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XXI

WHEN FOUR POWERED down the paver that afternoon, he found Nine awake and smiling. There was color in his face, and when he saw Four, his eyes welled. "My savior," he said.

With some difficulty Four lowered Nine from the hood of the paver and dragged him to the side of the road. He brushed aside some gravel and arranged Nine so his, head looked down the gentle grade. Once settled, Nine took Four's arm with remarkable strength.

"My superior," Nine said, and smiled.

Four went to the vehicle to retrieve his pack. He returned and threw a nutrition bar to Nine. Its plastic wrapper made a scraping sound against the plastic tarp still enclosing Nine.

"Will we make the schedule?" Nine asked.

"We'll be done tomorrow."

"Where's the man? The helper?"

"He's coming. When the road's done he's bringing his wife for treatment. At the hospital in the city."

"So we did something good," Nine said. "You did, that is. We actually did something here. I've been picturing the parade and it makes me proud. You happy?"

"I don't know," Four said. He had been thinking about Medallion and his wife, and when he thought about people like that, quickly reaching the capital and its promises, he felt some satisfaction.

"I'm sorry, though," Nine said. "I know I didn't do much to *mitigate obstacles*."

Nine smiled as if the two of them had established a wonderful inside joke. Four could not pretend he had forgiveness for Nine.

"You should not do this kind of work again," he said.

"I know," Nine said. "I see that now. I do. I watched you. You just do the work. You don't look left or right."

Four softened toward Nine. "You gave away the first-aid kit, didn't you?"

Nine nodded, almost imperceptibly.

"And the satellite phone?"

Nine looked into his open palms. "I thought they needed them more than we did."

Four was unaffected. Nothing surprised him and none of this mattered now. It was over and he was going home. He pictured himself on the ferry, passing his archipelago's whaleback stones, seeing his family waiting for him on the landing. "I'm going to rest awhile before dinner," Four said, and moved to retrieve his earphones.

Nine raised himself to his side. "Can I ask what you listen to when you put those in? Even when I'm close, I don't hear any music."

Normally Four would not allow a stranger, and he considered Nine a stranger, to hear his recording. But soon he would leave this country and leave Nine, and would never see him again. He gave Nine his earphones and looked away.

"Sounds like a kitchen," Nine said, listening intently. "Plates and silverware being set." Four had not expected Nine to narrate what he heard, but he found it oddly pleasant.

"A child's voice. That must be your daughter. You have a daughter. You told me you weren't married. But of course you're married. Of course you have a child. That explains so much. Her voice! It's funny how high it is. It sounds like a cartoon. What's she saying over and over?"

Four knew the word was *breakfast*. It was his

daughter's favored time of day. She was so quick to rise. When she opened her eyes in the morning she was wholly awake, on her feet, moving, as if she'd been only pretending to sleep through all the dark hours.

"Now a quick wet clicking," Nine continued. "I'm thinking eggs being whisked in a bowl?" Yes, Four thought, exactly. "Now someone's humming. A woman. That must be your wife. She has a pretty voice. Is that a song? It sounds familiar."

Four pictured his wife uncapping his daughter's cup, the spillproof one she could hold with her tiny hand.

Nine's eyes opened wide. "Wow. A loud banging. What is that? Sounds like a woodpecker."

As soon as his daughter's cup was filled with her carrot juice, she banged it like an exultant king. His wife would calmly ask her to stop, and she would, taking a long pull of juice and wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. She was a brazen and unflinching child, having never been made aware of the vulnerabilities of her flesh.

"Now the eggs are simmering," Nine said. "Now a sound like chopping. Someone's chopping something."

Apples, melon, celery. Four would cut them and his wife would arrange the pieces in a radial for their daughter, who would put her cup in the middle of them

and stare, as if momentarily stunned by their beautiful symmetry. Then, with a heavy sigh, she would take the first spoke from the wheel and eat it.

"Hm. Just sounds of silverware. Tinking. How long does this tape go on?"

## XXII

AS THEY APPROACHED the capital, Nine was now squeezed into the cab. The forest gave way to shantytowns that stitched themselves into waves of blue-rented inter-nally displaced camps and then stone dwellings hundreds of years old. And soon all the settlements knelt before the city, itself an irrational mix of ancient and modern, glass and iron and wood.

"Look," Nine said.

Behind them, stretching as far as they could see, people from the south were on the new highway, making their way toward the gleaming city. There were the ill and infirm, carried on oxcarts and pulled by bicycles. There were pickup trucks bearing produce. There was a line of women pulling wagons full of woven goods. All were moving at the pace of the paver, as if respectfully following a funeral procession.