

The team members kneel beside their respective subjects and unsling their S.I.R. bags from their shoulders. Each removes a xawa from his bag.

"Does it matter where on the head it's placed?" Tristan asks Rye.

"No, watch," Rye says, setting his eight-legged induction device onto the back of his subject's neck. The xawa snaps to, as if surprised from sleep, starts slowly crawling up the back of the subject's head, making its way to the left temple, where it spreads its legs, evidently to gain a closer, tighter hold, the underbelly of its body now flush with the brave's skull, one leg resting on the bridge of his nose. It emits a quiet but high-pitched sound. "He's out now," Rye says. "Now we draw the blood sample," he adds, removing the braceletform vein-seeking phlebot from his bag. He twists the subject's left arm to expose the underside and clasps the phlebot onto the brave's forearm.

"How much blood do we need?" Tristan asks.

Rye leans over the face-up brave once again to refresh his knockout with a second spritz. He stands back up and says, "One ml, half for blood chemistry, half for DNA sequencing. Now, here's the creepy part." Kneeling beside his subject, he removes the monitrax injector from his bag, with his left hand pulls up the animal hide covering the brave's back, and with his right, presses the muzzle of the injector onto the fleshy area just to the left of the subject's spine. "Inject as close to twenty centimeters from the base of the skull as you can; it's hardest for them to feel it there and the signal's usually good." One abrupt puff of air and the monitrax is implanted. "This one's done, one, two, three. Got it?"

"Sure," Tristan says.

"Now you do the last one," Rye says. "Let's turn him over first, though, so his back's available." Yao, already finished, helps Rye turn face down the only brave who fell face up.

"OK, go!" Rye says to Tristan, who begins as the three others watch.

The fifteen-year-old proceeds smoothly, confidently. The xawa affixed, he pulls his phlebot from his bag and says, "The only part I don't like is this thing—I'd rather draw the blood myself, with a needle."

Rye says, "No need to use a needle for such a small amount. Besides, you'll probably use one in a medical arta someday. Time is of the essence out here, though. Use the phlebot."

"Wants to draw the blood himself," Yao whispers inaudibly, nodding his head, hardly surprised. *That baowey doesn't fall far from the tree*, he says to himself.

Tristan administers the knockout spray to subject four and removes the xawa and phlebot. "How'd I do?" he asks the others.

"Fantastic," Rye says.

A whoosh, a flash of red, spurts of blood from Tristan's neck, he falls backwards. Attack!

Yao screams, "What's happening!?"

"There! On those rocks!" Okeef says, urgently pointing to the boulders on each side of the path farther north.

Two braves, ones not spotted by drone, shoot arrows at them. A ninety-kilo lazquet lies in the path.

*Was that there before, dead maybe, or asleep from the gas, or did they bring it with them?* Rye wonders. *And where did they come from? How could drone miss them?* "We've got to leave! Now! Here, help me with him!" Rye tells Yao, and the two of them pick up the hemorrhaging Tristan, already unconscious, and carry him between them back towards the shuttle, Okeef following.

"Hurry up!" Okeef says, fearful in her totally exposed rear position.

"Aahh!" Yao screams, hit by an arrow, a spreading blood stain over his right thigh abductor muscle. He drops his side of Tristan's limp body and grabs his own leg in pain.

Rye shouts, "Okeef, grab his other arm!"

Okeef picks up where Yao left off.

"You'll have to make it back on your own!" Rye shouts over his shoulder to Yao.

"I'll try!" he says, his voice tense and crackling, his face contorted with pain as he presses the wound and hurriedly hobbles.

Both braves descend from the rock tops, kneel to check on their comrades. One launches himself upwards into the air and makes a menacing gesture with his bow and arrow towards the S.I.R. team, which

retreats as fast as possible but only now goes round the last boulder south in frenzied flight back to the shuttle in the grove.

Side doors part. Thaze at top of ramp. Rye and Okeef shoulder Tristan inside. Yao falls midway up. Tristan secured, Rye rushes down, helps Yao stand, they limp up. Shuttle doors close. Okeef at controls. Liftoff!