

“Listen. They’re coming.”

Kalev shuts his eyes and diverts the power of all other senses to his ears.

Nothing.

He relaxes, counts to thirty, and then focuses again on hearing.

There. A brush of tall grass against britches; whisper of branches pushed aside into leaves of others. Slow, but closer.

“Four. I saw them cross a clearing. Not Hivers—armed.”

Kalev hears Freya’s voice in his mind as clearly as if she’s sitting on the tree limb beside him. There is no sound and she, too, is in a tree, probably several hundred yards away. Closer to The Hive.

“Coming this way. I haven’t seen them yet. A game trail runs in their travel direction. They’ll probably use it,” Kalev.

They are using the trail. The sound of their boots on bare earth is louder than if they were walking in grass.

“Use the Shopper anyway, don’t take a chance that they’ll see you,” Freya.

In an inside pocket of his leather vest, Kalev finds a device the size of a thick fountain pen. He uncaps both ends and spreads a conical fan from each. He points the larger cone at a point on the game trail where someone, looking up in the trees, could see him. The smaller cone is aimed over his shoulder. If anyone on the ground looks up, the only visible sight will be a picture gathered by the device and projected. They’ll see the tree limbs and oak leaves behind him.

“They’re on the game trail, not looking up. I’ve got the Shopper putting out a false sight anyway. What are they searching for?” Kalev.

Through summer oak leaves, thirty feet below and fifty feet away to the east, four men in green and tan mottled camouflage walk the trail, their tread—virtually noiseless. They’re armed with stubby automatic rifles and grenades hang from their belts. Protectors.

“Don’t know. After they’re far away, let’s go closer to The Hive. Something’s happening there. Protectors don’t normally come to The Hive,” Freya.

Kalev focuses all sensory power into his ears, listening to the diminishing tread of the patrol. When only silence touches him, he relaxes.

“Freya, send a locator. I’m coming to you.”

Immediately a silent, but strong, pleasant song, like a solo violin begins.

“Like the sound?” Freya.

“Yes.”

He slides, limb by limb, to the ground. His feet touching with no more sound than a falling leaf. Lithe as a whip and maturing, he moves with easy grace.

He turns, seeking the music. If he veers off course, the song fades. Never traveling on trails, he reaches the base of an immense beech when the song reaches a crescendo. The trunk is probably five or six feet thick. There are no low-hanging limbs.

How to climb?

“You don’t need to go up. I’m here.”

Freya had moved behind the trunk when she sensed his approach. She appears from behind the huge tree's base, smiling, her head cocked to the right—a mannerism she's shown Kalev since they were six.

They are dressed alike. Short, brown leather boots, loden green trousers, lighter green shirt and a dark-brown, fringed leather vest with multiple pockets. Sheath knives hang from their belts.

Freya has her blond braids circling the top of her head. Pale blue-green eyes sparkle and a light dusting of freckles over the nose emphasize a mischievous grin on full lips .

The patrol has passed and the two can safely speak aloud, but they keep their voices low.

“How far is The Hive? You've been closer than I,” Kalev says.

He didn't even ask how I got in and out of the tree. Let him try it. She holds back the thought and answers his question.

“We can get to the top of the eastern ridge line of the mountain chain in about thirty minutes. If we go to the north end—another half-hour—we'll be able to look down on The Hive. It's just below the cliffs. We'd better go in that direction anyway, those Protectors will be doubling back soon, if my guess is right,” she says.

A lift of her chin and movement of her eyes shows the direction.

“We don't know why they're here, but if they're on a security patrol for some reason, they're probably coming back this way soon. Show me the way to the ridges,” Kalev says.

Freya slips through the woods with Kalev following; her movement smooth and quieter than the breezes. No rustling of leaves marks her passage.

Kalev admires her fieldcraft, but as he watches her supple body, his throat tightens. Freya is a blossoming young woman. She is almost as tall as he, but while his shoulders have been widening, her figure has developed feminine curves that make him aware of his masculinity. He unconsciously touches his red-gold soft beard.

She has shifted back to mental communication.

“Let’s pause for five minutes. Your eyes are better than mine and my ears more sensitive than yours. If that Protector patrol is nearby, we need to know. There’s a clearing ahead we’ll have to cross.”

“I’ll climb a tree and look for movement. You listen. After we’re sure, we’ll sprint across the open space side by side and wait again, just to be sure,” Kalev.

The security halt reveals no threat and within fifteen minutes, the two are in a dense hardwood forest that only begins to lighten and turn to evergreen as they climb higher on the ridge. The refreshing scent of pines and cedars offsets the increasingly rocky ground.

“When we get to the top of the mountain, we’ll drop to our hands and knees. We’ll crawl toward the crest until we’re far enough away from the edge so that we can’t be seen from the ground.”

Freya doesn’t comment, but the silent sense Kalev feels is like she’s nodding her head. He takes the lead, watching for any sign of the Protector patrol.

Once the pair has reached the summit and turned north, they hear voices. Not individual speech, but the storming thunder of thousands in unison. Though loud, the words are unclear.

With no possibility, now, that they can be seen from the ground, Freya and Kalev jog through sparse trees and underbrush at the crest of the immense limestone ridge, toward the sound as it rises in intensity.

Another sound grinds its way through the mountain's silence; a higher-pitched, scraping, screeching sound. Combined with the thunder of massed human voices, the sound increases tension and slows the pair's feet.

As the two near the point of the mountain above The Hive, the words become clear.

“Plant food! Com—post! Com—post! Plant food!”

Over and over the rhythmic chant rebounds against the rock cliffs rising above The Hive like heaving waves breaking against a rocky shore in a storm.

Then, as the earth underfoot is almost all rock, the source of metallic screeching becomes clear. Almost at the edge of the cliff, a gigantic wind turbine rises into the sky. It once had three propeller blades, but now only two are full length. The third is a ragged stump. As the wind catches the remaining blades, they try to turn, but are unbalanced and howl with a sound like metallic pain.

Two more towering turbines once stood with the surviving structure and now lie fallen, useless and still.

Suddenly the deep, human chant from below goes silent. Within seconds, a clamor of cheers punctuate the end of the earlier calls.

“What’s that all about?” Freya.

Though the chance of their voices being heard is virtually nonexistent, she stays in silent communication.

“Let’s crawl to the edge of the cliff and see,” Kalev.

The Hive is a dense city made up of scores of high-rise gray concrete buildings forming a squared “O.” Growing plants cover the flat tops of the buildings. The open space is about a hundred yards on each side. Though the promontory on which Kalev and Freya lie is a towering limestone mountain, The Hive’s buildings are only a few hundred feet below.

People are jostling in the square, shoulder-to-shoulder around a black metal box with a shining top. They are dressed in identical gray shirts and trousers. A lane through the crowd, leads west under the buildings to a narrow exit road. Parked near the reflecting box is a black vehicle six or eight times the size of The Hive’s Lectrics. The packed crowd avoids the paved area.

Beside the huge car, facing the box, are two people; a man and a woman, both dressed in long black robes that reach shining black boots. Hoods on the robes are thrown back. They stand, spines straight and chins lifted—as unlike the masses before them as timberwolves among animal shelter dogs. An armed silver-uniformed Protector stands beside each of them. From their training, Freya and Kalev know—these are Deciders.

The woman, tall, narrow faced, with shoulder-length dark hair, wide mouth and imperious black eyes raises her right hand. All crowd noise stops. In the silence, her mechanically-amplified voice rebounds from the cliffs. Only the grating scrape of the wind turbine continues.

“Let any who would dissent remember!”

The male, tall, brown-haired and square-jawed stands beside her with arms crossed. A thin smile curves his lips. He raises a signaling hand.

The crowd, as one hoarse voice, responds.

“Remember!” then goes silent.

“Let’s get a picture of her,” Kalev.

“No, don’t. You’d have to stand, exposed,” Freya

The two Deciders turn toward the car. Protectors hold two of the eight doors open. The male steps through one door and disappears. Just as she is about to enter the vehicle, the woman pauses.

She turns toward the mountain where Freya and Kalev lie. She lifts her chin and shifts her gaze like a questing predator. After several still, ominous seconds, she turns, enters the car and a Protector closes the door.

A group of four Protectors in camouflage uniforms trots into the square. The patrol. They join the Deciders in the car. Gray smoke trails as the vehicle departs and accelerates with a speed no Lectric could hope to match.

The crowd leaves the open square disappearing into the buildings, like gray water sluicing down open drains. Three people with white cloth bags enter a door in the side of the shining box. When they emerge, the bags they carry into the nearest building are half-full.

Kalev and Freya crawl back from the lip of the promontory, away from the cliffs. Once they are in the scraggly bushes, they stop to sip water from their canteens. Strange sights and the nauseous stench rising from The Hive clog their throats.

“What did we just see?” Freya.

“The ending of something. It was almost over when we got here.”

“I think it’s a good thing that you didn’t stand to get a picture. Even with the Shopper, it would have been too dangerous.”

“Probably, but we have to get back and report to Andrus. The scene we just saw was weird.”

They stand, without further discussion, and head south along the eastern military crest of the hill. Their path is just far enough below the mountaintops to assure they won’t be silhouetted against the sky. Sunset will be within two hours and the first Cave is at least ten miles away.

The ruined wind turbine’s moaning follows them as they move through the birches, deeper in the forest, like the trailing threads of a nightmare, after waking.

Their caution is lessened as The Hive falls farther behind, but unease about strange sights and sounds keeps their audible conversation silent and spare.