behind his back, looking insolent. He smirked at Xander.

"I almost got out again," he said.

"And we caught you again," Xander answered. He surveyed the scene. A hover-plane was sitting near the entrance of the hangar, one door open and slightly dented. Noticing Colonel Saunders was having an agitated conversation with the prison guard, I deduced that Edward must have managed to swipe the keys again.

"Put him back," Xander told the guard when he approached, "and keep the cuffs on this time. I don't want anything like this to happen again."

"Yes, sir," the guard said, looking at the floor.

Xander walked over to Colonel Saunders. "Get the repair crew to fix the dent in the door and then put it back. And from now on, I want a guard posted at the door," he said, gesturing over to the door that led from the hanger into the hall.

Colonel Saunders nodded and walked off. I went to shut the hangar door, and then rejoined Xander.

"Let's go get something to eat," Xander said, starting for the door.

"Wait a minute," I answered. Xander tuned around. "I had one more question for you. Did the intelligence reports say anything about Mother?"

Xander shook his head. "I'm sorry, but we couldn't get anyone into the government buildings, so we weren't able to locate her. If she's even still there."

I blinked back tears. I hadn't expected anything, but I was still disappointed.

"Gale," Xander said, then hesitated. He looked at the floor. "I think it might be best if you realized that even if we get your mother back, there's not much we can do for her. Brainwashing is, as far as we know, impossible to reverse. I'm sorry."

Again, he had said something I already knew, but it was harder once he had confirmed what I thought. I walked to the door and headed down to the corridor towards the dining hall, unable to swallow the lump in my throat.

I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling. The work day was over, and I should be going to sleep. Only I couldn't. Instead I was thinking about the last few weeks. What had we done? We had escaped Section Four, found a colony of rebels, destroyed most of the Republic's weapons, and captured the president. It was a lot, but it wasn't enough. There were still a couple hundred soldiers and twenty thousand people

who supported the Republic to deal with. To top it all off, we were going to try to do it without killing a single person. Even though I agreed with Xander now, I almost laughed at the thought of how ludicrous it was. How were we going to do it?

The first thing we needed to do, I decided, was convince the citizens of Section Three and the capital that the Republic was evil. After that, it was probably just a matter of time until we captured enough soldiers that the remaining ones realized it would be impossible to win a war. The only problem was, just as Xander and I had discussed earlier, we couldn't use the broadcast system and there was no easy way into the Republic. Except El Paso, of course, but there were too many hoverplanes with surveillance cameras flying over the city. We needed to get somebody into the buildings to keep the broadcasting system on long enough to deliver a message.

Xander and I, of course, would have to be the ones to do it. We were the only ones who had actually been in there, and Xander knew how to run the computers. We had gotten in before. But that time we had only escaped because the government hadn't thought we were much of a threat, and they had put us in the cells with wooden ceilings. No way that would happen again if we were caught.

No matter. We had to do it.

The next day I told Xander about my plan. He had immediate objections. "When we got in before there weren't already hoverplanes flying around looking for someone sneaking in. Also, as soon as the broadcast started, we would still only have less than a minute. Everyone in the building would see it, and guess why it wasn't turning off quickly enough."

"You have any better ideas?" I asked, a little put off at his immediate rejection of my plan.

"No, I'm going to wait and see what happens."

"We don't have time to wait, though," I said. "Sooner or later they're going to get tired of flying their hoverplanes around in circles over El Paso and come attack us."

"They don't know where we are."

"It shouldn't take them too long. Their cameras are good."

"That," Xander answered, "is why I've been working on this."

He activated the holo sitting on the table and pulled up a video file. "This is aerial footage of the lockdown test this morning. I designed a new door for the main entrance and some disguises for the hangar."

He started the video, and I watched as the main entrance and the door to the hangar all but disappeared.

"Wow," I said. "So we just do that if they ever get to close?"

"Actually," Xander answered, "I'm planning on keeping it like that permanently. I'm going to make an announcement tomorrow."

I replayed the video to see the disappearance again. This time, though, I didn't turn it off right afterwards, I watched the whole thing. Right as the clip was ending I saw a silver blur come out of the trees and make for the entrance.

"Xander," I said, "what's that?"

I replayed the clip and let him see it.

"Drone," he said. "They must not have launched the whole fleet, and then run the ones that weren't destroyed from different computers." He paused for a moment. "Well, that changes things. They know where we are now, so we're going to have to do something fast. Not tonight, though. We need everything here in case they attack soon. If they don't attack tonight, it might be safe to guess that they are holding off for a while."

"I think it was doing something besides spying," I said, slowing down the clip and playing the same part over and over. I stopped it and zoomed in. "See? It's carrying something."

Xander zoomed in more. "Looks like a large tube of gas with a sprayer in front. Nothing happened to anyone, though. It must not have got a chance to do anything. I'll send out a notice asking if anyone saw it."

I watched the clip one more time, and then went to my room. I looked at the small dent in the north wall of my room. Xander never had found out who had placed the bugs, but they had all been removed when we were put in charge.

But I had the feeling that whoever it was, they would make another move soon.

The holo in the corner of my room beeped as I was heading towards the door for dinner. I glanced over at it. '*Meeting at 1900, conference room.*' Odd. Xander hadn't said anything about calling a meeting. Whatever. It was 1815 now, so I would have plenty of time to eat beforehand.

When I got to the mess hall, I spotted Xander sitting at a table near the back of the room. After picking up a tray of soup at the counter, I headed over to where he was.

"Hey," I said. "What's the meeting after dinner for?"

"I don't know."

"What?" I sat down at a chair and set my bowl down.

"I mean I didn't set it up. Apparently it's a right of every citizen here to be able to call a public meeting if he or she has something important to discuss."

"Everyone has to be there?" I asked.

"Yeah," he answered. I looked at his face and guessed that he was wondering the same thing I was. Why would someone call a meeting without consulting us? I ate and then amused myself with making patterns on the bottom of the bowl with the spoon while I thought. It probably had something to do with me and Xander, and since they hadn't come to us directly, that meant it probably wasn't going to be good.

At 1850, Xander and I left for the conference hall. There were three levels in the rebel headquarters. The bottom floor was the military storage and hoverplane hangar, the second was the mess hall, conference room, president's office and a few other public rooms, and the top floor was the sleeping quarters and the main door. We took the stairs up to the second floor and entered the conference room.

Almost everyone was there, and a man I hadn't noticed before was standing on the stage up front, turning on the mic. Xander and I found two empty seats near the front and sat down. The first time there had been a conference, they had offered us a special seat to the side of the stage, but I preferred sitting with everyone else.

"Good evening," the man up front said. Everyone in the room hushed and turned their attention to him.

"Thank you for coming. I have something that has been weighing on my mind lately." My suspicions were confirmed as he spoke, looking everywhere in the room except at us. "The resistance, as all of you know, is strong, strong enough for a victory over the Republic. We have worked hard over the last ten years, building an army,

making weapons, and training." This man knew what he was doing. Complimenting the crowd to set them up for what he would say next.

"Our army is strong enough to defeat the Republic, but only if power is in the right hands." *Exactly. That's why Xander and I are in charge.* "Are we sure that we want the fate of everyone here sitting in the hands of two children?" He looked at us for the first time, contempt showing on his face. If he failed tonight, I would authorize an investigation. I had little doubt that he was the one who had planted the bugs, and he had probably been sending information back to the Republic. In fact, that night that we flew to El Paso, he had probably alerted the Republic, which was why my father.... I struggled to contain my rage.

As these thoughts went through my head, the crowd was reacting. Some were obviously pleased, showing that this man had spoken what they had been thinking for some time. Others, the ones who actually knew us, were shocked that he would challenge our authority. Most were simply confused.

"What have they managed to do so far? They stole a hoverplane and took supplies, and then got the president killed. But when they came back, you made them his replacements?" He had totally won over those who had been leaning towards him, and lost the ones who were with us. Colonel Saunders jumped up.

"You forgot to mention that we now have the leader of the Republic in custody here, and that their weapons are destroyed and the forcefield is down. As for the hoverplane and supplies, I gave them permission to use them. The president—"

"Enough!" The man up front yelled into the microphone, looking at the crowd. "He's playing up his side, trying to make them look good. I'm giving you unbiased facts and asking you to decide." Colonel Saunders had done some damage to the man with what he said, but our accuser had bounced back quickly enough that it didn't effect many.

"Excuse me," I said, standing up and walking towards the front.

"No," answered the man. "You and your friend are the ones being discussed here. You are not allowed to speak."

"That's hardly—" Colonel Saunders began.

"I don't want to talk about this, I need to say something else," I replied, cutting Saunders off.

He looked at me for a moment, and apparently decided that he would lose favor if he denied me. He stepped away from the mic. I removed it from the stand and held it instead, anticipating that he would try to shove me out of the way after a few sentences.

"I just wanted to know if anyone had a response to the notice that was sent out last night."

"Notice? What notice? I didn't get one." The noises of whispering floated up to the stage. I looked at Xander. His look said that he was as confused as I was. Someone must have hacked the system.

"Okay," I said, "there must have been some technical difficulties. All I want to say is, there was a drone here two days ago. The Republic knows where we are."

A few panicked shrieks came from the crowd and everyone jumped up.

"Please sit down," I said. "I am proposing that we send a few hovercraft to destroy as much of their fleet as possible tonight, before they can attack us. If we—"

The man behind me snatched the microphone, though I tried to hold on to it. "Don't you see what she's doing? Seizing an opportunity to make you forget what I was saying." Mixed responses from the crowd. "And one other thing. You probably don't know this yet, but these two children are trying to fight this war without killing anyone. No one can win a war like that. We need a new leader."

He had everyone's attention now. Most of them had not known that yet. Our friends knew that we could probably pull it off, but those who didn't know us obviously thought that we were crazy.

Xander had been doing some serious thinking while I was talking, and now I could see him scribbling furiously on a sheet of paper. He held it up for me to see. I strained my eyes and could barely make it out. *Stall for me. I'm going to see the doctor.* It was strange, but if he had a plan I would do what he wanted. He probably was still trying to find out what the drone was carrying. The doctor was standing in the back, and Xander made his way towards him. They conversed silently for a moment and then left.

Meanwhile, the Republic's spy – I was certain now that he was – was still talking. He was winning the crowd. There had to be some way to convince the people that we were right. I took the mic back.

"Please," I pleaded. "Let me speak for a moment." I took a deep breath. "Everyone we kill is a human being. Someone's son or daughter, mother or father. They're just like you, but they have been misled by the Republic. If we can defeat them without killing them all, we can help them. If you had been deceived by the Republic, fed lies since you were a child, wouldn't you want someone to do that for you?"

Everyone in the crowd was shouting. Some supporting me, some supporting the spy. Just as he grabbed the mic back, Xander, looking a little pale, entered the room. He walked to the control board and cut off the mic. The man beside me was yelling at him, but he couldn't do anything about it. Xander turned on another mic and began talking.

"Give me your attention please," he said, and then waited. Everyone in the room turned towards him and quieted down. "We don't have time for this. I have just been to see the doctor. The drone that was spying was also carrying a chemical sprayer.

In what it released was a fatal disease engineered by the Republic's scientists. There is an antidote, but it has to be applied within fifty-five hours of contamination. The drone left approximately fifty-three hours ago."

The moment Xander had finished speaking, the hall erupted. People surged towards the exit, ignoring Xander as he asked them to calm down.

The next couple of hours were a nightmare. The doctor was working feverishly, treating people and trying to teach others how to do it as well. The antidote, I learned, was ninety four percent effective. Some people were going to die, and others were going to be seriously crippled for the rest of their lives. I wondered, not for the first time, or the last, if this war was even worth fighting.

But I knew it was, because we were going to pass down freedom to generations after us. That was a cause worth fighting for. Worth dying for.

Two hours and thirteen minutes after Xander's announcement, the last person was treated, and everyone went to their rooms. The side effects of the treatment amounted to nausea, a headache, and a fever. Head pounding, I started to return to my room. Xander stopped me in the hall.

"I know everyone feels horrible, but if the Republic finds out how we are feeling they're going to attack. We need to get some hoverplanes in the air."

"Okay," I answered. "Pairs of two would be good, so if someone feels too bad to keep going the other can take over."

"That's what I was thinking," he answered. "And we should go too. This is a good chance to show the people that we are with them."

"What about the spy?"

"Can't do anything about him right now. We'll deal with him in the morning," he said.

I nodded. Xander left to gather the troops and I headed toward the hangar.

We boarded the hoverplane together and took off, followed by three more. We circled around in the area between the mountain and the capital of the Republic. Close enough to be seen, but not close enough to be hit by their missiles.

"Since we're out here already, why don't we go ahead and blow up their hoverplanes?" I asked

"They know we're here already, and they're probably expecting us to do something."

I got up and took a turn in the pilot's seat. Xander strapped himself into the other seat and fell asleep immediately. There were two hoverplanes near me, and the other was over the mountain. We had a quarter tank of fuel left. When it was depleted we would need to go back, refuel, and get some new pilots. That would give the Re-

public about twenty minutes to do anything that they wanted. Not good. We needed to get someone in the air before we landed....

My head jerked up. I had been dozing. I hit the throttle in frustration and looked over at Xander. Still asleep. I stared out the windshield, trying to see through the fog that had enveloped us while I slept. I descended down below the fog level to get a better view. Good, I thought as I turned back north, we weren't too far away from the mountain. We were closer to the Republic than I had meant to come, though.

The fuel level was barely above empty. I radioed the other hoverplane pilots and told them to head back to base. There was no answer, indicating that they had already done so. I turned the hoverplane around and headed back, going slower than the highest speed to conserve fuel. I was cutting it close.

Xander woke up. "Want me to take a turn now?"

"No, we're heading back to base, the fuel is almost out."

"I'll say," said Xander, glancing at the gauge. I blushed. If only I hadn't fallen asleep, we would have been safely on the ground by now.

We approached the hangar door, the fuel gauge blinking urgently to notify me that we were nearly out of time. The door was shut, though. Strange. I radioed the guard in the hangar, but he didn't answer.

"Xander," I asked, my heartbeat quickening, "what happened? No one is answering."

"I don't know," he answered, "but we need to land, now." I moved and let him get in the pilot's seat. He selected a spot not far from the main entrance and brought it down. While the hoverplane was still ten feet in the air, it finally died and we dropped to the ground. It jolted violently as it hit, but weren't injured. Xander and I climbed out and walked to the door. Locked. I used the radio again, but with no response.

"Well," Xander said, "it looks like our spy has gotten the best of us."

Suddenly I remembered something we had been shown when we first arrived. "What about the evacuation door? If we could find the entrance tunnel, we could get in. That door is never locked."

"We don't know where the tunnel is."

"We could find it." The night wasn't too dark. The moon had been full just a few days before.

"We can try it," Xander said. "It seems to be our only option."

Judging by the location of the door, we decided that the entrance would be towards the east. We walked for thirty minutes until we reached what we assumed was the approximate location of the entrance.

We poked behind rocks and behind bushes for an hour without finding anything. We moved a little further east and started looking again, with the same results. Bush-

es, rocks, the occasional snake hole, but no escape tunnel. The moon was getting lower, and soon we wouldn't be able to see.

I sighed and sat down on a rock. Or, I thought it was a rock, until I fell through it into a tunnel. Xander laughed.

"That's the best rock made out of a bed sheet I've ever seen."

We entered the tunnel and started down it. The floor was slick with water filled with slimy scum and the ceiling hung with cobwebs. Apparently it wasn't used very often. When we reached the door, we stopped.

"Xander," I asked softly, "what are we going to do once we get in there?"

"Find Colonel Saunders and try to take the spy prisoner."

It sounded like a reasonable idea. Once the spy was in prison, his supporters would probably fade away. My head was still pounding, though, making it hard to think. Xander put his hand on the door handle and turned. It was not locked, as we had thought, so we walked into the hall. It was as dark as the tunnel.

"He must have shut all the electricity off," Xander said.

"Can we get it back on?" I asked.

"Yes, probably. Unless he destroyed the generator. If he only shut it off, it'll be easy to turn back on, and it's on the way to Colonel Saunders' room," Xander answered.

We made several turns – thankfully Xander knew his way around this place that he could navigate it in the dark – and then entered a doorway. I assumed that it was huge and filled with machinery, but I couldn't see anything at all. Xander felt his way along the wall until he reached a switch, which he flicked on. Machines started whirring, and the lights flickered on.

"Come on," he said, "We've got to hurry now."

We locked the door behind us, sprinted down the hall, and then hurried up the stairs. When we reached the landing of the second floor, the power went off again. Xander stomped the floor in frustration. We started to make our way up the stairs to the top level, holding on to the hand rail.

I heard a quiet thud, and Xander, who was walking in front, suddenly fell to the floor. As he did, I felt a searing pain in the side of my head, and crumpled to the ground beside him.

I sat up. Why couldn't I see anything? I reached to where my lamp should have been. My hand bumped against a rock wall. The events of the night before flooded back into my mind. I had seen the prison before, and I knew that there wasn't any easy way out. We were below the bottom floor, and the walls, floor, and ceiling were all solid rock. The door, however, was not rock but made of iron bars. That's how Edward had gotten out, by grabbing the keys from a guard's belt as he walked by.

The light in the hall was off at the moment, so I couldn't see anything. I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes. Might as well try to get some more sleep since I couldn't do anything right now.

Thump. I sat up, startled, and turned around. It had come from the wall behind me. There was another row of cells behind the one I was in, which opened into a different hall. The walls were too thick to talk through, but apparently if you hit the wall, the noise traveled through. That gave me an idea. I turned around and started knocking on the wall.

The person in the other cell knocked back. I grinned, and knocked again. A quick tap, two long. W. Four quick. H. Three long. O. Who. I tapped out the rest of the message more quickly. *Who are you.* Xander knew morse code, so he shouldn't have any trouble deciding the message.

The response started. X... A... N... D... E... R. Good. I stopped for a moment to consider what to ask, but Xander was tapping again. L... I... G... H... T.... I put my ear to the wall so I could hear better. *Light is on in my hall.*

Guard there? I tapped out as quickly as possible.

Yes. He answered.

Get keys. Xander didn't respond. I waited for a few minutes and then moved away from the wall. A few moments later I heard another loud thump. I moved back to the wall and put my ear to the cold stone.

Left already. Will try again later.

I moved away from the wall again. Then the light came on in my hall and the guard walked by. I went to the door and looked out. He was nearing the end of the hall, looking in every cell as he passed. As he turned around to come back, I saw the keys swinging from his belt.

I scooted away from the door and waited for him to get close. As soon as he was in front of my door, I made my move. By the time my hand was reaching out of the bars, I was out of his line of vision. I grabbed at the keys, and missed by an inch. He

seemed to have heard me, so I quickly pulled my arm out from the bars and moved away from the door. It was only a matter of time before one day he happened to walk close enough to the door, but the spy had probably already contacted the Republic. If he had done that, there would be hoverplanes on the way here right now. I didn't have time to wait for him to come back.

The guard stopped at the door as his radio crackled. "Squadron of hoverplanes approaching from the south." The guard ran out of the hall and slammed the door behind him.

So the spy had contacted the Republic, but no one knew it. How did he shut everything down then? I couldn't think of anything, so I decided to try a different approach. What would I do if I wanted to do what he did? I would tell the people that the Republic was about to attack, and that they needed to shut everything down. Half the people already liked him, so he shouldn't have had much trouble.

Whatever had happened in the past, I needed to act now. What was I supposed to do, though? There wasn't any way to get out. I looked around. In his hurry, the guard had forgotten to turn the light off. That was something, at least. I looked out into the hall and my heart leapt. The keys had fallen onto the floor. Now I just needed a way to reach them.

I lay down on the floor to think. My eyes happened to go to a dimly lit corner, where there was something hanging from the ceiling. I stood up and walked towards it for a closer look. It was a tree root. I jumped up and snagged it. It held firm, and I dangled a few inches above the ground. Useless. I let go and dropped to the ground. Then I looked back up again, confused. What was a tree doing there? The prison cells were under the weapons storage. No, wait. That's where the entrance was, but the stairs were at the south end of the bottom floor, and the hall ran south. Maybe the tree root wasn't so useless after all.

I jumped up and grabbed it again, then climbed up it until my head touched the roof. I let go with my left hand and felt around the ceiling, since the light was too weak to see much here. I found that the tree had shoved aside one of the stones, and left an area big enough to climb through. I tried digging into the dirt. A little fell off, but mostly it was as hard as rock. I dropped to the floor and kicked the wall.

After a moment Xander thumped his wall, too, so I started tapping. I told him about the keys, the tree root, and that the dirt was too hard to dig through. At the end I asked if he had any ideas.

Have any loose rocks? He asked.

I scanned the floor and saw a couple of small pieces of rock. I told him.

How close is the key? Xander answered.

Five or six feet. I tapped back.

Good, he answered, I have a plan. I waited for more. Get a sharp rock, saw off the branch. Hurry.

He was right, we didn't have much time. I found a rock with an edge on it, and climbed back up the tree root. It was about an inch thick, but the wood was sturdy. I held on with my right hand and my feet while I sawed with my left. I was forced to drop several times to take a break, but after about ten minutes, the branch came down.

Obviously, I was supposed to use the branch to get the key, so I went to the door and stretched out my arm. The stick touched the key, but I couldn't find a good spot to grab. I stretched a little more, and got the end of the root behind the key, and pulled slowly. I lost it a couple of times, but soon it was close enough to grab.

I have the key, I told Xander, should I come now?

Yes, hurry, came the reply.

I grabbed the key off the floor and went to the door. It was simple enough to stick my hand out of the bars and place the key in the lock. I turned it and the door swung open. I went to the door of the main hall, and turned left twice, taking me down the hall Xander was in.

"There you are," said Xander. "Let's get out of here."

I unlocked and opened his door, and we rushed out of the hall. Once we were away from the prison cells.

"Let's go find Colonel Saunders," I said.

"I forgot to tell you," Xander answered, "All the people who were supporting us are in prison now."

"What? That doesn't make any sense. If everyone supporting us is in prison, than why is the Republic still attacking?"

"The Republic is attacking?" It was Xander's turn to be surprised.

"They sent a squadron of hoverplanes, so that's what I assumed was going on."

Just as I finished speaking, the ground shook and dirt fell from the ceiling.

"Apparently," said Xander, "the Republic doesn't care what happens to their spy, and they want everyone else dead." Another bomb detonated, shaking the mountain. "But I still don't know why they would bomb this place when my brother is here."

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to think of some way to stop them. "You remember the computers in the armory? Can you pull up everything that was on there on another computer?"

"As far as I know," Xander replied.

"They had a command on the computer in the hovercraft section labeled 'Emergency Autopilot Return'."

"Let's go see if we can get to the capital, then," Xander said, taking off down the hall.

We ran into problems immediately. The halls were swarming with people, and it was hard to go unrecognized in a place with such a small population. Fortunately, our destination was on the floor that we had come up on. We snuck behind crates of bombs and stacks of guns until we reached the door to the hangar.

Just as we were preparing to sprint for the door, it opened and smoke poured into the room. Two soldiers ran out and slammed the door behind them. One of the soldiers ran over to an officer and said something, pointing at the door. The officer ran to a control panel and hit a red button. A metal wall came down, closing the entrance to the hangar.

"Any other way to get to El Paso?" I asked.

"Not here," Xander answered. We both stopped and thought for a moment.

"There are other hoverplanes..." I said, looking up.

"You can't be serious."

"If you think of any better way, we can do something else, but it's the only thing I can think of. We should at least try it."

"Okay," Xander replied.

I snuck over to a crate in the corner of the large room and grabbed a grappling hook while Xander got some knockout gas and masks. Fortunately, the middle and top floors were all but deserted, since everyone was down on the military floor. The ground shook again as another bomb slammed into the mountain.

"The good thing is," I said, "they only have the bombs that were in the hoverplanes when we destroyed the armory, so they have a pretty limited supply."

Xander nodded. We got to the top floor and went out the door.

"The only way to do this is to hook the wing flap," Xander told me, taking the grappling hook. There were three hoverplanes buzzing around the mountain, and one of them looked like it was preparing to dive.

"The bombs penetrate further if the hoverplane dives and fires," Xander said, "so we need to catch one right after it drops a bomb."

The hoverplane I had been watching had finished climbing and was now dropping like a bullet. If we stayed where we were, though, it wouldn't be close enough. The engine noise grew louder and louder.

"Xander," I yelled, "We're going to have to get closer. This way." I ran along the side of the mountain, dodging boulders and leaping cracks. Xander followed, swinging the grappling hook, preparing to throw. The hoverplane sent a bomb into the side of the mountain – not close enough to the entrances to do much damage – and leveled out, speeding towards us.

"It's low enough," yelled Xander, "I'm going to try."

The hoverplane screamed overhead and Xander threw. The hook glanced off the wing and fell back down to the ground. Xander gathered the rope back up and looked back up at the sky. The hoverplanes circled for two or three more minutes and then another one started climbing.

"You try this one," Xander said, tossing the rope to me.

"I'm not as strong as you," I answered, "You should do it."

"You don't have to be very strong. They fly low. I think your aim is better."

I looked up at the sky and saw the hoverplane speeding towards the mountain. Xander and I ran towards the spot that it was aiming for. It dropped its bomb and then sped away from the spot. I spun the rope and threw as it flew overhead. The hook went right through the gap between the wing and the flap. I grabbed Xander's hand as the rope went taught. It was almost jerked away from my hand, but somehow I managed to hold on, and we were lifted into the sky. Xander grabbed the rope and started climbing up. After he was about halfway up, I followed him.

The wind almost knocked me off when I climbed onto the wing, since I no longer had the rope to hold on to, but Xander had hooked his feet on the other side of the wing, and he snagged my hand. The wind whipped my hair back as Xander pulled himself across the wing and towards the door. As he did, the hoverplane slowed and started banking to the right. Since we were on the right wing, it decreased the wind.

"I'm going to open it now," Xander said and put his gas mask on.

I nodded and did the same as he leaned out and grabbed the door handle. He pulled it down and almost fell off the wing as it swung open. He jumped in and sprayed the gas all over the cockpit.

By the time I stepped through the door, Xander had taken the Republic soldier out of the pilot's seat and was strapping himself in. I sat down in the other seat.

"That was the craziest thing I've ever done," Xander said.

"Well," I answered, "It worked."

Xander looked out the side window. "Looks like they've noticed something weird is going on," he said, gesturing towards the other hoverplanes. "We'd better get out of here." He hit the accelerator and we sped forward towards the capital.

"Wow," I commented. "This goes a lot faster than any of the ones we've flown before."

"This is the newest model. They go up to three hundred miles an hour."

"Should be a quick trip then," I said.

"Hopefully," he answered, activating the tail camera. There were two hoverplanes behind us, but we were pulling away quickly.

"Looks like we've got the best hoverplane here." I looked at the back of the hoverplane to see if there was anything we could use. Nothing except a couple of parachutes.

"So," I said, "who's going to go mess with the computers?"

"What do you mean?" Xander asked.

"I think one of us should stay in the hoverplane so no one takes it," I answered.

"Okay," he said, "On the condition that I'm the one who goes to hit the button inside."

"No," I replied. "You did it last time."

"I tried, but you didn't actually let me."

He did have a point. But we didn't really have to go into the building in a traditional way, did we? What if one of us went in through the top? Or something like that.

"Hey," I said, "what if we took the hoverplane right next to a building and broke a window? We wouldn't have to be in there longer than a minute."

"You are having a lot of good ideas today," Xander answered.

We were silent for the rest of the flight. The forcefield was still broken in the north, so we flew through without any trouble. Xander brought the hoverplane right to the center of the city, over the government buildings, and brought it down.

"Okay," I said. "What do I do when I get onto the holo?"

"I told you, I'm going in."

"That was... oh, whatever." I glared at the windshield.

Xander had the hoverplane right next to one of the buildings now. He took it to the right a little and broke the window.

"Get in the pilot's seat," Xander said. "If there's trouble, get out of here."

"Would you stop saying stuff like that?" I yelled, my frustration boiling over. "If something happens I'm not just going to leave. I'm going to help. You're not the only one who can make sacrifices for other people."

Xander bit his lip. "I just want you to—"

"No!" I yelled.

"I've got to go," Xander said. He opened the door and ran out along the wing. He jumped through the broken window and into the office. At first I sat in the pilot's seat like he had asked, but then I heard sounds of a scuffle coming from the office.

I jumped out of the seat and ran over the wing and through the window. I stopped, taking in the situation. Xander was on the floor, his nose bleeding, and there was a big man in a soldier's uniform standing over him. He hadn't seen me yet, so I darted to the holo and saw that Xander had already found the hoverplane control page but hadn't been able to hit the button yet. I selected the small red button and then looked up. The man had seen me, and was coming towards the desk. I leapt on top of it and jumped onto him. He stumbled forward, surprised, and I had time to slide off before he could grab me.

"Come on!" I yelled to Xander. He picked himself up and ran to the window. The soldier was right behind us, but we managed to get inside and shut the door.

"What do we do now?" Xander asked, staring at the soldier standing on the wing.

I jumped into the pilot's seat and brought the hoverplane down towards the ground. When we were about five feet above the street, I tilted the wing and the man slid off to the ground.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Xander said. "You were right. Thank you for helping."

I smiled at him and gave him his seat back. He sat down and turned the nose north. We passed two hoverplanes going the opposite direction on the way back to the mountain.

I stared at the landscape below as it glided by. We were quiet again, but I enjoyed it. With some friends, just being together is enough. Xander and I had fights, but we always made up and continued our friendship without any hard feelings. We had known each other for three years now, but it seemed like much longer. I stopped looking out the window and turned towards Xander.

"So, what are we going to do when we get back?" I asked.

"See if anyone is still alive," said Xander grimly, pointing at the smoldering wreck where the top of the mountain used to be.

We landed the hovercraft as close as we could and rushed to the wreckage. The Republic pilots had been using high-powered bombs that would go about thirty feet down and then detonate. There was a pile of rubble where the door to the hangar was, but the front door was still intact. Xander eased the door open and stepped in. It was pitch black, so Xander returned to the hoverplane to grab a flashlight. When he had one, we went in.

At first we didn't see anyone. We walked through the halls, finding ways around ones that had collapsed. When we finally made it down to the military floor twenty minutes later, I was starting to hope that everyone had fled. After one look in, though, all hopes that there were any people still alive were dashed. The ceiling had partially collapsed and detonated a pile of bombs. Blood covered everything. Bodies and shattered fragments of equipment lay all over the floor. Xander moved the flashlight beam around the room, but I didn't look. I didn't want to see any more.

Finally he started towards the door that led to the prison cells and I followed him. Anything to get away from this room. It was a nightmare.

"It's possible that everyone down here is still alive," Xander said. "They were only blasting the area near the entrances on the north side."

I nodded. Surely I would wake up now. This had to be another dream. How could anyone do this? Again I questioned Xander's pacifistic approach to this war. If the Republic was going to do this, surely we could kill a few of them to end the war.

We were nearing the prison now. I heard a faint noise coming from our destination and quickened my pace. As we got closer, I could tell it was definitely shouting.

"...got to get out of here," someone was saying.

"Shh," said someone else. "I think I heard something."

Xander opened the door to the hall and shone his flashlight in, illuminating the dark hall.

"Who goes there?" the first voice, which I now recognized as Colonel Saunders', yelled. In answer, Xander pointing the flashlight at himself, squinting into the bright light. The hall echoed with cheers.

"You still have that key?" Xander asked, walking towards the nearest cell.

I dug around in my pocket and tossed it to him when I found it. He quickly unlocked all the cells and, after a few moment of congratulations from the soldiers, we went to the other hall.

It was empty, and two of the doors were hanging open. Mine and one other.

"No," Xander groaned. "They got him out."

His brother was back in the Republic. The odds were back where they had started. We have one only one hoverplane, and the entire military floor was destroyed. They have twelve hoverplanes, a small supply of bombs and guns, and an overwhelming numerical advantage.

One hoverplane was something, at least. We could still use Xander's plan to destroy several of their hoverplanes, and they were bound to run out of ammunition and bombs at some point.

I noticed another look cross Xander's face. At first I was confused, but then I realized that his parents – guardians, technically – weren't among the people we had freed.

"Let's grab as much stuff as we can and get out of here," I said, hoping to distract him.

"No," Xander answered, "we need to stay. There is still plenty of shelter here, and –"

"We are defenseless and they know exactly where we are. They're going to be back, probably just as soon as that emergency return that makes the hoverplanes return to El Paso deactivates."

The soldiers – who were all loyal to us, which is why they were in prison – weren't quite sure what the emergency return was, but they agreed with me.

Xander stood for a moment, and then shrugged. "You're probably right. I guess they know that we survived and that we would be able to get everyone else out, so they might come back soon."

All of us were agreed, so we filed out of the prison hall and went to retrieve everything that hadn't been destroyed in the bombing.

The search took longer than I would have liked. The hoverplanes could potentially be back in an hour, and if they radioed back to the capital to tell them what was going on, we had no time at all. In either case we needed to get out fast, and there was hardly anything left, anyway.

There was nothing on the military floor. It was totally destroyed. I hurried past it as quickly as possible, trying not to look around. The second floor, though, was a little more useful. There were several holo computers in the offices, and we found some backpacks in a small storage room. The living quarters were mostly useless, except that one of the soldiers kept a gun in his room. We took it to use for hunting, since the food storage was on the bottom floor and had been destroyed.

As soon as everything had been cleared out, we went back to the hoverplane. There were eleven soldiers, not including Xander and me. It was cramped, but ev-

everyone fit. Colonel Saunders, being the senior pilot, flew while Xander and I directed him. We flew away from the mountain for about five minutes, and then dropped down towards the ground to look for a spot to camp. I found a place just below the tree line where the branches wove together and made the area almost impossible to see from above, and Xander agreed that it would be the best place.

"Bring it down there," Xander said, pointing at a clearing a couple hundred yards away from the spot we had chosen.

When we had landed, we carried everything we had from the hoverplane to the camp. Among the things that we had found on the second floor was a solar powered generator, so we were able to set up the holos.

"Why did we even bring those?" I asked Xander, gesturing towards the holos. Colonel Saunders and a few other soldiers were setting them up.

"Because," he answered, "I got the password to their computer system earlier. I can hack into their hoverplanes and fly them wherever we want."

"Better do it quick, then," I said. "As soon as your brother figures out what we can do, he's going to change all the passwords." Now that Edward was in charge of the Republic again, we could no longer count on them taking a lot of time to figure things out.

He nodded. "I'm going to show a few of the soldiers how to do it, so we can get as many as possible. There are seven holos, so we should be able to take a large portion of their fleet. They probably won't have more than seven on the ground anyway."

"Why don't we just destroy them?"

"And why would we destroy something so useful?"

"If we keep them, your brother will just take them right back with his computers. We can't change the password."

Xander considered this for a moment. "Fine, we'll destroy them. Of course, if he's able to take back hoverplanes also, then ours will be gone before too long."

"Is there any way to deactivate the remote controlling?"

Xander shook his head.

"The holo computers are ready," Saunders said as he approached.

"Good," Xander replied. "Gather everyone, I need to teach some of them how to fly a hoverplane over the holo."

When the soldiers were gathered and standing attentively behind Xander's holo, he walked them through the program. When everyone was ready, Xander signed all the computers onto the system. There were eight hoverplanes on the ground, more than we had expected. We would only be able to take out seven, since we only had seven holo computers.

"Okay, " said Xander, "now."

Colonel Saunders, Xander, four other soldiers and I picked our hoverplanes up of the ground and flew them towards the forcefield. The idea was that if we slammed the hoverplanes into the forcefield they would be destroyed.

On the tail camera I could see someone pointing at our hoverplanes and shouting. A soldier sprinted towards the government buildings. He wouldn't have time, though. We were going a hundred miles an hour and still accelerating.

"Twenty seconds," Xander said.

It would have been faster to run them into the top of the forcefield, but we were afraid that if any debris fell they could be fatal to anyone who was in the way. Ten seconds. The hoverplanes were fully accelerated now. Seven seconds. Six. Five.

Suddenly all the screens started flashing red. Someone near a hole in one of the buildings must have seen what was happening. Between the flashes, we could see the hoverplanes decelerating. There wasn't time, though, they were going to hit. Xander was frantically typing on his keyboard.

Four of the hoverplanes went into the forcefield and exploded. The other three managed to turn in time to miss it. Xander was still typing, and after a few seconds the screen stopped flashing and we had control back. My hoverplane was one of the three that hadn't been destroyed yet.

"Get those into the forcefield fast," Xander said. "You've only got about ten seconds."

I turned the hoverplane back towards the forcefield and jerked the accelerator back up to maximum speed. This time we didn't lose control until the hoverplanes had been incinerated.

"Good work," Xander told everyone as he turned off the generator.

"We need someone to explode our hoverplane first," I said.

"We don't have any time bombs or parachutes," one of the soldiers answered, looking over the small stack of supplies.

"That's fine. Removing all of the fuel should have about the same effect," Xander replied.

Colonel Saunders and a young soldier – no more than twenty – named Rodney volunteered to put a hole in the gas tank. They found a few large rocks and finished the job in about five minutes. I was surprised that it hadn't been taken before that, but they were probably still trying to figure out how to keep us out of the system.

"How are we going to take care of their other five hoverplanes?" I asked. "Their fuel supply wasn't in the armory, so they still have it."

"I don't know," Xander replied.

"We're going to need to hike to one of the sections at some point anyway, so why don't we go to the capital and take their hoverplanes?"

"It will take several days," Xander said.

"We've got to start sometime," I answered.

"True. But tonight we need to do some hunting. No one has had anything to eat today."

Saunders brought down a deer while I started a fire, and everyone had a good meal. Or, as good as you could expect after that day's events. We arranged a schedule for guards during the night, and then most of us went to find a spot to lay down.

It was hard to get comfortable. There were no blankets or sleeping bags or tents, so I decided to get together a pile of pine needles to sleep on. A few were sharp, but I decided it was better than sleeping on the hard ground.

As I drifted off, I saw a faint glow coming from over the hill in the distance. I continued watching as a full moon slowly and majestically made its way up into the sky. It had never looked like that back home. The forcefield always made it look fuzzy and blue. Another reason to win this war and free everyone. Granted, it was a small one, but to me, at this moment, it represented everything else. I smiled. If Mother was still alive, one day I was going to free her and show her this.

"Today we're going to start our hike to the capital," Xander told everyone. "We'll ditch the holos and the generator, but take the flashlights and radios. Rodney, you've got the gun in case we see any animals along the way."

The soldiers nodded and then dispersed. A few made a hole to put the holos in while everyone else sorted the supplies or spread pine needles over the area, trying to hide all traces of our stay. Xander and I removed and destroyed the memory chips from the holos in case the Republic managed to locate them.

When everyone was finished Xander gathered them back together.

"I want to make sure everyone here understands what we are doing," Xander said. "Gale and I think that we can win this war without killing anyone, and we're going to try because we think that we can help them. If anyone here wants to leave, go now, because we're going to be in charge."

The soldiers mostly nodded. I guessed that some of them didn't agree with Xander and I, but they knew they had a better chance with us than without us. A few of them, including Colonel Saunders, did totally agree with us. Rodney did also, and that's why he had the gun. But even so, you never know what someone may do with a gun when they're about to be killed. I hadn't talked to Xander about it, but I thought it would be best to leave the gun when we got near the capital and didn't need any more food.

"Gale," Xander said, reaching his hand into his backpack. He pulled out a book and tossed it to me. I opened it and saw my mother's handwriting.

"How did you get it?"

"I was looking through your room when we were searching the place and I found it in a drawer."

"Thank you," I said softly, placing it in my pack. He smiled and stood up.

"All right," he called, "let's move out."

Everyone hastily finished rearranging their sparse supplies and followed Xander south. I caught up to him and walked beside him. It was weird to be leading a group of adults, especially adults who were all trained soldiers. They didn't care, though. Xander and I had proved that we deserved to be in charge.

"So how long do you think this is going to take, exactly?" I asked Xander. "Six days?"

"Something like that," Xander answered. "We can probably go about forty miles every day, and it's about a hundred and fifty miles... so actually more like four days."

Assuming no one here is effected too badly by the Republic's disease." So far none of the men with us had shown any signs that the antidote had failed, so I decided not to think about it.

"That's still a long time. I hope we get there before they can get the forcefield back up. If we don't, we're going to have a hard time of it."

Xander nodded in agreement.

A couple hours later we found an old road which ran roughly south. There was hardly anything left of it, but the ground was much more smooth, so it made the walking a little easier. The terrain was beautiful. It had snowed three days before, and it was just starting to melt. There were water droplets falling from the trees, catching the sunlight and sparkling like diamonds.

Hunger, though, was beginning to become a problem. We hadn't seen any animals, and all the tracks we had seen were old.

"There must be something scaring them away," I said, standing up after examining another set of rabbit paw prints.

"And whatever it is, I'm guessing we don't want to meet it," Xander continued.

"Or them," said Rodney, staring into the distance. "I think I can see something."

A howl split the air.

"Wolves," I breathed.

The soldiers behind me shifted their feet. Wolves could be extremely dangerous.

"We only have one gun and there's about a dozen of them," Xander said squinting into the distance. "And if they're really hungry, they won't think twice about attacking us."

"We need to get up a tree," I told everyone, looking for one with low branches. As I did, I realized this wouldn't be as easy as it had been for Xander and me to climb a tree on our escape. The trunks were wet and slippery from the melting snow, and several of the men were heavy, so I wasn't sure if they would actually be able to get themselves onto a branch anyway.

"Anyone who can get up into a tree, go, everyone else stay as close as possible," I said. "Rodney, give me the gun." It wouldn't fire far enough to hit them on automatic, and by the time they got within range, no one would have time to shoot them all down.

He handed it to me and I clipped the scope onto the top. The wolf pack had picked up our scent and was coming towards us. I closed one eye and put the other up against the scope. I quickly found the wolves, took careful aim, and pulled the trigger.

The scope jerked away from my eye, but I could see that I had hit my target. The wolves had stopped, confused. Then one of them howled, and they started coming

towards us again. I aimed and fired again, killing another wolf. This time they kept on running towards me, more infuriated than before. I shot another, and another. They were close now, and there were still nine left.

As I shot again I heard the someone, I think it was Colonel Saunders, yelling for me to get up the tree. I ignored him and shot again at the pack of wolves, now only about a hundred yards away.

A hand grabbed my shoulder and pulled me back. I wriggled out of its grip and fired again. Only seven left now. Fifty yards. Six left. Thirty yards. I turned around and ran to the tree, tossing the gun to Rodney.

"Finish this for me, will you? I can't hold it when it's firing on automatic."

Rodney flipped the switch to automatic and pulled the trigger. A spray of bullets met the wolf pack head on. Four went down, and another turned around and fled. The last kept going, straight towards me. I jumped and grabbed a branch, swinging myself into the tree. The wolf leapt into the air and its jaws closed on the back of my shoe. I shook my leg, trying to get it off, but it held on. It wasn't actually biting me, but if it held on much longer I was going to have to let go. From the way Rodney was shaking the gun, I could tell it was jammed.

Suddenly, I had an idea. I let go of the tree and let myself fall to the ground, twisting in the air so that my free foot was positioned over the wolf's head. Bones crunched as I hit the ground, and the wolf went limp. I pried its jaws away from my foot and stood up.

"Let's get see if we can get any meat off of them," I said, walking to one of the other wolves, trying to breath normally. Everyone was still staring at me. I looked at Xander and shrugged. He grinned, and climbed down out of the tree he had been in.

"That was good," Xander told me. "You're not only smart but a good shot, too. All the soldiers love you for it."

I blushed and pulled a knife out of my pocket. Xander watched as I knelt down and began skinning the wolf.

"Where'd you learn how to do that?" he asked.

"Same place you learned all that stuff about El Paso," I said. "They had quite a library back at the headquarters."

"It wasn't destroyed in the bombing, so hopefully it will still be there once we finish this," Xander replied.

"I doubt it," I said, fiercely ripping a piece of skin off. "I'd bet that they're going to come back again for another round of bombings to make sure that everyone is dead."

"They'll probably send a few soldiers to check it out first," Xander answered, "I doubt my brother would use so many bombs without making sure that they would be useful first."

We finished skinning and deboning the wolf and then put the meat in a sack. The other soldiers had already finished doing the same on the other wolves and were ready to go. I wiped my hands off in a pile of snow, shouldered my pack, and started after Xander.

The days passed slowly. I would have enjoyed them if our pace had been slower, and if our group didn't have the fate of the Republic in our hands. Everyone was hoping that it would snow again and cover our tracks, but so far it was only getting warmer and the snow was melting. Our boots sunk into the mud and left a clear trail for anyone to follow. Everyone was frustrated by it, but there was nothing we could do.

On the third day, when we had already left the road far behind, the mountains petered out into level ground. This close to the capital there were also hoverplanes flying overhead with surveillance cameras. There were no trees, so we were quite exposed. Xander kept the pace as fast as possible. There was the occasional dry creek bed or ravine that offered some shelter, and we stayed close to them whenever we could.

We found a creek bed that was larger than most of the others and decided to camp in it. We ate some of the wolf meat that we had cooked the night before while we were still in the mountains. I had the second watch that night, so I went to bed early.

A hand was shaking my shoulder. I sat up and rubbed my bleary eyes, trying to focus on the person in front of me. I stood up and nodded to the soldier who had awakened me, and he went to find a place to lay down. I found a good spot on the edge of the ravine where I could lean against the wall. After about ten useless minutes of trying to think about strategy in our attack against the capital, I went to my pack and got a flashlight and my mother's book.

I read for the whole three hours of my watch, and finished the entire thing. I had a lot to talk with Xander about. I thought through the things I had learned. There was someone greater than ourselves in the universe, and He cared about us. This book had more implications on life than I had realized. I laughed, remembering when I had been so skeptical of the book. Back then I would have thought the whole thing was idiocy, but now it all made sense. When you are already biased against something, it's hard to see it in the right light. But if you take someone else's position and look at it from there, it often sheds light on the situation.

In the Republic no one ever talked about religion, except when we learned about ancient peoples in school. They taught that uncivilized people thousands of years ago had religions, but once a nation became modern, everyone understood that it

was just superstition. Modern science had proven that the world could not have been created.

But now I know that's a lie, I thought. How could the entire universe come out of nothing, all on its own? It couldn't. It didn't. It was created. What affect did that have on current events?

It meant that we were in the hands of someone much greater than ourselves.

My mind took an unexpected turn towards another question. If He was so powerful, why did he allow evil? I thought again of the weapons room and shuddered. How could a perfect and all powerful being allow that to happen? It was confusing. Maybe he wasn't all powerful, just more powerful than us. But the book said that wasn't true.

I glanced at the sky. It was the next soldier's turn to watch.

The next day, I didn't get a chance to ask Xander about my questions. We left our camping place at dawn and moved at a quick pace toward El Paso. I could now see the blue dome that covered the city. As far as I could tell, the northern part was still down. Good. There would be a guard or two there, but we might be able to sneak past. The area where the shield was down was large, so they couldn't watch the whole thing at once.

I felt around in my almost empty pack as we walked. What did I have? A flashlight, a book, some wolf meat, and a case of bullets. The bullets would need to be dropped soon. There were no animals here, and there was no point in taking them if we weren't going to use them.

"Where should I dump these?" I asked Xander, jogging to catch up to where he was.

"Just drop them," he replied. "We don't have anything to dig with and there's no way to destroy them without a hot fire. One case of bullets wouldn't do the Republic much good, anyway."

I reopened my pack and tossed the bullets onto the ground. Rodney had left the gun in the mountains. It would be a little more useful to the Republic if they found it. I closed my pack and put it back on my shoulders. I ran forward again to catch up with Xander, who was walking very quickly.

"What were you planing on doing once we there?" I asked Xander gesturing towards the blue dome that was now only ten or fifteen miles away.

"There are probably about a hundred soldiers in El Paso. There are about another hundred more spread out through the sections who could get to the capital within three hours, and some even as quickly as twenty minutes."

"So," I said, continuing his thought, "we need to work fast and cut their communications."

"Exactly." He was used to me finishing his ideas, and I usually finished them just as he would have.

"Once we defeat the capital, how are we going to get the sections? There will still be soldiers there who will want to stay in control."

"Advertising. What's good for selling useless things in peace time is just as effective in war time."

"This isn't war though," I said, "and it isn't peace either. What is it?"

"Peacewar," he answered.

We were approaching the entrance. The piece of ground where the force field was deactivated was about a mile wide, and as far as we could tell there were only five guards. They seemed to be mostly looking for our hoverplane. Xander decided that we would cross about halfway between the broken generator and where the force-field was still working on the west side.

Xander and I waited until a guard had been just out of eyesight, and then we sprinted to the cover of a scrubby bush about seventy yards away. We motioned for another group to come, and Colonel Saunders and Rodney followed, going to another bush a few feet away. Another group of two came across, and then we had to wait as another guard passed. After the guard was gone, all five of the remaining soldiers crossed at the same time.

"From now on we're staying low and moving fast," Xander said.

Everyone stooped low and jogged along. From a distance we would have been hard to see. Our uniforms blended in with the dirt brown color of everything and we stayed lower than the bushes. Hoverplane cameras, though, were built to detect movement as well as take videos, so we ducked into a creek bed or under a bush and froze when one flew over. We were now less than a mile from the capital.

"Okay," I told everyone, "when we get a few hundred yards away from the first houses, everyone is going to need to lie low for a while. After dark, we're going to use the roof to get to the center of the city."

The soldiers nodded. We slowed down for the last bit of hiking, since now we could potentially be seen by civilians as well as hoverplanes and Republic soldiers. We found several bushes that had grown close together and ducked down behind them to wait for dark. It was tedious at best, and when hoverplanes flew over it was terrifying. If we were spotted here, there would be no escape.

The only bright side, though, was that I finally had some time to talk with Xander. He had finished the book back when we were in the mountains, and had been wanting to talk with me as well.

"It's comforting to know that there's someone besides us who cares anything about justice," Xander said in hushed tones. "And he's all powerful too."

"Just pieces on a chessboard," I said quietly.

"What?"

"We're just pawns. Directed by someone else. Someone more powerful than us."

"Even pawns have a part in the game," he answered, looking towards the city.

"Not a very large one."

"But both sides of the game are played by the master chess player," Xander answered. "We're in good hands."

"I sure hope so," I said, suddenly doubtful for some reason. However strongly you may believe something, it's always put to the real test when your life is on the line. There was something else that I didn't tell him about. I had a growing sense of foreboding about the attack. For some reason I was sure that most of our soldiers were going to die. It seemed almost silly, though, to warn Xander just because of some odd notion. I decided to ignore it, and looked up at the sky. "It's time to go."

The sun had sunk below the eastern horizon half an hour before and it was now fully dark. I woke the few soldiers who had been dozing and we got ready. Not that there was much to do, anyway. We didn't have anything except the food and flashlights.

"Everybody listen up," Xander said. "We're heading for the communications room first. If there's anyone there we will take them prisoner. I'm going to work as quickly as possible to change the password to the broadcasting system and set up a new firewall. After I'm done with that, we're going to Section Two. They seem as likely to help as one or four, and they're the closest to the capital. I'll give you the rest of the plan when we get where we're going."

I took a peek over the top of the bush. The coast was clear as far as I could tell.

"Let's move," I said.

Everyone jumped the bush and we sprinted towards the city. As we ran I scanned the sky for hoverplanes, but it was clear, too. When we all reached the first house, we mounted the roof and resumed our sprint. It was about five miles to the government buildings, so we wouldn't be able to continue our pace, but it was possible that we would have to go slower later if we were detected.

About three miles into the city someone saw us, and within minutes there were hoverplanes flying low over the city, spotlights roving the streets. We stayed in the alleys and pressed ourselves against walls whenever a hoverplane came too close. We weren't spotted again, but even so it took hours to get to the government buildings. When we finally reached them, the doors were locked.

"What are we going to do?" Colonel Saunders asked.

"We need to break one down," Xander answered.

"The building with the communications center in it was on the west side," I said. We sprinted towards the building as fast as we could. Halfway there, gunfire erupted from our right. Two soldiers dropped to the ground.

It was happening. I should have said something.

"Get down!" I yelled. Everyone who hadn't already done so dropped and another wave of bullets flew overhead.

"We need to get to cover, now," Xander said. He stood up and ran for the nearest building. Colonel Saunders took a bullet in the shoulder on the way, but he kept going. When we got to the building he slammed into the glass door with his good shoulder. It shattered and everyone else followed him through.

Once we were inside, Xander and I decided to take the emergency stairs rather than risking the elevator. We ran up them until we came to the floor which had the passages between the buildings, and went into the one that connected with the building we needed to get to.

"Xander, we need to take a hoverplane and get out," I said. "This isn't working."

Xander shook his head. "If we leave now, we'll never get this close again. Everyone knew that death was a possibility. We all think what we are doing is worth it."

I nodded hesitantly.

"Our destination is in this building," Xander said to everyone, stopping at the end of the passage. "We need to go down three floors. Once we are there, we proceed with the plan."

We got to the communications room without any more trouble. There were two people there, but our soldiers quickly unarmed them and gagged them with a cloth they found laying over some broken computers in the corner of the room. Xander began working on the computer.

Everyone besides me and Xander stood guard at the door. I looked out the window towards the ground. There were dozens of Republic soldiers milling around on the ground, trying to locate us. I saw a large group enter the building we were in.

"Xander, we're almost out of time," I said urgently.

"Is there any way you can stall them?" he asked. "I need more time."

"I'll take a few people and break the elevator," I answered.

Xander nodded without looking up from the computer. I motioned for some of the soldiers to follow me. Rodney and two others came. We ran down the hall until we found the elevator. I hit the button and it arrived on our floor after a few moments.

"We need to break it," I said, pointing at the elevator. "Any ideas?"

"Get in and ride it to the next floor down," Rodney said.

"What?"

"Just do it. I need to get into the shaft."

I realized what he meant, so I nodded and got in. One of the other soldiers grabbed a chair out of the nearest office and put it in between the two sliding doors. I hit the button and the elevator descended. I got out as soon as it arrived and ran to the stair case. I came back to the spot where I had left the soldiers in time to see the elevator fall down the shaft. Rodney climbed back up the maintenance ladder and stepped over the chair.

"That was close," he said. "I barely caught the ladder before the elevator fell."

We got back up to the room where Xander was. He was still there, typing quickly on the computer. Rodney stayed at the stairs to watch for the Republic soldiers.

"The elevator is down," I told him, "but we don't have any way to destroy the stairs. Are you almost done?"

"Just about," Xander answered. "I just need to..." he trailed off and concentrated on the computer. Thirty seconds later he shoved his chair away from the desk. "That should be enough."

The sound of pounding feet and shouting came from the stairs.

"We need to get out of here fast," Rodney said, sprinting into the room. "They're on the floor right below us."

We beat them to the stairs and got back into the bridges. We ran halfway around the circle of buildings and then sprinted down another set of stairs.

"Where do they keep the trucks?" I asked as we descended.

"There's a garage at the bottom of this building," Xander answered.

We ran down flight after flight of stairs. My breath was coming in ragged gasps and I had a stitch in my side. I was fast, but my endurance was nothing like what these soldiers had. I could hear enemy soldiers behind us, but we were getting further and further ahead.

At the bottom of the last flight of stairs I skidded to a halt and swerved away from the barrel of a gun. A bullet flew past me and hit the soldier standing behind me. I watched, horrified, as he slumped to the floor. That bullet should have killed me. Why had I moved? Another bullet flew by, grazing my cheek. That same feeling that had come over me when we had seen the military floor five days before was the only thing I could feel. It threatened to make me black out and I stumbled backward.

Xander grabbed my hand and pulled me forward, right into the Republic soldier, knocking him to the ground before he could fire again. We ran through a door and jumped into a truck as a bullet shattered the windshield.

"Come on!" Xander yelled and everyone in our company who could jump into the truck. Colonel Saunders turned it on and sped forward. He wove through the crowd of enemy soldiers, most of whom didn't realize that we weren't on their side until we were out of firing range. I think that most of them were still confused that we weren't shooting at anyone.

Xander directed Colonel Saunders through the streets towards the passage to Section Two. The truck bounced along the street as I looked around, making sure there were no enemy soldiers behind us. Just as I thought that we were free, a hoverplane landed in the road in front of us.

Soldiers poured out of the hoverplane into the street. Colonel Saunders spun the wheel and barely avoided running someone over. He grazed the side of a house and

made it past the hoverplane. Machine gun fire hit the truck from behind, but it was too far away now to do much damage. The truck was now away from the houses and we were approaching the entrance to the tunnel that led to Section Two. The hoverplane was back in the air and chasing us.

"What are they doing?" I asked no one in particular. "If they keep flying above us they're going to—"

As I was speaking, we drove into the passage, and the hoverplane above us burst into flame and sent metal flying everywhere. More people had died because of us. Because of me. What was I doing? We were trying to fight this war without killing anyone – we hadn't – but people had died all the same.

"Gale," Xander said, and for the first time I looked around truck. I saw Colonel Saunders, and Rodney, and Xander, who was trying to say something to me. That was all. Everyone else was gone.

"Gale," Xander said again. My hands were shaking. My vision darkened. "Look at me." I was having trouble focusing. All gone. They were dead, killed by the soldiers in the Republic. Couldn't we have waited to start the truck until they got in?

I pinched myself and tried to think. They were already dead, so the least I could do was finish what they had been trying to do. My senses slowly started responding and I turned my eyes towards Xander. "We're going to be to be in Section Two forty minutes from now. We need to do some planning. As soon as you are able."

I nodded slowly. My mind wandered back to my feelings earlier that night. For the second time I wondered why I hadn't said anything. My instinct had been correct. It was more reliable than I had previously thought.

Out of my swirling mix of terror, loathing, and sorrow came a single purpose. Defeat the Republic. It was the one way to stop all of this. And we had to do it in a way that we weren't the cause of more death.

Focus. I was going to defeat the Republic, but I couldn't do it without Xander. I needed to make a plan with him. Focus on Xander, I told myself. Again I cleared the haze out of my mind as best as I could.

"Okay," I said, "I'm ready."

"Thirty minutes," Colonel Saunders told us after glancing at the GPS.

Xander nodded. "First of all, we're going to need help, and lots of it. We can't sneak around anymore. Every soldier in the country knows what we're doing and where we're going by now. To overcome armed and alert soldiers takes a lot of people. If we can get access to a holo, we can send out a broadcast."

"Sir," Rodney said, "my family is in Section Two. I know they would help if we went to them." He stopped for a moment, considering whether or not to go on. "There was a man who had a plan to escape, and he said he could take one of us with him. My family chose to send me, since I was the most physically fit and would be able to make the journey." His face was pained. He had obviously left under protest, wanting someone else to be safe. Probably a younger brother or sister.

"Perfect," Xander answered. "I'm going to try to get access to the hoverplane cams from the day when we blew up the armory and throw together a few quick additions to the broadcast. They will be more likely to believe that we are capable of winning if they can see what we did."

I had recovered sufficiently from my shock and was almost fully alert. My mind whirled with a hundred different ways the plan could go wrong, but it seemed like our best option.

"What exactly are we going to say in the broadcast?" I asked.

"We're going to tell them what's happened, and ask them to help us. As many as decide to help will storm the government buildings, and from there we'll send a broadcast to all of the Republic. I'm guessing that about half the population will help us take control of Section Two, and the others will be on our side once we have."

After about twenty more minutes of discussion regarding the specifics of the broadcast Colonel Saunders announced that we were approaching the border of Section Two. We sat in tense silence for the remainder of the ride. When we came out of the passage Saunders parked the truck and we got out. Rodney led the way through the deserted streets to his family's house.

The word deserted stuck in my mind as soon as I had thought it. Why wasn't there anyone out? The streets should be teeming with Republic guards and soldiers looking for us.

"That was too easy," Xander whispered, voicing my thoughts, as we stood in front of the house Rodney had led us to. "They should have been notified by the capital as soon as we went into the passage leading here."

I thought back to our escape, trying to think of any reason why they couldn't have contacted the Section Two authorities. I couldn't think of any reason, so I looked at Xander.

"They use old fashioned wires and have a separate generator so that they can still communicate with their soldiers even if the power supply was cut, and because the forcefields interfere with signals," Xander told me, trying to give me some information to go on.

Suddenly I knew the answer. "A piece of that hoverplane that was chasing us knocked down a telephone pole when it exploded. That must be why no one here knew about us."

Xander flashed me a quick smile. "Finally, a stroke of luck."

At the mention of luck my mind went to the soldier who had been unlucky enough to stand behind me on the stairs, and had gotten a bullet in his chest. My good humor quickly vanished.

Rodney had been quietly knocking on the window as we had been talking, and now a face appeared, illuminated by a dim light. The man behind the glass was confused at first by what he saw, and his eyes grew wide. His face disappeared from the window. The front door opened quickly and we all slipped in.

The man and Rodney shared a tearful embrace and then they went to wake the others in the house. Xander and I smiled at the joy of our companion and then went

to find a holo. We found one with a camera in the office and Xander began working. He typed several passwords and then found the hoverplane surveillance videos. He selected a date from last month and found footage of us, and then found some footage inside the armory from another place. When he had downloaded them to the holo, he got the broadcast ready.

"Gale," he said, "I think you should do it."

"What?" I answered, "But I—"

"I need you to do this," Xander cut me off. "Believe it or not, you are much more persuasive than I am."

I cocked an eyebrow at him. He knew as well as I did that I was terrified of public speaking. I almost always stammered and forgot what I was saying. But, the day the spy had been trying to take over the Republic, I hadn't had any trouble at all. Maybe when there was a lot at stake I did better. Anyway, this was just a camera. Xander was the only one actually here watching me.

"Okay," I said hesitantly. "What should I say?"

"You know as well as I do," Xander answered with a shrug. "You ready?"

"Give me a minute." I took a deep breath and blew it out slowly while tapping my foot on the ground. What was I going to say? I should probably just stick with the basics. Tell them what happened, what we want to happen, and then ask them to help.

With another deep breath I looked at the holo. "Ready."

"Alright," Xander replied. "I'm going to put the video clips in the middle of the broadcast, but keep talking. It will play the video with a voiceover."

I nodded and Xander tapped the button.

The TV next to the holo came on and started flashing and beeping loudly. At first I was confused and thought that something had gone wrong, but then I realized that it was late at night and we needed people to wake up if they were going to see our video. After fifteen seconds it stopped and I was live.

"Hello," I said, my nervousness suddenly flying away. "My name is Gale. I am in Section Two right now, and I have just come from the capital. In case you aren't aware of what has happened recently, let me tell you. About a month and a half ago, my friend Xander and I escaped from Section Four. We made our way to the mountains and found a colony in the north who were planning on bringing down the Republic." I told them of everything that had happened. Xander broadcasted videos from time to time while I was talking. I had now been talking for about five minutes, so Xander's firewall was apparently giving the Republic a hard time.

"Now that you know what has happened, it's time to talk about what will happen. We believe that we can bring down the Republic if we have your help. I am calling everyone to follow me to the government buildings right now and take power from the dictator who has been oppressing you for ten years." I stopped for a moment, de-

ciding how to convince them that they shouldn't kill anyone. After a few seconds, I continued. "I want to do this without adding more deaths to the many casualties that have already occurred during this war. We don't fight out of anger, but out of hope for a better world to pass down to the next generations. If you are with us, follow me as we free this country."

Xander ended the broadcast and flashed me a quick grin. "Perfect. We better get out there."

I went outside and removed a flashlight from my pack. As soon I saw people coming out of their homes I began waving it in the air like a beacon. At once, people began gathering. First dozens, then hundreds, and more kept coming. I turned my attention to the buildings in the distance. I could hear shouting coming from that direction as soldiers scrambled to prepare to meet the huge crowd. Now that we had already started, I questioned the wisdom of the plan. The soldiers knew we weren't planning to fight. Would they respect that and not use their own weapons, or take advantage of it and kill hundreds of us? Either way, there were enough of us to win. I just hoped that they would realize that and decide not to fight.

When it seemed to me that everyone who was coming had gathered, I climbed up on a roof and scanned the crowd. There were almost four thousand, at least according to my estimate. I waved my light in the air again and a hush spread through the crowd. Once I was sure I had the attention of everyone who could see me, I started jogging along the roof towards the center of the city. When the crowd started to follow, I slid down the gutter to the ground and found Xander.

"Come with me," I said, taking his hand. He nodded and we ran to the front of the crowd. The closer to our destination we got, the more quiet everyone became. The tension inside me grew. I could die tonight. I was in the front of the crowd, an easy target for anyone shooting at us. It was a terrifying and exhilarating feeling, standing in front of this crowd, who were willing to follow me wherever I went. That was good, because where I was leading them could cost them their lives.

Nothing happened as we ran into the open area surrounding the government buildings. Everyone who could fit walked into the open area between the three large buildings, unsure of what to do next. I had expected to have met with opposition by now, but so far we had seen no guards. Just as I was preparing to speak, several of the second story windows in the buildings around us shattered and machine guns opened fire on the crowd. Instead of screaming and running for safety, though, the people surged towards the entrances to the buildings. Even as dozens fell every second, more flooded into the open area and towards the doors. I stared, in awe at what I had started. These people had decided that what we were doing was worth their

lives. They were willing to do anything to gain freedom, even though they themselves wouldn't get to enjoy it.

I had begun this, but it had gone further than I could have imagined. Here were thousands of people willing to give up their lives to achieve their goal. We were unstoppable. Still holding Xander's hand, I broke from the cover of the building we were standing under and ran towards the nearest door.

Somehow we made it into the building alive and followed the rush up the stairs and towards the gunmen. By the time that we had ascended the stairs, they had given up firing out the window and were now shooting at the people inside and trying to escape. Before long, though, they were overcome by the sheer number of people coming towards them. Their guns were taken away from them and they were pinned to the floor.

Xander looked at me. "What you did was amazing, Gale. We are going to have enough support to win this war. Thank you."

I smiled.

"Gale," someone said, and I looked up. "What are your orders?"

"Orders? Oh. Um... Xander? What do you think?" I hadn't thought about having to give orders to anyone after we had won this battle, so I looked to Xander for help.

"Let's put these soldiers in the prison," he replied, pointing at the Republic soldiers on the floor, "and then we'll go from there."

The man in front of us nodded and walked off to relay the orders to everyone else. Xander nudged me and pointed towards the stairs.

"We need to get to work if we're going to send out a message to the whole country tomorrow."

I nodded and followed him to the elevator. We ascended to the eleventh floor and walked down the hall. I paused to glance out the window. My eyes were met with the sight of bodies lying all over the ground in the field below us. A tear slid down my cheek. We had won this battle, but we had paid for it with hundreds of lives.

"I promise we will honor your sacrifice," I whispered. "You did not die in vain."

Xander nodded and we stood, looking at those who had died for our cause.

An alarm beeped and Xander and I jerked awake. We had spent most of the previous night recording and finding videos for the broadcast, and Xander had also been setting up a new firewall. When we were done we decided to take a short nap before the morning. I stood up from the desk I had been leaning my head on and went to the holo to check the time. 0700. In about thirty minutes we would send the broadcast. I was worried at first that the downed communications line would make it impossible, but Xander said that for some reason the emergency broadcast signal wasn't effected by the forcefield.

So far, the Republic had shown no signs of preparing for war. Since the communication lines were down we hoped that the Republic assumed that we had been killed by the Section Two guards. Hopefully they would continue assuming that until several thousand revolutionaries marched into the capital.

Xander finally pulled his feet off his desk and slowly stood up.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Seven," I answered. "Everyone should be up in about thirty minutes, so I figured we would start the broadcast then."

Xander nodded and went to the holo. "Looks like they're about to get through the new firewall. We had better send it now. The alarm before the video will probably wake anyone who isn't already awake."

Xander started the broadcast and the televisions in the room turned on and started beeping. After they stopped, our video began. It was basically the same as what I had said the night before, with a few additions and more videos.

Once it had started, Xander opened live footage from several different surveillance cameras around the country so we could see the effect after the video had finished. The main thing that we had on our side was that most of these people already wanted to defeat the Republic, they just needed a leader. Now that they had one, most were ready to act.

As the broadcast came to a close, we could see people pouring into the streets in Sections One and Four. In Three, there weren't as many, probably only five or six hundred. We watched as the events of last night repeated themselves in different forms. The few guards that were in Four laid down their arms when they saw what was happening. In One, there was more opposition, but our supporters were able to overpower the Republic soldiers.

Section Three was a different matter altogether. The soldiers wasted no time in grabbing their guns and firing into the crowd. Everyone who wasn't killed fled back to their homes. Xander turned off the holo.

"So," I said, breaking the silence, "what are we going to do about Three? Should we just leave them alone and hope they surrender when El Paso falls?"

"No," Xander answered. "They will send a lot of soldiers to help the capital defeat us. We need to go to Three first. I'm just not sure how...."

"We need everyone to group together," I said. "Probably in Section Four, since it is the closest to Three."

"The only problem is that all the passages lead to the capital. There aren't any that run between the Sections."

"We'll tell them to destroy the forcefield. They can get into the generator easily enough."

Xander considered this for a moment and then went to the holo. He typed out a quick message and sent it to the capital buildings of One and Four, telling them to do what I had suggested. When he was done, he got up and started to leave the room.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"We're going to Section Four, too, right?"

"Yeah," I answered, "I just thought we would wait until.... Never mind. Let's go."

As the elevator descended, I began to think about Mother. She was probably still in the Correction Center in Section Four. At the thought of that, I remembered that Two had a prison, also.

"Xander," I said, "we forgot something."

"What?" he asked, turning around.

"The people in prison. We need to let them out."

Xander smiled. "They already did that last night." His smile faded as he glanced northwest towards Section Four. He could tell what I was thinking. "We're going to find your mother and get her out, Gale."

I nodded, trying to decide whether to be excited or worried. She could be gone, she could be permanently damaged from the brainwashing, anything. We exited the building and found hundreds of people milling about. They had buried the dead the night before while Xander and I had been working on the broadcast.

We gathered a group of people to come help us destroy part of the forcefield. After looking for a few minutes we found the garage with the transport trucks. Everyone got into the largest truck and we drove towards the forcefield. Xander would have liked to drive, I think, but since he was only thirteen no one here really wanted to let him.

When we got to the forcefield generator, Xander led the way through the door. It was packed with whirring machines and control boards, and no one knew how they worked. After a few minutes of deliberation we all decided that the best course of action would be to just take pieces of it apart until it stopped functioning. Then Xander selected the part that looked least likely to electrocute anyone and we started demolishing it.

After about fifteen minutes of pulling things apart the part of the forcefield near us began flickering, and finally turned off all together. I walked through the place where it used to be to make sure it was fully deactivated, and then we went back to the center of the city to gather everyone. On the drive back, Xander sketched a rough map of the Republic and we tried to figure out the best way to approach Section Three.

"Okay," he said. "Obviously, we want to avoid the mountains. We don't have to go far out of our way and it will save us a lot of time." He paused and traced a route from Section One to Section Four. "They're going to have to go over the mountains. They might be able to find an old road that they can drive the trucks on, and if they can't they're going to have to walk. That would slow them down considerably, and we might even have to go without them. If and when we have conquered Three, we'll head down to the capital like this." He drew another line on the paper.

"One question, though. Aren't the passages going to block us?" I took the pencil and drew lines from each of the sections to the capital.

Xander slapped himself. "How could I have forgotten about that? I guess we'll have to... I don't know."

"They aren't the same as the forcefield," I said, "I think we could dig under them."

"Maybe you're right," he answered. "And the only time they will be a problem is the one that goes to One. It's between us and Four. Besides that, I think we stay clear of them."

I handed the pencil back and nodded. The truck stopped and the soldiers around us, who had been listening intently to our conversation, got out and we followed. Xander and I went to find a microphone and some speakers and then told everyone what we were doing.

The people sorted themselves out and as many as could ride in the trucks got in. There were about a hundred large trucks, so about two thousand people were able to fit in. It was decided that another four thousand would start for the capital on foot in a few days, and the rest – about five thousand – would stay in case the Republic figured out what happened and attacked.

I calculated that it would probably take about seven hours, since there were no roads, and we were going to have to dig a tunnel large enough for a transport truck to drive through. The people from One who had to drive through the mountains

would probably take about the same amount of time or a little longer, if they could get their trucks through. If not, they would be several days getting there. Either way, we wouldn't be able to leave for Three right away. There was a lot of planning and organizing to do before we did anything.

Xander rode next to me, still staring at his map. Once in a while he would receive an update from Section One on his radio. When he did, everyone in the truck would get as close as possible to listen to the news.

As I looked at them, I began to feel sorry for them. They knew what they were doing, and they wanted to do it, but they were civilians. They shouldn't have to do this. But then, I thought, if they didn't do it, no one would. They were giving away their lives now so that in the future no one else would have to die for this cause. I felt privileged to be with them, and even more so to be their leader. I hoped that I was worthy of their trust.

What if I failed? What if our strategy wasn't good enough, or the enemy was too strong, and everyone was killed? I would be responsible. Suddenly, more than anything, I wished that I lived in a time where there was no war. Where no one was killed or stolen or hurt. Why did I have to be the one that lived now? Why couldn't I have inherited a better world?

"Xander," I whispered. "I don't want to be the one to fight this war."

"I understand," said Xander. "But we have no choice. We were placed in this time. The most we can do is use our lives wisely."

I considered this silently. I knew what he said was true, but I was angry. Angry at the one who had put me here at this time. He was responsible for everything bad that had happened. As soon as I thought it, a quiet voice in my head protested. He was not evil, it said. He was also responsible for everything good that had happened in my life. I still wanted to be angry, but all the reason had gone from my anger.

The truck ground to halt and everyone looked out to see what was going on.

"Just the passage," Xander told me. He pressed a button on the truck that apparently was a radio, and gave instructions for one or two people from each truck to get out and help with the digging. A truck loaded with shovels and picks pulled up in front of the rest and everyone grabbed a tool as they walked by.

A few of the people who weren't digging helped with other things. Some prepared food, others refilled the gas in the trucks from the reserve cans. The rest sat down and waited.

Waiting is the thing I dread most. Nothing to do but think. Thinking is good, but when it's all you can do for hours on end, it gets old. After about an hour and a half, the tunnel they were digging was about halfway done. I sighed and wished again that I could do something.

Finally I stood up and started running. If we were going to be stuck here, I might as well do something productive. It felt good to have the wind in my face, even though it was winter, so I kept going. For the next hour while they were finishing the tunnel, I ran. A few people had joined me by the end, and I was glad to have some company. We didn't talk, but being with someone who has a similar goal, who would live and die beside you, was a comforting feeling.

When the tunnel was finally done, everyone loaded back into their trucks and we continued on towards Section Four.

Xander received a message from the people from Section One about an hour later. They had found a road awhile earlier, and they were still on it. Judging by how long they had been traveling, I guessed that they were probably about halfway through the mountains by now. If the road kept going all the way they would be to Section Four by nightfall.

We were now only an hour and a half away from our destination, and the closer we got the more anxious I was. I was totally unsure what to expect when we arrived. I hoped that Mother was still alive and could be cured, but my reason told me that it was impossible. She had been in the hands of the Republic too long. They had probably already either killed her or damaged her beyond repair. Still, I hoped.

It was the middle of the afternoon when we arrived. They had already broken the eastern side of the forcefield so we drove in without much trouble. When the trucks came into the populated area we were met with cheers as we made our way through the streets. Xander and I climbed out onto the roof and waved to everyone. A lot of them knew us from before we had escaped, and everyone recognized us because of all the notices the Republic had sent out when we escaped and because of our broadcast.

When we finally finished weaving through the crowds and had parked our vehicles in the city center Xander and I climbed down from the roof. We were met by the man who had been placed in charge of Section Four, General Thompson. He greeted us warmly and lead us to a room inside the building where we could sit down. He was large, but not at all intimidating, and I liked him.

"How many did you lose here?" asked Xander when we had chosen seats.

"Only a dozen or so," he answered. "As soon as they saw how many were coming, they surrendered."

"Good," said Xander. "Are most of them in good enough shape to come with us to Section Three?"

"Yes," Thomson replied. "There were a few wounded, but not very many."

"Okay," I answered, taking over from Xander. "How many trucks do you have here?"

"Enough to carry about a thousand," he said. "Not near so many as you have."

"That's fine," I replied. "We'll do the same as we did back in Two. As many as can ride in the trucks will go with us, some can go on foot, and the others can stay and guard."

A knock sounded at the door and then it opened.

"Sir," said the man who entered, "she's awake."

"Who is awake?" I asked.

"Come on," General Thompson said, ignoring my question and standing up and walking towards the door.

Xander and I followed him to the elevator and then across the bridge to another building. I enjoyed looking off the sides of the bridge and seeing my liberated home town. We came to a hall with what looked like apartments on either side, and Thompson led us to the middle of the hall and stopped. He opened a door and motioned for me to go in.

I walked into the room and saw a woman sitting on the bed. She was dressed simply, but she was beautiful. She looked familiar but I couldn't quite place it. Then I took a step closer, gasped, and ran forward to embrace my mother.

I sat next to my mother on the top floor of the Section Headquarters, watching the trucks from Section One pouring into the city. It was night now, and all of the lights on top of the three buildings had been lit, making the entire area as bright as day. I had spent most of the afternoon and evening with Mother, listening to her story and telling her mine.

When the Republic soldiers had surrendered, the revolutionaries had freed all the prisoners. After they finally convinced Mother that they weren't trying to kill her, they found out who she was. They let her see the broadcast that we had sent out earlier, and something happened. She said it was like the Republic people had built a wall in her mind, and that video had torn it down. When she saw me, her child, all of her memories flooded back. After they realized that she was totally healed from the brainwashing, they tried similar treatment for all of the other prisoners, and it had worked on almost all of them. I asked why the same thing hadn't happened when we came to rescue her, and she said she thought it was because she had been brainwashed so recently, and that by the time she was freed, it had worn off some.

I looked at my mother and then looked out the window again. Now that all the people from Section One were here I was going to have to go, but I didn't want to. I wanted this moment to last forever. Not having to run from the Republic or command any armies, just sitting here with my mother. But I couldn't, of course. There would be time for that later, but now we had a war to fight. A peacewar.

"Gale," Xander said, walking into the room, "we need you."

"Go ahead," Mother told me. "I'm fine."

I stood up and followed Xander out the door. "See you later."

Xander and I walked to the elevator and he pushed the button for the ground floor. I looked out of the glass side at the trucks still moving into the city center.

"How many came?" I asked.

"About three thousand," Xander answered. Section One had the largest population, so there were more soldiers there than Two and Four, which also meant there were more trucks. A few of the trucks had brought food and drinking water as well as people. That was good. There weren't enough rations for everyone in the government's stockpile, and the river was flowing even lower than usual.

The elevator came to a stop and we got out. We made our way into the crowd and looked around for General Thompson, who would probably be with the comman-

der from One. We found him and another man leaning against a truck and observing the people going by.

"Hello," I said. They both looked up. General Thompson smiled, but the other man did not.

"So this is the kid that's in charge of everything." He looked at me with disapproval. "It's great that she started it, but why hasn't someone else taken over now?"

It was happening again. Same as the spy from the Republic, he thought that just because I was thirteen I couldn't do anything. He had also made the mistake of thinking that because I was the one who talked in the video that I was in charge. I started to make a retort but Thompson cleared his throat.

"I don't think that matters all that much at the moment, Reigter," he said. "We need to start planning our advance on Section Three so we can leave as soon as possible."

"That's General Reigter to you," the man muttered as he stomped off.

"Well," said Xander, "what're we going to do about him?"

"And how did he get in charge in the first place?" I asked.

"He's a control freak," observed Thompson as we watched him giving orders to the people unloading the trucks. "And it also seems that there are a lot of people from One that don't like your method."

"Figures," Xander said under his breath. For some reason there always had to be someone that wanted to mess everything up.

Our next step was obviously to try to find some way of getting him replaced, but that could end badly if enough people stuck to him. We would just need to make it clear that in the battle, we were in charge, not the Section commanders. I told Xander this, and he said that we could discuss it later.

"We should postpone the strategy meeting until tomorrow," he said. "Tonight let's get everything unloaded and find the people places to sleep."

It turned out that some things are easier to say than to do. In one day, the number of people in Section Four had increased by fifty percent, and the houses weren't big enough to hold many more people than were already in them. In the end, we had to move almost everything out of the Town Hall and convert it into sleeping quarters.

That night, though, instead of going to sleep, Xander and I decided to hold our own private strategy meeting. We couldn't count on having any real strategy discussions when one of the generals disagreed with our ethics. We decided to meet on the roof of the Section Headquarters so we wouldn't be overheard.

I sat on the edge, my feet dangling over the side of the building, but making sure that I was in an area not illuminated by the huge lights near me. It made me a little dizzy and a little frightened, but I needed to stay awake.

We had accomplished a lot, but there was much left to do. The most urgent thing that Xander and I needed to talk about, of course, was what to do about General Reigter. He was going to make things difficult.

I heard noise from behind me and turned around to see Xander emerging from the trap door. He crept towards me but stopped a few feet back.

"Would you mind scooting back a little?" he asked as he sat down.

"You're afraid of heights?" That was surprising. He hadn't had any qualms about standing on the wing of a moving hoverplane several thousand feet in the air.

"I don't mind them that much," he said, "but when there's no urgent need to be on the edge of something high I stay away." Same as me, but for some reason I didn't want him to know that.

I stood up, leaned over the edge for one last look, and walked back to where Xander was. He was sitting on a small upraised section of the roof, and he scooted over to make room for me.

"What are we going to do about Reigter?" I asked, getting right to the point.

"That's what I was going to ask you."

We sat quietly, both of us in contemplation. We couldn't – wouldn't – kill him, and we couldn't just throw him out of command, either. That would start a riot.

"There could be a public vote," I ventured.

"Maybe," Xander replied, "but I'm not sure that enough people would actually vote against him if it came down to it. There are a large number of them that think that we did a good job getting everyone together, but someone else should be put in charge now."

"If someone else were put in charge," I said, "our side would win for sure. That's no longer a problem like it was back at the mountain, so we can't use that against them. There are just too many of them for even a genius like your brother to handle. The only problem now is that they wouldn't win like we want to. They would kill everyone who works for the Republic."

"Right," Xander answered.

As my mind often had in the last few days when thinking about complicated issues, it wandered back to the library in the mountain. One day I had read a book about local plants, and the vivid illustrations had made it quite memorable. One entry floated to the top, and then a memory of a plant I saw during our entry into Section Four. I compared them and decided they were the same.

"What if our friend Reigter got sick tomorrow?" I grinned mischievously and Xander raised an eyebrow. "It would last for about a week, plenty of time for us to get started on our way to Section Three."

"Zero percent fatal?" Xander asked.

I nodded.

"Do it," Xander said.

The next afternoon General Reigter retired to his room, leaving a note saying he had a headache and wouldn't be at the strategy meeting. I smiled and went to tell Xander. After I showed him the note we went to a small meeting room and sent a message to General Thompson.

"Good afternoon," he said, glancing around the room. "Where's Reigter?"

Xander coughed.

"The General wasn't able to come today, he said he was sick," I answered, a smirk hovering around the corners of my mouth.

"That's unfortunate," replied Thompson. "I wanted to inform him that a truck from his section was just destroyed. By me." He paused for a moment, apparently enjoying our looks of confusion. "It was loaded with guns and bombs."

"Did you find any of Reigter's supporters there?" Xander asked.

"No," General Thompson replied, "but it was undoubtedly his doing. It was the truck that he drove."

Xander and I both nodded.

"He'll be sick for about a week," I told Thompson.

"Good," he answered. "That should give us enough time to do what we need to do."

"Speaking of that," I said, "let's get started."

Thompson sat down across the table from us. I grabbed a holo computer and placed it on the table. I pulled up a map of the Republic and switched the display to three dimensional mode.

"Our approach should be fairly straightforward," I said, flying the view over our route. "Three is far enough south that the mountains won't be much of a problem. The real issue, then, is what to do when we get there."

I stopped the moving display and switched files to a plan of Section Three. The holographic forcefield spread almost to the edge of the table, and the three large buildings in the center stood about two feet high. I quickly brought up a group of people, duplicated it several times, and placed them at the edge of the forcefield to represent our army.

"First thing to do is to get in. Any ideas?"

General Thompson considered the display for a moment. "Will this give you realistic outcomes to anything we might try?"

"Yes," Xander said.

"Would you mind?" he asked, holding his hand out for the holo computer. I handed it to him and he selected something and moved it over to the three dimensional display. A bomb.

"You're not suggesting—" I started.

"Wait a second." He placed the bomb next to the forcefield generator, on the outside, and hit a button. The generator shuddered and the forcefield blinked, but then came back on. Thompson reset the file and placed the bomb underground, where the forcefield was weaker. This time the generator fell apart and a piece of the forcefield turned off.

"Well done," Xander said.

I was a little more doubtful. "What if there's a guard in there, or a mechanic? And do we even have a bomb?"

"There were a few bombs in the small weapons storage here. They were the only ones that weren't destroyed when we bombed the armory. Why they were in Section Four, I have no idea. As to your other question, any kind of a diversion somewhere else should do the trick," Xander said. "They probably wouldn't leave anyone there when they're being attacked."

"We just have to make sure there's no one in there." I replayed the simulation, and the forcefield went out again, but slightly slower. "Hang on," I said. "This thing is factoring in a bunch of possibilities, so we should run it several times to make sure there is a large chance of success."

Xander took the holo and told it to run the simulation a hundred times, and triple speed. The forcefield was destroyed exactly eighty seven times.

"We'll take two," Xander said, "and detonate the other one in the same place even if it isn't needed. Can't risk letting the Republic get it."

Since everyone was agreed on our entry strategy, I moved our holo army to the edge of the city. "Now what?"

"We use the same strategy that we did in all the other Sections," General Thompson replied.

"No," Xander and I said in unison.

"I don't want to lose that many again," I told him, thinking of what I had seen two days ago.

"I don't either," Thompson replied, "but do we even have a choice? They're too alert to attempt sneaking in, and we're not using guns."

The room was uncomfortably quiet for several moments. He was right, but no one wanted to admit it.

"We can do it," Thompson said, finally breaking the silence. "We did it before, we can do it again."

My mind was racing. There had to be some way to do this besides repeating what we did before. I didn't want to see that happen ever again.

"Wait," I said, getting an idea. "I think we're approaching this the wrong way. We don't have to defeat them. Do you think they would surrender?"

"I considered that before," Xander answered, "and I don't think that my brother can be trusted. He's the kind of person who signs a treaty with one hand and rips it to shreds with the other."

"We should at least try," I insisted.

"She's right," Thompson said. "Even if they don't accept, there's no harm done."

Xander shifted his feet under the table.

"Fine," he said, "but we're going to proceed with as much caution as possible. If he breaks a treaty, we might lose more people than storming Section Three and El Paso like we did in the other Sections."

Xander glanced over at me. "Why don't you go check on your mother and pick up some food for us while we rough draft a message."

Alarm bells went off in my mind. Why wouldn't he want me in here? I couldn't think of any reason, so I was worried. Xander didn't usually hide things from me. I got up from the table and walked to the door.

I stopped and listened for a few seconds before my conscience got the better of me. The only word I had heard was "revenge". What were they talking about? Whatever it was, I needed to find out. Instead of doing what Xander had asked, I ran to the next meeting room and signed onto a holo. I opened live security camera streaming, and found the room they were in. I zoomed in on the holo so I could see what they were writing, and then froze.

From the few notes they had written so far, I reconstructed what they were thinking. Xander had been thinking about what I had said in the hoverplane a month before about Edward's main wish was revenge, the word I had heard, and he was going to offer him a deal. Edward would surrender, take his soldiers, and leave the Republic.

In return, Xander would give himself up to whatever fate his brother wanted.

I sat down heavily on the nearest chair. Obviously I had to stop him. He would be killed. Or should I? If his brother accepted.... No. It was out of the question. So what should I do? I couldn't tell him what I knew. He would have me tied up and locked in an office until he was finished.

I could offer myself instead. Then, just as when I had decided to shoot myself so Xander would slow down, I wished I hadn't had the idea. He wouldn't take me though, would he? It's his brother he really wants. I tried to decide whether I was thinking rationally or if I was just trying to talk myself out of what I needed to do.

Thinking would have to wait. If I didn't finish up what I was supposed to be doing Xander would get suspicious. I deleted the holo's history, snapped it off, and then jogged down the hallway towards the makeshift cafeteria that had been set up the previous day. I grabbed three plates of food and walked back up to the room where Xander and General Thompson were. I would have to check on Mother later.

As I opened the door, Xander turned off the holo and pushed it aside. Had he already finished the letter and sent it, or were they going to finish later? Either way, I was supposed to pretend like I didn't know what they were doing.

"Thanks," Xander said.

"No problem," I answered, barely keeping the fear and anger out of my voice. "How's the letter going?"

"Fine," said Thompson, a little too quickly. Apparently he thought it was better for one person to die than thousands of others. I agreed, but I would die myself before I saw that happen to Xander. Friendships like ours aren't easy to forsake.

I finished my meal and looked up. "I'd better go get some sleep," I told Xander. "We may be up late tonight working on negotiations."

Xander nodded, trying not to show his relief too plainly. I stood up, left the room, and walked down the hall towards my quarters. When I got there I said hello to Mother and then grabbed a holo. I had no intention of sleeping. I positioned myself so that Mother couldn't see the screen, and then changed the settings so that the display couldn't be seen from the other side.

Again I opened the live security camera streaming and selected the conference room. As I had expected, Xander and Thompson were on the holo again. Xander was typing something, so I zoomed in. If I was going to do something about this, I needed to know everything.

He was almost finished already. The letter was short. Basically it was what I already knew, but he had written two things that were essential. The time and place that Xander had given for Edward to come. Top of the Section Headquarters, in a hoverplane, at 0200 the next day.

I needed to go with him, but that wasn't going to be easy. I had no grappling hook, no other hoverplane, nothing. How was I going to do it? Maybe I could start for the capital the day before. No. Xander would guess what was going on and figure out a way to stop me. I needed help.

Looking up from my holo, I saw Mother in a chair near the window, gazing out. Why couldn't I ask her? I had always figured that she wasn't able to help with war strategy, but I now realized that my genes had come from somewhere, and they probably weren't all from Father. I skimmed over the events of the last few months in my mind, and decided that not all adults were total idiots, as I had assumed a few months before.

"Mother," I said flatly, "I need help."

"Yes?" She looked away from the window.

I took a deep breath and looked at the floor. "Xander is planning to make a treaty with his brother. The Republic for himself."

Mother understood immediately. "What are you wanting to do?"

"I need to follow him and see if I can...." What was I planning to do? How was I going to stop several armed soldiers and Xander's brother? Knockout gas was effective, but we didn't have any here. "I don't know. But I can't just let him go off and get killed."

She nodded slowly. "You should know, though, that I want to stop you for the same reasons that you want to stop him." Great. I should have seen that coming. "But I believe in you. I think you can do it."

Relief flooded through me. "Thank you."

She grabbed her own holo and walked over to me. She activated the screen and opened a file.

"This is something that your father made before your cousin took over."

It was a full body suit, grey with odd black streaks running down it. I gave her a puzzled look. She smiled and changed the background. The suit blended with it perfectly, so that if I hadn't seen it a moment before, I wouldn't have known it was there. I smiled back.

"Wow. How does that work? Do we have one here?"

"I have no idea how it works, but we do have a couple here. When your father was taken, the Republic took all of the memory chips from his holo and made a few. They didn't use them for long though, because the suits got into the habit of turning neon red."

My grin grew even wider. "How did you hack the system?"

"I did a little hacking with your father a while back. I can fix the programming for tomorrow."

"Thank you so much," I said grasping her hand. She smiled tightly and got up.

"I think that they are down in the weapons room somewhere. I'll fix the coding while you get one." She set her holo down at the desk and sat down in front of it.

Taking care not to let anyone see me, I jogged down the hall towards the weapons chamber. I waited until the guard looked the other way and then darted inside. The room was almost empty, so it didn't take me long to find them. Guessing that Mother had finished her programming by now, I put one on. As soon as I zipped it up, it compressed to fit my body. The cloth covered my whole body, but it was thin enough on my face that I could see and breathe. I looked around until I spotted a reflective piece of metal. I went to it and looked. There was nothing. I was invisible.

How the technology worked was a mystery to me. How could it blend in perfectly from every angle? Whatever. I was just glad that it did work. I left the room, making sure to walk in front of the guard. He showed no sign of having seen anything. I made my way back up to my room, enjoying the odd feeling of invisibility.

When I got to my room I quieted my step. I might as well have some fun with this. It might be the last chance I ever got to play. Silently stepping in front of Mother, I made sure not to breathe too loudly. Then I pulled the headpiece off.

She jerked back and let out a small shriek. I fell on the floor and laughed, rolling around. Mother slowly joined in.

"Look at yourself," Mother said, starting to laugh harder. I walked to a mirror and stepped back, startled. The headpiece was removed, but nothing else was, so my head appeared to be floating in the air. Slightly nauseated, I removed the rest of the suit.

Mother slowly stopped laughing and looked down at her feet. "Your father always had a good sense of humor, even during hard times. You remind me of him."

I wasn't sure what to say. I always felt sad and guilty when I thought about Father, since it was partly my fault that he had died. Did she blame me? She forced a tight smile and got up.

"I need to go. I'm supposed to help with supper," she said.

A tear made its way down my cheek. It was odd how quickly we could go from laughing to crying. I brushed it off quickly and nodded. "See you later."

"We sent the letter yesterday afternoon, and we haven't gotten a response yet," Xander said as I sat across the table from him and General Thompson.

I blinked several times, trying to clear the fog away from my eyes. I had been up late the night before, trying to figure out some kind of a plan, and the lack of sleep

was finally catching up with me. So far, I hadn't come up with anything that would work. "That's fine," I answered.

"If we don't have a response in the next couple of days, we will go ahead with an attack on Section Three, and then El Paso." Xander looked like he had been up late the night before, also, I thought as I saw the dark circles under his eyes.

I nodded.

Xander again seemed relieved that I hadn't asked too many questions and was not overly suspicious. He turned on a holo and opened correspondence. "We have a message from General Reigter, who is claiming that he was poisoned."

Thompson let out a snort. "That wording seems a little dramatic."

"My opinion entirely," I said, drumming my fingers on the table.

"I guess we just ignore it, then?" Xander asked.

Thompson and I both agreed. We had enough problems without trying to deal with Reigter.

"Okay," Xander said, "we're done. This was a short meeting, but we needed to tell Gale what was going on and deal with that message."

We all got up and left, and I went straight to my room. I needed to get some sleep if I was going to be able to do anything tonight. Mother left and locked the door behind her, not wanting to disturb me.

As it usually did when I was trying to sleep, my mind wandered. I had talked to Mother about the book once. She was delighted to hear that Xander and I had decided to believe in it, and she had also told me that we could talk to its author. I still didn't understand, but I decided to try it.

I had one prayer. That Xander would live through the night.

"Gale," Mother was shaking my shoulder. "It's time."

I sat up and opened my eyes. It was dark except for the light that came from the dim lamp on the ceiling. I glanced at the holo, which read 0143. Sliding my feet off the bed, I reached for the desk to pull myself up.

"I have your suit ready, and something else you might find helpful," Mother said as I stood.

I slipped into the suit, and then glanced at my arm. It was still visible.

"Nothing's wrong," Mother said, "I just deactivated it so I could see you."

She handed me a small parcel and I opened it. Inside was a gun.

"What?" I said. I didn't understand.

"It's a tranquilizer," she answered. "The dart leaves the victim knocked out for the next hour or so. You'll have to carry it inside your suit, though, if you want to stay totally invisible."

I thanked her and did as she had suggested. She embraced me and held me for several seconds. "Be careful."

"I will." I stayed until Mother withdrew her arms, and then walked towards the door. "Thank you again, for everything." I darted out into the hallway before I could start crying. Once the door was shut, I activated the suit and started down the hall, treading lightly. I couldn't be seen, but I could be heard.

Still moving as silently as possible, I climbed up the ladder that led to the roof. I opened it unbearably slowly, being careful to make no noise. Xander was already there, looking east, where the breach in the forcefield was. I climbed out onto the roof and eased the trap door shut behind me. When I was done, I slowly let my breath out and walked to the opposite side of the roof and sat down.

The waiting was unbearable. Xander was there, a few feet away, but I couldn't talk to him, or even let him see me. I wanted so badly to talk to him, to let him know that I was there, but I couldn't.

Several minutes later I heard a faint noise. I glanced to the east and saw the faint lights of one of the Republic's few remaining hoverplanes approaching, much closer than I would have thought possible from the sound. They must be using silencers, I thought.

The hoverplane stopped over the building, and a ladder descended. Xander stepped onto it and began climbing. I sprinted across the roof, hoping that the noise of the hoverplane engines would muffle my footsteps. Just as I reached the base of the ladder, the trap door on the roof burst open and a large man jumped out.

"Traitor!" he yelled, waving a gun. General Reigter, I realized.

He pointed the gun at Xander and fired. It missed him by an inch and hit the ladder. I pulled the tranquilizer out of my suit and pointed it at him. Noticing the movement, he lowered his gun toward me, and then stopped. Utter confusion showed on his face. I smiled, relishing the moment, and then fired. Reigter dropped to the ground and Xander, who hadn't seen the tranquilizer and was quite confused, climbed the rest of the ladder as quickly as he could. I followed after tucking the gun back into my suit.

When I was safely in the hoverplane, I found a corner and sat down. The pilot seemed surprised that Xander had actually come, but wasted no time in handcuffing him. We made the flight to the capital quickly. I was hopeful that I might be able to do what I wanted to, now that I had the tranquilizer, which kept me from despair. Still, I worried. If something went wrong.... No, nothing would go wrong. This was going to work. Xander was going to live, even if I had to give my own life.

As the hoverplane pulled into El Paso, I thought about Xander. Back in Section Four, I had been using him as a means to get Mother free. Something happened af-

ter he shielded me from that bomb, though. Our friendship took a totally new dimension, one of protecting each other, no matter what the cost. That's why I was here.

The hoverplane had stopped. The pilot got Xander to his feet and led him out, towards the building that he had parked next to. We ascended several flights of stairs, and then entered a small room. My heart rate quickened. There were four soldiers, not including the one who had just entered with Xander, and Edward. The pilot shoved Xander down to his knees and moved away.

Everything slowed down. The people in the room looked blurry as they moved around. I struggled to breath normally and clear my vision. It wouldn't stop. I had been dangerous situations before, but this was the worst. I knew that in a matter of seconds, I would have to reveal myself by drawing my weapon. Either Xander or I could be killed before I had time to do anything.

Finally I seized control of reality. Edward was talking, and one of the men was handing him something. A gun. My breath fluttered in my chest. I had to move now.

I yanked out the tranquilizer and fired at Edward. I cursed myself as the dart bounced off the gun he was holding. How could I have missed? He dove behind a soldier, who I shot immediately. I dropped two more before one of them realized what was going on. I held the gun at an odd angle to throw off anyone shooting at me. Sure enough, a bullet whizzed through the air where it looked like I was standing.

Xander had stood up and backed against the wall. Edward seemed to have lost his gun in the scuffle and was shouting at one of his soldiers, pointing at Xander. The soldier lifted his gun, and I shot him, and then fired at the other soldier before he could lift his gun.

Edward dodged the dart I shot at him and picked up a gun. He pointed it at Xander. "Show yourself, or he dies." I froze. Had I come so close for this? I dropped the gun to the floor and removed the suit. Edward smiled. "I'm so glad you could join us. I was hoping you would come."

I reached for my tranquilizer, but Edward's finger tightened on the trigger. "Don't try that," he said.

"Okay," I answered. "You win." I needed time. Every moment we were alive was a possibility. I moved my hand away from the tranquilizer. Edward seemed satisfied.

"Now, go kneel by him," he gestured towards Xander with his gun. I obeyed. He stood still for a moment, considering. "Of course I will honor my word and leave. But what's to keep me from coming back? I'll spend a few years preparing, and then when I attack your petty new country will be gone."

Xander didn't look worried. He must think that by that time they would be strong enough to repel an attack. He shot a glance at me and then moved his hands to-

wards mine, as far as the cuffs would allow. I reached out towards him, and gripped his hand.

Edward stepped back, gun still aimed at Xander. His finger tightened on the trigger again. A little more, and it would fire. What was I supposed to do? I thought I could save him, but there wasn't any way out. At least, not for both of us. Wasn't this what I came to do?

Edward pulled the trigger, and I fell into the bullet before it could hit Xander. It embedded itself in my chest and I blacked out.

Machines whirred around me and lights flashed. I tried to sit up, but someone ran over to me and gently pushed me back down. I closed my eyes and slipped into sleep again.

I drifted in and out of consciousness. It could have been days, or weeks, or months for all I knew. I tried to ignore the pain in my chest, but I couldn't. Once in a while a face I knew would drift by, but I never could tell if it was reality or a dream. It all seemed to blur together.

There were some things I could figure out, though. From the fact that I was being cared for, I gathered that I was either back in Section Four or that we had already won the war.

And Xander. I had to find out if he was safe, but I didn't have the strength to speak, much less get out of bed. I tried to remember what had happened after the bullet hit me, but that area of my memory was blank.

Five days later – at least they tell me that's how long it was, it felt like longer – I was allowed to get up. I walked slowly down a hall and looked out the window. I was in the capital, which meant we had won. I should have felt joy or exultation, but all my emotions seemed dead. I followed the hall further and glanced in all the open doors. All medical rooms, most of them empty.

The last room, though, was not empty. I almost continued after one short glance, but then I stopped short. I walked into the room, barely believing my eyes. It was Xander. He was alive. I ran to his bed, not caring about the pain in my chest, and jumped on. He smiled at me. I wept as I looked at him, tears of joy and relief.

"We did it," Xander said, his voice weak.

"Yes," I answered, "we did." I closed my eyes and let the warm feeling finally envelop me. We had won a war, freed a nation. Now that I knew that Xander was safe, everything that I should have felt earlier flooded in. "We did it with the help of the Almighty One." After a moment of silence, my curiosity got the best of me. "What happened?" I asked.

"After you took that bullet," Xander said, glancing at my chest, "I lunged. I caught my brother off guard, and knocked the gun out of his hands with my head. I hit the edge of a table – hard – when I fell, and made a big gash in my head. That's why I'm in here." He gestured towards a bruise on his forehead. "I grabbed your tranquilizer

and shot him, and then I got the keys for my cuffs. I contacted Section Four and then blacked out. I woke up here a few days ago."

"You shot the tranquilizer with your hands cuffed behind your back?" I asked, incredulous.

"Like you said, we did it with the help of the Almighty."

We were silent again. It was a comfortable silence. We didn't have any obligations now. No one was depending on us to lead them to war, or to come up with brilliant strategies. We were just kids.

"Where is he now?" I asked.

"Who?"

"Your brother."

"Oh," Xander said. "He's in prison. I'm planning on going to see him occasionally. I want him to..." he stopped, trying to think what to say. "Heal. I want him to understand the truth."

"That's good," I answered.

Xander closed his eyes. "What are we going to do now?" he asked.

"I don't know," I replied. Honestly, I hadn't thought past the end of the war.

Is the war over? came an awful thought. "Xander, what's going on in Section Three?"

"It's under control. There may be trouble later, but I think we can count on at least a few month's peace."

I relaxed a little. I decided to forget the future for a little while and enjoy the moment.

The door behind me creaked, and I turned around to see Mother coming in.

"Gale!" she said, rushing towards me.

I opened my arms and she ran into them. From where he lay, Xander grabbed my hand. I smiled. I was surrounded by the people I loved, and the One who loves us more than anyone else can.