

THE HUNT

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St. Martin's Press  New York

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www.stmartins.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN 978-1-250-00514-4

First Edition: May 2012

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

THERE USED TO be more of us. I'm certain of this. Not enough to fill a sports stadium or even a movie theater, but certainly more than what's left today. Truth is, I don't think there's any of us left. Except me. It's what happens when you're a delicacy. When you're craved. You go extinct.

Eleven years ago, one was discovered in my school. A kindergarten student, on her first day. She was devoured almost immediately. What was she thinking? Maybe the sudden (and it's always sudden) loneliness at home drove her to school under some misbegotten idea that she'd find companionship. The teacher announced nap time, and the little tyke was left standing alone on the floor clutching her teddy bear as her classmates leaped feetfirst toward the ceiling. At that point, it was over for her. Over. She might as well have taken out her fake fangs and prostrated herself for the inevitable feasting. Her classmates stared down wide-eyed from above: *Hello, what have we here?* She started to cry, they tell me, bawl her eyes out. The teacher was the first to get to her.

After kindergarten, when you're free and clear of naps, *that's* when you show up at school. Although you can still get caught by

surprise. One time, my swimming coach was so enraged by the team's lethargic performance at a school meet, he forced all of us take a nap in the changing room. He was only making a point, of course, but that point near did me in. By the way, swimming is fine, but don't do any other sport if you can help it. Because sweat is a dead giveaway. Sweat is what happens when we get hot; water droplets leak out like a baby drooling. I know, gross. Everyone else remains cool, clean, dry. Me? I'm a leaky faucet. So forget about cross-country, forget about tennis, forget about even competitive chess. But swimming is fine, because it hides the sweat.

That's just one of the rules. There're many others, all of them indoctrinated into me by my father from the time I was born. Never smile or laugh or giggle, never cry or get teary-eyed. At all times, carry a bland, stoic expression; the only emotions that ever crack the surface of people's faces are heper-cravings and romantic-lust, and I am obviously to have nothing to do with either. Never forget to apply butter liberally all over your body when venturing out in the daytime. Because in a world like this, it's a tough task explaining a sunburn, or even a suntan. So many other rules, enough to fill a notebook, not that I ever felt inclined to write them down. Being caught with a "rulebook" would be just as damning as a sunburn.

Besides, my father reminded me of the rules every day. As the sun was going down, over breakfast, he'd go over a few of the many rules. Like: Don't make friends; don't inadvertently fall asleep in class (boring classes and long bus rides were especially dangerous); don't clear your throat; don't ace your exams, even though they insult your intelligence; don't let your good looks get the better of you; no matter how the girls might throw their hearts and bodies at you, never give in to that temptation. Because you must always remember that your looks are a curse, not a blessing. Never forget

that. He'd say all this while giving my nails a quick once-over, making sure that they weren't chipped or scratched. The rules are now so ingrained in me, they're as unbendable as the rules of nature. I've never been tempted to break any of them.

Except one. When I first started taking the horse-drawn school bus, my father forbade me from looking back at him to wave good-bye. Because people never do that. That was a hard rule for me, initially. For the first few days of school, as I stepped onto the bus, it took everything in me to freeze myself, to not look back and wave good-bye. It was like a reflex, an insuppressible cough. I was just a kid back then, too, which made it doubly hard.

I broke that rule only one time, seven years ago. It was the day after my father staggered into the house, his clothes disheveled as if he'd been in a tussle, his neck punctured. He'd gotten careless, just a momentary lapse, and now he had two clear incisions in his neck. Sweat poured down his face, staining his shirt. You could see he already knew. A frenzied look in his eyes, panic running up his arms as he gripped me tight. "You're alone now, my son," he said through clenched teeth, spasms starting to ripple across his chest. Minutes later, when he started to shiver, his face shockingly cold to the touch, he stood up. He rushed out the door into the dawn light. I locked the door as he'd instructed me to do and ran to my room. I stuffed my face into the pillow and screamed and screamed. I knew what he was doing at that very moment: running, as far away from the house before he transformed and the rays of sunlight became like waterfalls of acid burning through his hair, his muscles, his bones, his kidney, lungs, heart.

The next day, as the school bus pulled up in front of my house, steam gushing from the horses' wide and wet nostrils, I broke the rule. I couldn't help myself: I turned around as I stepped onto the

bus. But by then, it didn't matter. The driveway was empty in the dark birth of night. My father was not there. Not then or ever again.

My father was right. I became alone that day. We were once a family of four, but that was a long time ago. Then it was just my father and me, and it was enough. I missed my mother and sister, but I was too young to form any real attachments with them. They are vague shapes in my memory. Sometimes, though, even now, I hear the voice of a woman singing and it always catches me off guard. I hear it and I think: *Mother had a really pretty voice*. My father, though. He missed them terribly. I never saw him cry, not even after we had to burn all the photos and notebooks. But I'd wake up in the middle of the day and find him staring out the unshuttered window, a beam of sunshine plunging down on his heavy face, his broad shoulders shaking.

My father had prepared me to be alone. He knew that day would eventually come, although I think deep down he believed it was he who would be the last one left, not me. He spent years drilling the rules into me so I knew them better than my own self. Even now, as I get ready for school at dusk, that laborious process of washing, filing my nails, shaving my arms and legs (and recently, even a few chest hairs), rubbing ointment (to mask the odor), polishing my fake fangs, I hear his voice in my head, going over the rules.

Like today. Just as I'm slipping on my socks, I hear his voice. The usual warnings: *Don't go to sleepovers; don't hum or whistle*. But then I hear this rule he'd say maybe just once or twice a year. He said it so infrequently, maybe it wasn't a rule but something else, like a life motto. *Never forget who you are*. I never knew why my father would say that. Because it's like saying don't forget water is wet, the sun is bright, snow is cold. It's redundant. There's no way I could ever forget who I am. I'm reminded every moment of every

day. Every time I shave my legs or hold in a sneeze or stifle a laugh or pretend to flinch at a slip of stray light, I am reminded of who I am.

A fake person.

The Heper Lottery

BECAUSE I TURNED seventeen this year, I'm no longer mandated to ride the school bus. I walk now, gladly. The horses—dark, gargantuan brutes that came into favor long ago for their game-finding ability but are now consigned to pulling carriages and buses—can detect my unique odor. More than once they've swung their noses in my direction, singling me out, their nostrils gaping wide, like a wet, silent scream. I much prefer the solitude of walking under the darkening dusk sky.

I leave home early, as I do every night. By the time I walk through the front gates, students and teachers are already streaming in on horseback and carriages, gray shapes in a murky blackness.

It is cloudy tonight and especially dark. "Dark" is this term my father used to describe the nighttime, when things get covered over in blackness. Darkness makes me squint, which is one reason it's so dangerous. Everyone else squints only when eating something sour or smelling something putrid. Nobody ever squints just because it's dark; it's a dead giveaway, so I never let so much as a crease cross my brow. In every class, I sit near the mercurial lamps that emit the barest suggestion of light (most people prefer gray-dark over pitch-

black). That cuts down on the risk of an inadvertent squint. People hate those seats near the lamps—too much glare—so I can always find a seat by one.

I also hate getting called on in class. I've survived by blending in, deflecting attention. Getting called on in class puts the spotlight solely on me. Like this morning, when I get called on by the teacher in trig class. He calls on students more than anyone else, which is why I detest the man. He also has the puniest handwriting ever, and his faint scribbles on the board are near impossible to see in the gray-dark.

“Well, H6? What do you think?”

H6 is my designation. I'm in row H, seat 6: thus my designation. My designation changes depending on where I am. In my social studies class, for example, I'm known as D4. “Mind if I pass on this one?” I say.

He stares blankly at me. “Actually, I do. This is the second time in a week you've done this.”

I look at the blackboard. “It's got me stumped.” I resist trying to make out the numbers on the blackboard, afraid I might accidentally squint.

He closes his eyelids lightly. “No, no, I won't accept that. I know you can do it. You always ace the exams. You can do this equation in your sleep.”

Students are now turning to look at me. Only a few, but enough to make me nervous. Including the person in front of me, Ashley June. Her designation in this class is actually G6, but in my mind I've always called her *Ashley June*. From the first time I saw her years ago, that designation has stuck.

She turns around, looks at me with her opulent green eyes. They seem comprehending, as if she's at last caught on: that I've often gazed longingly from behind at her lush auburn hair (the

magnificent, dazzling color!), wistfully recalling their silky feel in my hands so many moons ago. She holds my gaze, surprise lighting in them when I don't flick my eyes away the way I've been doing for years now. Ever since I sensed her interest in me, ever since I felt a pull in my own heart tugging toward her.

"H6?" The teacher starts tapping the chalk on the board. "Give it a shot, come on now."

"I really don't know."

"What's gotten into you? This is basic stuff for you." He peers at me. I'm one of the smarter students in school, and he knows that. Truth is, I could easily be the top student if I wanted to—grades come that easily to me, I don't even have to study—but I deliberately dumb down. There'd be too much attention at the top. "Look here. Let's work together on this. Just read the question first."

Suddenly the situation has intensified. But nothing to panic over. Yet.

"Guess my brain's not quite awake yet."

"But just read the question. That's all." His voice now holds an edge of sternness.

Suddenly I don't like this at all. He's beginning to take it personally.

More eyes start to peer back at me.

Out of nervousness, I begin to clear my throat. Then catch myself. Just in time. People never clear their throats. I breathe in, forcing myself to slow down time. I resist the urge to wipe my upper lip where I suspect small beads of sweat are starting to form.

"Do I need to ask you again?"

In front of me, Ashley June is staring more intently at me. For a moment, I wonder if she's staring at my upper lip. Does she see a slight glisten of sweat there? Did I miss shaving a hair? Then she

puts up an arm, a long slender pale arm like a swan's neck arising out of the water.

"I think I know," she says, and gets up from her seat. She takes the chalk from the teacher, who is taken aback by her forthrightness. Students don't usually approach the board uninvited. But then again, this is Ashley June, who pretty much gets by with whatever she wants. She gazes up at the equation, then writes with a quick flourish in large letters and numbers. Moments later, she's done and adds her own check mark and an "A+" at the end. Dusting off her hands, she sits back down. Some of the students start scratching their wrists, as does the teacher. "That was pretty funny," he says. "I like that." He scratches his wrist faster, demonstrably, and more students join him. I hear the *rasp rasp rasp* of nails scratching against wrists.

I join them, scratching my wrists with my long nails, hating it. Because my wrists are defective. They don't itch when I find something humorous. My natural instinct is to smile—smiling is this thing I do by widening my mouth and exposing my teeth—and not to scratch my wrist. I have sensitive nerve endings there, not a funny bone.

A message on the PA system suddenly sounds over the loudspeakers. Instantly, everyone stops scratching and sits up. The voice is robotic, man-female, authoritative.

"An important announcement," it blares. "Tonight, in just three hours at two A.M., there will be a nationwide Declaration made by the Ruler. All citizens are required to participate. Accordingly, all classes held at that time will be canceled. Teachers, students, and all administrative staff will gather in the assembly hall to watch the live broadcast from our beloved Ruler."

And that's it. After the sign-off chimes, nobody speaks. We're

stunned by this news. The Ruler—who hasn't been seen in public in decades—almost never makes a TV appearance. He usually leaves Palatial and other administrative announcements to the four Ministers under him (Science, Education, Food, Law) or the fifteen Directors (Horse Engineering, City Infrastructure, Heper Studies, and so on) under them.

And the fact that he is making a Declaration is missed by no one. Everyone starts speculating about the Declaration. A nationwide Declaration is reserved for only the rarest of occasions. Over the past fifteen years, it's happened only twice. Once to announce the Ruler's marriage. And second, most famously, to announce the Heper Hunt.

Although the last Heper Hunt occurred ten years ago, people still talk about it. The Palace surprised the public when it announced it had been secretly harboring eight hepers. Eight living, blood-filled hepers. To lift morale during a time of economic depression, the Ruler decided to release the hepers into the wild. These hepers, kept under confinement for years, were fattened and slow, bewildered and frightened. Cast out into the wild like lambs to the slaughter, they never had a chance. They were given a twelve-hour head start. Then, a lucky group chosen by lottery were permitted to give chase after them. The Hunt was over in two hours. The event generated a surge in popularity for the Ruler.

As I walk to the cafeteria for lunch, I hear the buzz of excitement. Many are hoping for an announcement of another Heper Hunt. There is talk of a lottery for citizens again. Others are skeptical—*haven't hepers become extinct?* But even the doubters are drooling at the possibility, lines of saliva dripping down their chins and under their shirts. Nobody has tasted a heper, drunken its blood, feasted on its flesh, for years now. To think that the government might be harboring some hepers, to think that every citizen

might have a shot at winning the lottery for the Hunt . . . it sends the school into a tizzy.

I remember the Hunt from ten years ago. How for months afterward I didn't dare fall asleep because of the nightmares that would invade my mind: hideous images of an imagined Hunt, wet and violent and full of blood. Horrific cries of fear and panic, the sound of flesh ripped and bones crushed puncturing the night stillness. I'd wake up screaming, inconsolable even as my father wrapped his arms protectively around me in a strong hug. He'd tell me everything was all right, that it was just a dream, that it wasn't real; but what he didn't know was that even as he spoke, I'd hear the lingering sounds of my sister's and mother's wretched screams echoing in my ears, spilling out of my nightmares and into the darkness of my all-too-real world.

The cafeteria is packed and boisterous. Even the kitchen staff are discussing the Declaration as they scoop food—synthetic meats—onto plates. Lunchtime has always been a challenge for me because I don't have any friends. I'm a loner, partly because it's safer—less interaction, less chance of being found out. Mostly, though, it's the prospect of being eaten alive by your so-called friend that kills any possibility of shared intimacy. Call me picky, but imminent death at the hands (or teeth) of a friend who would suckle blood out of you at the drop of a hat . . . that throws a monkey wrench into friendship building.

So I eat lunch alone most of the time. But today, by the time I pay for my food at the cash register, there's barely a seat left. Then I spot F5 and F19 from math class sitting together, and I join them. They're both idiots, F19 slightly more so. In my mind, I call them *Idiot* and *Doofus*.

“Guys,” I say.

“Hey,” Idiot replies, barely looking up.

“Everyone’s talking about the Declaration,” I say.

“Yes,” Doofus says, stuffing his mouth. We eat silently for a while. That’s the way it is with Idiot and Doofus. They are computer geeks, staying up into the wee hours of the day. When I eat with them—maybe once a week—sometimes we don’t say anything at all. That’s when I feel closest to them.

“I’ve been noticing something,” Doofus says after a while.

I glance up at him. “What’s that?”

“Somebody’s been paying quite a bit of attention to you.” He takes another bite into the meat, raw and bloody. It dribbles down his chin, plopping into his bowl.

“You mean the math teacher? I know what you mean, the guy won’t leave me alone in trig—”

“No, I meant somebody else. A girl.”

This time, both Idiot and I look up.

“For real?” Idiot asks.

Doofus nods. “She’s been looking at you for the past few minutes.”

“Not me.” I take another sip. “She’s probably staring at one of you.”

Idiot and Doofus look at each other. Idiot scratches his wrist a few times.

“Funny, that,” Doofus says. “I swear she’s been eyeing you for a while now. Not just today. But every lunchtime for the past few weeks, I see her watching you.”

“Whatever,” I say, feigning disinterest.

“No, look, she’s staring at you right now. Behind you at the table by the window.”

Idiot spins around to look. When he turns back around, he's scratching his wrist hard and fast.

"What's so funny?" I ask, taking another sip, resisting the urge to turn around.

Idiot only scratches his wrist harder and faster. "You should take a look. He's not kidding."

Slowly, I turn around and steal a quick glance. There's only one table by the window. A circle of girls eating there. The Desirables. That's what they are known as. And that round table is theirs, and everyone knows by some unwritten rule that you leave that table alone. It is the domain of the Desirables, the popular girls, the ones with the cute boyfriends and designer clothes. You approach that table only if they let you. I've seen even their boyfriends waiting dutifully off to the side until granted permission to approach.

Not one of them is looking at me. They are chitchatting, comparing jewelry, oblivious to the world outside the sphere of their table. But then one of them gives me a lingering look, her eyes meeting, then holding, mine. It is Ashley June. She looks at me with the same kind of wistful, longing glance she's shot at me dozens of times over the past few years.

I flick my eyes away, spin back around. Idiot and Doofus are scratching their wrists maniacally now. I feel the heat of a dangerous blush begin to hit my face, but they are thankfully too busy scratching to notice. I quell my face, taking deep, slow breaths until the heat dissipates.

"Actually," Idiot says, "didn't that girl have a thing for you before? Yeah, yeah, I think that's right. A couple of years back."

"She's still pining after you, she's got the hots for you after all this time," Doofus wisecracks, and this time the two of them start scratching each other's wrists uncontrollably.

Swimming practice after lunch—yes, my coach is a maniac—is almost called off. None of the squad members can concentrate. The locker room is abuzz with the latest rumors about the Declaration. I wait for the room to clear before getting changed. I'm just slipping out of my clothes when someone walks in. "Yo," Poser, the team captain, says, ripping off his clothes and slipping into his extra-tight Speedos. He drops down for push-ups, inflating his triceps and chest muscles. A dumbbell sits in his locker awaiting his biceps curls. His Buffness the Poser does this before every practice, jacking up to the max. He has a fan club out there, mostly freshmen and sophomores on the girls' squad. I've seen him let them touch his pecs. The girls used to gawk at me, the braver ones sidling up and trying to talk to me during practice until they realized I preferred to be alone. Poser has thankfully drawn away most of that attention.

He does ten more push-ups in quick succession. "It's got to be about a Heper Hunt," he says, pausing halfway down. "And they should forget about doing it by lottery this time. They should just pick the strongest among us. That would," he says, finishing his push-up, "be me."

"No doubt about," I say. "It's always been brawn over brains in the Hunt. Survival of the fittest—"

"And winner takes all," he finishes as he pushes out ten more push-ups, the last three on one hand. "Life distilled down to its rawest essence. Gotta love it. Because brute strength always wins. Always has, always will." He runs his hand over his bicep, looking approvingly, and heads out the door. Only then do I fully remove my clothes and put on my trunks.

Coach is already barking at us as we jump in and continues to

berate us for our lack of focus as we swim our laps. The water, always too cold for me even on a normal day, is freezing today. Even a few of my classmates complain about it, and they almost never complain about the water temperature. Water at cold temperatures affects me in a way it doesn't anyone else. I shiver, get something my father called "goose bumps." It's one of the many ways I'm different from everyone else. Because despite my near identical physiological similarity with them, there are seismic fundamental differences that lie beneath the frail and deceptive surface of similarity.

Everyone is slower today. Distracted, no doubt. I need more speed, more effort. It takes everything in me to stop shivering. Even when the water is at its usual temperature, with everyone splashing away, it usually takes a full twenty minutes before I'm warm enough. Today, instead of getting warmer, I feel my body getting colder. I need to swim faster.

After a warm-up lap, as we are resting up on the shallow end, I am almost overcome by a sudden urge to kick off and swim the forbidden stroke.

Only my father has seen me use it. Years ago. During one of our daytime excursions to a local pool. For whatever reason, I dipped my head underwater. It is the first sign of drowning, whenever even the nose and ears dip below the surface. Lifeguards are trained to watch for this: see half a head submerge underwater, and they're instantly reaching for their whistles and life preservers. That's why the water level, even at the deep end, goes up only to our waists. It's the depth that gets to people, renders them incapacitated. If their feet can't touch bottom without their jaw line sinking below water, a panic attack seizes them like a reflex. They freeze up, sink, drown. So even though swimming is considered the domain of adrenaline junkies, those willing to flirt with death, really, it's not. Here in the pool, you can simply stand up at the first

sign of trouble. The water is so shallow, even your belly button won't drown.

But me that day, dipping my head underwater. I don't know what possessed me. I ducked my head below and did this thing with my breath. I don't know how to describe it except to say I gripped it. Held it in place in my lungs behind a closed mouth. And for a few seconds, I was fine. More than a few seconds. More like ten. Ten seconds, my head underwater, and I didn't drown.

It wasn't even scary. I opened my eyes, my arms pale blurs before me. I heard my father yelling, the sound of water splashing toward me. I told him I was fine. I showed him what to do. He didn't believe at first, kept asking if I was okay. But eventually, he came around to doing it himself. He didn't like it, not one bit.

The next time we went swimming, I did the same thing. And then some. This time, with my head underwater, I stretched out my arms, stroked them over my head, one after the other. I pulled on the water, kicked my legs. It was awesome. Then I stood up, choking on water. Coughed it out. My father, worried, waded toward me. But I took off again, arms reaching up and over, pulling the water under me, legs and feet kicking the water, my father left in my wake. I was flying.

But when I swam back, my father was shaking his head, with anger, with fear. He didn't need to say anything (even though he did, endlessly); I already knew. He called it "the forbidden stroke." He didn't want me to swim that way anymore. And so I never did.

But today I'm freezing in the water. Everyone is just going through the motions, even chatting to one another, heads smiling above water as hands and feet paddle underneath like pond ducks. I want to stroke hard, kick out, warm up.

And then I feel it. A shudder rippling through my body.

I lift up my right arm. It's dotted with goose bumps, grotesque little bumps like cold chicken skin. I paddle harder, propelling my body forward. Too fast. My head knocks up against the feet of the person in front. When it happens again, he shoots a glare back at me.

I slow down.

Cold seeps into my bones. I know what I have to do. Get out of the water before the shivering gets out of control, escape into the locker room. But when I lift my arms, goose bumps—disgustingly like bubble wrap—prickle out, obvious to all. Then something weird happens to my jaw. It starts to chatter up, vibrate, knock my teeth together. I clench my mouth shut.

When the team completes the lap, we rest up before heading out for the next lap. We've all paced ourselves too fast and have twelve seconds before the next lap. It's going to be the longest twelve seconds of my life.

"They forgot to turn on the heat," somebody complains. "Water's too cold."

"The maintenance crew. Probably too busy talking about the Declaration."

The water levels off at our waists. But I stay crouched, keeping my body underwater. I trail my fingers over my skin. Little bumps all over. I glance up at the clock. Ten more seconds. Ten more seconds to just fly under the radar and hope—

"What's the matter with you?" Poser says, gazing at me. "You look sick." The rest of the team turns around.

"N-no-nothing," I say, my voice chattering. I grip my voice and bark it out again. "Nothing."

"Sure?" he asks again.

I nod my head, not trusting my voice. My eyes flick at the clock. Nine seconds to go. It's as if the clock is stuck in Super Glue.

“Coach!” Poser yells, his right arm motioning. “Something’s wrong with him.”

Coach’s head snaps around, his body half a beat behind. The assistant coach is already moving toward us.

I raise my hands, up to the wrists. “I’m okay,” I assure them, but my voice trembles. “Just fine, let’s swim.”

A girl in front of me studies me closely. “Why is his voice doing that? Shaking like that?”

Fear ices my spine. A soupy sensation steals into my stomach, churning it upside down. *Do whatever it takes to survive*, my father would tell me, his hand smoothing down my hair. *Whatever it takes.*

And in that moment with the coaches coming toward me and everyone staring at me, I find a way to survive. I vomit into the pool, a heaving green yellow mess filled with sticky spittle and gooey saliva. It’s not a lot, and most of it just floats on the surface like an oil spill. A few colorless chunks drift downward.

“That’s so *disgusting!*” the girl shrills, splashing vomit away as she jumps backward. The other swimmers also move away, arms and hands slapping at the water. The green slick of vomit floats haphazardly back toward me.

“You get out of the water now!” Coach yells at me.

I do. Most people are too distracted by the vomit in the pool to notice my body. It’s ridden with goose bumps. And shaking. Coach and his assistant are making their way to me. I hold up my arm, pretend I’m about to upchuck again. They stop in their tracks.

I run into the locker room, bent over. Inside, I make retching sounds as I towel off and throw my clothes on. I don’t have much time before they come in. Even with the clothes on, I’m still shivering. I hear them getting closer now. I jump down onto the floor and start doing push-ups. Anything to get my body warmer.

But it's useless. I can't stop shivering. And when I hear the first voices cautiously enter the locker room, I grab my bag and head out. "I don't feel well," I say as I walk past them. Disgust pulls their faces down as they step aside, but that's okay. I'm used to it, that look.

It's the way I look at myself in the mirror when I'm alone at home.

You live too long trying not to be something, eventually you wind up hating that thing.

In english literature class right before the Declaration, no one can concentrate. All we want to do—including the teacher, who jettisons any pretense of teaching—is talk about the Declaration. I'm quiet, trying to thaw out, coldness still dug in deep in my bones. The teacher insists the Declaration is about another Hunt. "It's not like the Ruler is going to marry again," she says, her eyes stealing up to the clock, counting down the minutes to two A.M.

Finally, at one forty-five A.M., we're led to the auditorium. It's bubbling over with excitement. Teachers line the sides, shifting on their feet. Even janitors loiter in the back, restless. Then two A.M. arrives and the screen above the stage is filled with our nation's symbol: two white fangs, standing for Truth and Justice. For a frightful moment, the projector sputters and blanks out. A groan ripples across the rows of seats; technicians fly to the projector that sits, heavy and unwieldy, like all audiovisual equipment, in the center of the auditorium. Within a minute, they have it up and running again.

Just in time. The Ruler, sitting at his desk in the Circular Office, is beginning his speech. His hands are clasped, his long fingers interlaced, the nails gleaming under the spotlights.

"My dear citizens," he begins. "When it was announced earlier

this evening that I would be speaking, many of you”—he pauses dramatically—“if not all of you, were intrigued, to say the least. My advisers have informed me that concern spread across this great land, and that many of you were overwrought with speculation and even undue worry. I apologize if that happened; it was not my intent. For I come to you with news not of war or distress, but of great tidings.”

Everyone in the auditorium leans forward at this. All across the land, over five million citizens huddle around TVs and large screens with bated breath.

“My announcement to you, gentle people, is that this year we will once again hold that most esteemed of events.” His tongue slips out, wets his lips. “For the first time in a decade, we will once again have a Heper Hunt!”

At that, everyone’s heads snap back and forth, side to side, loud snorts issuing out of their noses. The auditorium, filled with the staccato movement of snapping heads and the sound of suctioned air, reverberates with excitement.

“Now, before I sign off and the Director of the Heper Institute furnishes you with the details, let me say that such an event is emblematic of who we are. It encapsulates all that makes this nation transcendent: character, integrity, perseverance. May the best succeed!”

A raucous stomping of feet fills the auditorium. As one, we stand with him, placing our hands over our throats as his image on the screen fades out. Then the Director of the Heper Institute speaks. He is a wiry, sharp man, officious in demeanor, dressed to the nines.

There will be a hunting party of between five and ten this year, he tells us. “This is a democracy we live in, where every person counts, where every person matters. Thus, *every* citizen over the age of fifteen and under the age of sixty-five will receive a randomly

assigned sequence of four numbers. In exactly twenty-four hours, the numbers of the sequence will be randomly picked and publicly announced live on TV. Anywhere between five to ten of you will have this winning sequence.”

Heads snap back, spines crack. *Five to ten citizens!*

“The lottery winners will be immediately taken to the Heper Institute of Refined Research and Discovery for a four-night training period. Then the Hunt will begin.” The auditorium breaks out in hisses and snarls. The Director continues. “The rules of the Hunt are simple: The hepers will be given a twelve-hour head start into the desert plains. Then the hunters will be released. The goal? Chase the hepers down, eat more of them than any other hunter.” He stares into the camera lens. “But we’re getting ahead of ourselves, aren’t we? First, you have to be one of the few lucky lottery winners. Good luck to you all.”

Then more foot stomping, silenced with an uplifted hand. “One more thing,” he says. “Did I mention anything about the hepers?” He pauses; everyone leans forward. “Most of the hepers were too young for the previous Hunt. They were mere babies back then, really. It would have been cruel, barbaric, and, well, simply unfair to have babies as prey.” A cruel glint perches in his eyes. “But since that time, we have raised them in the most controlled of environments. To ensure not only that will they provide us with succulent flesh and rich blood, but that they will also be more . . . dexterous than last time. Finally, as we speak tonight, they are ripe and ready for sport and consumption.”

More wrist scratching and drooling.

“Good citizens,” the Director continues, “there is no time like the present. Most of you will receive your lottery numbers at your workstation within a minute. Mothers at home, your numbers will be sent via e-mail to your official account. And for those in high

school and college, your numbers are awaiting you back at your desk. Good luck to you all.” His image fades out.

Usually we are led out in orderly fashion, row by row. But today there is pandemonium as the student body—a slippery, sloppy soup—gushes out. The teachers, usually lined up along the side directing traffic, are the first ones out, hurrying to the staff room.

Back in my homeroom, everyone is maniacally logging in, long nails tapping against the glass deskscreen. I am all fakery as I put on my act of shaking my head and drooling. At the top of my inbox, in large caps and in crimson red, is the lottery e-mail:

Re: YOUR HEPER HUNT LOTTERY NUMBERS

And these are my numbers: 3 16 72 87.

I could care less.

Everyone shoots off their numbers to one another. Within a minute, we realize that the first number in the sequence ranges from only 1 to 9; the remaining three numbers in the sequence range from 0 to 99. A meaningless tally over the first number is drawn up on the blackboard:

First sequence number	# of students with that number
1	3
2	4
3	1
4	5
5	3
6	2
7	4
8	3
9	2

Irrational theories are quickly developed. For whatever reason, 4—being the most common number in our classroom—is surmised as having the best chance of being the first number selected. And 3, with only one hit—me—is quickly dismissed as having no chance.

All fine with me.

It's dark when I arrive home, a hint of gray smearing the sky. In another hour, the morning sun will peek over the distant mountains to the east. A siren will sound; anyone outside will have only five minutes to find shelter before the sun's rays turn lethal. But it's rare for anyone to be outside by that point. Fear of the sun ensures that by the time the sirens sound, the streets are empty and windows shuttered.

As I slip my key into the keyhole, I suddenly sense something is off. A fragrance? I can't put my finger on it. I scan the driveway and streets. Other than a few horse-drawn carriages hurrying home, no one's around. I sniff the air, wondering if I imagined it.

Somebody was just here. A few moments before I arrived.

I live alone. I have never invited anyone here. Other than me, nobody has even stood at the front door before. Until today.

Cautiously, I make my way around the perimeter of the house, looking for signs of disturbance. Everything looks fine. The stockpile of cash left by my father and secreted in the floor boards, though slowly diminishing, is untouched.

Closing the front door, I stand listening in the darkness of my home. No one else in here. Whoever was standing outside never came in. Only then do I light the candles. Colors break out.

This is my favorite time of day. When I feel like a prisoner taking his first steps of freedom or a diver rising from the depths of the

mythical sea, drawing in his first gasps of air. This is the moment, after the endless gray black hours of night, I see color again. Under the flickering light of the candle, colors burst into being, flooding the room with pools of melted rainbows.

I put dinner in the microwave. I have to cook it twenty times, because the timer only goes up to fifteen seconds. Hot, slightly charred, is my preference, not the tepid, sippy mess I'm forced to eat outside. I remove my fangs, place them in my pocket. Then I bite into the burger, relishing the heat as it attacks my teeth, savoring the solid feel of charred crispiness. I close my eyes in enjoyment.

And feel dirty, ashamed.

After my shower—showering is this thing you do where you rub gobs of hand sanitizer and pour water over your body to get rid of odor—I lie on the sofa, my head propped up on folded sweatshirts. Only one candle is alight; it casts flickering shadows on the ceiling. Sleep-holds dangle above me, placed there years ago merely for show on the off chance a visitor might drop by. The radio is on, the volume set low. “Many experts are speculating that the number of hepers will be in the range of three to five,” the radio analyst says. “But because the Director was silent on this issue, there really is no way of knowing.”

The radio program continues, with a few callers chiming in, including a crotchety woman who speculates that the whole thing is rigged: the “winner” will end up being someone with deep pockets and close friends in high places. Her call is suddenly cut off. Other callers weigh in about the number of hepers in the Hunt this time. Only one thing is for certain: it has to be at least two, because the Director—in a voice loop that has been played over and over—used the plural tense: hepers.

I listen to a few more callers, then get up and switch off the ra-

dio. In the quiet that follows, I hear the gentle *pit-pat* of rain on the shutters.

My father sometimes took me out in the daytime. Except for the times he took me swimming, I hated going outside. Even with sunglasses, the brightness was overwhelming. The burning sun was like an unblinking eye, spilling light like acid out of a beaker, turning the city into an endless flash. Nothing moved out there.

He would take me to empty sports stadiums and vacant shopping malls. Nothing was locked, because sunlight provided the best security. We'd have the whole Core Park to fly kites or the empty public pool to swim in. He told me this ability to withstand sun rays was a strength, made us superpowerful. *We can withstand what kills them.* But to me, it was only something that made us different, not stronger. I wanted to be like everyone else, cocooned in the dome of darkness that was home. Blackness comforted me. It hurt my father to hear that, but he didn't say anything. Gradually, we stopped going out.

Except when a certain awful need hit us.

Like right now. I open the door. The rain has stopped.

I venture out.

The city is fast asleep behind shuttered husks of darkness. I "borrow" a horse from a neighboring yard and ride down empty streets under an overcast sky.

I head out today because every few weeks I get the urge. When my father was alive, we'd venture out together. The shame was mutual because we'd never speak, wouldn't even look each other in the eye. We went far, past the city borders, to the Vast Lands of Uncertain End. That's a mouthful, and most people simply call it the Vast.

It's an endless stretch of desert plains. Nobody knows how far it goes or what lies beyond it.

Because I live in the outer suburbs, far from the tall office buildings of the Financial District and farther yet from the center of the metropolis where towering governmental skyscrapers clutter the landscape, it doesn't take long before the city is well behind me. The city boundary is vague: there's no wall to demarcate the beginning of the Vast. It arrives indiscernibly. Scattered homes give way to dilapidated poultry farms, which in turn cede to crumbling shacks long ago abandoned. Eventually, it's just the spread of empty land. The Vast. There's nothing out there. No place to flee. Only the cruelest of elements, the three Ds: desert, desolation, and death. *There's no escape for us out here, my father would say, no sanctuary, no hope, no life for us at all. Don't ever come out here thinking there's escape to be had.*

I don't dillydally out here but head north. About an hour out, an isolated mound of soft green fuzz sits there in the middle of the Vast, an aberrational oddity discovered years ago by my parents. And what I need is in the green fuzz. By the time my feet hit the soft grass, I'm sprinting toward a glade of trees. I reach for a red fruit hanging off a branch. I tear it off, shut my eyes, and sink my teeth through the skin. The fruit crunches in my mouth, watery and sweet, my jaws working up and down, up and down. When my father and I ate the fruit, we'd eat with our backs to each other. We were ashamed, even as we chewed, bite after bite, juice running down our chins, unable to stop.

After my fourth fruit, I force myself to slow down. I pluck away at the different offerings of fruit, tossing them into a bag. I pause for a minute, gazing up at the sky. High above me, a large bird glides across the sky, its wings oddly rectangular. It circles around me, its form strangely unchanging, then heads east, disappearing into the

distance. I pick a few more fruit, then head over to our favorite spot, a large tree whose leaves spread lush and high. My father and I always sat under this tree, munching fruit, back against the trunk, the city in the far distance, darkened and flat. Like a dirty puddle.

Years ago, we would explore the green fuzz for signs of others like us. Signs like rutted cores of discarded fruit, trampled grass, snapped branches. But we almost never found anything. Our kind was careful not to leave any giveaway signs. Even so, I'd occasionally find that unavoidable and clearest of signs: less fruit on trees. That meant others had been there as well, plucking and eating. But I never saw any of them.

Once, between bites, I asked my father, "Why don't we ever see other hepers here?"

He stopped chewing, half turned his head toward me. "Don't use that word."

"What word? Heper? What's wrong with—"

"Don't use that word," he said sternly. "I don't want to hear that word coming out of you ever again."

I was young; tears rushed to my eyes. He turned fully toward me, his large eyes swallowing me whole. I tilted my head back to keep the tears from rimming out. Only after my tears dried did he turn his eyes away. He gazed afar at the horizon until the rocks stopped churning inside him.

"*Human*," he finally said, his voice softer. "When we're alone, use that word, okay?"

"Okay," I said. And after a moment, I asked him, "Why don't we see other humans?"

He didn't answer. But I can still remember the sound as he bit off large chunks of apple, loud crunches exploding in his mouth as we sat under a tree drooping with ripe fruit.

And now, years later, there's even more fruit hanging off the

trees, an overabundance of color in the verdant green fuzz. So sad, to have colors signify death and extinction. And that's how I eat now, alone in the green fuzz, a solitary gray dot among splashes of red and orange and yellow and purple.

Dusk arrives, the night of the lottery. Inside every home, young and old are awake, jittery with excitement. When the night horn sounds, shutters and grates rise, doors and windows fling open. Everyone is early to work and school tonight, to chitchat and tap impatiently on computer screens before them.

At school, there's not even an attempt at normalcy. In second period, the teacher doesn't call the class to order but simply disregards us as she taps away on her deskscreen. Halfway through class, a citywide announcement on the intercom is made: Because work productivity in the city has fallen so drastically, the announcement of the lottery numbers has been moved up a few hours. In fact, it will now be broadcast live in a few minutes. "Have your numbers in front of you," the announcer ends cheerily, as if everyone hasn't already memorized them.

Instantly, delirium breaks out in the classroom. Students rush back to their seats, eyes fastened on deskscreens.

"Are you ready for the lottery yet?" the news anchor says a few minutes later, all aplomb abandoned in his excitement. "I have mine right here," he says, holding up a sheet of paper with his numbers. "Tonight might just be my night, I woke up with a feeling in me."

"As did every citizen of this great city, no doubt," chimes in his co-host, a slim woman with jet black hair. "We're all so excited. Let's go now to the Heper Institute, where the numbers are about

to be picked.” She pauses, her finger reaching up to her earpiece. A feral glint invades her eyes. “We’re getting word now of a surprise. This is a whopper, folks, so sit down.”

In the classroom, heads snap back and then lurch forward. No one says a word.

“Instead of having the Director pick the numbers, the Palace has decided a captive heper will pick the numbers.”

Somebody snorts loudly; several students suddenly leap onto their desks.

“You heard that right, folks,” she continues, and her voice is wetter now, with a slight lisp. “We’re getting a live feed. . . .” She pauses again. “I’m hearing that it’s coming from a secret location from within the Heper Institute. Take us there now.”

Instantly, the view of the newsroom switches to that of a bare, cavernous indoor arena. No windows or doors. Placed in the center of the arena is an empty chair. Next to it, a large hemp sack and a glass bowl. But nobody is looking at the sack or the chair or the glass bowl. All our eyes are fastened on the blurry image of a male heper crouched in the corner.

It is elderly and wiry, but its stomach is fat-marbled and protrudes disproportionately to its thin frame. Hair plasters its arms and legs, and the sight of the hair sends a river of lip smacking through the classroom.

The videocamera zooms in and then out on the heper. But clearly the camera must be running unmanned, on autopilot. If anyone were in the arena with the heper, the heper would have been devoured within seconds. The newest wave of videocameras—weighing a relatively spry two tons—is capable of autozooming, a technological advancement unimaginable just a decade ago.

The camera zooms in now, capturing the heper’s uncertainty as

it gazes upward at something offscreen. Then, as if instructed, it gets up and walks to the chair. There is indecision in its every step, caution. Emotions pour nakedly off its face.

A student shakes his head violently, drool trapezing outward, some of it landing on me. Saliva pours out of our mouths, collecting in small pools on desks and the floor. Heads are half cocked sideways and back, bodies tensed. Everyone in a trance *and* a heightened sense of alertness.

The news anchors have been silent.

The heper reaches the chair, sits down. Again, eyes bulging wide, it looks offscreen for direction. Then it reaches into the hemp sack and takes out a ball. A number is printed on it: 3. It holds the ball up to the camera for a second, then puts it in the glass bowl.

It takes a moment before we realize what's just happened. The news anchors break their silence, their voices wet and blubbery with saliva. "We have the first number, folks, we have the first number. It's three!" Loud groans all around, fists crumpling sheets of paper. The teacher in the back of the classroom whispers a cuss.

I stare down at my own paper: 3, 16, 72, 87. Coolly, I cross out the number 3. Only a few classmates are still in the running. It's easy to spot them. Their eyes are sparkling with anticipation, drool running down their exposed fangs. Everyone else is unclenching now, muscles relaxing, mouths and chins being wiped. They slump in their chairs.

The heper nervously reaches for another number.

16.

More groans. I take my pen and cross out 16, a slight tremor in my fingers. Must hold the pen tighter, get my fingers under control.

As far as I can tell, that last number took out the remaining contenders in the class. Except me. Nobody has noticed yet that I'm still in the running. I kick out more saliva, let it run down my

chin. I hiss a little, cock my head back. Heads flick toward me. Before long, a crowd has gathered around my desk.

The heper pulls out the next number.

72.

There is a momentary, stunned silence. Then heads start bobbing, knuckles cracking. My next number—87—is chanted like a mantra. Somebody runs out, tells the adjacent classroom. I hear chairs scraping against the floor; moments later, they come flying in, crowding around me. Drool splatters on me from above; a few are hanging upside down from the ceiling, staring down at my screen. News flies up and down the hallways.

My heart, like a claustrophobic rat in a cage, is out of control. Fear grips me. But for the moment, no one is looking at me; everyone is fixated on the screen. Something is wrong with the heper. It's shaking its head from side to side now, almost violently, eyes wide with fear. A naked, overwhelming display of emotion. A fruit suddenly falls from a small opening in the ceiling. A red fruit, and the heper leaps for it, devouring it within seconds.

"So disgusting," somebody says.

"I know, I can barely watch."

The heper takes a few steps toward the sack, is about to pull out the last number, when it pauses. It drops the sack and retreats to the far corner, where it crouches, hands over ears, eyes snapped shut. For a second, it lifts its head and stares offscreen. Then its eyes widen with fear, and its head shakes violently. It pins its head between its knees.

"It doesn't want to pick the last number," a student whispers.

"I told you," my teacher says, "these hepers are smarter than they look. It somehow knows these numbers are for the Hunt."

The screen blacks out. The next shot is of the newsroom. The anchors are caught off guard. "Looks like we're having technical

difficulties,” the male anchor says, quickly wiping his chin. “We should be back on air shortly.”

But it takes more than a few moments. Video of the heper picking the first three numbers is looped over and over. Word spreads around school about me; more students crowd the classroom. Then more news: Another student in the school is still in the running. As I pump out more saliva down my chin and jerk my head in staccato fashion, I make some rough math calculations in my head. The odds that I have the last winning number are 1 in 97. That’s just a little over 1 percent. *A comfortingly low chance*, I tell myself.

“Look!” someone says, pointing at the deskscreen.

The TV channel has shifted away from the newsroom to an outdoor location. The male heper is gone. In its stead is a female heper, young. This heper is sitting outdoors in a chair, a hemp sack and glass bowl on the ground next to it. The image is glassy and shiny, as if a glass wall stands between the heper and camera. Behind the heper, distant mountains sit under the few stars that dot the night sky. Unlike the other heper, this female heper is looking not nervously offscreen, but directly at the camera. With a collectedness in its gaze, a self-possession that seems odd in a captive heper.

Some of the boys lurch up on desks. A female heper is known to be the choicer morsel of the two genders. The flesh meatier, fattier in parts. And a teenage one—as this one appears to be—is the most succulent of all, its taste beyond compare.

Before the hissing and drooling kicks up again, the heper is already reaching into the sack. It calmly removes a ball, holds it with outstretched arm toward the camera. But it’s the eyes I’m looking at: how focused they seem to be on mine, as if they see me in the camera lens.

I don’t need to see the ball to know the heper has picked number 87. An explosive *hiss* curdles out from classmates, followed by

a *phat-phat-phat* of smacking lips. The congratulations begin: ears brought down to mine, rubbing up and down, side to side. A minute later, between ear hugs, I glance down at the deskscreen. Amazingly, the heper is still holding the numbered ball up to the camera, a look of quiet defiance imprinted on its face. The picture starts to fade out. But in the moment before it does, I see the heper's eyes moistening, its head slanting forward ever so, hair bangs falling over its eyes. Its defiance seems to melt into a sudden, overcoming sadness.

Before too long, they come. Even as my classmates are still congratulating me, I hear their officious boots thumping along the hallway. By the time they open the door to my classroom, every student has taken his or her seat, standing up at attention as the team of four walks in. They are all immaculately dressed, silk suits with tight, clean lines.

"F3?" the squad leader asks from behind the teacher's desk. Like his suit, his voice is silky, pretentious, but with undeniable authority.

I put my hand up.

All four pairs of eyes swivel and fasten on me. They are not hostile eyes, just efficient.

"Congratulations, you have the winning lottery combination," the leader murmurs. "Come with us now, F3. You will be taken directly to the Heper Institute. Your ride is awaiting you in front of the school. Come now."

"Thank you," I say. "I feel like the luckiest guy in the world. But I need to pick up a few items from home, clothes." And my shaver and scrubber and nail clipper and fang cleaner—

"No. Clothing will be supplied at the Institute. Come now."

I've never been in a stretch carriage, much less one drawn by a team of stallions. The stallions are sleek black, merging seamlessly with the night. They turn toward me as I approach the carriage, their noses sniffing me out. I climb inside quickly. Students and teachers spill out of the school from the east and west wings, rushing over to gawk. But they all stand a respectful distance away, silent and still.

Because of the darkly tinted windows, it's unnerving how pitch-black it is inside. I restrain the urge to stretch out my arms or to widen my eyes. Head bent down, I slide my body forward slowly until my knees hit the soft front of the leather seat. I hear more bodies following me in, feel the seat sag under the weight of their bodies.

"Is this your first time inside a stretch?" a voice next to me asks.

"Yes."

Nobody says anything.

Then another voice: "We will wait for the other winner to get here."

"Another student?" I ask.

A pause. "Yes. Shouldn't be long now."

I stare out the tinted window, trying not to give away the fact that I can't see a thing in here.

"Some papers to sign," says yet another voice. A faint rustle of papers, the unmistakable snap of a clipboard. "Here you go."

My eyes still trained outside, I swing my right arm in a wide arc until I hit the board. "Ooops, I'm such a klutz sometimes."

"Please sign here and here and here. Where the Xs are."

I stare down. I can't see a thing.

"Right where the Xs are," yet another voice chimes in.

"Can we just wait a bit? I'm kind of caught up in the moment—"

“Now, please.” There is a firmness in that voice. I sense eyes turning to look at me.

But just then, the limo door opens. “The other lottery winner,” someone whispers. A faint gray light from the outside spills inside. Not a moment to lose. I whip my eyes down, barely catch sight of the Xs, scribble my name down. The carriage tilts with the added weight. Then, before I can see who entered, the door swings shut and the interior is plunged into blackness again.

An ankle jams into my shin.

“Would you watch where you put your legs!” a voice snaps at me. It’s a girl’s voice, somewhat familiar.

I stare out the window, not even trying to meet her eyes.

“Do you two know each other?” a voice asks.

I decide the safest action is to shrug and scratch my wrist. Something ambiguous that could be interpreted a number of ways.

The sound of wrists scratching in response. I’m safe for now.

“Please sign these papers. Here, here, and here.”

There is a momentary pause. Then she speaks with command. “My friends are outside. The whole school is outside. This is the best moment of my life. Can you please roll down these windows so they can see me? It’d be good for the school, for the community, to join us in this wonderful time.”

For a long time, there is no response. Then the window rolls down and the gray outside light ambles in.

Sitting across from me is Ashley June.

We ride in silence and darkness, the officials dispensing with small talk. The stallions stop at a stoplight; the *click-clock* of their hooves comes to a momentary cease. The muffled, rumbling sounds of the

crowd outside filters through: bone snaps, teeth grinding, the crackle of joints and ankles. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people line the streets, watching our passage.

Ashley June is silent but excited. I can tell. Snaps of her neck crack out in the darkness in front of me. I throw in a few snaps of my own, cracking my knuckles once or twice.

This is not the first time Ashley June and I have been in the dark in close quarters. It was a year or two ago, before I became the recluse I am today and just as Ashley June was beginning her meteoric rise in the ranks to the Desirable club. It was raining that night and the class was cloistered inside the school gym. Our gym teacher never showed, and nobody bothered to let the office know. Somehow—these things just have a way of happening—everyone started playing spin the bottle. The *whole* class, all twenty or so of us. The class divided into two circles by gender. The words—*This is so lame, I'm outta here*—were on my lips when the guys suddenly spun the bottle and got things going.

It whirled around in a blur, then slowed, coming to a stop at the boy sitting across from me.

Then it continued to inch forward slowly, as if through glue, until the bottle mouth, like the gaping mouth of a dying goldfish, came to a stop. Pointing right at me, dead center, no question about it.

“Suck fest,” the boy next to me said bitterly. “So close to me.”

And it was as though an electric jolt shot through the girls' circle. They started whispering, heads huddling together, casting me luring, excited looks. In a flash, a girl reached forward and spun the bottle. The bottle twirled fast, then broke into a slower blur. When it was crawling through its final rotation, girls leaning back in disappointment as the bottle passed them, and just as it was slowly

passing by Ashley June, she reached forward and stopped it with her foot, the mouth of the bottle pointing at her.

“Wow,” she said, “figure that.” And because it was Ashley June, they let her get away with it.

A minute later, Ashley June and I were inside the closet. We stood mere inches apart, the walls enclosing us tightly. The smell of pine was thick inside, the darkness complete.

Neither of us moved. I heard the others talking outside the door, their voices miles away. I stared down at my feet, breathing through my nose in long, controlled breaths.

I thought to speak to her, this being the perfect—the *only*—opportunity to express what had been bottled up in me for years. *Ashley June, I've had feelings for you for a long time. Since the first time I ever saw you. You're the only one I've ever been drawn to, the only one I think of every day.*

“Should we get a move on?” she asked in the darkness, her voice whispery and surprisingly low. My opportunity, so fleeting, gone.

We bumbled awkwardly in the confined space as we took off our arm sleeves. I grabbed the zipper, pulled at it, felt it give.

With our sleeves off, we paused. Now was the moment. Was she waiting for me to move first? Then the sound of her neck cracking, a loud bony snap. A low rumbling in her throat, then a snarl, so close, the hiss wetting the walls and ceiling and floor of the blackened closet enclosing me.

I let my mind go blank, an erasure, then a replacement with a primal urge manufactured in the imaginings of my mind. I opened my mouth and a snarl hurled out, its raw savagery and urgency catching me by surprise. My arms flew forward toward her and our forearms collided, nails gashing against skin. For a second, alarm shot through my mind: if blood was spilt, her ardor would

quickly—in a microsecond—shift, and she would be at my neck, her fangs sinking razor quick through my skin, and the others outside would pour in just seconds later, diving inside in an orgy of blood. But caught up in the moment, I did not stop, we did not stop, but brusquely brushed aside arms, so many impeding us, shoved elbows and shoulders away, jostled for position. We knocked up against the walls confining us on every side, hollow thumps thudding as our elbows and knees hit against the invisible walls.

I got there first. Before she could regain her footing, I shoved my elbow into the socket of her armpit. The way I had read about in books, seen in movies. I had her. Her body tensed in anticipation as my elbow locked into her armpit. And just like that, her body lost all tension and softened. I swiveled my elbow in long, luxurious circles, and her body moved in rhythm. Salivary wetness slivered between and around her snarling teeth. I concentrated hard after that, keeping up with appearances, making sure that the snarls came out in the right fevered pitch, that my body oscillated with enough passion and frenzy.

Afterward, Ashley June and I bent down to find our arm sleeves. In the dark, our arms bumped into each other; and in one unforgettable second, our hands briefly touched. The skin of her fingers brushed against the open palm of my hand. We both flinched back—I in surprise, Ashley in revulsion. She was quiet, perhaps collecting herself. I was about to push the closet door open when she spoke.

“Wait?”

I paused. “What is it?”

“Can we just . . . stand here for a bit?”

“Okay.”

A minute passed. I could not see her in the dark, what she was doing.

“Are you . . .,” she began.

I waited for her to continue. But for a long time she did not say anything.

“Do you think it’s still raining hard?” she said finally.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“It’s supposed to rain all night, the forecast said.”

“Did it?”

And again, she was quiet before speaking again. “You always walk to school, don’t you?”

I paused. “Yes.”

“You brought your umbrella tonight?”

“I did.”

“I walked to school tonight,” she said, and we both knew she was lying. “But I left my umbrella at home.”

I did not say anything.

“Do you mind walking me home?” she whispered. “I hate getting wet.”

I told her I did not mind.

“Meet me by the front gates after school, okay?” she said.

“Okay.”

She then pushed open the closet door. We did not look at each other as we joined the group. The guys kept looking at me expectantly, and I gave them what they wanted: I mouthed, “Wow!” and bared my fangs. They scratched their wrists.

Later that night, after the last bell rang and the students poured out of school, I sat at my desk. I stayed there even as the din of the hallways subsided, even as the last students and teachers vacated the school, the *clip-clop* of horse hooves fading into the distance. Rain gushed down in thick columns outside, splattering against the window. Only after the dawn siren rang hours later did I get up and leave. The front gates were empty of people as I walked past,

as I knew they would be. It was frigid by then, the rain still pouring down heavily, as if trying to fill the void of the emptied streets. I did not use my umbrella. I let the rain soak my clothes, seep all the way through to my body, the wet cold licking my chest, stinging my skin, freezing my heart.

The Heper Institute

THE RIDE IS long. Even the stretch carriage becomes uncomfortable and jarring after the first couple of hours—it's not built for long-distance travel. Long travel is very rare: the appearance of the deadly sun every twelve hours restricts travel. But for the sun, travel distances would be much longer, and locomotive technology would probably have supplanted horses long ago. In a world where, as the saying goes, “death casts its eye on us daily,” horses more than sufficiently meet the short-distance travel needs.

Nobody speaks as we travel through the outskirts, along roads that get bumpier by the minute until they yield to the give of desert sand. Finally, some five hours out, we pull up in front of a drab government building. I step out, legs stiff and unsteady. A desert wind blows across the darkened plains, hot but somehow refreshing, sifting through the bangs of my hair.

“Time to go.” We are escorted toward the gray building, the officials' boots kicking up slight puffs of dust. Several other carriages are parked off to the side, the horses tied but still jaunty from their journey, their noses wet and wide with exertion, heat steaming

off their bodies. I quickly count the carriages: including the one I shared with Ashley June, there are five others. That makes seven lottery winners.

Nothing about the spare gray of the building's exterior prepares me for the opulence of the interior. Marble floors glow with the ebony hue of old world craquelatto. Interior Ionic columns, scrolls curling off top and bottom, stretch high to impossibly tall ceilings that are outlined by a plaster cornice etched with curled fronds. A labyrinth of hallways and staircases crisscrosses in a dizzying disorientation. We walk single file, a few officials in front, a string of them tailing behind us, our boots *click-clocking* on the marbled floor, flanked by lines of mercurial lamps. Ashley June walks directly in front of me, an arm's length away. Her hair is like a torched fire, leading the way.

The hallway leads to a large set of silver-crested double doors set between two Corinthian columns. But before we reach them, the lead official suddenly turns to a door on the left. The procession comes to an awkward halt as he knocks on the door. A moment later, the door swings open.

The cavernous hall is dark. In the middle is a circle of curved-back velvet chairs dotted about like the numerical digits of a clock; all but two of the chairs are occupied. Ashley June, in front of me, is escorted to an empty chair. I'm taken to the chair next to hers and sat down. The officials take their place a few yards behind us, standing at attention.

Seven of us sit in the murky grayness, hands laid on kneecaps, staring directly ahead, the tips of our fangs jutting out slightly. The

hunters. We are perfectly still, as if the molecules in the air have been glued together, fastening everything in place.

The official, when she appears, catches us all by surprise. Instead of being dressed in military garb, she wears a flowery dress, the long sleeves adorned with pictures of dandelions and roses. She floats gracefully from the dark periphery to the center of the circle, where a high-backed chair slowly ascends from the floor. Her bearing is one of homespun goodness, more matronly than military. She seats herself gracefully on the chair that continues to revolve slowly upward. As it makes a full circle, she makes eye contact with each person in turn, taking us in, studious yet affable. When her eyes meet mine, friendliness spills out toward me like the rays of a summertime dusk.

She speaks, and it surprises no one that her voice is soft yet clear. “Congratulations to you all. Each of you gets to partake in a rare and splendid experience that the rest of the world only dreams of.” She pauses, her ears perching up. “Everyone will be dying to hear about the Hunt afterwards; you’ll all be plenty busy afterwards dealing with the media, especially the one of you who hunts down the most hepers.” She spins slightly on her feet; her dress sashays around her legs.

“To that end, we’ve prepared a potpourri of activity for you all. You’ll have *so* much to share with the media afterwards. Over the next few nights, your schedule will be jam-packed with events, from dusk to dawn. You might get restless, your mind on the Hunt in five nights. I understand.” A few heads flick back, almost indiscernibly. She pauses, and when she recommences, there is a seriousness lining her words. “But between now and then, I need to stress the importance of maintaining your focus over the next few nights. With the training. Learn your necessary skills, absorb the tidbits of advice we give you. These are not ordinary hepers, the classic hepers

you've read about or been told about. These hepers are different, special: they've been trained in the art of evasion, they know how to be on the run and, when necessary, to strike back. Over the past few months, we've supplied them with weapons—primitive fare like spears and daggers—but you'd be surprised by how adept they've become at using them.

“So keep your focus. If you start daydreaming too much about their blood, about the taste of their warm flesh under you, the feel of their hearts beating swiftly under your nails, the skin of their necks just about to break under the sharp pricks of your fangs”—a glazed look enters her eyes—“the taste of that first squirt of blood in your mouth, gushing into a stream . . .” She shakes her head, clearing her eyes. “That is what you need to avoid. Focus on your training so that you can help yourself be the victor. Because remember: You're training not only to hunt down the hepers, but also to beat out the other hunters. We've found from past Hunts that usually only one hunter comes to dominate the Hunt, who devours most, if not all, of the hepers. Out there in the desert, there's no community spirit, no spreading the wealth. You get to the hepers first, last thing you'll want to do is share the riches. No, inevitably, you'll find yourself gorging on the embarrassment of riches set before you. You want to be that hunter, you want to be the winner. So train hard. Focus. To the swift go the spoils.”

Her face then breaks into rainbows. “You'll be taken to your rooms momentarily. Rest well, because tomorrow will be a real treat. A sumptuous breakfast, then a tour of this facility. You'll see the training grounds, the artillery room, the Control Center, the meditation lounge, the dining area. And finally, at the end of the night, we'll take you to . . . the heper village.”

Officials step forward from outside the circle and stand next to

each hunter. The official on my right is a sullen gray statue. In his hand is a package.

“That’s right,” she says, still seated in the center, slowly revolving, “take the package. Read it when you get to your room. It has some invaluable information. Your escort will take you to your rooms now. You’ve all had an exciting and long night. Try to get some rest today. Turn in early.”

She gets up and disappears into the dark. At that, we stand and follow our beckoning escorts. Our circle disintegrates as we disperse, quietly, swiftly. We are taken down different hallways, through different doors, until all that remains are the emptied chairs still positioned like the numbers of a handless, dysfunctional clock.

My escort leads me brusquely down a hallway, up a flight of stairs, along another hallway, and then down another flight of stairs without speaking. We walk the length of yet another hallway, dimly illuminated by candle, until we stand directly outside a large door. The escort pauses, turns to me. “I’ve been told to extend to you apologies. On behalf of the Heper Institute. Due to the number of lottery winners and the lack of rooms here, one of you has to be housed in . . . unique accommodations. It came down to the two youngest—you and your fellow schoolmate—and chivalry demands the girl be given the last guest room in the main building. Your room is actually in a small building a short distance removed. Unfortunately, the only way to get to it is by walking outside. Under the open sky.”

Then, before I can respond, he pushes open the door and steps out. The expanse of the night sky—the desert plains spread underneath—catches me a little. Stars, pinpricks of silver, are

scattered about like spilt salt. My escort mutters a curse and slips on a pair of shades. The moon hangs just above the mountains to the east; it is crescented, its lopsided smile reflective of my own pleasure at being outside. Truth is, I'm glad to be separated from the main building, from everyone else.

We're on a brick path that leads to a distant small slab building, single story. "What did you say this place is?"

"It's a conversion," he answers without looking at me. "Used to be a small library. But we've spruced it up into a comfortable living quarter for you. It's up to snuff with everyone else's."

I take a quick glance back at the main building. Isolated patches of mercurial light are dotted about its face. Otherwise, the building is completely dark. "Look," my escort says, observing me, "I know you're wondering why we couldn't put you in the main building. It's got more unused rooms than hairs on a heper. I wondered the same thing myself. But I just do what I'm told. And so should you. Besides, there's a perk that comes with being housed here."

I wait for him to continue. But he shakes his head. "When we get there. Not right now. You'll like it, I promise. And you will want me to demonstrate how to use it, of course, won't you?"

Each brick of the path thrums with a vibrant red, like translucent containers of fresh blood. "This path was put down two days ago," he says, "to make this walk a little more pleasant for you." He pauses for effect and then says, "You'll never guess who did the job."

"I have no idea."

He turns to look at me for the first time. "Hepers."

I resist the impulse to widen my eyes. "No way," I say, snapping my head to the side a little. *Click*.

"Absolutely," he says. "We set them to work. In the daytime, of course. Our guys worked the night shift; but once it became clear we couldn't get it ready in time, we got the hepers to help out. They

worked in the daytime for two days straight. We rewarded them with some extra food. Those things will do anything for food.”

“Who supervised them? Who could have . . . you let them just roam freely?”

My escort just shakes his head with a “you’ve got a lot to learn, kid” look.

He pushes open the front doors and walks in. The interior is surprisingly spacious and airy. But the conversion from library to guest room is incomplete. It’s really still a library, the only modification being a set of sleep-holds newly attached to the ceiling. Otherwise, the whole library looks virtually untouched: shelves still full of books, old, yellowed newspapers hung in cherrywood holders, and reading desks positioned evenly about the floor. A musty smell hangs over everything.

“The sleep-holds,” he says, gazing upward. “Just installed yesterday.”

“Hepers?”

He shakes his head. “That one we did. Hepers would never come inside. Too afraid of a trap. They’re dumb, but not stupid, know what I mean?”

He shows me around at breakneck speed, pointing out the reference section, the mercuric light switches, and the closet filled with clothes for me and explaining how the shutters work automatically by light sensors. “They’re super quiet, the shutters,” he tells me. “They won’t wake you.” He speaks hurriedly. It’s obvious he has something else on his mind. “You want to try out the sleep-holds? We should try them, make sure they fit.”

“I’m sure they’re fine, I’m not fussy that way.”

“Good,” he says. “Now, follow me, you’re going to like this.”

He leads me down a narrow aisle, his footsteps quick and eager, then turns sharply to the back of the library. Lying on a bureau

next to a small, square window is a pair of binoculars. He picks it up and peers out the window, his mouth open, drool sloshing audibly in his mouth. “I’m demonstrating how to use these binoculars because you asked me to. I’m only responding to your request,” he says robotically, his index finger turning the zoom dial. “It’s only because you asked me to.”

“Hey,” I say, “give me a look.”

He doesn’t respond, only continues to peer intently through the binoculars. His eyebrows are arched like the wings of an eagle.

“You can adjust the zoom by turning this dial,” he mumbles. “Up and down, up and down, up and . . .” His voice drifts.

“Hey!” I say, louder.

“And on this side is the focus dial,” he mumbles, his slim fingers sliding over the control. “Let me explain to you how this works. Since you asked. It’s complicated, let me explain carefully. This might take a while.”

Finally, I snatch the binoculars out of his hands.

His hand snaps around my forearm. I don’t see it happen, he moved too fast. His nails pierce my skin, and for one horrible, sickening moment, I think those nails are about to slice through and draw blood. He lets go immediately, of course, even takes a step or two back. A glazed, distant look is still clouding his eyes, but it is dissipating fast.

Three nail indentations are planted in my wrist, dangerously deep. But no blood.

“Apologies,” he says.

“Don’t worry about it.” I hold my arm behind my back, feeling the indentation with the fingers of my other hand. Still no moisture: still no blood. If a drop of a drop of blood had seeped through, he’d already be at me.

“Did I demonstrate it well enough for you?” His voice is pleading. “Do you understand how to use the binoculars now?”

“I think I can give it a try.”

“Perhaps one more demonstration will—”

“No. I can handle it.” Keeping the binoculars behind my back, I turn to look outside. A crescent moon shines behind a scrim of clouds, its thin, sickly light falling down. “What am I supposed to be looking at?”

He doesn’t say anything, so I turn to look at him. For a moment, the clarity in his eyes turns slightly opaque again. A line of drool that hasn’t yet been wiped away thickens down his chin. “Heper,” he whispers.

I don’t want him hovering behind me, pestering me for another “demonstration,” so I wait until he leaves. I’m filled with a strange dread but also an excitement as I pick up the binoculars. Other than my family, I’ve never laid eyes on a heper.

At first, I’m not sure what I should be looking for. Then moonlight spills through a break in the clouds, illuminating the swath of land. I swivel the binoculars slowly, searching: a brief burst of cactus, a boulder, nothing—

A small collection of mud huts sitting inconspicuously off in the distance. The heper village. My guess is it’s about a mile away. A pond of some sort—no doubt man-made; no body of water could possibly survive in this terrain—lies in the center. Nothing moves. The mud huts are as nondescript as the desert.

Then I see something.

Moonlight glimmers above the mud huts in a concave shimmer. Then I realize: There’s a transparent dome covering it. It rises high,

about fifty yards at its highest point above the mud huts. Its circumference encapsulates the entirety of the village.

Of course; it all makes sense now.

Without the dome, the hepers would be a free-for-all. What would prevent the people from marauding the mud huts at night when the hepers lay asleep and unprotected? Who could stop themselves from feasting on them unless they were sealed in completely? They'd never have survived a single night hour without that dome of protection.

I zoom in on the mud huts, searching for some sign of life. But nothing moves. The hepers are asleep. Not a chance of seeing them tonight.

A heper steps out of one of the huts.

Even with binoculars, I make out very little. A thin figure, walking toward the pond, female. It appears to be holding a bucket of some kind. When it reaches the edge of the pond, it bends over, fills the bucket. I play with the dial until it comes sharper into focus. Then I recognize it: the female heper on TV, the one that picked out the last lottery number.

I watch as it stands up, takes a sip of water from cupped hands. Its back is to me, its head staring east at the mountains. For a long time, it does not move. Then it bends down, cups its hands, takes another sip. Its movement, even for so simple an act, is graceful and sure. Its head suddenly swings in my direction; I flinch back. Perhaps it has caught a reflection off the binoculars' lens. But it is looking past me, at the Institute. I zoom in on the face. Those eyes: I remember them from earlier this evening, on my deskscreen, their brown tone like the trunk of a wrongly felled tree.

After a few moments, it turns around and disappears into a mud hut.

Hunt Minus Four Nights

I AM CURIOUS about the library they've lodged me in and intend to stay up through the day hours to explore. But the night's activities have worn me out; no sooner have I sat down to read the welcome package than I find myself waking up, hours later.

Somebody is pounding at the door. Startled, I jump up, my heart hammering. "Give me a minute!" I shout. I hear a mumbled response.

Fear douses me awake. I'm realizing now. My face. I'm not ready. My fingers reach for my chin: a faint stubble just breaking the skin. Enough to be noticed. And what of my eyes? Are they bloodshot with fatigue? And do my fake teeth need to be whitened, my body washed?

Never forget to shave. Get enough sleep to avoid bloodshot eyes. Never forget to whiten your teeth every morning before you leave. And wash every day; body odor is the most dangerous—

My father's instructions. I've abided by them every single day of my life. But my razor blades and eyedrops and fang whiteners and underarm ointments are stashed miles away at home. Given

the right mix of other products, I could cobble together what I need. For example, three sheets of aluminum foil dissolved in horse shampoo with a liberal application of baking soda will, after a fortnight, congeal into a serviceable bar of underarm deodorant. Trouble is, I don't have these ingredients at hand. Nor do I have a fortnight to spare.

The door pounding gets louder, more insistent. I do the only thing I can. Grab my penknife and quickly raze my chin, making sure not to chafe my skin. That would be a fatal mistake. Then I grab my shades and head to the front door. Just in time, I catch myself. My clothes. They're creased from being slept in, a telltale sign that I didn't sleep in the sleep-holds. I run to the closet, throw on a new outfit.

The escort is not happy. "I've been knocking for five minutes. What's the matter with you?"

"Sorry, overslept. Sleep-holds were comfy."

He turns, starts walking. "Come now. The first lecture is about to begin. We have to hurry." He takes another glance back at me. "And lose the shades. It's cloudy tonight."

I ignore him.

The Director of the Heper Institute is as sterile and dry as his surroundings, which is saying a lot. His face has a plastic sheen, and he likes to stand wherever it is dark. He exudes an austere authority that is both quiet and deadly. He can whisper a rat to death with the razor-sharp incisions of his carefully nuanced words.

"Hepers are slow, hepervers like to hold hands, hepervers like to warble their voices, hepervers need to drink copious amounts of water. They have an expansive range of facial tics, they sleep at night, they

are preternaturally resistant to sunlight. These are the rudimentary facts about hepers.” The Director speaks with a practiced élan. He pauses dramatically in the dark corner, the white glow of his eyes disappearing, then reappearing, as he opens his eyes. “After decades of intense study, we now know significantly more about them. Much of this information is known to only a few of us here at the Heper Institute of Refined Research and Discovery. Because you will be hunting hepers in four nights, it has been determined that you, too, will become privy to the latest research. Everything we know about hepers, you will know. But first, the waivers.”

We all sign them, of course. The papers are handed out by officials in gray suits who emerge from the darkness behind us. *All information learned over the next few weeks will not be disclosed or disseminated to any person after the Hunt is completed unless the Heper Institute expressly grants permission.* I initial next to it. *You may not sell your story for publication or option said story for a theatrical production unless the Heper Institute expressly grants permission.* I initial next to it. *Compliance is total and irrevocable.* I initial next to it. *Upon punishment of death.* I sign and date it.

The Director has been watching us carefully as we sign, each hunter in turn. His eyes are black holes, sucking in observations with a slippery, keen acuity. He never misses a thing, never guesses wrong. As I hand over my waiver papers, I feel his eyes clamp down on me like a suddenly jammed stapler. Just before the papers are taken from me, they dangle off my hand, shaking ever so slightly. His eyes flip to the papers, to the way they are quivering. I know this without looking, from the piercing cold burn on my wrist where his eyes settle. I grip the papers tighter to still them.

Then I feel his stare shift away, the cold burn on my wrist evaporating. He has moved on to the next hunter.

After all the papers have been collected, he continues without missing a beat. “Much of what is known about hepers is more fictional than factual. It’s time to debunk these myths.

“Myth one: They are wild beasts at heart and will be continual flight risks. Fact: They are easily domesticated and are actually quite afraid of the unknown. Truth is, during the day while we sleep and the Dome is retracted, they are unsupervised and free to roam. The whole stretch of the plains, as far as you can see, free for them to escape, far and away. If they choose. But they never have. Of course, it’s easy to understand why. Any heper who leaves the safety of the Dome is—come nighttime—free game. Within two hours, it would have been sniffed out, chased down, and devoured. In fact, this has happened. Once or twice.” He does not elaborate.

“Myth two: They are passive and submissive, ready to lie down rather than fight back. Ironically, this myth has been perpetuated by previous Hunts when the hepers showed anything but resistance. Historical accounts of that Hunt reflect how useless they were: first, the initial flight, where they proved to be slow and disorganized; and second, their submissive surrender when surrounded by us. Even when we were two miles away, they just gave up. Stopped running. And when we came on them, not a single one fought back, not so much as even a single raised arm. Practically lay down and let us have at them.

“What our research has demonstrated, however, is that hepers can be trained to be aggressive. They’ve demonstrated surprising acumen with the weapons provided. Primitive weapons, mind you, mere spears, knives, daggers, axes. And, quite endearingly, they’ve even fashioned leather guards that they place around their necks for protection. Those naive darlings.” He starts scratching his wrist, then stops. He jots something down in his notebook. “Not sure how they got the leather. Surprisingly resourceful, they can be.”

We sit still as he finishes writing. He snaps the notebook shut, starts speaking again.

“Myth three: They are a male-dominated society. This is another myth perpetuated by previous Heper Hunts. You’ve all heard about it, how it’s always the men who take charge—futilely; the men who make all the decisions—the wrong ones, as we also know. The women typically do nothing but follow. Followers. Submissive. We thought this was simply how they were genetically wired: men dominate, women submit. But our research has produced some startling results. Currently, we have five hepers in captivity, all but one of which is male. Four males, only one female. Want to wager a guess who’s the leader?” His eyes sparkle with excitement.

“This is one of the more surprising discoveries. In fact, it was I who was the first to spot the trend. Even early on, when the hepers were mere toddlers, it was I who noted that the sole female heper seemed to be in the forefront of everything. A natural-born leader. Today, she is without question the leader of the pack. They look to her for . . . well, everything. Where she goes, they follow. What she commands, they obey. During the Hunt, if you want to cut off the head from the body, you take her out first. With her out of the picture, the group will quickly disintegrate. Easy pickings, thereafter.”

He licks his lips.

“This girl. All of you have seen her, in fact. On TV—she was the one who picked the last number. That wasn’t supposed to happen, of course. We would never have put a female on the airwaves, especially one so young. We know the effect a young female heper has on people. It was supposed to be a little boy heper. But she . . . well, before we knew it, she took control of the situation and put herself in front of the camera. That girl . . .” His words grow slithery with saliva. Spittle collects at the corners of his mouth. His eyes grow distant; he is lost in some dreamland. When he

speaks, his voice is soft with desire. “She would be delicious, so . . .”

He snaps out of it with a quick flick of his head. “I digress. My apologies. The official who let that happen is no longer with us.” He scratches his wrist, once, twice.

“There are other myths,” he continues, “and other discoveries we will disclose to you over the next few days. But for now, absorb what we’ve just told you. Use this new knowledge to aid you in the Hunt: First, hepers are afraid to flee into the unknown; and second, they can be trained to be aggressive. And they do not mind having a woman lead them. Not this one, anyway.”

He slips away deeper into his dark corner; blackness swallows him. Nothing happens for the next few minutes. Nobody moves, nobody speaks. We sit, blasé faces and glazed stares. Waiting for someone, something, to break the silence.

Then I sense it. A prick at the back of my neck: someone from behind is staring intently at me. The last thing to do—I hear my father’s voice instructing me—is turn around. Moving so drastically while everyone else is stationary will only draw attention. *Unwanted* attention, as if there were any other kind.

But the prick sharpens until I can take it no longer. I let a pen in my hand fall to the ground; as I slowly swivel around to pick it up, I shoot a quick glance back.

It’s Ashley June, her eyes death green in the mercurial light. She’s sitting *right* behind me. I almost startle in my seat—“startle” is this reflex where we jump a little in fright—but tamp it down just in time. I close my eyelids halfway—a trick my father taught me to make sure my eyes don’t widen too much—and turn around.

Did she see me startle? *Did she see me startle?*

Somebody is at the lectern. Frilly Dress from yesterday. “How are we all tonight? Having fun?” She takes out a notepad, scans it,

then looks up, smiling. “We have a busy schedule tonight. First, we’ll tour the facilities—should take most of the night. Then, time and darkness permitting, we’ll cap it off with a visit to the heper village just shy of two miles from the main building. If we’re running late and it gets too close to sunrise, then we’ll have to push it off till tomorrow.” She looks at each of us, reading our expressions. “Somehow I don’t think you’re going to allow that to happen. Shall we move on, then?”

What follows for the next few hours is a mind-numbingly tedious tour of the facilities. It’s nothing more than an amble along dark, endless hallways. And emptiness. That’s what strikes me the most: how still and empty everything is—the rooms, the hallways, the very dank air we inhale, mere remnants and echoes of a busier, fuller, livelier era. Our escorts follow us, silently. The second floor is where the staff and hunters are housed, and we bypass it. The third floor is the science floor, for obvious reasons: from one end to the other, it’s lined with laboratories. A smell of musky formaldehyde permeates the whole floor. Although the guide speaks glowingly about each laboratory—this one used to study heper hair, this one to study heper laughter, this one heper singing—it is obvious the laboratories have fallen into disuse.

“This whole thing’s a crock, you know that, right?”

“Excuse me?” I turn to the elderly man next to me. One of the hunters. We are in a lab previously used to study heper hair and fingernails. The man is leaning toward me, his gaunt frame tilting like a snapped pencil, his head slanted close to a sample of heper fingernails encased in a glass plate. His bald head is as shiny and hairless as the plate, but mottled over with age marks near his forehead. A few wisps of hair are combed across his gleaming head,

like thin strands of night clouds across the moon. We are alone at the back of a laboratory; everyone else is clustered near the front of the lab, where the (apparently) more exciting samples of heper hair are on display.

“A crock,” he whispers.

“These fingernails?”

He shakes his head. “This whole tour. This whole training period.”

I take a sideways glance at him. This is the first time I’m seeing him up close, and he is older than I thought. Hair wisper, wrinkles deeper, the curve of his back more pronounced.

“Why do we need training?” His voice is gravelly. “Just let us have at the hepers, already. We’ll devour them in a minute. We don’t need training. We have our instinct, we have our hunger. What else do we need?”

“We need to draw this out. Savor the moment. Anticipation is half the enjoyment.”

It’s his turn to look at me. A brief look, but one that absorbs. I feel the suction of his brain taking me in. And then his approval.

I’ve been watching him a bit since yesternight. He stuck out, and I now know why. He doesn’t want to be here. Every other hunter (except me, of course) is ecstatic, has just literally won the lottery of a lifetime. But his feet drag just so, his eyes fail to shine with the glee the others have, and everything about him seems to spell r-e-l-u-c-t-a-n-c-e. In short, he’s everything I’m feeling inside. A thought comes to my mind, but I dismiss it outright: *There’s no chance he’s a heper*. A real heper (like me) would be covering up those feelings (as I’m doing), not letting them hang out like dirty underwear for all to observe.

As I study him—his stiff, arthritic gait whittled down by age—it hits me why he’s so sullen. He knows he doesn’t stand a chance.

Not against the younger hunters, who'll outrun and outgun him. By the time he gets to the hepers, there won't even be bones left to gnaw on. This Heper Hunt is torture for him, to be so close yet so far. No wonder he's bitter. He's a starving man at a banquet who knows there won't even be crumbs left on the floor for him.

"There's more going on here than meets the eye," he says, still bent over the glass plate.

I'm not sure what to say, so I wait for him to continue. But he doesn't; he shuffles to the front of the lab and joins the others, leaving me standing all alone.

After touring the laboratories on the third floor, we are taken to the fourth floor. We go through it quickly; it's really nothing more than a series of unused classrooms, the chairs inside propped upside down on desktops. At the far end is the auditorium. We stick our heads through the door to take a look. I smell a dusty dankness. Nobody wants to venture in, and we move on.

Eventually we wind up on the top floor, the fifth. The Control Center spans the full length and width of this floor. The hubbub here is markedly different from the deadness of the lower floors. Clearly, this is the nerve center to the whole operation. Numerous computers and TV monitors glow from one end to the other. Staffers are up and about, clipboards in hand, walking briskly between desks and cubicles and computer terminals. They're all men, dressed in navy blue single-breasted jackets with peaked lapels and double vents, but slim to the fit and streamlined. Three buttons run down the front of their jackets, emitting a dim mercurial light. They're curious about us, and I catch them stealing furtive glances. We're the heper hunters, after all. We're the ones who get to eat and drink heper flesh and blood.

Instead of concrete walls, large panel windows stretch from ceiling to floor, giving us an almost uninterrupted 360-degree view of

the outside. From up here, it feels as if we're hovering above the moonlit plains spread below us.

The group moves over to the windows facing east. The Dome. They all want to see the Dome.

It sits small in the distance, a marble sliced in half, glimmering slightly under the stars.

"There's nothing to see," an escort says. "All they do is sleep at night."

"They never come out?"

"Hardly ever at night."

"They don't like the stars?"

"People. They don't like people watching them."

We stare in silence.

"It's almost like they know we're watching," one of the hunters whispers.

"Bet there's a bunch of them staring back at us. From inside one of those huts. Right now, as we speak."

"They're just sleeping now," says an escort.

We're all straining forward, hoping to catch some movement. But all is still.

"I heard the Dome opens at sunrise."

The escorts glance at one another, not sure if they're allowed to respond.

"Yes," says an escort. "There are sunlight sensors that trigger the Dome. The Dome rises out of the ground two hours before dusk and retracts into the ground one hour after dawn."

"So there's no way to manually open the Dome?" asks Ashley June. "From in here? A button to press or lever to pull that would open it?" There's a protracted, intense silence.

"No. Everything is automated," says an escort. "It's all been

taken out of our hands.” He has more to say, but he’s biting his tongue.

“Do you have any binoculars?”

“Yes. But there’s nothing to see. The hepers are all asleep.”

Everyone is so caught up with the Dome, nobody observes Ashley June slide away.

Except me.

I follow her from the corners of my eyes, turning my head when she slips altogether from my vision.

She drifts toward the back of the room where three rows of security monitors line the wall. Under the monitors sits a staffer, his head swiveling slowly from side to side and up and down as he scans the monitors above him. She stands very close behind him, edging closer, slowly, until a few strands of hair graze the side of his forehead.

He moves quickly, a slide to his right. She scratches her wrist, apologizing, scratching harder, making sure the moment becomes light and accidental. On his chair, he swivels around to face her, then stands. He’s baby-faced and inexperienced, and his bleary eyes take a while to take in what’s before him. A young lady, and a beautiful one at that. This man, his world filled with an endless onslaught of digital screens, is taken aback by this sudden intrusion of flesh. Ashley June scratches her wrist more, trying to set him at ease. A moment passes, and he begins to scratch his wrist in return, cautiously at first, then faster and surer. His eyes begin to gain focus and brighten.

She says something, but I’m too far away to hear. He answers, energy now beginning to course through his body, and points at a number of different monitors. She asks another question, her body turning slightly toward the monitors, inching closer to the man.

He notices. And when he answers, his head bobs enthusiastically on his narrow shoulders.

No doubt about it, she's good at this flirtation game. And she's up to something.

She raises her long arm, pointing at one of the monitors. Her arm stretches out effortlessly upward like the exclamation point at the end of a sentence that reads: *I'm gorgeous!* That arm has always done a number on me, all those years sitting behind her, especially in the summer months when she wore sleeveless shirts and I could view the whole length of her wonderful, perfectly sculptured arms. They were neither too thin nor too thick, just the perfect dimensions with perfect ridges that exuded both assurance and grace. Even the light freckles that sprinkle her arm, exploding in a splattering of dots as they disappear into her shirt, are more seductive than imperfect.

Slowly, I edge closer to Ashley June, positioning myself behind a small pillar. I peer around the pillar; she's moved even closer to him. Above them, images from security cameras shine with a dull blur. At least a good half of them center on the Dome.

"Can't believe they're running all the time."

"Twenty-four/seven," he answers proudly.

"And is there always someone watching these monitors?"

"Well, we used to station a staffer here. But, well, it became . . . there was a policy change."

"A policy change?"

There is a long pause.

"Oh, c'mon, you can tell me," Ashley June says.

"Don't tell anyone," the staffer warns, his voice hushed.

"Okay. Our secret."

"Some staffers became so lost in these images of the hepers that they'd . . ."

“Yes?”

“They lost their senses, they were driven mad with desire. They’d rush out at the heper village.”

“But it’s enclosed by the Dome.”

“No, you don’t understand. They’d rush out in the daytime.”

“What?”

“Right from this very seat. One moment they’re staring at the monitors, and the next they’re rushing down the stairs and out the exit doors.”

“Even with the sun burning?”

“It’s like they forgot. Or it just didn’t matter to them anymore.” Another pause. “So that’s why there was a policy change. First, no more recordings—illegal bootleg copies were somehow winding up on the streets. And second, now everyone leaves this floor before dawn.”

“It’s completely unstationed during the day?”

“Not only is it unstationed, but look, the windows have no shutters. They were taken down. So now, the sun pours in during the daytime. The best security system. Nobody’s coming in here after dawn. Nobody.”

There is a pause, and I think that’s the end of the conversation when Ashley June speaks again. “And what’s that big blue oval button over there?”

“I’m not really supposed to say.”

“Oh, c’mon, it’s safe with me.”

Another pause.

“Like everything else you’ve told me, all the stuff you could get fired for disclosing, it’s all safe with me,” says Ashley June, this time with a hint of a threat in her voice.

“It’s the lockdown control,” he says tersely after a moment.

“What’s that?”

“It shuts the building down, locks all entrances, shuts all windows. There’s no leaving the building once lockdown has been deployed. Push it to set the system, push again to cancel—”

His voice gets drowned out by the approaching tour group, which has moved away from the windows and is now mumbling its way toward the back of the floor, toward the monitors. I slink back into the mix. Nobody’s noticed my absence. I don’t think.

By the time the group reaches the monitors, the staffer is back in his seat, his head swiveling back and forth, up and down. One of the escorts is speaking in a monotone voice, talking about the function of the monitors, how every square inch of the Institute is covered by a camera. But nobody is listening, they’re all staring at images of the Dome in the monitors. They’re still looking for hepers.

Except me. I’m watching Ashley June.

She’s slinked away again and is wandering around. Or at least pretending to. Something about her bearing—maybe the way she turns her head just so to read documents on desks or bends over as she passes by a control panel filled with switches and buttons—seems purposeful and deliberate. And she’s trying to go about unnoticed, but it’s near impossible. She’s a heper hunter, she’s female, she’s beautiful. She’s sizzling hot oil on your brains. Before long every male staffer around her has taken notice. She realizes this, too, and before long, gives up. She rejoins us at the monitors, tilting her head up. She stands very still, immovable, unreadable.

I stare from behind, the line of hair streaming down over the nape of her neck, dark with a dull gleam. She’s up to something here in the Control Center; I can’t shake that feeling. Digging for information. Looking for something. Seeking confirmation. I’m not sure. But what I am sure of: She’s playing a game the rest of us don’t even realize has begun.

Lunch is late that night; it's well past midnight before we are taken down to a large hall on the ground floor and seated at a circular table. None of the escorts sit with us; instead, they retreat to their own table in the peripheral darkness. Without their hovering presence, the hunters are set at ease: our backs relax, we become more talkative. Lunch offers the first time I'm really able to meet the other hunters.

It's the food we talk about initially. These are meats we've never tasted before, only read about. Jackrabbit, hyena, meerkat, kangaroo rat. Fresh kills from the Vast. Or so they say. The flagship dish is a special treat: cheetah, typically eaten only by high-ranking officials at weddings. Cheetahs are difficult to catch, not because of their speed—even the slowest person can outsprint a fleeing cheetah—but because of their rarity.

Each dish, of course, comes wet and bloody. We comment on the texture of the different meats on our tongue, the superior taste to the synthetic meats we usually eat. Blood oozes down our chins, collecting in the drip cups placed below. We will drink it all up at the end of the meal, a soupy collection of cold animal blood.

What I most need is absent from the dinner table: water. It's been over a night since my last drink at home, and I can feel my body desiccating. My tongue, dry and thick, feels like a wad of cotton wool stuffed in my mouth. The past hour or so, spells of dizziness have whirled in my mind. My drip cup gradually fills with mixed blood. I will drink it because it is liquidy and watery enough. Kind of.

"I heard they stuck you in the library." It's a man in his forties, sitting next to me, beefy with broad shoulders; he's the president of SPHTH (Society for the Protection and Humane Treatment of

Horses). His generous potbelly protrudes just above table level. My designation for him: *Beefy*.

“Yup,” I say. “Sucks the big one, having to walk outside. You guys are probably partying up in here all day while I’m cooped up all by my lonesome, bored as anything.”

“It’s the sunrise curfew that would get me,” Beefy says, his mouth full of flesh. “Having to leave everyone and everything, drop of the hat, forced to leave. And all alone out there, surrounded by desert and sunlight in the day hours.”

“You got all those books,” Ashley June says next to me. “What’s there to complain about? You can study up on hunting techniques, get a leg up on us.”

I see the elderly, gaunt man I’d met in the lab earlier scratch his wrist ever so slightly. He jams a piece of hyena liver into his mouth. His designation: *Gaunt Man*.

“I heard,” says another hunter, “that the library belonged to a fringe scientist with some pretty loony theories on hepers.” The woman, who looks fit for her age—I place her in her mid-thirties, a dangerous age, equal parts fit and savvy—sits across from me; she barely looks up from her plate as she speaks. Jet black hair, greased up, accentuating her angular pale chin. Her lips are luscious and full, crimson with the dripping of flesh blood, as if her own lips were bleeding profusely down her chin. When she speaks, her lips part across her teeth at an angle, as if only one side of her lips can be bothered to move. Like a lazy snarl. I think: *Crimson Lips*.

“Where did you hear that?” I ask.

Crimson Lips looks up from her bloody plate and holds my gaze, measuring me. “What, the library? Because I’ve been asking about you,” she says, her voice cool and difficult to read, “and why you were put there. My escort knows everything. Quite chatty, once

you get him started, actually. Told me, too, lest we start feeling too sorry for you, of the great view you have.”

“Same view you guys get. Except I’m out in the boondocks.”

“But you’re closer, though!” Beefy says, blood spraying out of his mouth and speckling down his chin. A wad of half-chewed rabbit liver flies out, landing near Crimson Lips’ plate. Before Beefy can move, she snaps up the chunk and puts it into her mouth. He glares at her briefly before turning his attention back to us. “You’re closer to the Dome. To the hepers.”

At that, it’s as if every head turns to look at me.

I quickly bite off a large chunk of meat; I chew it slowly, deliberately, buying time. I scratch my wrist rapidly. “With about a mile of daylight between me and them. And at night, an impenetrable glass dome insulating them from me. They might as well be on a different planet.”

“It’s cursed, that place,” says Crimson Lips. “The library, I mean. Eventually, it gets to you, drives you batty. It’s the proximity. Being so tantalizingly close, being able to smell them but not get to them. Every person who’s stayed there has lost it, sooner or later. Usually sooner.”

“I heard that’s what happened to the Scientist,” says Beefy. “He got the itch one night. A few months ago. At dusk, he ventured out, went right up to the Dome. Was pressing his face against the glass like a kid outside a candy store. He simply forgot the time and then . . . *well, hello, sunrise!*” He shrugs. “At least that’s the theory. Nobody saw it happen. They found a pile of his clothes halfway between the library and the Dome.”

“Good riddance, is what I hear,” Crimson Lips says. “He was absolutely useless. They looked at his research after he disappeared. Notebooks and journals filled with absolute dreck.”

Dessert arrives, ice cream. This is one of the few foods for which I don't have to fake an appetite. I scarf it down, slowing down only when a sharp pain pinches my forehead. The other hunters continue to stuff their faces, especially the two sitting on my left.

They're in their twenties, both students at the College. He's a phys ed major, she's undeclared. Physical specimens, both of them, to say the least. He's rippling in muscles, although he doesn't flaunt it. She's more of an exhibitionist, wearing daring cutoffs that show off her abdominal muscles. Lookers, too, with crystalline skin, high-bridged noses, and doorknobs for cheekbones. Both Phys Ed and Abs have a natural bounce to their step that speaks of effortless strength and agility. But dumb as doorknobs. One thing's instantly clear: They're the top contenders. One of them is going to win the Hunt. The other is going to finish whatever hepers are left over. No wonder Gaunt Man is unhappy.

Frippy Dress springs in from nowhere, her shrill voice ringing across the hall like a shattered plate. "And did we all have a stupendous lunch?" she asks. It's apparent she has: her chin is still dripping with fresh blood. "Time to move on to the next part of the tour. In fact, we've been moving so fast, we have almost nothing left on today's agenda. My, my, my, you all really should pace yourselves slower. You won't learn anything at this breakneck speed!"

I catch Gaunt Man shoot me a knowing look, as if to say: *Didn't I tell you? This whole thing is a meaningless exercise in redundancy.*

"So," continues Frippy Dress, "the only thing left remaining on tonight's itinerary is the visit to the Dome. This is going to be a real treat. Mind you, we'll likely not see any hepers since they sleep at night, but their odors are really pungent there. To die for, really."

A few necks twitch around the table.

"So, shall we? Make our way now?"

And like that, we're all standing, waiting for our escorts. And then, away we go.

By the quick pace of our feet rushing down the stairs; by the force with which the exit doors are flung open; by the look of excitement on even Gaunt Man's face; by the spasmodic and minuscule vibrations of our heads—I know we are excited. I know we are desirous.

As if by tacit agreement, no one speaks. We are silent, our shoes first padding the hard marble floors and then, once outside, tilting on the softer give of the brick path. Even as we walk past the library, nobody says anything. Only Gaunt Man peers inside, curiously, then at me, perhaps wondering why I, of all of them, have been housed in there. When the brick path comes to an end and our shoes hit the hard, dusty gravel of the Vast, it is as if nobody dares even breathe, we are so wordless.

"It never gets old," an escort finally says. And at that, the pace quickens even more.

I worry that the collective excitement will spring everyone into running. It wouldn't take much to set them off. If that happens, I'll be exposed. Because I can't run, at least not as fast as everyone else. Not by half, in speed or stamina. I still remember in first grade how all my classmates used to zoom past me, and all I could do was plod along as if I were in a vat of mercury. *Always fall*, my father would say, *always pretend to trip and sprain your ankle. Then you can sit out.*

"Hey," I say to no one in particular, to everyone in particular, "there's no way we can get inside the Dome, right?"

"Nope," answers my escort.

"Probably won't even see any hepers, right?"

"Nope. They're all sleeping this time of night."

“So we’ll see exactly what we’re seeing now, but closer up?”

“What?”

“Well, just mud huts, a pond, laundry lines. That’s all, right?”

“Yup.”

“Boring,” I say daringly.

But the group buys it, at least enough to dampen their excitement. The pace slows.

Fifteen minutes later, we’re nearing the Dome. Its scale as we approach takes me by surprise: it towers above us and cups over much more acreage than I previously thought. Crimson Lips starts twitching as she walks in front of me. Abs’ shoulders hike up, stiffening with excitement. Phys Ed, walking next to her, is elevating his nose into the air, sniffing.

“I smell them. I smell heper,” Gaunt Man shouts, his gnarled voice exploding into the night’s quiet. Other heads snap up with a *crack*, noses pointed upward and around, sniffing.

About fifty yards out, they crash through the tipping point and break into a stampede. I plod behind them, running as fast as I can. They are blurs, a haphazard menagerie of black oscillations and gray smudges, legs springing and pumping, arms swinging upward and out. There is no grace or order about their movements, just a random assortment of cuts, springs, leaps.

By the time I catch up with them, they’re pressed up against the glass, too fixated by the Dome to notice my late arrival. Inside the Dome are about ten mud huts. They’re dotted evenly around the compound, about half of them clustered near a pond. And the pond is remarkable: first, for its very existence smack bang in the middle of the desert; but also for the perfectly symmetrical circle it makes. Man-made, without a doubt.

Next to the technological wizardry of the pond and Dome, the mud huts look like prehistoric relics. The walls are cratered and

rough, punctured by small, unframed windows. Each hut sits on two encircling rows of rectangular stones, coarsely fitted together.

“Can’t see a thing inside,” Beefy says.

“Probably all just sleeping, anyway,” an escort says.

“But take a whiff, I can smell them. Stronger than usual,” says my escort, standing next to me.

“Just a bit,” another escort says, at the other end of the group.

“More than just a bit,” my escort says. “It’s pretty strong tonight. They must have been running around a lot, sweating earlier.” But a frown crosses his face. He turns in my direction, takes another sniff. “Very strong tonight. Odd, that.”

I force myself to remain calm. It’s me who’s giving off the smell, I know that, but I can’t move or do anything too drastic. So I try to distract. With a question: “How deep is that pond?”

“Not sure,” he says. “Deep enough to drown in, I suppose. But no heper has ever drowned. They’re like fish, those things.”

“No way that pond’s natural,” I say.

“Genius in the midst of us,” Gaunt Man says, then spits in the dusty, hard ground.

“Is this glass Dome porous?” Abs suddenly asks. She’s been so quiet, it takes me a second to realize the pretty voice belongs to her. “Because I can smell heper. So much better than the artificial smells they sell.”

“It does seem to have gotten stronger over the past few minutes,” Phys Ed says.

“Must be porous. I can really smell them!” Abs says excitedly.

“Didn’t think so, but the air really is thick with their odor . . .,” my escort says distractedly. “Daylight was hours ago. Almost eight hours ago. Shouldn’t be this much odor lingering.” His nostrils are working faster now, flaring with alarming wetness. Those nostrils start turning toward me, like eyes widening with realization.

I shift away from the group. “I’m going to walk around the Dome, see if I can see anything on the other side.” Thankfully, no one follows me. On the other side, hidden by the mud huts, I spit into my hands, then vigorously rub my armpits. Pretty disgusting, but so is the alternative, which is being ripped apart into a hundred pieces.

When I return to the group, they’re ready to head back. “Smell’s gone,” Gaunt Man says with a hangdog expression, “and nothing to see. Hepers are all asleep.”

We start to head back, despondency dragging our feet. No one says a word. I take the back of the line, downwind.

“Starry night,” someone says to me.

It’s Ashley June, peering back at me.

“A bit too bright for my liking,” I say.

She scratches her wrist ambiguously with a glance upward. “Those hepers are just like zoo animals,” she says, “sleeping all the time.”

“The escorts say they’re naturally shy.”

“Stupid animals,” she spits. “It’s their loss.”

“How so?”

She surprises me by slowing down until we’re side by side. “Think about it,” she says, her voice congenial. “The more the prey knows about the hunter, the more of a strategic advantage it gains. If those things were awake, they’d know how many of us there are, how many men, how many women, our ages—”

“You’re assuming they know about the Hunt.”

“They must. They’ve been given weapons.”

“Doesn’t mean anything. Besides, a ‘strategic advantage’ isn’t going to help them one bit. No matter what, this Hunt’s over in two hours tops.”

“One hour, if I have anything to do with it,” she whispers. It’s

clearly meant for only me to hear. I steal a sideways glance at her. Since we've arrived at the Heper Institute, she's been less brash, less front and center, than the starlet I know at school, hardly a blip on the radar, in fact. She still commands attention, of course, on account of her attractiveness, but she hasn't flaunted it the way she does at school.

A breeze sifts across the Vast, blowing strands of hair across her pale cheekbones. Her eyes, hardened under the stony night light, seem restless. She suddenly bends down to tie her laces. I stop with her. She takes her time, untying and then retying the laces on her other shoe as well.

By the time she stands up, the group has moved on ahead. "You know, I'm so glad you're here," she says softly. "It's just so good to have a . . . friend."

The sound of the desert wind fills the silence between us.

"I think we should team up," she says. "I think we can really help each other."

"I work best alone."

She pauses. "Did you read a lot about the Hunt ten years ago?"

"Yeah, just like everyone else," I lie. I avoided every book, every article, every sentence, every word.

"Well, I've been studying up on this Hunt thing. A lot more than anyone else. Like, religiously. It's been an obsession of mine for years. I've read books, subscribed to journals, scoured the library for tidbits of information on the topic. Even listened to radio interviews with former winners, though they tended to be plenty brawny but pretty dumb. Anyway, just to say, whatever you might learn over the next five days, I already know. Knew it years ago."

"That's nice to know," I say, not sure where this is going. But she's not lying. She a member of all kinds of heper societies and clubs at school.

“Listen. This is the open secret. Most people here already know it, but you seem clueless, so let me fill you in. It’s all about alliances. The winner always comes out of the strongest alliance. Always. It’s true for the last Hunt, and it’s true for every Hunt before that. If you team up well, you’ll do well. Simple as that.”

“Why don’t you partner up with one of the other hunters? Everyone knows that raw strength and physical prowess always wins the Hunt. And the other hunters are better contenders than me in that department. Take the two college students, for example: they’re athletically and physically imposing. Even the cagey old guy is a stronger hunter than me; where he might be lacking in the strength department, he more than makes up for it with his guile and street smarts. And what about the woman—she looks like she knows how to handle herself. She’s got it both: she’s mentally wily *and* physically dexterous. You’d do well with her.”

“It’s a trust issue. You’re the only one here I can trust.”

“Well, trust me on this one. With me, you’ll lose.”

“Why, you’re not going to even try?”

“Of course I am! I want those hepers just as much as anyone else. But I’m a realist.”

“Look,” she says, putting a hand on my chest and stopping me. “You can go at it alone and have no chance, or you can team up with me, and together we might have a chance. But you go into this without any kind of plan, and you’re going to end up empty-handed.”

She’s right, but not in the way she thinks. Because I, more than anyone else, know that if I go into this without a plan, I lose. And not just the Hunt. But my life. Without a strategy, the Hunt will expose me for what I am.

I do have a plan, and it’s quite simple: Survive. That’s it. Over the next few nights, lie low, don’t attract attention. Then, the night before the Hunt, feign an injury. A broken leg. Actually, I’ll have to

do more than feign—I'll have to *actually* break my leg. I'll make a big fuss about the bad luck of getting taken out of the Hunt. Punch and kick and claw at the administration as the hunters head off into the distance while I lie in bed, cast wrapped around my leg. And then go on with life. So yes, she's right: I do need a plan. And I already have one. But it doesn't involve teaming up with her.

"Look, I understand. But I . . . work better alone."

I think I see something flash in her eyes, some kind of breakage. "Why do you keep doing this to me?"

"What?"

"Pushing me away. All these years."

"What are you talking about? We don't even really know each other."

"And why is that?" she says, and paces forward to catch up with the group, her hair billowing behind her in the breeze.

Against my better judgment, I quicken my steps until I catch up with her. "Wait, listen."

She turns to look at me but keeps walking.

"We *should* talk. You're right."

"Okay," she replies after a moment. "But not here. Too many prying eyes, curious ears. Let's stop by the library."

Our escorts are none too happy with this. "Any deviance from protocol is not permitted," they recite, almost in unison. We ignore them; as the group passes the library, we break from it, walking through the front doors. Our escorts, miffed, follow us in. They know there is little they can do to stop us.

We walk through the foyer, stopping in front of the circulation desk. The escorts stand with us. We stare at one another.

"Well," I say to Ashley June after a prolonged period, "this is a little awkward."

She tilts her head toward me with eyes that seem to sparkle a

little more. “Give me a tour,” she says, then glares back at the escorts. “Alone.” She walks away, past the tables and chairs, farther into the main section, observing the décor and furniture. “So this is the Shangri-la resort we’ve all been hearing about,” she says, standing on a worn-down floral rug in the center of the large room.

“How did *that* happen?” I ask. “A few hours ago, everyone was calling this place a hellish solitary confinement, and now it’s a resort? No, really, I’d so much rather be in the main building,” I lie, walking over to her. The escorts, thankfully, don’t follow.

“Trust me, you’d rather not. The constant bickering, the complaining, the pettiness, the watchfulness, the stalking—and that’s only among the staffers. It’s pretty oppressive. Wouldn’t mind it myself, getting away from it all. And from all the questions.”

“Questions?”

“About you. People are wondering why you’ve been set apart here, why you’re getting the special A-list treatment. And since they know we go to the same school, they assume I know you well; they’ve all been peppering—more like bombarding—me with questions about you. What you’re like, your past, whether you’re smart, ad nauseam.”

“What do you tell them?”

Her eyes meet mine, at first seriously, then with a softness that surprises. She walks to the floor-to-ceiling windows, the point farthest from the escorts, and gives me a beckoning look. I follow, coming to stand with her at the windows. And now, far removed from the escorts, it’s just the two of us, bathed in the silver glaze of moonlight pouring in. Our chests less constricted, the air lighter.

“I tell them what I know,” she says, looking out the window and then back at me. Her eyes, awash in the moonlight, radiate out, her irises delineated and clear. “Which isn’t a lot. I tell them that you’re a bit of an enigma, a loner, that you keep to yourself. That you’re

crazy smart even though you try to hide it. That even though all the girls whisper about you, you've never so much as dated a single one. They ask if we've ever been together, and I tell them no."

My eyes flick to hers. She holds my stare with a kind of quiet desperation, as if afraid I might break away too quickly. The air between us changes drastically. I can't explain it, other than it feels like both a hot quickening *and* a calming softness.

"I wish I had more to tell them," she whispers. "I wish I knew you better." She sags her body against the window as if suddenly fatigued by an invisible weight.

It is this leaning—it looks like a surrender—that cracks something in me, like ice splintering on the first day of spring. Pale in the moonlight, her skin is a glowing alabaster; I have a sudden strong urge to run my hands down her arms, to feel its cool clay smoothness.

For a few minutes, we gaze outside. Nothing moves. A rind of moonlight falls on the distant Dome, bejeweling it in a glint of sparkles.

"Why is it that this is the first time we've really talked?" She reaches up, tucks some loose hair strands behind her ear. "I've always wanted something like this with you, you must have known that. I think a hundred of these moments have passed us by."

I stare outside, unable to meet her eyes. But my heart is beating faster and hotter than it has in a long time.

"I waited for you that rainy night," she says, her voice barely audible. "For almost an hour at the front gate. I got completely drenched. What, did you sneak out the back entrance after school? It was a few years ago, I know, but . . . have you forgotten?"

I fix my eyes on the eastern mountains, not daring to meet her eyes. What I want to tell her is that I have never forgotten; that not a week goes by that I don't imagine I made a different decision.

That I'd walked out of the classroom as the bell rang and met her at the front gates and walked her home, rain slicking down the sides of my pants, our shoes sloshing through puddles, hands together holding the umbrella above our heads, useless against the down-pour, but the wetness not minded in the least.

But instead of speaking to her, I hear my father's voice. *Never forget who you are*. And for the first time, I realize what he meant by that. It was just another way of saying, *Never forget who they are*.

I don't say anything, only stare out at the night stars, their lights blinking down with abject loneliness. So close together, these clustered stars, their lights brushing, overlapping; but their proximity is only illusory, because in reality they are impassably far apart, separated by a thousand million light-years of emptiness between them.

"I don't think I . . . know what you're talking about. Sorry."

She doesn't respond at first. Then she suddenly jerks her head to the side, her auburn hair veiling her face. "Light's too bright tonight," she says, her voice brittle as she slides on a pair of large oval moonglasses. "Hate it when there's a full moon."

"Let's step away from the windows," I say, and we move back to the rug, back within earshot of the watching escorts.

We stand awkwardly in front of each other. My escort steps forward.

"We need to get back to the group. It's dinnertime."

At dinner, most of us are pretty spent. We're too tired to engage in anything more than middling conversation, a far cry from the gabfest we had at lunch. I worry about my body odor and discreetly sniff my underarms from time to time. I eat quickly, mindful of my

proximity to others. Gaunt Man seated next to me is given to occasional twitches. He doesn't say anything, but a couple of times, his nostrils enlarge in my direction.

Ashley June sits on my other side. I am conscious of her every move: the closeness of her elbow to mine, every time she picks up and puts down her utensils, the sway of her hair as she ties it into a ponytail to keep it from falling into the drip cups. Mostly, I notice her silence. A strong urge pulls in me to look at her. And to move away from her, keeping my odor from her.

By midmeal, I'm more than worried about my body odor. And the more nervous I get, the more odor I emit. A quick and quiet exit is what's needed. I stand up; all eyes at the table immediately turn to me. Stepping away from the table, I look for my escort sitting at his own table somewhere in the surrounding darkness. He emerges from behind me a few moments later.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes, fine. I should be heading back to my lodging. I'm worried about the sunrise."

He looks at his watch. "It's not due for another hour."

"Even so, I'm a worrier. I don't want to chance getting caught outside by a premature sunrise." Everyone at the table is staring at us now.

"I assure you, our dawn–dusk calculations are never wrong," he says.

I cast my eyes downward, realizing I actually don't have to feign tiredness. I'm truly worn to the bone. "If there's nothing else for tonight, I think I'm going to retire early. Pretty pooped."

I sense him staring at me, trying to understand. "But the food—there're so many more succulent dishes to come."

I realize what's going on. "You know you don't have to escort

me back. Stay and eat. To your fill. Really. I know my way back from here. Two flights down, left down the hallway, right, another left, then out the double doors with the Institute emblem.”

“You don’t want to stay for dessert?”

“No, I’m fine, really.”

“But the choicest, bloodiest meats are yet to come!”

“Just knackered, is all. Really, don’t you worry about me.”

“You sure you’re fine getting back without assistance?”

“I got this.” And before he can object, I leave. And as I walk away, I shoot a quick look at the table.

They’re all supposed to be eating, ignoring my conversation with the escort, stuffing their faces. But instead they’re looking at me with befuddlement. No; more than befuddlement. This is *bewilderment*, the kind that nests in people’s minds, keeps them wondering.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” I mutter to myself as I walk down two flights. *Idiot, idiot, idiot*, I inwardly reprove myself as I head down the hallways. “Moron, moron, moron,” I say out loud as I push open the double doors to the outside. And then it is my father’s voice in my head: *Don’t do anything out of the ordinary, don’t do anything that sticks you out from the crowd. Avoid anything that’ll draw attention.*

Even when I reach the doors to the library a few minutes later, I am still chastising myself. *Imbecile, stupid, moron, doofus.*

Back in the library, I roam the aisles, the back rooms, hidden corners, scour every inch. But it’s useless. There’s no drinkable liquid of any kind in the library, not so much as a drop. And in the restroom, like in all bathrooms, there’s nothing but hard sanitizing dispensers. Knowing better, I dab a few drops of the sanitizer on my tongue. The sanitizer drops scour my tongue with an acidic burn

that leaves a foul after taste. I'm really worried now. Away from my supplies stashed at home, from all my instruments of subterfuge—my shavers, bottles of water, odor suppressors, teeth whiteners, nail filers—things are deteriorating quickly. The lack of water is causing my head to spin. I can't concentrate. On things. All my thoughts are jagged. Short thrusts. A pounding headache.

I lift up my arm, take a sniff of my armpit. There. Even *I* can smell it now. And if I can smell it, they can. No wonder Gaunt Man and Beefy were so distracted at dinner.

I don't know if anyone suspects me yet. Gaunt Man and Beefy might have smelled something at dinner, but I don't think they've connected the dots to me yet. But by tomorrow, I'll be reeking.

I head over to the leather couch and plop down. My head: still pounding, spinning. Outside, a hint of dawn presses against the windows. The shutters will close soon.

I throw my elbow over my eyes, not wanting to think but knowing I need to face reality. Plan A seemed perfect not so long ago: Fly under the radar during training period, break a leg right before the Hunt. But now, things have changed. With my body sending out eat-me smells and my tongue as dry and coarse as sandpaper, I won't make it to the Hunt four nights away. I'll either die of thirst or be savagely devoured. Probably the latter.

Lying on the couch, a numbed alarm pressing down on me, I begin to drift. Actually, it's more like a plummet into a deep canyon of sleep.

Thirst awakens me. I cough: a thousand splinters pierce my parched throat.

Slowly, I peel my draped arm away from my face. The library is dark: the shutters have closed. But something is odd. I can still

see, with a dim clarity, the interior of the library. As if a candle is burning.

Impossible. I spin around, drowsiness quickly shaken off. I see the light source.

It's right there. A single, thin beam of sunlight shooting from a hole in the shutter behind me. The beam shoots past my ear, reaching to the far wall of the library. It is a piercing line of light, laser-like, seeming to carry a physical heft. I hadn't noticed it yesterday. But then again, I was on the other side of the library, fast asleep during the day hours.

I walk over to the shutter. Tentatively, I reach toward the hole. I half expect the light to sear my skin. But there's just a pinprick warmth where the beam hits my skin. The hole in the shutter is a perfect circle, smooth along the edges. Very strange. This is no accident, no result of the building's aging process. This hole was intentionally made—*drilled*—through a two-inch steel-reinforced shutter. But for what purpose? And by whom?

The kooky Scientist. That part is not difficult to figure out; no one else has ever lived here. But why would he do it? A beam of sunlight like this would not only keep a person from sleeping, but cause permanent retinal and intestinal damage. None of this makes sense.

Or perhaps the Scientist had nothing to do with this. Perhaps the hole was drilled by the staffers later, after he'd disappeared. But why? And if they knew they were going to house me in the library, surely they would have patched it up before I moved in. Again, none of this makes any sense.

And then a thought blizzards into my mind, chilling me.

I shake my head, as if to banish the thought. But it's latched on to my brain, irrevocably now. And the more I think about it, the more likely it seems.

Somebody drilled this hole. Tonight.
To test me. To flush me out.
To find out if I'm a heper.

It makes sense. Tonight, with my unwashed body giving off an odor, suspicion is aroused. But more proof is needed before I can be accused. Sending a surreptitious sunbeam into the library during the day is perfect. Subtle yet dispositive. A sunbeam so small that it wouldn't awaken a heper, but enough to jolt any normal person awake, making him flee to the far side of the library and demand a new room at first dark. The perfect litmus test.

I pace down the aisles, trying to keep fear at bay. My fingertips brush against the dusty spines of leather covers. There's a flaw in my thinking, I realize. The only people who could possibly be on to me are those who've been in proximity. That would be the hunters and the escorts. But they've been with me all night long; we've never left one another's sight. Nobody has had the opportunity to slip away and drill a hole through two inches of reinforced steel.

I head back to the hole and study it even closer. The edges are weathered and dulled, not shiny or sharp as they would be after a fresh cut. I bend down to the floor, looking for any fresh shavings. Nothing. This hole has been here a while.

That leaves me in a bit of a pickle. If I feign anger tomorrow and complain about the hole, staffers will come over to take a look before sealing it up. But that hole will invite questions about my first day of sleep—why hadn't I complained after that first day? On the other hand, if I say nothing and this is indeed a ploy to trap me, then I'd be flushed out.

Then something clicks inside my head. Perhaps the beam is just

a side effect of something more important. Maybe it's the hole—and not the beam—that is really the key to this whole mystery.

I peer intently at the hole now, taking in every tiny scratch near it, its height from the floor, its small diameter.

But of course. It's the perfect size.

To peer through.

But when I look through the hole—the light outside blinding—it's a nothing. Just the bland, monotonous Vast, stretching endlessly in front of me, the hot sun bleaching whiteness into it. Not even the Dome is in sight. Dust and dirt and sand and light. That's it. There's nothing to see.

For the next hour, I pace the floor, study the sunbeam, peer through the hole; but it's useless. I can't figure it out. What kills me is the feeling that I'm so close, that I'm actually staring at the answer. Eventually I sit down, my aching feet worn to the nub. I close my eyes to focus; and when I pry them open some hours later, the sunbeam is gone, the shutters have opened, and somebody is pounding at the door. Dusk has arrived.

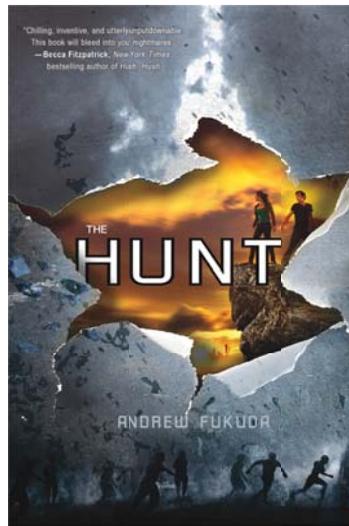
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