

Mycelium

I wade deeper into the belly of the forest. Closer to the sound of the river whooshing, like blood through veins. The smell of last night's rain oozes from the pores of the leaves. The orange caps are the easiest to see. The beige ones not so much. You told me one day I'd be able to spot the peak of a mushroom hump without even trying—like you could. A flash of beige and orange catches my eye. I tread light. Kneel. Draw my knife. They're good.

When I cut my first, you explained how the mushroom was only a fraction of the fungi. Underground, millions of tiny mycelium threads formed mycorrhizal networks, linking the different trees and plants. Helping spread nutrients and warnings of drought and disease. Fungi, the forest peacekeepers. That's what you called them.

I secure my findings in my pack and press on. Thank the taller trees with my touch for keeping lookout. A shield from the drones.

Beige and brown caps this time, beside a fallen trunk. Its decaying flesh bows beneath my touch. Kneel. Knife. Gather.

A cough. Chill freezes my muscles. A splutter. Unmistakable. I grip my knife tighter and silently curse its size. I inch my head to the left. Up on the bank, a body lies limp in the grass. A fallen soldier.

Rise. Tread heavy. Try to sound strong.

As I near, hope drums in my chest and longing sloshes the walls of my stomach. I can make out the black of his hair. His body pale and wilted. Your hair was lighter. I remember you tall and strong; your skin, always tanned. But countless days inside the simulations, fighting their cyber war, could've changed all that.

I reach his side. Disappointment stings my eyes. Rub them. Focus. He coughs again. His ribs visible through his thinning uniform. Wet leaves and dirt plaster his flesh, like the decaying tree. Fallen warriors. Beyond the help of the forest peacekeepers.

I gently turn his wrist and read his number. The warmth drains from my skin. Glowing in his flesh, is the tag of the enemy. I drop his hand. Stand and nudge him awake.

His eyes flicker open. Adrenaline surges him backwards, thrusting his hand out. In warning? I hold my ground.

"Please." He wheezes. Learned fears flicker in the blacks of his eyes.

I place my knife on the ground. Display my empty hands. Then slowly reach for my bag.

He steps back again.

I shrug my pack off.

They're just as scared of you. That's what you always said, when I called you to get a spider or a bug that had found its way into the house. *It just wants what you've got: a nice home and a family.* You'd joke.

"I'm not going to hurt you." I can't tell if he understands. "I have something that'll help."

I pull out the elixir, mum's fresh batch from last night. Toss it across the ground.

"It will help with the headache." He clearly gets that—snatches the bottle and downs it.

After we lost you to the war, mum and dad started the refuge. After the first few rescues—defectors from the state military base—we learned the headache is the main 'unplugging' symptom. And that you're lucky if it's all you get. The supposedly bloodless,

'clean' war has left thousands with brain injuries and botched mod-attempts they'll never recover from. Not to mention the psychosis.

Wars have always been giant games. Once fought with guns on the physical chess boards of land and water as disposable pawns; now, in the simulation battlefields as equally disposable avatars. The trick to winning is knowing who the real enemy is. You taught me that.

"I'm Maeve." I extend my hand.

He wipes his mouth. Hesitates, remembering the lies he's heard about me, 'my side'.

Then he clasps my palm. "Ricardo."

I smile. "Are you looking for the refuge?"

The camp is in full swing when we clamber up the hill. A group is unloading barrels of water and others are loading a truck with spare produce. When the state abandoned us for the war efforts, and vital services crumbled, we humans formed our own mycorrhizal networks. Threads of resistance, sharing food and water and warnings.

The buzz of chatter fades as we walk through the yard's centre. We've taken in at least 50 defectors, but he'll be the first from the 'other side'. Jazz, one of our more recent refugees, drops a tray of produce and runs towards us.

"Ricky?" She turns Ricardo's wrist over in his hands. Murmurs the number under her breath, making sure. Then smiles, tears spilling from her eyes. "Welcome brother." She pulls him in close.

Two tiny mycelium threads. Binding.