

THE HAZMAT SISTERS

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The runaway soldier comes upon their party days after they cross out of Oklahoma into Missouri, late in the afternoon when their Questmaster is on shift, as they camp in a culvert near a river somewhere near Grand Falls.

Wilmie drew last watch, shift at the end of day, through hot and humid afternoon and its build to an equally dense evening. She’s sliding in and out of a doze, heat-torpor amplified by her hay fever meds.

Pony pokes her with one of its sharps, silent alarm that shoots Wilmie to her feet, adrenalized, raring and ready to wake the others . . . unless it’s a feral chicken, or a skunk. Pony’s supposed to know a coyote when it sees it, but it still flags every. Single. One.

“UNKNOWN INTERLOPER.” Text from the bot scrolls across her augmented display.

She flicks the warning away with a gesture, linking to Tess’s dragon and zooming with its cameras. It feeds a view of the brush direct to her goggles. No coyote this time. The man’s scrawny, but a man nonetheless. Not as big as Fee, but full-grown.

He’s creeping toward them. Not blundering, not snuffling about for shelter, and moving superslow. Bidding to fool their motion detectors? Not good.

Wilmie checks the charge on Pony—three quarters—then side-steps, fighting a sneeze as she crouches beside her twin, Tess, and puts a hand over her mouth. Tess

goes from slack to electric under her hands. She joins the Dragon channel, takes one look, and sends, subvocally: "Someone's coming, Fee."

Wilmie's earbuds make the utterance seem loud.

Fee, their fearless leader, rolls deeper into the culvert they've claimed for the night's camp. "Secure the mule."

Wilmie obeys, triggering a clattering furl of shield over Mule's chest-mounted solar panel. Pony collapses into a pile of dull silver spaghetti, camouflage mode, pretending to be broken chain-link fence, scattered in grass. Dragon rises another three meters, propellers whirring lustily as Tess, emitting a cheerful spray of happyface moji, queues up a trunk dart.

Wilmie sneezes, adding to the noise.

The man pauses, just short of the clearing.

Fee lights up an arrow across the group shareboard, indicating the bug-out trail they established when they made camp. Tess slithers up two pegs they banged into the base of an American elm, climbing into its sparse coverage.

"Call him out," Fee orders Wilmie, scrambling.

"But your helmet!"

"I just need a second!" The older girl lunges for the helm, with its opaque, light-bending visor and advanced tactical screen that lets her pass not only for an adult but for corporate security.

"We see you," Wilmie shouts. "Come on out."

The man steps forward. Maybe he gets a look at Fee's face before it vanishes under the screen and maybe he doesn't.

By now, Tess has dropped to the ground again, working her way along the banks of the river, flanking him.

The man puts his hands up. "Steady, girl scouts. I come in peace."

Wilmie scans him. He's a fairhair: old-looking, stubbly yellow-grey beard, and lots of ugly freckles. His nanosilk coverage is thin. Bare patches of chest show under his much-abused bulletproof vest. The primer is running in safe mode—basic black tights, without even free apps like kneepads or pockets. A glitch, or is he hiding something?

"Casting Whooz," she subs on the team channel.

"Don't get distracted." Fee's voice is tight: probably she didn't get her face hid fast enough. She has her hands behind her back—by now, her mother's telescoping baton will be fisted in her left. She's got her toes up against the pile of apparent rubble that is Pony, in case it comes to a real fight. "Ready a fireball."

Wilmie opens Mule's Dangerous Goods drawer, pulling a handful of puttied napalm out of her bag of tricks and installing a fuse. She keeps running the Whooz spell. Unless this guy has friends—in which case, face it, they're probably all bagged and tagged—he's outnumbered. Tess rustles in the brush, giving him something to think about. Dragon whirrs above, extending their scan perimeter.

"I'm alone," he says, guessing their thoughts.

"What do you want?" Fee can do a good impression of her mother's voice: deep, authoritative. That sound of Chakeesa sends a stiletto of grief into Wilmie's chest. She sucks lip over her teeth, fighting another sneeze, and tastes blood.

"Just making sure you girls are okay. Need anything? I got food."

Tess's voice floats back from the trees. "Ooh, he's a humanitarian!"

"You're such a good guy, why sneak up?" Fee agrees.

"Aww, girls." He's got a gosh-darn twang to his voice that suggests he grew up in Texas. "You always this suspicious?"

By now, data have come back from his clothes. The primer is running a pretty good firewall—his OS is definitely militia grade. But Wilmie's Mule has cracker software,

downloaded from the world's foremost online retailer and media monolith. She runs comparisons, trying tools in her spellbook against his security.

If she gets in, she can reboot his uniform. Literally show his true colors. She's got no beef with deserters—well, unless they're true believers from the Dixie Purity Party. But if he's here to mess with them, she'll turn his nanosilk undies into a puddle, dripping at his feet, even as Tess shoots him full of azaperone.

"Come on, honey, what's your names?"

Fee crosses her arms. "Honey's fine."

"Me, I'm Baron," the fairhair says.

"Didn't ask," Fee says.

This is usually the point where the nicey-nice wears off, where the man gets all pissy and calls Fee a bitch, or worse, and Tess starts asking if she can please trunk him.

Baron keeps his hands up. "Okay, I get it. You're badasses, and you don't want for nothing. I'mma leave."

Tess makes another intimidating rustle, shaking hell out of a willow tree.

He reaches into his satchel.

Fee goes full alert, slapping out the baton. Pony rises from the underbrush, bones knitting into chainmail as it crawls up her body, toe to top, and the DisMazon logo forms, in bas-relief, on her chest.

That knocks Baron back a step. But he gleams a little, too, like maybe he was wondering something and now he knows the answer.

He minces backward into the scrub. No coward, he still pulls whatever it is out of his pack.

"Peace offering, okay?" He sets three plastic-skinned boxes the size of grenades at the base of the elm before backing off.

Wilmie's surreptitious handshake with his outfit loses connection. She's tried maybe thirty driver codes without success. She saves her progress.

"Tess," says Fee. "Possible tainted goods. Loop 'round and check for traps after he's cleared the camp."

Dragon keeps him in its sights as he retreats, into foot-high fresh-planted forest on the ditch across the highway. Tess establishes a perimeter around his so-called offering, zooming in from a distance. The boxes contain brightly colored marshmallow chickens, individually wrapped, their safety seals allegedly intact.

Sugar. Wilmie's mouth waters. "Think we could test 'em?"

Her sisters don't even seem to hear her. Tess dumps leaf litter on them from a meter out.

"Burn it," Fee says.

Wilmie throws the fireball carefully, underhand, landing it in the leaf litter. Everything goes up in a whoosh of stink.

Maybe they weren't smeared with virus. Maybe they weren't drugged or poisoned. Maybe Baron really was just offering a dessert share and a chance to friend.

Fee, voice threadbare, orders: "Water, for the fire."

Wilmie rummages in Mule for their collapsing bucket and schleps off to the river.

They wait upwind as the blaze burns to ash, filling the moist air with heat, with the stink of frying mulch mixed with caramelized sugar. After they douse it, Fee says: "I think the QM would tell us to move on, don't you?"

"No shit, Captain Obvious." Tess starts breaking camp. "At least we'll get XP for refusing to take candy from strangers."

* * *

The first plague, the stay-at-home, mostly killed the olds and the weaks. Daddy—who was a notable asshole in every possible way—liked to refer to it as a "necessary

population correction." This made it total cosmic justice, Tess says (at least she does when she's trying to show what a toughie she is) when the second wave mutated and drowned him in pneumonia.

Their mothers couldn't afford to be sentimental. Mom sold Daddy's guns and got herself transferred to DisMazon call center in Chicago. She found a family-sized apartment—and population correction be damned, that's no small trick these days. Chakeesa, Fee's mother, spent that same time hunting for a car. One mom would set up house; the other would bring all three girls a few weeks later. Great plan, except for the part where Chakeesa caught the bug, either while car-shopping or because of the long shifts she was pulling at the end, guarding HazMat deliveries for the company.

Sunset finds the party trudging along Interstate 44 toward Joplin, Missouri, Fee still dressed in her mother's uniform. The corporate brand confers an aura of authority even though they are refugees, even though Wilmie and Tess are obviously still kids. Everything they own is piled high on Mule, their precious server and charging station, encased in a wheeled and armored toolkit. They take turns pushing Mule: it can drive itself, but they need to save the battery.

When Mom checks in, they've paused for breakfast; sharing out egg bars with cheese and ketchup as the sun goes down.

Chimes tinkle in their speakers. A shimmery, androgynous fairy in a silver suit appears, projected onto their augmented view of the road.

"Hail and well met, adventurers! How fares your party this evening?" Mom's familiar tenor bursts with warmth.

"Good health and good spirits all," Fee says. Leader's privilege to speak for the group, and Mom awards her ten XP for staying in character. Even now, hollowed out by grief, Fee's good at preserving her lead in-game.

Mule's HR app will have reported their vitals by now, summarizing body temp fluctuations, spikes in heartrate, sleep history, calorie intake. Checking they didn't make any asks of the first aid kit, unless you count Wilmie's antihistamines. Geopositioning reports how far the party got yesterday and scans their compressed audio feeds, high-grading for tension in their voices. Fee and Tess get docked whenever they actually yell at each other.

"Tell me about this encounter with the boy."

Boy? Wilmie thinks.

"Scrounger. Hoping to steal Pony, probably," Tess says. As a nod to staying in character, she throws in a "Milady" as an afterthought.

"No way!" Fee says.

"What makes you say so?" Mom asks.

"All that with the marshmallows, I think he just wanted a good look at . . . at our valiant steed."

The sister with the most XP when they get to Chicago gets first dibs on a wish, anything that's within Mom's power to grant. Their apartment has three bedrooms . . . one of them, just one, will get her own space. Gamifying their evacuation is Mom's way, basically, of bribing them to work together.

"I believe he deserted from one of the local warlords," Wilmie puts in.

For a wonder, everyone actually seems to hear her.

"A Dixie deserter?" A note of fear creeps into Mom's voice.

"He *is* a fairhair."

"Doesn't make him a true believer," Fee argues. "Especially if he left them. Could just be lonely and clueless."

Tess snorts. "Clueless fails before clueless levels."

Wilmie shares her hack attempt. "I ran a spell to reveal his true nature—"

"I told her not to," Fee says.

“He took off . . . um . . . *fled* before my incantation was complete.”

Mom nods. “If he returns, complete the spell and report his whereabouts to his lord or lady.”

“Turn him in?” Fee says sharply. “They’ll shoot him.”

Wilmie imagines it: hail of bullets from an autonomous gun platform, punching through flesh. She shakes the unwanted image away.

Mom posts the quest in their sidebar. “With luck he’ll stay away. You all did well to treat him with suspicion.”

She awards XP for distanced traveled and homework completed, with bonuses for Wilmie and Tess for getting up and facing the threat right away. Fee gets a smidgen less because her face got seen. She and Tess look daggers at each other. . . . Wilmie will have some heavy peacekeeping to do later.

Last Mom updates the day’s school quests. Wilmie gets a conundrum—a programming puzzle with some kind of Easter egg inside. Fee’s graduated, but Mom’s sending college prep: there’s a basketball scholarship waiting for her at UChicago, assuming the schools ever reopen.

“Now then,” Mom says. “I have a treasure quest, two days ahead. Who’s in?”

* * *

Treasure quest is a fancy euphemism for shopping. Someone has erected a pop-up mall next to the food drop on their route. Not their own corporate overlord, alas, or they’d have priority in the line-up.

Mom put in a provisional order, before they even arrived. Simple rations: nobody’s going to raid their party for protein bars and carrot leather. As a treat, she threw in six canned spaghetti. Cans add weight to the Mule, but the girls all agree: spaghetti’s worth every mouthful. She’s also unlocked the family treasure chest—allocating a spending allowance for each of them.

“Get in, get out. Don’t cause trouble, and don’t overload the mule. Stay in character, Fiona.”

The estimated wait time in the queue is about two hours. Fee’s dressed in her dead mom’s corporate cop costume, widecasting Chakeesa’s ID and the HazMat courier certificates on her visor. Wilmie and Tess aim for a look that says they’re too tough to mess with and too boring to target for robbery.

Arriving at the end of the line, the girls array themselves the usual four pandemic-approved meters behind the party ahead, a fairhair mom-dad-baby trio. The man is carrying a homemade weapon, a baseball bat with nails driven through it.

Unwelcome mental image—the Papa Bear, swinging it—makes Wilmie flinch.

Fee puts a comforting hand on her back. “What’ll we buy?”

Tess answers promptly: “Stingers.”

“Not for the party, for yourself.”

“Stingers,” she repeats, edge in her voice. Tess *loves* her trunk darts. “Gum, maybe. Do they have gum?”

“I’ll check,” Wilmie conjures a user account for them all, using Chakeesa’s name and DisMazon ID. A catalog unfurls in their goggle views.

There’s a chip that would boost their network reach, and another that would speed up Mule’s processing power. Wilmie weighs the options, then picks the network boost and buys an additional fan. Keeping Mule cool is almost harder than keeping its batteries charged.

It’s hard to know what to want for herself: to find something in the catalog gratifying enough to make it worth the extra weight. There’s nothing that’ll help them move faster, which is what they really need . . . to get out of the hot zone, and back within range of a responsible adult before Fee and Tess give up the pretense of cooperation.

"Maybe they have a spa," Fee sighs. The three of them currently get a wash maybe once a week, whenever they find a campsite with functional plumbing.

Oh! Wilmie brings up camping gear. "What if we get a shower?"

Typically, neither sister seems to hear her. So Wilmie repeats herself.

Fee makes a *shoo, fly* gesture. "I just *said* a shower."

"Not a one-off. What if we *buy* one?" Wilmie shares the specs on an expandable plastic tank, swanky version of their water bucket, with its own solar charger. It pumps and filters river water, spends the day heating it. A telescoping head comes up from the tank. "Whole rig, once collapsed . . . it barely weighs two pounds. We could use the tank as a bucket."

"We have a bucket. And this isn't cheap," Tess says.

"If we go in together, though!" Fee brightens. "Tess, come on. Hot showers whenever we camp near water? We even still have soap."

Tess frowns, no doubt struggling with her natural reluctance to agree with Fee. Wilmie gives her wideeyes.

"Fine. If it's still in stock," she agrees at last.

"Moment of unity, ground shippers?"

They turn, three heads simo-swiveling as Baron takes over the back of the line, four meters back.

"How's it going?"

"Don't talk to us," Wilmie says.

"That's up to you girls, innit?"

Deep irritation flashes across Tess's face. She's looking at Fee.

She's right . . . there's something there. Something in the way their elder sister sets her shoulders before turning to look across the distance at him.

"What?" Wilmie subs.

"Fucking flirting," Tess signs.

She can't be, can she? But Wilmie remembers Fee, two years ago. Already tall, already the school sports star. There'd been a guy at a backyard barbecue—

—she feels a pang of grief for the old normal, for yards and barbecues and friends and having people over—

But Tess is right. Fee did the shoulder thing then, too.

Wilmie remembers Mom saying, in their briefing yesterday: *Tell me about this boy.*

But Baron's old!

Wilmie's goggles are so much a part of her that she sometimes goes a week without removing her rig. Now she pops up the screens, blinking as the unaugmented night-time world makes everything seem dim and mundane. The mall catalog disappears, along with the virtual boundary of their social distancing hex. Her school and social apps vanish. The stars get further away and tree pollens start clawing at her face.

Without augments, Baron's hair goes from dirty grey to gold. His blotches and wrinkles vanish. He's not forty at all. He's their age, more or less, and even by moonlight she can see he's got the face of an angel.

Wilmie snaps the visor down.

"Well?" Tess says.

"Mom's running some kind of Beauty and the Beast wallpaper on the boys."

"Someone's gotta protect the straights." Tess snorts, but doesn't resist taking a peek. "Figures. Hey, didn't you have a side quest? Fuck him up the AWOL or something?"

"Don't swear."

"Why the fuckity fuck not?"

"Just trying to keep you in the chase for your own room," she says.

This gets a surly snort. Meaning, Wilmie guesses, that if Tess wins the XP and gets

the wish, she's planning to ask for something else.

Feeling uneasy, Wilmie unscrolls her list of drivers. She handshakes again, delicately, with Baron's primer, trying to unlock his defaults. Her eyes are watering.

Tess subs in-channel abruptly: "The Callums are up ahead—I'm gonna go say hey to Patty." She leaves without waiting for permission. Wilmie looks to Fee, but *she's* still smouldering at the interloper.

Wilmie subs: "Fee, what if Tess is right and he's after Pony?"

"Tess thinks everything with a Y chromosome is out to either bone or rob us."

"Doesn't make her wrong—" Cries near the front of the line interrupt them.

The blond Papa Bear, up ahead, raises his improvised mace. Moving frantically, his partner manhandles a kevlar cape around herself and their infant.

Wilmie climbs atop Mule for a better look.

It's a couple big drones, incoming, and some of the other shoppers have mistaken them for gun platforms. Skittish civilians break from the line, fleeing for the dubious shelter of the trees.

"Wilmie?"

"False alarm, Fee—it's treeplanters." There are three of the bots, each the size of a moose and in the moonsprung dark, it's hard to make out their public service infographics. "Something's dimmed their nightlights."

Word has spread. All the people who'd initially scrambled away, in case the planters were gun platforms, are now racing back to reclaim their place in line.

"Why are the planters even out?" The ditches here are already seeded—a mix of knee-high saplings has taken root in evenly spaced lines from the edge of the road.

As if responding, the lead drone sprays tiny webs of super-cold nanomaterial among the saplings. Water will condense on the threads, and its weight will draw the filaments down to the soil. Wilmie doesn't understand the process, but by dawn everything will be damp, and the webs will have dissolved.

She reconfigures her own primer to give her a bit more padding around her core; if there's that much moisture to be harvested, it probably means a damp night. Usually the cold doesn't get to her, but usually they're hiking, keeping warm by pushing the mule. Not sitting like ducks on the edge of the road.

Papa Bear has tried to barge ahead, into a space left by one of the families that panicked.

"You got out of line!"

"You knew we were here!"

He's got the mace raised, and that unwanted image comes to Wilmie again, all those nails, slamming into flesh, how that would feel. Her stomach flips.

It's not just Papa Bear—another fight, the same fight, is going on maybe four spaces forward. Everyone, up and down the stretch to the pop-up mall, goes on alert, in case one of the disputing parties has a handgun.

"Tess, you should come back," Fee sends. She doesn't quite phrase it as an order, so naturally Tess ignores her.

A waterweb shouldn't need escorts. Wilmie tracks the planting platforms as they cruise closer.

Baron bends then, pretending to fiddle with bootlaces he doesn't have.

"What's he doing?" Fee has her visor down, but she mojis a frown, curling her index fingers over her eyes, and popping a starburst of cartoon-puzzled faces on their screens.

"Who cares?" Wilmie's getting closer to having his primer unlocked.

Suddenly the tree planters turn on spotlights, bathing the highway in artificial daylight. It's bright enough for their cams to run facial recognition on everyone in the queue. Papa Bear, unnerved, gives up his chest-beating fight for a better spot in

line.

The planting platforms are allowed near civilians, despite the treaties, because they're not supposed to be dangerous. Great in theory, but they're designed to fire a quarter million tree spikes an hour. Sprouted tree seedlings, wedged in a crystal matrix of growth medium: they can penetrate even hard, dry, unprepped ground and loose asphalt. Human flesh would be nothing to them.

Sure, the tree planters aren't supposed to be weaponized. But it'd be so easy.

Paranoid thoughts dart through Wilmie, schooling like sardines in a bait ball. Militias shoot deserters wherever they find them. Some even shoot their opponents' deserters.

Suddenly Fee strides over to Baron's hex, defying Mom's social distancing rules. Like, times a thousand! Wilmie finds herself deeply shocked. So's the server in Mule—their border turns from yellow to red and flashes about sixty violations.

"You better hope this doesn't just work in old movies," Fee tells Baron, almost purring. She forgot to switch out the shared audio channel. She tips her visor up. Exposing her own face! And she pulls Baron up from his pretense of shoe-tying, into an embrace and then into . . .

It's *so* gross.

Wilmie can't look away.

Baron gobbles on her sister's lips happily enough, putting his hands into Fee's hair, obscuring both their faces.

Ugh, tongues. Now Wilmie *does* turn away.

Her spellbook pings—she has unlock codes on Baron's primer. He won't even notice if she resets him, he's so busy trying to get his tongue down Fee's . . .

. . . *ugh* . . .

. . . but if Wilmie's paranoid idea about the planters is right, her sister could end up riddled with weaponized seedlings, along with the blonde boy.

What to do? Instead of triggering the unlock code for the primer, she tries casting a new charm, this one on the treeplanting platforms.

An ordinary spellbook wouldn't be up to the task, but Wilmie's been practicing her side quests faithfully, and of course the Mule OS has Chakeesa's corporate authorizations—or it will, as long as Fee doesn't keep advertising her true identity to the entire universe one gross French kiss at a time.

Hacking the platforms is at least a decent way of keeping busy as Wilmie avoids the horror of worrying that she's going to see—and then *never* unsee—Baron making a grab for Fee's boob.

Tess turns up beside her. "You hack Dragon's settings, I can probably land two darts in his back."

"Don't tempt me."

When the platforms are a good 500 meters past them, and they're well out of the spotlight, Fee pushes the boy away. Light move of her fingers, like she's setting a volleyball. He stumbles backward, trout-gaffed. She slaps down her visor in one smooth move and turns on her heel, walking away like he's nothing.

Honestly, it's the coolest thing Wilmie has ever seen.

"Don't come near us," Tess says as she steps back into their hex. "You've got plague now."

"They immunized him," Fee says, sharing closeup footage; a ring of dates and bar codes tattooed on Baron's gross, dirty neck.

"New flu bug every month," Tess mutters.

"Oh, and you didn't snorkle Patty when you went upline to visit her?" Fee snaps.

I'm setting Dragon to double-trank him if he comes near any of our tech," Tess says. "Just so you know."

“Dragon won’t repeat fire unless Wilmie overrides his safety settings.”

They both look to her.

“Hey!” She puts up her hands. “If we trank him to death, I can’t turn him in for the XP Mom offered.”

Fee snorts. “Coupla murder twins.”

Somehow that’s the funniest thing that ever happened in the history of ever. The planters wheel round a curve in the road. Wilmie loses the connection midway through her attempt to hack them, and all three girls fall into gales of laughter. It’s been so long it almost hurts.

* * *

The shiny new shower comes with their food order, a package of government-issue food and goods packaged in nanosilk that will serve as top-up for their primers. With it comes a moisture-wicking towel Fiona insisted they add to the cart.

Tess somehow shoplifts a brick of caffeinated gum during the pickup. Papaya flavored, a bit cloying, it’s light, laced with vitamin C, and definitely tastes better than road dust.

They walk off the night and make camp, at dawn, near a stream.

Wilmie plays the others to a standstill in math drills, which wins her first crack at the shower, and as a bonus keeps them from coming to blows over it. She fills and filters the shower tank . . . and then keeps waking up all day, checking its status bar. Whenever she gets restless, Fee reminds her, “It’ll ruin it if the water’s just lukewarm.”

So Wilmie waits. Waits. Waits for the ping.

A couple hours before sunset, it comes. The girls scan the camp for interlopers and randy deserter boys, and then Wilmie runs a conversion app on her primer. Her onesie unravels, leaving her naked to the sky as it transforms into an opaque screen. She sets it to run a defrag routine, expelling hair and bits of grit, before she removes her goggles. Then, solemnly hanging up the sprayer, she steps onto the shower’s floor mat, leaning on its footpedal.

Hot water sprays over her, enough of a jolt that she squeals. Soaping up is glorious. Her sinuses clear enough that she can smell the river—old algae and wet rocks. There’s a sense of filth sliding off her, steam curling off her flesh . . .

“Good?” Tess asks from the other side of the screen.

“Bleeping Heaven!” She closes her eyes, pretending she’s home, with live friends and school twice a week, with Mom down the hall and a bedroom with a door that closes. Chakeesa and Fee living down the road. Even Dad, just a text away.

But the moment collapses. Papa Bear’s baseball bat, bristling with nails, smashes into the meat of her imagination again. She flashes back to the sound of Chakeesa coughing blood from the other side of a barricaded bathroom door.

Wilmie’s still bawling when the water tank runs dry.

Fee was right; they needed this threadbare terry towel. She uses it now, scrubbing at her face, then trying to dry herself with what’s left. She’ll compromise her primer if she puts it back on while she’s damp. Instead, she tiptoes naked and dripping to the riverbank, rinsing snot and tears out of the fabric. Mud chills her feet and she fights the wrack of sobs, shaking through her long bones.

Finally, when she’s dry enough, she walks back into the nanosilk privacy screen like it’s a curtain. Her clothes flow over her, leaving her barefoot, tights stopping at her knees so her muddy feet don’t contaminate them.

As her clothes transform back into a jumper, she faces her sisters—who haven’t even noticed her meltdown.

Remounting her goggs, she signs for their attention: “We need to talk.”

* * *

Keeping a conversation off their mics without Mom noticing is a *process*. Wilmie

has to hack their rigs, first, so they don't log the loss of haptic feedback when the girls take them off. Pony and Dragon have to be fully powered up and on red alert, just in case someone sneaks up on them. If they talk for too long, Mom will see discrepancies in a battery audit.

Quick and dirty, that's the ticket. Two minute meetings, max.

Fee opens: "This better not be you dinging me for that kiss."

Wilmie says: "No ding. But it is about the gross lip-smacking."

Tess can't resist. "Why did you? He's cute, I'll give you that, but—"

"He'd seen my face, remember?"

They fall silent for a breath.

Wilmie says: "Are you saying he blackmailed you into . . . I'll report him right now!"

Tess snorts.

"You think I won't?"

"No, he didn't *make* me kiss him. I initiated, remember? But yeah. He could report me. Us. Cause trouble. Lose the corporate ID." Fee shrugs. "As they used to say . . . business *and* pleasure."

Wilmie fists her hands. "Okay, but, what about why he was hiding?"

Fee looks puzzled.

"Tree planters aren't supposed to be hunting deserters, you stupid jock," Tess says.

"Name-calling," Wilmie says. They ignore her.

"It's against, like, *all* the treaties."

"Like you're an expert?" Fee was so wrapped up in getting her mash on that she forgot what she was protecting Baron from. "Were they after him specifically?"

Tess says: "Would they give that much of a shit about one draftee?"

"Not unless he's someone important," Wilmie says.

"Or *stole* something important."

Fee rolls her eyes. "He's not after Pony, Tess."

Tess says, "That boy is a dirty taker."

Fee cracks papaya-scented gum. "Takes one to know one?"

Wilmie steps in before fists come up. "Question is, do we tell? And who?"

Their timer chimes. Thirty seconds left. "Wilmie, can you prove one of the militias hacked the tree planting platforms?" Fee asks.

"Well . . . I can log onto the agricultural network again, maybe, when we're near the right kind of bots. With the upgrades I just got Mule, it might be possible."

"Meanwhile there's no proof, nothing to tell?"

Wilmie signs: Yes. Because that's about the size of it.

"We're out of time," says Tess.

Fee passes out their goggs. All three of them rerig, check in with their perimeter—no pings on Dragon. Pony's found a coyote a hundred meters away. They reset everything, and Wilmie fiddles their offline timers so they don't all three come back online at once. Then she takes an antihistamine; her ass will be dragging for twenty-four, but her ears are ringing and she itches all over.

Nothing to tell. Fee's right.

"Tess, break camp," Fee says. "Don't forget your homework."

Act normal for now, in other words. Keep working the problem, and in the meantime what the Questmaster doesn't know won't hurt any of them.

* * *

Another sundown, another night on the quest. Mom's check-in is perfunctory: hand out XP, confirmation of their route. No mention of abnormal battery use, so they got away, once again, with their secret confab. She seems distracted. Things must be getting hot at the Chicago call center.

The girls push Mule along in the refugee fast lane, passing slower-moving families

with kids and the occasional masked elder. Some of them are dragging smartcases. The real unfortunates are chipping the wheels off actual antique shopping carts, mile by brutal mile.

There's no sign of Baron.

Around midnight they are crossing a bridge when the border of their hex runs up against the fairhair family, Papa Bear and his baseball bat mace and baby makes three. They're riveted, watching something downriver.

Fee calls a stop before they get too close. She activates the infrared in her visor and shares the view with the others.

It's a firefight. A clutch of warm bodies sheltering under a trio of armored cars exchanges fire with a thick concentration of autonomous platforms hovering over the blackly glinting river. Spotlights, tracers, and of course machine guns all pour fire into the ground position.

"Can we tell who's who?" Wilmie subs.

Tess has shut off her display, opting to instead keep an eye on the family on the bridge. "Who cares?"

"Platforms are flying government tags," Fee says. "Assuming they haven't been captured . . ."

A global override goes out. Dragon shuts down. Tess lunges to catch her precious drone before it drops all the way to the water. Hugging it, she throws herself flat to the bridge deck. "Incoming!"

A missile shrieks overhead, so close Wilmie feels a backwash of something burnt on the back of her neck. The shock of the explosion is a whole-body slap. Her primer reboots into a baggy clownsuit.

There's a crump. Crashes and tinkles. Silence, giving way to shrieks. The gun platforms downriver crank up their fire rate until the voices are gone. They glide in close, shining spotlights, just long enough to tag the bodycount, before rising into the skies.

Ears ringing, Wilmie asks: "Is it over?"

"Gun platforms herded the militia in close to each other and then hit 'em with a single rocket." Tess sounds like she admires them.

Fee stands, brushing herself off. "I know I'd desert if I was up against that."

"Shhh!" Wilmie said, but Papa Bear shoots them a piercing look all the same.

Did he hear?

Both parties double-time down to the illusory safety of the Interstate. Fee has Wilmie boot Mule so it's actually rolling on its own charge, allowing the three of them to break into a jog. They're young, they've got better tech, and Mama Bear's humping that baby; they pass the fairhair family easily.

"Baron could be—a deserter—and a true believer," Tess huffs.

"Shut up and jog," Fee snaps.

Wilmie doesn't know what to say. She likes her feelings about Dixie and the other antifed militias nice and neat. Yes, the missile made short work of them. But they can't go feeling sorry for every boy who's gotten drafted just because he has blue eyes.

* * *

Their next Questmaster meeting starts with a big hash over the firefight and missile strike—how close was it, was their hearing affected, how traumatized are they? Mom wants to divert them onto another road, before Dixie and their allies roll right up the allegedly demilitarized Midwest Evac route. But swinging north toward Kansas City is impossible—rumors of a new new coronavirus there are not hypothetical anymore, and of course going south's a non-starter. "Dixie's even stronger going into Tennessee," Mom says, "It's no place for three brown girls on their own."

Either diversion will add weeks to the journey.

None of them tells Mom about the treeplanting platforms that might have been

weaponized. She doesn't need to think about a freefire zone breaking out around them if the DMZ truces covering the highways get violated. Come to that, neither does Wilmie.

All they can do is push the pace, try to outrun the battle. It's the obvious answer so obvious that every other refugee on the road has the same bright idea. Clusters of foot traffic double time it in the heat and humidity of the evenings, ping-pong back and forth, snarking as they negotiate who passes who and at what distance.

It's tempting to use Pony's flasher and siren to jump ahead, but Fee's pretense of being on a priority delivery mission is wafer-thin as it is. And there's always that slight chance of pissing off someone who's already on the DisMazon customer blacklist, who's got nothing to lose if they go on the attack.

So they trot some, walk fast. Eat on the move rather than stopping. Long sore nights. Wilmie takes as many shifts pushing Mule as she can. Being a sled dog for their server lets her zone out within her antihistamine haze. She can disappear into her lessons and her spellbook and pore over Baron's primer firewall. If the team of programmers that built his firewall also hacked the agricultural network, they might have a standard bag of tricks.

Each night starts out sticky and hot and then becomes wet, sweaty and cold. Each morning when they make camp, she is ridiculously jealous when it's one of the others who has a turn with the shower. They feel the same. Hostilities rise, and she begins to regret buying the thing at all.

You'd think with everyone being stickier, and hungrier, and more tired, that Fee and Tess wouldn't have energy for fighting. Instead, they bicker back and forth, nastier by the day.

The heat, the thickness of the air, the feel of summer all around . . . it puts the lie to fall approaching. Yet Wilmie imagines she can feel winter pacing and muttering up north, ready to flow down from the Arctic and sink fangs into them all.

What if they don't make it to the Lakes before the snow flies? They were supposed to be out of the battle zone by now. Instead, America's patchwork civil war seems to be chasing them east.

They reach a field of late summer peaches, produce going bad on the branch as picker bots pointlessly harvest fruit the farmers can't sell. They take a break in the orchard's shadow, just for an hour, so Wilmie can look over the picker security codes.

None of this is what her life is supposed to be. Chakeesa was going to get a corporate car for their flight out of Oklahoma. Or she was supposed to be the one walking them out. She wasn't supposed to get sick, wasn't supposed to insist, in concert with Mom, that the three girls had to burn down Fee's childhood home and go it alone.

They'd left her bones behind, unmarked and unmourned, slugged to ash by one of Wilmie's own fireballs, all so Fee could have her mother's corporate ID and the company bots, the HazMat shipping license that allowed them trunk darts and fireballs and armor and a night vision visor.

They should have been four strong and ahead of the evacuation, not stuck in the middle of this throng of scared young families and horny Dixie deserters.

Wilmie tries not to let herself think like this, not to let herself get wrung out until the injustice of it all burns her throat, so acrid not even the fake papaya gum can dispel it.

A week goes by where they don't see Baron. Whenever she's near a farm bot, Wilmie has a little peek at its code, looking for evidence of weaponization, bit by bit and mile by mile assembling a passkey. Maybe it'll all be okay.

* * *

When the fight finally breaks out between her sisters, it's over the shower. Fee

falls into a mudhole, and Tess says she did it on purpose to get an extra turn at a wash. It turns into a Whole Huge Thing, escalating into actual yelling, and in the end Wilmie has to grab the showerhead and threaten to frisbee it into the river just to get them to pause for breath.

“You wouldn’t,” Fee says.

“Try me.”

There’s a twitch in her elder sister’s cheek.

Tess emits *bored now* moji. “Go on. Pull the trigger for once.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re all threat, Wilmie, no follow-through.” Even though the two of them were at each others’ throats a second ago, Fee is nodding. Wilmie wonders if they’ll forget fighting each other if they both turn on her.

The obvious way to prove them both wrong is hurl the shower into the river. But how does giving up the one thing making her own life better help any of them? Instead she shoves it at Fee: “She’s filthy, Tess. What are we gonna do?”

Triumphant, Fee washes and combs out her hair, letting it sun-dry into a glorious curled tangle. She produces some lipstick from somewhere.

“Told you,” Tess says. “She’s on the make.”

Giving them a contemptuous look, Fee vanishes into the bush.

Wilmie calls, “Where are you going?”

Her voice floats back. “I need some space.”

Tess shimmers with fury. “I am so done with this whole family.”

“Thanks a lot,” Wilmie says. This barely gets her a glance.

She tries again. “It’s not Fee’s fault this sucks.”

“It’s *her* fault she sucks.”

“C’mon. What’re you gonna do?”

Tess comes back, too fast, with the answer. “Join the feds.”

“You’re too young. You’d need—” Wilmie’s throat goes dry. She’d need parental permission. Mom promised one of them a wish . . .

Tess pops a lightbulb moji overhead, confirming Wilmie’s guess is right. Then she turns on her heel. “Since it’s apparently date night, I’m gonna go find Patty. Watch the camp, I guess.”

Off she flounces. And then, as if things aren’t rotten enough, Mom promptly phones.

“Where’s your sisters?”

“Cooling off in separate corners.”

Long venting breath from Mom as she scans the transcript of the fight. “You didn’t defuse that very well, honey.”

“Right. Make it my fault.”

“This is life or death, in case you haven’t noticed. I rely on you to be the responsible one.”

“Fee’s in charge, not me. And you’re welcome to join us anytime you want.”

“Come on, Wilmie.”

Instead of answering, she sits cross-legged in Mule’s miserable slip of shadow and opens one of the cans of spaghetti. She eats the whole thing, all four portions. She pulls her earbuds so Mom’s voice is a tinny buzz at her neck. She eyes the code on Baron’s firewall and the treeplanting bots and scans for overlaps and similarities, crunching, crunching, while Mom makes sounds like she’s going bananas and Fee presumably gets laid and who even knows what Tess is actually up to? Maybe the girlfriend has been a figment all along and she’s playing aptitude games with the recruiting officers who dog the evac route.

It was like this before, too. They’ve all just been pretending. The friendship

between Mom and Chakeesa was totally dysfunctional from the start: Dad was screwing Mom while he was still married to Chakeesa. What were the chances that the five of them could form a family around that?

"Wilma Jean!" Tinny shriek from the earbuds.

"We're just kids and it's not fair!" She starts chanting it, "Not fair, not fair, not fair . . ." She keeps it up until Mom logs, and if she's crying too, Wilmie pretends she doesn't hear.

Nobody's coming for us.

Somehow this feels like new information.

* * *

A few hours later, in the hot sticky height of afternoon, Pony flags something bigger, for once, than a coyote.

"I have tranks!" She shouts, and too bad if he hears she's hoarse from crying.

"Hey, girl. Girl, it's me." It's Papa Bear, nail-studded baseball bat and all. The weapon is lowered, and he stands well back, a good five meters. "Name's Jim. I'm . . . you've seen me and my wife, Stacy?"

"And baby makes three." Wilmie peers at him from behind Mule.

"I think something's wrong with your . . . aunt?"

He'd say sister if he meant Tess—the twin thing makes that relationship undeniable. Instead of answering, Wilmie puts Dragon on high alert over Mule and switches Pony into piggyback mode, scooping the armor onto her back. The effect might almost have made her look cool, except she sneezes just as soon as she has the robot mounted.

Jim turns on his heel, keeping the mace down. Showing her his back, a sign of trust. She sends him a stroke in thanks and scrubs snot off her lips.

They go about half a click, toward an old church.

"I was hoping to find better water bottles in the kitchen here, or . . ." He shrugs, maybe realizing he doesn't have to explain scavenging. "I thought I heard—"

He lets that trail off too, gesturing at a window.

Wilmie goes up on tiptoe, peering through dirty glass. Fee is sitting, barely, next to a litter of plastic and marshmallow dust. She's humming.

No blood, no bruises. A flood of relief, even though Wilmie knows this means nothing. Still, she doesn't *look* hurt.

Instead of going straight in, she backs up several paces, looking to Jim. "Can you break the glass?"

He obligingly smashes out the window with the mace, action that sends a shudder through Wilmie's whole body. Then he backs up again.

As soon as he's clear, Wilmie throws Pony through the window.

She orders the metal bones to deploy around Fee—who shrieks in surprise. Wilmie keeps the bot on override, poking her with a sharp, forcing her sister up to her dumb stoned feet, burning battery like nobody's business.

"Wake up!" Wilmie shouts, waving.

Fee staggers to the window, nearly sticking her hands in jagged shards as she supports herself. She slurs. "It's Conan Babydaddy."

"Don't mind her," Wilmie says.

"Don' 'pologize for me!"

"You're coming back to camp," Wilmie says. Fee tumbles out the window, more or less headfirst. Pony turns the move into a rolling somersault that brings her right up, on her feet and nose to nose with Jim. He steps back, weapon trailing in the dirt.

Fee rips the bat out of his hand, brandishing it . . . then tosses it at his feet. He scoops it up and backpedals, fast.

"I'll—uh. Leave you to it—"

“Wait!” Wilmie calls before he can book. “Thank you.”

He shrugs. “I gotta daughter, right?”

Wilmie feels tears pricking. “We have a collapsible bucket. If you want it.”

He smiles. “Join you in a minute, then. I want to grab some—” He gestures at the glass shards.

It’s not a bad idea—she scoops one or two herself. Then: “Come on, Fee.”

If she needs to, she can use Pony to force her sister to walk. But now Fee’s up, her basic athleticism has taken over. She stumps along, drunk but humming.

Wilmie takes point. What did Baron give her? What if it’s poison or viruses, not drugs?

I rely on you to be responsible . . .

At least things can’t get any worse, right?

* * *

When Wilmie gets back to the camp Tess is there. With Baron. He’s got Dragon in his left hand and her sister in an armlock in his right. He’s wearing Tess’s goggles and he’s trying to hack the locks on Mule.

Wilmie freezes. She’s no thief. They’ve only got one chance to sneak up on him . . .

And then they don’t, because Fee yells, “Unhand her, varlet!”

Baron wheels, throwing Dragon upward. The bot isn’t on their network anymore. Wilmie throws up a thread of enchantment, trying to charm it back to their side. Then it aims a trunk dart at her, and she has to hurl herself under a bush.

“Leggo a Tess!” Fee says.

Pony’s battery is already half burned; she can’t do a fight. If Baron tranks Wilmie, it’s bags and tags for them all.

She’s got to be the responsible one.

She reaches out, finds a salmon-counting bot on the river, just barely within range. Shoots it a packet of code. Then she waits, like she’s waiting for the hot water, waiting for the right moment.

It comes when Fee decides to charge straight at Baron. “Let! Tess! Go!”

Wilmie handshakes with Baron’s primer. She unlocks his firewall. Reboots him.

There’s a sound—Dragon firing darts.

“Come out come out wherever you are!” Baron shouts. “Get this mule open for me and—” A grunt. Hopefully Fee hit him. “I’ll leave you all in peace!”

Wilmie hears bodies colliding, a chorus of cries and grunts. She risks a peek around the trunk of a tree. Fee and Tess are flailing, a pile of girls and robot mixed in with deserter boy. Baron’s still got her twin around the throat.

Restore Dragon or try to remote-pilot Pony?

The dragon. Wilmie redoubles her efforts to charm the drone into a reboot. Baron sees the play, takes command, slamming Dragon propellers-first into a poplar. Tess, despite the fact that she’s being choked, finds energy to moan as something pops.

“In peace or in pieces—” Suddenly Baron freezes. “What did you do?”

Pausing was a mistake. Fee’s armored hand is suddenly clamped over the top of his skull. Sharps start noodling up her wrist, laying points against his eye sockets.

“Let Tess go,” she says again.

Baron tightens up on Tess. Wilmie takes advantage of the distraction to try to shinny up the tree toward Dragon. If she can get to Tess’s stinger supply . . .

But she’s no athlete, and there are no pegs in this tree; she slides down the trunk. Her bare hands, no doubt exposed to a billion types of pollen, dust, and dirt, begin to itch and blister.

“Don’t worry about it,” she says to the others. “He’s done. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

Nobody’s listening, but suddenly, Tess is free.

She grabs Fee by the armor, pulling her back. The girls stagger away, getting

distance from the boy.

"What did you do?" Baron shouts it this time.

His uniform is color-shifting, from safe-mode black to butternut khaki. The vile Dixie flag is resolving on his shoulders.

Wilmie finds her voice. "They'll be coming for you."

"Party's got nothing in the area," he says, a little shakily.

"Actually, there's a cornpicker with your name on it," she informs him. "Only half a click away."

Baron makes a lunge then, one last desperate grab for Mule. Hoping to get to the server and use it to create a new ghost ID for himself, probably.

Wilmie steps in front of her bot. She tosses Tess a shard of glass she picked up at the church. She pulls out a fireball.

"You utter fucking bitch!"

Somehow it's weirdly satisfying that he means Wilmie. Not Fee, not Tess. For once, she's not invisible.

"I'm widecasting your portrait to the socials and the agricultural network. Giving your coordinates to DisMazon and logging an interference complaint. Your best bet now is to go into the water and hope the current carries you out of the region. You might be able to get your pants back into safe mode if you get far enough from Mule. Unless, of course, you keep Tess's goggs."

He rips them off, throwing them away like they burn.

"Yeah," Fee agrees. "Time-ma float away."

Baron looks like he's about to charge them again—Wilmie can see him thinking it—when there's a rustle behind them. Jim and his wife appear on the edges of camp.

Jim has the mace raised. The woman has a rock in each hand.

Wilmie raises the fireball. "We see you again, we're lighting you up."

Baron's expression turns red and ugly. But he takes her advice, pulling the whole of his primer into itself, stripping with one gesture down to disgusting full-bore naked and he's so dirty and, God, how did Fee *ever*? He seals the nanosilk into beach ball mode.

"I'm marking your face, girl," he says to Wilmie, and then he swims for it. And then he's gone.

Wilmie lets out a long, slow breath. She tries to watch him retreating on Drag-oncam—tuning in is second nature—and gets a view of leaves, the tree it's crashed in.

At least that means the uplink is working, even if it can't fly for awhile.

Jim lowers the mace. "Oh, thank Christ."

Mama Bear smirks. "Jimmy wouldn't hurt a fly, he had his druthers."

"Maybe you should give me the bat, in that case," Tess growls. "I could cave in serious head with that thing."

"Don't be fucking rude," Wilmie says, and her twin's eyes widen. "Neighbors saved our ass, case you didn't notice. You should be thanking them."

"*You saved . . .*" Fee says. They all turn to look at her as, instead of finishing that thought, she does a slow-motion curl down to hands and knees, then fetal.

"Pony, disengage," Wilmie says but it's too late; the armor's battery's at red; it stays boned around Fee as she curls up and lets out a snore.

"Rousing endorsement," says Mama Bear, and even Tess snorts, despite herself.

"I'll get you that bucket," Wilmie says. "Tess, do medical. This is Jim and—"

"Stacy. And—" The woman retrieves a kevlar-wrapped bullet from behind a tree. "—our baby, Future."

"Stacy and Future," Tess says, in her extra polite voice. "Hi!"

Tess opens Mule, digging for the stimulant kit and the blood test kit, all the kits, in

case Fee's crashing.

She's not going to crash, Wilmie promises herself. She says, in a bright, tea-party tone: "We're walking to the Lakes!"

"Us too," Stacy tells her. "You got people there?"

"Mom," Tess says, stabbing the blood tester into Fee's thigh. "You?"

"Just us."

Wilmie hands their old bucket to Stacy. Blood data starts coming up on their shareboard, and Fee turns out to be heavily tranked, nothing's in the redzone. She smiles at her sister, there at her feet. Tess is staring at the ground, hiding tears of relief from the strangers.

"We'll try to get casual shifts at a warehouse or something in Detroit," Stacy says. "Work our way up to proper work and housing."

"Maybe we'll see you on the road." Wilmie makes up a code for friending, sends it to them both so they can text and share. They accept right away, even though the corn-picker thrashing its way to the banks of the river, even now chasing Baron, has got to have confirmed for them that she's a mage. They must know she can crawl into their systems and fuck with their stuff.

YOUR FRIEND INVITE HAS BEEN ACCEPTED. Baby pictures fill an icon on her contacts list.

Catching at Stacy's free hand, Jim salutes them with his ugly-looking weapon. Then they make their way out to the road, carrying Future in their new bucket.

"Mixing a stimulant cocktail for Fee," Tess reports.

"Great." Wilmie bends to the task of picking Pony bones off Fee's sleeping body. She twists them into a long metal rope, connecting to Mule's charger, the better to encourage the rest of the armor to retract on its own. It'll be slow; the sun's not up yet. Better to do as much as they can manually.

Tess decants pills into a crusher, powdering them in an injector, shaking that into solution. She almost hesitates before sticking the injector into Fee's throat, but when she glances up Wilmie is watching.

"Pull the trigger," Wilmie says. She's limp with relief.

So Tess does, steady-handed, and still wet-faced, before climbing into the tree, to retrieve Dragon.

"You called it," Wilmie says to her twin. "Baron was a dirty taker."

"Wrong about Papa Bear though." Giving her the option to say I told you so, even the score. "Took him for a big bully."

"To be fair, he is walking away with some of our stuff."

"He earned the fucking bucket," Tess says, and hops down. She hands the bot to Wilmie. "You did good. You're gonna get all the XP tonight."

Licking their wounds as they continue to make camp, the sisters pull out the hand crank and continue disassembling Pony, waiting on Fee to wake up so they can begin figuring out how to spin the night's adventure for Mom.