

Camp Daze

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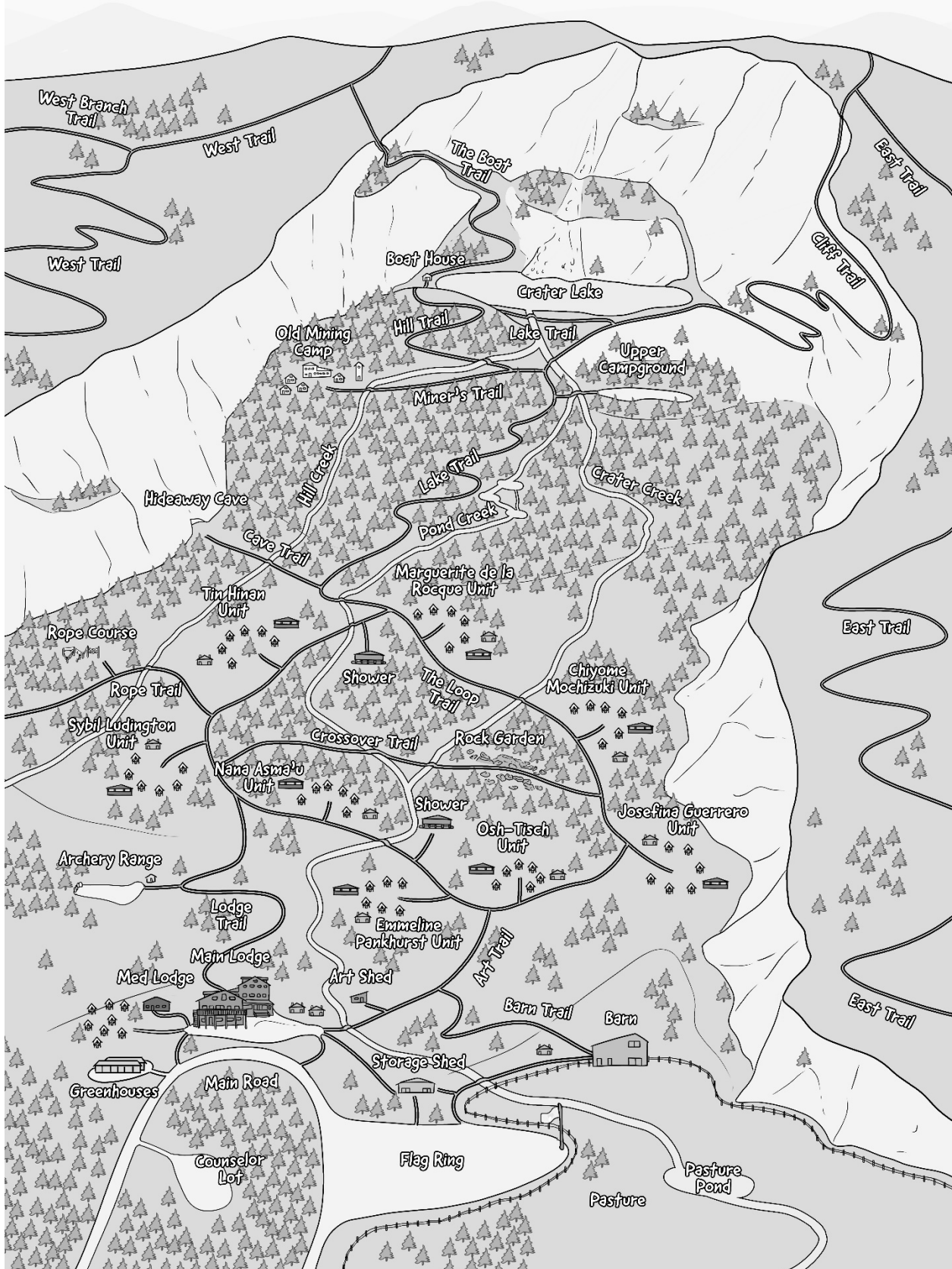
Summary: A sudden nuclear apocalypse leaves a rural girl's camp to fend for themselves with only a few dozen mostly young counselors attempting to help keep over a-hundred-fifty children alive through the coming winter.

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“What one has to do usually can be done.”

-Eleanor Roosevelt

Part 1

Chapter 1

Drop Off

“Try hitting it again, I’m sure it’ll work this time,” Marauder said. She was in the passenger seat of the stationary Bronco, facing backwards with her legs thrown over the back of the bench seat and shoulders against the dash.

Conifer gave her fellow camp counselor a withering stare. “Maybe if you weren’t draped across my dashboard, I could get the radio to work without hitting it.”

Marauder shrugged, giving a smile that was clearly meant to be cute. Most of what Marauder did came off as cute, though. It was hard not to when the girl didn’t even crack five-feet tall and had the under layer of her shoulder length white-blond hair dyed bubblegum pink. Conifer had spent the whole summer so far trying to pin down if she actually did find Marauder cute, or if it was just an objective observance. In general she hadn’t figured it out, but as for right now, Marauder was just in the way.

“Shoo.” Conifer poked at Marauder’s shoulder.

Marauder sighed and made a great show of shuffling around to sit with her back against the door, throwing her legs out across Conifer’s lap instead.

Hands hovering in the air, Conifer stared down at the tanned legs now sprawled across her lap. There was a lot of exposed skin between Marauder’s pink hiking boots and tan cargo shorts. Was this better? Conifer didn’t think this was better.

“I don’t see why you even need the radio to work. All you pick up on that thing is the rare trucker that detours through the valley. And Jim, that weird dude from town.”

Conifer gave up on figuring out her feelings on Marauder’s legs and went back to messing with her radio. “I want it to work because it is supposed to work.”

“It” was a bulky thing, not at all meant to be where it was. CBs this size were meant for big rigs, not fifty-year-old Ford Broncos with rusted out rims and almost bald tires. So she’d had to go at the dashboard with a hacksaw to get it in there at all, so she’d cut some stuff she shouldn’t have in the process, so the radio was now cased in in a way that sort of resembled Frankenstein. The truck was the closest thing she had to a permanent home since she’d moved out four years ago to work odd jobs instead of going to college, and sometimes it was fun to listen to the truckers chat, plus anyone else who had a CB in range. Even Jim, who was usually trying to get in touch with aliens, could be interesting to listen to. Besides, you never knew when you might really need a radio like this.

Conifer had made it a habit to come out to her truck in the staff parking lot every day on her breaks and flip on the radio for a few minutes just to know the rest of the world was still there outside their isolated summer camp. No one’s cellphones worked at the camp and there was no internet. Even regular radios struggled, if not failed, to pick things up most of the time due to the terrain. Aside from the satellite phones carried by the backpacking groups, which were only to be used in emergencies, and the janky old ham radio, they were cut off.

Which was fine.

Conifer had grown up learning all about how to survive being cut off. But just because she knew what to do if the world ended didn’t mean she wanted it to, despite what a lot of people tended to assume about survivalist families like hers.

She just wanted her radio back and, after two days of nothing but static from it, she was starting to get ticked off.

“I’m so glad you let me dye your hair,” Marauder said. “The flame colors suit you.”

Conifer glanced down, examining the hair that splayed across her chest in messy waves. It was now an ombre of her natural deep brown fading into yellow, then orange, then red. It had indeed been Marauder’s idea. Conifer was mostly apathetic to it, and to her looks in general, but a bunch of the counselors had been doing it during the break between camp sessions, so she’d gone along with the group.

“They are fun colors,” Conifer replied, jamming the little screwdriver she’d been using back into the guts of her radio.

Marauder huffed. “Buy the poor thing dinner first!”

“It doesn’t get dinner until it works,” Conifer told her. “It just needs to work.”

“Uh uh. What was it you said when you were complaining about this yesterday? You ‘like to know the rest of the world is out there’? Would it perhaps, actually, be because you are slightly paranoid?”

Conifer scoffed. “I am not.”

“Mmmmmhm. I’m sure you would be reacting exactly the same way to the death of your radio if the paper Silver brought back from her day off in town last week hadn’t had that little blurb about escalating tensions with whatever country it is this month.”

Conifer glanced over to see Marauder watching her with a quirked eyebrow, but she didn’t bother to disagree. There was a lot more in that paper that had her hackles up, aside from the one blurb. And in the paper before that. And the one before that.

“Well,” Marauder said, straightening up and slapping the dash, “if you want proof the world is still out there, here it comes. Time for a new batch of kids.”

Conifer twisted around and watched as the head counselor, Jackalope, aka Jack, threw open the gate and started waving the line of waiting parents in. With them would be over 150 new campers ready

to spend the next two weeks camping and hiking and learning archery and doing crafts and a dozen other activities.

The knot in Conifer's shoulders loosened a little. If things really were bad, the parents would have kept their kids home, but there were just as many cars as always. Everything was fine.

Everything was fine.

Slamming the door behind her—it was the only way to get the driver's side to latch—Conifer headed towards the check-in table for her unit, Marauder skipping along next to her. Skipping almost, almost, brought Marauder to the height of Conifer's shoulder. This was, however, because Marauder wasn't really trying. Conifer had seen her friend make a four-foot vertical leap onto a boulder when she wanted to show off. It wasn't until you looked closer at Marauder's slim build that you realized it was stacked with muscle. The girl had earned every one of her three MMA featherweight belts.

"Hello!" Marauder said, bounding up to a haggard looking mom with a twelveish-year-old daughter and two squabbling twin babies—almost toddlers—in a side-by-side stroller. Conifer couldn't imagine making the long drive out here with that many children packed in the car. Denver was, at best, six hours away. There were plenty of other little towns scattered through the mountains, but even then the drive up to Aspen Heart was long and slow.

While Marauder dazzled the twins into giggling and clapping with her, Conifer went over to the clipboards on their table and started going through them. They had eleven campers in their group this time, half what most of the units had, but that was intentional. They were a specialized, survival themed session that wasn't as popular as some of the others.

"What's your name?" Conifer asked the older girl with a smile.

"Tabatha!"

Conifer pulled out the proper clipboard and scanned down the sheet. Tabatha Lilley. First time at camp. Just turned twelve. Allergy to strawberries, but it was minor.

“Well, welcome to Camp Aspen Heart, Tabatha! I’m Conifer, and this is Marauder.” Marauder gave a wave from over by the stroller. “We’ll be your unit counselors for the next two weeks, which means you’ll be spending most of your days, and every night, with us. Our unit is called Marguerite de la Rocque, and we’re all the way at the back of the camp. Go ahead and put your suitcase in the trailer and hang out while we wait for the rest of our group to get here.”

Tabatha nodded and hauled her suitcase into the empty trailer for their unit, refusing her mother’s help. Horseshoe, the barn director, would use the camp truck to bring all the trailers up to the units later.

Over the next hour more and more campers trickled in, some with parents who lingered and others with parents who dashed off after quick goodbyes. Usually, the ones who left quickly were parents of campers who had been to camp before. Not always, though, and Conifer felt bad for the two first timers whose parents left quickly, making a mental note to keep an eye on them.

“Conifer,” a voice said from behind her.

She turned and saw Jack striding over, a mother and young girl following behind. It only took a second to clock the mother as military with the way she walked, the perfectly, tightly pulled back bun, and the hard, quick handshake she offered. The girl, her daughter presumably, looked a little embarrassed, trailing in her mother’s wake, suitcase dragging behind. Unlike her mother, her hair was wild and long, reddish-brown curls trailing down to her waist.

“What can I do for you?” Conifer asked.

“Miranda was hoping you’d be alright with having Cheyenne switched into your unit?” Jack asked.

“She signed up for the horsemanship unit, but we were talking on the way over, and I think she’d really enjoy your survivalism unit even more,” Miranda said.

Conifer glanced at Cheyenne, trying to gage if this was actually her idea or just her mother’s. There was something familiar about the girl, but beyond that Conifer couldn’t really get a read on her.

Cheyenne shrugged. “It’s fine. I already did the horse backpacking unit at the start of summer. This one sounds fun too.”

Ah, that was it, Conifer realized. Cheyenne had been here before. It wasn’t too uncommon for kids to come multiple times in a summer. Conifer herself had been coming here since she was seven, and there were a few summers she’d come three separate times. Once she’d turned eighteen she’d spent that summer as a junior counselor, and in the summers since she’d been a full counselor. This camp was almost literally her second home.

“Well, as long as you’re sure,” Conifer said. “We want you to have a good time.”

“She’s sure,” Miranda said.

Cheyenne rolled her eyes. “My mom’s all determined to get me into the military just like her. Wants me to get a head start.”

Miranda gave a tight-lipped smile that seemed like it was holding a longer explanation back. Conifer glanced at Jack who shrugged. The knot between Conifer’s shoulders tightened back up slightly.

“Well, alright then, as long as it’s okay with Jackalope,” Conifer said, not sure what else to do.

Of all the moms to try and drag their daughter into a survival themed unit, why a military mom? Why now? Marauder and Conifer had been running this session all summer, in both one week and two week versions. Unlike the other counselors, they didn’t move around. Conifer was the whole reason the session existed, having pitched it to Jack at the end of the previous summer. She’d grown up a survivalist and knew just about everything there was to know about how to survive in the woods; how to hunt, how to fish, how to set up and break down any sort of camp, how to track, and plenty of other skills. She

even had a wilderness EMT certification. Marauder had a wilderness EMT certification as well, plus a bachelor's degree in botany under her belt, and she was starting a Master's Degree to become a Field Naturalist soon. Survival, first aid, and foraging. Between the two of them, they had it covered better than anyone else.

Conifer knew she was reading too much into it. Plenty of parents tried to drag their kids into their own careers. If it was up to Conifer's own mother she would be going to school to be a vet. For all she knew Miranda had tried to get Cheyenne to do the survival session earlier, but hadn't talked her into it until now. This was nothing.

"I'm fine with it, and you've got the empty slot, so," Jack replied with another shrug.

"Well, welcome to Marguerite then, Cheyenne. I'm Conifer, and the bouncy pink one over there is Marauder."

"Nice to meet you," Cheyenne said, glancing over at Marauder who was teaching everyone else a clapping game. "She seems...bubbly."

Conifer chuckled. "She grows on you. Here, I'll take your suitcase while you say goodbye to your mom."

Cheyenne handed the large, dark green rolling case over and Conifer dragged it through the gravel to the trailer, sliding it in with the others. When she turned around she saw Miranda standing a foot away from Cheyenne, hands on her upper shoulders.

"Promise you'll be good?" Miranda said.

"No, mom, I'm going to stage a rebellion with all the other campers and we'll take over the camp and lock the counselors in the basement of the lodge."

Miranda sighed, squatting and sliding her hands down to hold Cheyenne's. "Come on. Serious face. I need to know you'll be good. I'm...going to be in the mountain pretty much 24/7 while you're here, so I won't be able to send you postcards like normal, or get yours."

Cheyenne squeezed her mom's hands. "Yeah, I'll be good, Mom, promise."

Miranda smiled and pulled her daughter into a hug. Conifer tried not to read too much into the expression on Miranda's face. Scared was the best word she could think to put to it, but that had to just be Conifer being paranoid again. Plenty of parents got a little worked up about leaving their daughters at camp for two weeks.

Miranda stood up, kissed the top of her daughter's head, and shoed Cheyenne off in the direction of the rest of the group before turning around to face Conifer again.

"Thanks for agreeing to take her," Miranda asked. "She loves this camp so much, and I know she'll enjoy this unit once she actually gets into it. If you don't mind my asking, Jackalope said you're a survivalist yourself?"

Jack beamed like a proud parent which, Conifer had to admit, she sort of was given how much time Conifer spent at Aspen Heart growing up. "Oh yes, Conifer knows everything you'd ever want to know about living off the grid. Her whole family does."

Conifer resisted the urge to wince at Jack's way of putting it. Once people started making assumptions about her lifestyle it was hard to bring them back around to not thinking she was a gun toting nut. She'd had to make the attempt so often, though, that she already had her response ready to go: "We're survivalists, not some weird libertarian preppers," Conifer tried to clarify. "No militia mindset, no hoarding, just learning how to survive when things go a little sideways. No one expects the world to end or anything, but that doesn't mean our skills aren't important. You never know when you're going to lose power for a week because of an ice storm, or get caught in a flash flood, or just get lost on a hike."

Miranda nodded. "Good. That's exactly what I want her learning. Well, it was nice to meet you. Thanks for taking care of my daughter."

With that she made a sharp turn more suited to a military drill and strode back to the emptying temporary parking lot set up for parents. Conifer watched her climb into a black Jeep, the knot in her back tightening once again at the sight of a NORAD crest bumpersticker on the back window.

“Honey, you look like you’re clenching every muscle in your body,” Jack observed.

“What’s your judgment on all of that, Jack? Because I don’t think I trust mine.”

Jack glanced at the Jeep as it pulled out and joined the line of departing parents and shrugged. “Just seemed like a bit of an overbearing mom to me. Not like we don’t get those all the time.”

“An overbearing mom who works for NORAD in Cheyenne Mountain,” Conifer muttered, chewing her lip. The pieces weren’t hard to put together. Miranda had said she’d be “in the mountain” for the next two weeks. What else could that be but the hollow mountain NORAD base in Colorado Springs?

Jack knocked her shoulder into Conifer’s, jarring her out of her thoughts. “Hey. I know you. I trust your judgment. If something feels funny, tell me.”

Conifer sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I don’t know. Everything feels funny these days. I think it’s just the news in general getting to me.”

Jack nodded. “Yeah. Every summer I hope the digital detox of being up here will help, but it’s almost worse not knowing, isn’t it?”

Conifer’s shoulders dropped in relief that Jack got it. “Yes, exactly.”

“I’ll let you sneak in and use one of the satellite phones if you want to make some calls,” she offered. “Ask your parents what they think. We’ll consider the cost of the calls a bonus for all the extra stuff you’ve been helping me with this summer.”

Conifer contemplated. The “extra stuff” was mostly just being an extra set of hands when Jack was busy, and she didn’t think it really added up to the cost of a handful of satellite calls. “Nah. It’s fine. I’m sure I’m reading too much into it.”

Just knowing Jack trusted her helped enough that, by the time she went over to help Marauder lead the campers up to Marguerite, Conifer was able to put the paranoia away. Mostly.

Cheyenne had melded into the group effortlessly and it was pretty clear she was the most experienced camper among them. She walked with confidence, seeming familiar enough with the camp to not feel the need to follow Marauder as closely. Her wrists were stacked with camp bracelets of all sorts, some made with creatively knotted embroidery thread, some with hemp and beads, others made of lengths of flat shiny plastic woven together. Not all of them were new either. Some looked like they had at least a year of age on them, maybe more.

“We’re in the Marguerite de la Rocque unit aaaaallll the way at the back of the camp, so let’s get walking!” Marauder said. She gave a quick double clap and led the way up the stairs built into the slope that the lodge sat on, giving the campers a rundown of the building as they walked. “The lodge was initially built in the late 1800s to serve as the base for a mining camp that used to be here, and it has been added onto over the years. It is the central hub of Aspen Heart. We’ll eat most meals here, and there’s a little post office for you to send letters home.”

It was a good, sturdy heart, Conifer thought. The original building made up the bulk of it: worn logs stacked two-stories high, offices and the post office room making up the first level while the second level consisted of Jack’s office and the counselor lounge, along with some storage and a large activity room. There was an expansive attic area, which was technically finished with a few different rooms, but the area served mostly as more storage. A long, squat dining room and kitchen area clung onto the west side of the building, added in the nineteen-forties to accommodate the change from mining camp to girls camp, and there was a small walkout basement mostly used for more storage under that. A large porch that went around the entire front and west side of the building wrapped it all up. Conifer gave the

weathered wooden walls an affectionate pat as they went around the back of the building, heading towards the Loop Trail that provided access to all the units.

There was no quick way to Marguerite, only the curving trail road. It took about twenty to thirty minutes to walk from the lodge back to the unit, depending on how fast the campers walked. Aspen Heart was more spread out than a lot of camps tended to be, meaning their group would generally only be in the actual unit at night, and thus only have to make the long walk twice a day—once in the morning and once in the evening—but the distance still meant it remained reserved for the older groups like this one, though they weren't the oldest overall. The youngest in their unit this time was eleven, the oldest thirteen. Other units had campers as young as seven and as old as sixteen.

Marauder walked backwards up the trail road, pointing out features of the camp from trails to other units to activity areas. "And see the cliffs that surround three sides of the camp? That's because we're in an old volcanic crater! This place erupted thousands of years ago a lot like Mt. Saint Helens, with a whole side of the mountain sliding off. But don't worry, she hasn't been active since then. Now her cliffs just keep us safe from the wind."

And cut the place off from the world, but Conifer didn't say that out loud. The closest town—an hour away down the mountain—had only about a thousand permanent residents, and the next town after that was another hour away on a good day, two on a bad one. That was going south, though. Any other direction and there wasn't even a way to get to a town by vehicle. There was nothing but wilderness on all three sides. If you walked straight north you'd hit Wyoming before you hit another town in Colorado, and it would be another few days of walking before you found somewhere in Wyoming that had people.

"How is she not falling over?" Cheyenne asked, forcing Conifer to stop mulling over their isolation.

Marauder was still walking backward, talking animatedly and not glancing over her shoulder once.

“You have no idea how many times we’ve walked this trail,” Conifer said.

Cheyenne hummed, still watching Marauder somewhat suspiciously.

“So, you sure you want to join this unit?” Conifer asked. She was just looking out for Cheyenne, she told herself. Not fishing for information on her mother.

“Yeah, it sounds cool. I thought about signing up for it when we got the catalog for the summer, but it was the same time as the horsemanship one and Mom said I could only do two this year. But it’s fine. I’ll do horsemanship next year.”

“And the military?”

Cheyenne groaned. “I don’t know. She started bringing that up, like, a week ago all of a sudden. I think it’s because I skipped a grade, so I start High School this fall.”

“Ah, so you’re smart then,” Conifer said with a grin. Cheyenne was growing on her, which helped chase away some of the paranoia induced by her mother.

“I’m bored,” Cheyenne clarified. “I hate school. I just want to be done with it.”

“That’s fair. I never liked it much either.”

They lapsed into silence, boots crunching on the gravel as they trailed behind everyone else up the slope. The afternoon was still warm, and there was plenty of daylight left, but the shadows of the cliffs were starting to creep across the camp. As they hiked higher and started the turn west the trees began to thin, offering a view of the rest of the camp spread out below them. A lot of it was still hidden, but there were glimpses of the white tarp roofs of the platform tents in other units, the green corrugated roof of the lodge, and the red walls of the barn. Beyond it all layers and layers of mountains stretched in all directions, fading away into atmospheric haze.

Everyone reached the unit a moment later, gathering in the center. The trailer of the girl's bags was already there, parked off to the side. A ring of six tents stood around the edges of the clearing, each consisting of a sturdy wooden platform, raised a foot or two off the ground with two or three steps for access. On top of the platforms were house-shaped frames, over top of which were stretched faded green canvases topped with thick, waterproof white tarps. To the east and about ten yards behind the tents was a small building containing two toilets, two trough sinks, and a storage closet. About twenty yards from that was a covered cement slab with a couple grills, tables, and benches; their outdoor kitchen space for the couple of meals they'd have in-unit. Pine trees ringed the whole setup, along with a few scattered aspens. Conifer loved it. Marguerite had always been her favorite unit at the camp. Quiet. The best view. A little more distance between the tents. It was comfortable.

Conifer took over for Marauder, stepping up to the front. "Alright y'all, since there's only twelve of you we're doing three to a tent rather than the full four. Marauder and I are in that tent," Conifer pointed to tent four opposite the entrance to the unit, "and we've already assigned you to yours. Once I call your name and give you your tent number head over to the trailer with Marauder and she'll help you get your bag out. Go ahead and get settled, and we'll head down for dinner at 4:30. Bring your winter coats out to us; we'll put them in the storage closet between the bathrooms so they're out of the way unless they're needed."

They all nodded and Conifer took the list out of her pocket, reading off names and pointing at tents. She put Cheyenne in the one tent that had had only two kids, Aadila and Giselle. There was a flurry of movement and then all the campers vanished into their tents. Laughter floated out and snatches of conversation joined it, mostly debates about who got what cot.

"I feel good about this group," Marauder said as she and Conifer waited to collect coats. All the campers were required to bring one—and a good set of gloves—in case Colorado decided to get extra

creative about the order of the seasons, which it was fond of doing. The campers had lighter jackets and hoodies that should suffice as long as the weather behaved, though.

“Oh yeah?” Conifer asked.

“Yeah. It feels like a good bunch. Not one of them seems like they might try to burn down the forest after we teach them to make fire!”

Conifer groaned. “Don’t remind me.”

At an earlier session a girl, thankfully not in their unit, did exactly that. Bluebird had had to use a fire extinguisher to put it out and there was still a char mark up the side of the main storage shed near the lodge. The girl got sent home early because she’d been so shaken up and the rest of the camp got a lecture on fire safety. Going through that again was not something Conifer wanted to deal with. They only had a couple more sessions left before the end of summer, not including this one, and the smoother they went the better. Conifer’s paranoia was already causing her enough problems. No need to add fire on top of that.

Chapter 2

The Art Shed

“Blech...these eggs are overeasay,” Marauder said, sticking her tongue out as she poked at the serving plate.

Their first night had passed uneventfully and now they, along with the forty or so other counselors and staff, and hundred-and-sixty or so total campers, were crammed into the dining room of the lodge shoveling down breakfast. Legally, the main room of the lodge could hold around three-hundred people. Practically, with all the square tables and benches, it could not hold nearly that many. Meals were cozy affairs full of knocking elbows and noisy chatter, all the windows thrown open to counter the heat of so many bodies and piles of food.

“Sucks for you,” Conifer said, taking the serving plate and Marauder’s egg, plopping it on top of her own egg.

“Can I have your apple then?” She asked.

Conifer nodded and Marauder’s hand darted out, snagging the shiny green fruit and pulling it under the table, likely to deposit in a pocket of her cargo shorts. She always had food in there. Food on the left, first aid supplies on the right, walkie-talkie clipped to the waistband. Conifer teased her about being a cartoon character for having five pairs of the same shorts, though they were at least in different colors. She, in turn, teased Conifer for owning eighteen different flannels, which Conifer had to admit felt fair.

Sitting here among the chatter and excitement, Conifer was finding it hard to justify the paranoia she'd been feeling the day before. Kids were far more observant than adults usually gave them credit for, so if there was something going on out in the world there was no way this many kids would be this relaxed and happy, right? Right.

"Don't they usually switch which counselors are together every session?" One of the campers at their table asked. She wasn't in Conifer and Marauder's unit this time, but she had been during a previous session.

"Conifer is a feral forest child," Marauder said. "So Jackalope decided she just has to do this all the time, and I'm the only one who knows how to find her when she wanders off, so I have to be with her all the time."

Conifer nodded sagely as she buttered her roll. Always had to be a little dramatic for the kids. It was part of the mystique of being a camp counselor. Not quite a teacher, not quite a parent, not quite a sibling, not quite a friend, but a little bit of all of them.

"You look like a cat," one of the other campers piped up, looking directly at Conifer. She didn't look any more than seven or eight-years-old.

Conifer knew the girl was referring to the fact that her left iris was split slightly from a childhood incident involving tripping over a chicken and smacking into a fencepost face first. The old injury made the pupil of that eye appear to have a sort of diamond shape if it was dilated right, and the green tones that came out of the hazel in the sunlight only increased the effect of it sort of looking like a cat's eye.

"Maybe I am," Conifer said, winking with the split eye.

The girl giggled and stuffed some ketchup smothered hashbrowns in her mouth.

Once everyone finished eating a clamor of activity rose from the unit of campers on lodge duty for the day. They got the gray plastic basins to collect dishes, filling them up before taking them to the counter to be washed. Jack stood up, dismissing tables using random attributes to pick who went first so

there wasn't a crush at the door. Tables where someone was wearing a red shirt, tables with someone who had a braid, tables with someone whose birthday was in April. Marauder and Conifer's table was released by the call for tables that had someone with unnaturally colored hair.

They found most of their unit clustered together under the large pine tree about twenty feet from the lodge steps, Cheyenne again at the center. She was trying to explain to the other kids how to make one of the more complicated bracelets on her right wrist. Once the rest of their campers joined them, Marauder made a sweeping motion out to the east.

"To the art shed!" She announced, skipping off in that direction.

Some of the campers grinned and started skipping with her towards the steps that led down the steep hill while the rest followed at a normal walk.

The art shed was a colorful red and white building, ran this summer by a woman called Robin. She was in her forties and had come over from Hong Kong to work at the camp for the summer to improve her English, and her skills with crafts were unmatched.

"Morning, campers! I'm Robin," she said, smiling brightly from the top of the steps.

"Morning, Robin!" They chorused, spreading out at the beat up and paint splattered picnic tables in front of the shed.

"Making journals today," she said.

"You'll use them to record what you learn in the session," Conifer added.

Robin nodded. "We're doing the covers from scratch too. Extra fun."

Scratchish. Really, they were just tearing up and blending old paper and reforming it into new paper, then sewing it together with regular sheets of printer paper. Conifer's suggestion that they start all the way from wood pulp had been shot down as "too involved," which was probably fair. They weren't a craft session, after all.

“Choose colors,” Robin instructed, pointing to the boxes of scrap paper she’d already set out on each table.

“How big are the journals going to be?” Cheyenne asked.

“Eight and a half by eleven, folded in half,” Conifer told her. “Pretty thick, too, for covers.”

She nodded and began carefully gathering pieces, going between all the boxes to get what she wanted. It seemed obvious she had a specific plan and Conifer was curious to see what it was. So far Conifer was having a hard time figuring her out beyond the fact she was quiet, smart, and her mother was interested in survival tactics for a possibly concerning reason.

Marauder helped negotiate between the kids for some of the rarer colors until everyone had a good enough pile. As they worked Robin and Conifer brought out a collection of beat-up old blenders, plugging them in to various extension cords, along with lots of empty bowls and jugs of water.

Without instruction Cheyenne began tearing up her sheets into small bits and distributing them between three bowls, filling each with water as well. Robin nodded and told the other campers to do the same.

“Okay, while that’s soaking, I think we should all get to know one another a little!” Marauder said.

“And we’ll work on the inner sheets while we do,” Conifer added. “Ten pages, folded in half, and I want you to draw one plant from the *Colorado Foraging* books on the table in the bottom corner of each page. Just a little drawing, no bigger than two-by-two inches, and write the name of the plant underneath.”

Paper was passed out and folded, books perused, and doodling begun.

“So, let’s start simple. Tell us your name, where you’re from, and a fact about yourself. I’m Marauder. I’m from Texas but I’ve lived in Colorado since I was eight, and my favorite flowers are fairy slippers.”

“Conifer, from Montana but lived in Colorado since I was two, and I’ve been to all fifty states,” Conifer told them. The answer was instinctual now, having done these introductions so many times over the summer. She had better fun facts, but according to Jack they were the sort of things that might give kids bad ideas about what activities qualified as safe.

“How come you don’t use your real names at camp?” One of the kids asked.

“It’s more fun,” Marauder told her. “We don’t want anyone to worry about what the proper thing to call is, like Ms. or Miss or Mx. or anything. We just want to be your counselors, so we use nicknames.”

The campers went next, answering one by one around each table, and Conifer did her best to pair their names with something noticeable about them to help her remember, because otherwise their names would go in one ear and out the other. Conifer had never been good with names and mostly she just tried not to have to use them at all, though that was a lot harder as a camp counselor than it was in general life.

“Lorelai, I live in West Virginia, and my mom is a senator.” Blond, shaggy hair that had probably been a buzz-cut several months prior.

“Aadila, my family just moved to Colorado from southern Iraq, and I’m looking forward to seeing snow for the first time this winter!” The tallest girl in the unit, a few inches taller than even Marauder. Not that it was difficult.

“Sierra, from Colorado, and I grew up on a farm.” A little scar on her chin that looked like a hoofprint.

“Farrah, from Kansas, and I play piano.” A very slight frame.

“Orlaith, from Oklahoma, I go by Orla. I have a cat named Corncob.” She had a streak of frizzy purple hair that looked like it had been fried somewhat when she bleached it from its natural dark brown.

“Giselle, from New York, and I came to camp so I didn’t have to sit around a hotel room while my mom is on a big business trip in Denver.” Light brunette hair with such a perfect edge to the bottom—which just brushed her shoulders—that it had to have been cut only a day or two before she came to camp. Conifer couldn’t help but notice she looked bored out of her mind and remembered that she was one of the newbie campers whose mother had left immediately. She also vaguely remembered that Giselle’s mother had been wearing a pants suit and heels, hardly a good outfit for up here, even if you were just dropping your kid off and leaving.

“Tai, and I was born in South Korea but my parents are military, so I’ve lived all over. Fact about me is...ah...I learned to shoot when I was seven.” She always seemed to be moving, tapping her fingers or bobbing her legs.

“Amy-Leigh, from Colorado, and I was born two months premature.” One of her eyebrows was half white, a patch of skin surrounding it just a bit paler and pinker than the rest of her face.

“Premie fist-bump!” Marauder said, bumping fists with Giselle.

Maybe that was why Marauder was so small.

“Tabatha, from California, and I have three metal pins and a plate in my left leg because I fell out of a tree last year. I’m getting them removed after camp, though.” A lot of little scars on her light brown skin. Conifer doubted a tree was the only thing she’d ever fallen out of. They’d have to keep an eye on her.

“Sammy-Jo, from Alabama, and I have six toes on each foot.”

This resulted in a scramble to see as Sammy-Jo took a shoe off to prove it, propping her foot on the table and wiggling her toes. The kids oohed and awed, delighted by this bit of weirdness until Sammy-Jo put her shoe back on. Looking for something that could be seen with her shoes on, Conifer noted her slightly chipped right canine tooth.

“Paloma, I’m from Nevada but I was born in the Bahamas because my parents got stuck there after a bad hurricane and my mom went into labor early. I like to go rock-hounding on the weekends with my big sister.” A silver ring with a cross on it on her right ring finger, and stunningly blue eyes.

Cheyenne took a moment to answer, distracted by her drawing of a wild onion. “Oh, sorry. I’m Cheyenne. Born and raised in Colorado, and I play soccer.”

Conifer had already memorized who Cheyenne was. The rest of them, though, were already starting to fuzz out in her mind. It was looking like another session of surreptitiously elbowing Marauder to get reminders about names.

“Cool group,” Robin nodded.

“Where are you from?” Sammy-Jo asked her.

“Hong Kong.”

The kids continued chattering happily, some asking Robin more questions as they worked on their doodles. Marauder, Robin, and Conifer moved between them to help with the plant drawings. The point wasn’t to get them perfect, not yet, just to get the kids paying attention to the details of the plants. The amount of points on a leaf was frequently the difference between a well-seasoned meal and a trip to the ER. Conifer had multiple cousins that had nearly killed themselves due to a bad identification of a mushroom.

“Conifer?” Cheyenne asked, waving a hand to get her attention. “Do we have any wildflower seeds? I wanna make my cover seed paper.”

“In back, little...uh...sky color? drawers,” Robin said. Her face was screwed up in a way that Conifer recognized as meaning she knew the word she was looking for, her brain was just refusing to actually provide it. It was a face Robin frequently sported this time of day, as she was very much not a morning person.

“Blue,” Conifer supplied, going to find the seeds.

“Blue! Blue, blue,” Robin said as Conifer passed her, working to commit the word to her memory.

It took a little wiggling to get the heavy wooden drawers to come out as they had no actual tracks, just slotted into the frame. Conifer found some packets of seeds in the third one and gathered them up. It was safe to assume that if Cheyenne wanted to make seed paper some of the other kids would decide they wanted to as well.

Conifer came back out to find Marauder setting up the screens for the paper pulp while Robin talked the kids through how to blend the paper to the right consistency and thickness. There were only eight blenders, so they’d have to take turns. Once the paper was pulped, it would be spread out on the screens and dried with hair-driers since they didn’t have time to wait for it to dry on its own.

Cheyenne had already poured one of her bowls into a blender and, once Robin was done talking, she started it up, pulsing it until she was happy, then pouring it back into her bowl. She did this with all three of her bowls, then passed the blender on.

“She’s very methodical,” Marauder said, coming to stand at Conifer’s elbow and nodding towards Cheyenne who was now carefully pouring the first bowl out onto a screen and pushing it around to form some sort of shape along the top edge. Marauder stood close enough for their elbows to touch and Conifer was reminded of the way Marauder had thrown her legs over Conifer’s own the day before. She still had no idea what to do with that, though, so she ignored it.

“Mmmhm,” Conifer hummed, watching Cheyenne.

Cheyenne dug her fingers into the pulp of the second bowl and started adding it to the rough shape she’d already formed, wiggling her fingers along the edges to make sure the layers stuck together well. It was hard to tell what she was doing just yet, but the first bowl was a light blue, the second a lavender color, and the third a darker purple. She seemed to be layering the colors to create uneven stripes on the cover. As she added the third layer, Conifer realized she was shaping the purple layers like

mountains, creating an atmospheric mountain range against the sky. Conifer had to admit she was rather impressed. It was a neat design, and Cheyenne had executed it well. Once all the colors were down, Cheyenne tore open a packet of seeds and pressed them into the damp pulp, then patted it all down so it was even and the right thickness.

She was quiet the whole time, unaware of or ignoring it as the other campers snuck glances at her paper. A few even negotiated to share their colors so they could do similar patterns. By the end most of the drying sheets of paper were swirls and swatches and stripes of multiple colors, all with seeds pressed in.

“Where’d you learn how to do that, Cheyenne?” Lorelai asked as the, also limited, hairdryers were passed out.

Cheyenne shrugged. “It was just an idea I got. Wasn’t sure if it would work or not.”

For the next few minutes it was noisy as the campers ran the hairdryers over their pulp covered screens, Marauder and Conifer stepping back a bit to talk.

“Cheyenne reminds me of you,” Marauder said. “Contemplative and methodical and a little lost in her own head.”

“Aww, thanks.”

“Not a bad thing!” Marauder said. “But my record for ‘amount of times I have to call your name before you noticed’ is eight.”

“You keep track?”

“It amuses me. Usually I try to leave you be when you’re that focused but, ya know, responsibilities.”

Once the drying was done, the kids peeled the paper off the screens and sat down to cut it to the right size, trimming off the uneven edges. Marauder and Conifer came back up and Conifer perched on the empty end of one of the tables.

“Alright y’all, in this unit we are going to cover shelter building, fire building, foraging, basic hunting, wild game preparation, first aid, knot tying, archery, and self rescue. With that we’ve got room for some other survival stuff if any of you have things you’d like to learn,” Conifer said.

“Okay, we’re learning survival stuff, but, like, surviving *what*?” Farrah asked.

“Anything,” Conifer told them. “There is such thing as specific survival knowledge for different scenarios, of course, but the basics are the same no matter what situation you’re in, and that’s what we’ll be covering here.”

“What about Yellowstone erupting?” Amy-Leigh asked.

“Or a meteor?” Tai said.

“Or a bigfoot attack?” Tabatha asked, which sent nearly all the kids into fits of giggles.

“No, no! Godzilla!” Paloma gasped through her laughs.

“I promise you will be able to survive all the things that do not exist,” Conifer chuckled. “As for Yellowstone and meteors, again, the basics will apply no matter what. Besides, Yellowstone isn’t a threat either. That’s a myth.”

“Does that mean we’ll only cover basic first aid, or will we cover bigger injuries?” Cheyenne asked. “Like, will we cover treating gunshots and stuff?”

The other campers went still, all looking to Conifer and Marauder.

Conifer swallowed, forcibly keeping her tone even. The fact that so many kids these days just expected to get shot at some point in their lives always made her livid. She’d finished her time at school right as the rate of shootings started to really pick up, so she’d missed a lot of that trauma, but she’d seen plenty of it now as a counselor here. “Yeah, we’ll cover bigger stuff as well.”

Cheyenne nodded and went back to carefully folding her cover around the inner pages, dampening the bend so it wouldn’t tear or break.

“What about animal tracking?” Tai asked after a moment of awkward silence.

“Yeah, we’ll do a little work on animal tracking as part of the hunting stuff,” Marauder agreed, voice somewhat tight. Conifer knew Marauder, especially, hated questions like what Cheyenne had asked. She’d only missed being at a shooting at her own High School because she’d ditched the last period of the day to take her then girlfriend to a job interview. Three people had been killed. Marauder said she hadn’t known any of them the one time she’d talked to Conifer about it, but that didn’t really make much of a difference.

Hammers were handed out, along with thick nails, and the kids used them to punch holes along the spines of their journals and the pages, winding embroidery thread through to hold the journals together. Cheyenne asked for extra thread for bracelets and showed the other campers how to tie it around the lowest loop of their boot laces, then tuck it all inside. Having it secured like that made the bracelets easier to make, and then you always had them with you, cutting them loose when finished.

The journals done, everyone cleaned up, waved goodbye to Robin, and went back up to the lodge for lunch.

Their afternoon was spent examining plants in the rock garden that was inside the confines of the Loop Trail. None of them were picked or consumed, just analyzed. Dinner was a hearty stew, green beans, and corn-on-the-cob. Stomachs full and the first hints of tiredness starting to prick at the campers, they all headed down to the flag ring to close out the day. The ring—a large, flat field below the lodge—was where every day at camp started and ended. It also served as the parking lot when parents were dropping off and picking up their daughters. The lodge may have been the heart of the camp, but the flag ring was the hands welcoming you in and eventually bidding you goodbye.

Marauder, never out of energy, led their group in a mimic game while they waited for everyone to arrive. She’d do a fast, complicated, series of claps mixed with crossing her arms and clapping her hands against different parts of her body. The campers would then attempt to replicate the pattern and

whoever messed up was out. Sammy-Jo was the last one left standing and Marauder gave her a fist-bump as the group spread out to stand in single file with everyone else until everyone, campers and counselors alike, surrounded the flag ring in a large U.

At the center of the bend in the U stood a flagpole made of a lodgepole pine. It was topped with the camp flag, placed there during the morning version of the ceremony before breakfast. The flag fluttered in a soft breeze, a blur of blue with a white and yellow aspen tree, branches in the shape of a heart, at the center.

“I like this flag better than the old design,” Cheyenne whispered.

“Me too,” Conifer replied. The flag had been redesigned last summer. All the campers had been invited to submit designs and then they’d been voted on by the last session. The previous flag had been a hideous orange color with a plain white heart in the center.

“Well! How was everyone’s first day?” Jack asked, standing in the center of the ring.

There was a chorus of “good” and “awesome” and “fun” from every camper, and many of the counselors as well.

“I’m glad!” Jack said. “The Chiyome Mochizuki Unit will be handling the closing flag ceremony tonight, but first let’s give the camp promise!”

She held out her right hand palm up with her thumb folded across it, the gesture that was made when reciting the motto of the camp. The four fingers pointed outward represented the tenants of what everyone offered to others: friendship, safety, compassion, and patience. The thumb, pointing back at your own body, represented never giving away so much of those things to others that you forgot you were important as well. One by one everyone else around the ring did the same.

“Repeat after me,” Jack said. “I promise to always do my best to be friendly and compassionate; I will show patience and provide safety to all those I meet; and I will do the same in my actions towards myself.”

The camp repeated each line after her, finishing at different times before dropping their hands. Jack smiled and thanked everyone, stepping back to an empty spot in the line. Silver, one of the counselors in Chiyome, stepped forward, followed by a group of five campers. Silver led the whole camp in a camp song about a restful night as one of her campers lowered the flag while four more caught it and folded it down into a triangle. The campers presented it to Jack and then returned to the U and the rest of their unit.

“Goodnight, then!” Jack said. “See you all bright and early tomorrow!”

“Should we report the comment?” Marauder asked as they got ready for bed that night. They’d been discussing what Cheyenne said at the art shed about gunshot wounds ever since they’d sent the campers to bed.

“I mean, it’s not like she said she’s planning on shooting anyone,” Conifer reasoned, flinging her bra under her bed before slipping on a ratty long-sleeved t-shirt. “What kid isn’t worried about that sort of stuff these days?”

As Marauder and Conifer were the only two counselors in the unit, they’d taken the extra two cots and doubled up their beds at the back of the tent to give them both more sleeping room. This left the front open to be used as a living area where they’d stuck a couple folding chairs and a rickety card table they’d found in the attic of the lodge.

“I guess that’s true,” Marauder said. She’d stolen one of Conifer’s shirts a month ago, using it as pajamas, and the thing looked like a circus tent on her. Conifer was average sized leaning towards lithe, but that still made her half a giant compared to Marauder. “But still, we’re mandated reporters.”

Conifer sighed, putting her hands on her hips and thinking it over. “She asked about *treating* wounds, though, and in the context of us telling her that we were going to learn to do just that in a more

general sense. If anything, she wants to be the one to make sure someone who *does* get shot lives, and that's a good thing."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Marauder said, flopping back on her bed.

"We'll keep an eye on her," Conifer replied. "I really don't think it's an issue. She's just a curious kid."

A curious kid with a suspicious mom. A suspicious military mom who wanted her to learn how to survive. A curious kid who was now asking about treating bullet wounds.

Conifer sucked in a frustrated breath through her teeth. Every new thing she learned about Cheyenne made it harder and harder to tamp down her paranoia. Maybe she *would* go use one of the satellite phones tomorrow, just to get her mind to shut up. Or ask Jack for an extra couple hours off so she could drive to somewhere with a cell signal.

"Okay," Marauder agreed, seemingly missing Conifer's tension as she burrowed under her sleeping bags. She had three of them and kept them all unzipped to act as regular blankets. Conifer had asked her why she had three—the cliffs sheltering the camp kept the whole area relatively warm in the summer as the warm air couldn't really get blown out—and she'd claimed she just appreciated being cozy, which was hardly something Conifer could argue with.

"I'm gonna read for a bit," Conifer told her.

"Mmmkay. Night," she yawned, throwing one of the sleeping bag blankets up over her head.

Conifer pulled out her current read on the psychology of natural disaster response and settled in at the card table with her booklight, but it was apparent within minutes that reading wasn't going to happen. Not with so much on her mind. Sleep likely wasn't going to be any easier. Turning off the light and setting the book aside, she went and sat on the steps of the tent instead, gazing out over the camp and out at the stars. There was no moon, but the starlight was enough to make everything visible anyway.

Leaning back against the center support pole, she tried to regulate her breathing in a way that would help her relax. Tried to just focus on what was around her. The crisp summer night air that smelled like pines. The distant thunderstorm, probably all the way out over Grand Junction almost a hundred miles away. She couldn't hear it from so far, but could see as lightning illuminated the clouds every few seconds. Everything was fine. She'd call her parents in the morning during her break, get the low down on the outside world, and then go back to work.

Everything was fine.

