

The Listeners

I cradle the gun in my right hand while looking off to the side, not at her. Holding it doesn't feel natural while she's in the room. Then I drop my arm down by my thigh and start pacing back and forth in front of the door, like I'm some British soldier doing that changing-of-the-guards thing, but that just feels stupid. Finally, I sigh and tap the barrel against my left hand.

"I'm sorry," I say.

Katie looks up at me from her spot on the bed. "You don't have to do this," she says.

I glance down at the M-1911, standard-issue. "That's not what I meant."

"You don't have to do this," she says again. She pulls herself further up onto the bed and sits cross-legged, like she used to do at my place Tuesday nights after soccer practice. "You can get me out of here, you can get them to leave—"

"That's not what I meant, Katie," I say, catching the cylinder this time as it hits my palm.

"You're not like this," she says, and I can feel her eyes on me, but mine are on myself, reflected in the shiny silver.

"You don't—"

"You're not one of them."

I release the gun, look up, and touch the head of the pistol against the white bandage that covers the spot where my right ear used to be. "Yes," I say, "I am." It

doesn't hurt anymore, tapping it, the way it did the first few days, but there's a light tingle Derek says never really goes away. It's a connection we all share.

"You're not," Katie says, but it feels like a question and I've already given her my answer. I cradle the gun again in both my hands, like a baby, and I look at, through, the white four-paneled door that closes the two of us off from Derek and Loren.

They've got Katie's mom in her own room a couple doors down—"Separate," Derek said, "so if something goes wrong and we go down we've still got one." But I haven't heard anything from the other room for a while, which I guess means nobody's saying anything. I'd be able to hear it if they were. I can always hear the voice of my brothers.

Katie sees me looking at the door like I've got X-Ray vision or something. Or radar vision, like Daredevil. "You know what they're doing to her in there, right?" She sniffs, and I turn, and I see a tear dripping down her red cheek—not because she's scared, I think, because I've never seen her scared and she'd never be scared of me anyway, but because she's angry. She doesn't get it, though: she hasn't been outside her apartment since the quarantine went up, so she doesn't know there's a civil war going outside on the sick, dead streets, she doesn't know how she got on the wrong side.

She shouldn't be mad, but I can't blame her. I guess I'd feel the same way if things were turned around.

"Stop them!" she says, and she looks right at my eyes and I look right at hers. It's like the staring game, which we've played, like, every week since we were eight, until the world changed. Who blinks first?

"She's fine," I say, "we're not going to hurt—"

“She’s *not* goddamn ‘fine.’ What the hell do you think they’re doing to her in there? What do you think you’re supposed to be doing in here?”

“Wha—”

“‘Girl’s all yours.’ You got any idea what that means? You’re not stupid, Danny.” She shuts her eyes, shakes her head, turns away. I’m not stupid, I do know what she’s talking about, and I know she’s wrong. I want to take her through the apartment right now and show her she’s wrong, but I’ve got my orders.

But she doesn’t know them. She thinks she knows them but she doesn’t.

“You don’t know them,” I say.

“*You* don’t know them,” she yells, and I look back at the door like someone’s on the outside, eavesdropping. “They kill people, Danny! These guys are a bunch of psychos,” but they’re not, they’re all about peace and making things better for everyone, “and they killed some of my dad’s friends,” and I think, of course they have, they were cops, “and I don’t know how they got you into this, but, God, Danny, *listen* to me, they’re—”

“You don’t know them!” I say. “I can’t listen to you because you’re wrong and I only listen to what’s right.”

“What?”

“‘One ear, so that we may hear only the voices of our brothers.’”

“What are you *talking* about?”

“They took me in, Katie. When I needed help, they were there. When Mom left and I was alone I—”

“Your mom?” says Katie. “What happened to your mom?”

* * *

I slip the red rod into the grey connector, which is what makes the leg mobile when I put the whole thing together. I've built the body out of a few white circles, which are supposed to be the bulk of some vehicle, I think, but this is more interesting.

Usually. Today it's rote, the familiar clicks of a model-in-progress, robots to occupy the world I've been building since I was ten. I can't get it to come to life today. Maybe because everything outside is reaching in a lot stronger than it used to. Maybe because the silence that's always been a part of this time, my time, is the rule and not the exception.

Here's the thing: when you're used to voices, everywhere, anywhere, silence is louder than words could ever be. Especially on Tuesday. On Tuesday I watch the news in the morning and talk to Mom before I head to school. Katie talks to me. Teachers talk to me. During soccer practice Coach talks to me. Comedy Central, homework, hanging out with Katie. Words.

And then nothing. The TV works but the story is the same: plague. Deadly. Quarantine. Teachers have nothing to say when you don't see them and you can't see them when you're not allowed outside. The phone isn't working. I don't know why. But the phone isn't working and I can't get to Katie.

And Mom? She went down to the CVS to get toilet paper.

That was Sunday.

I don't have any toilet paper.

So I connect a little green peg into the white circle, glance out the window on the far wall, and try very hard not to listen to the silence.

When the knocks sound through the door I'm not quite sure what to make of them. I haven't bothered to turn on the TV since yesterday, and I haven't said a word since the day before, so the knocks are almost as loud as the quiet's been.

I drop the pieces to the ground. I walk out of my room. I open the door.

"Afternoon, kid," says the first officer, a white guy with a scar on his right cheek.

Is it afternoon already?

"Can we come in?" he asks, and I nod and step out of the way.

The other officer is a little guy, chubby, with these big, round eyes. He looks up at me, then through the apartment, like he's casing it for intruders. Or something.

And they explain to me (and words from real live people feel like Spanish after all the silence) that they have a service to offer: food and protection in exchange for guns. To keep me safe. To keep everyone safe, now that the health workers are gone.

I need food, I've only got a few boxes of cereal, some milk left, water and fruit and enough to last me a couple weeks but no more, and I guess I need protection, though I hadn't thought any of the sick people could get up here, so I go into my mom's room, open up her cabinet, and pull out the small pistol she got after the time some guy took our TV when I was in the sixth grade. I hand it over to them, and they thank me.

I ask them if they'll keep an eye out for my mom. The little one looks me right in the eye, and he says, "Out there since Sunday? Kid, she's fucking screwed." Then they take my CD player, and my mom's necklace, which she left on the counter when she went out for the toilet paper, and they leave.

And it's quiet again. And the words I did hear didn't make any sense. You need words to understand what's going on, but all I've ever gotten during the three weeks since the quarantine started is half-explanations and quarter-truths and things that don't fit together, like twenty puzzle pieces from twenty different puzzles. Silence is the other option, but then you have to come up with the final picture without any pieces at all, and that's impossible.

I walk back into my room, look at the white and red and green thing I've spent the past hour working on, and I take off its red leg and detach it from its grey joint and split the thing in two. I crawl back against the teal blue wall and look out the window, but all I can see from this angle is the sky, a little cloudy but normal.

"What did they take?" says a voice, and I push myself away from it and look through the open door to my room.

There are two guys there, one really big and strong, the other skinnier and pale but mean-looking. They have surgical masks hanging from their necks. They have no right ears.

They're Listeners.

"Go away," I manage.

"Kid, kid, kid," says the big one, who kneels down and takes a little step towards me, like a bird. "It's all right. We ain't here to hurt you. We're here to help."

"We're here to hurt them," says the skinny guy, gesturing towards the door. He's got a gun tucked into his jeans. "Followed them up. Cops think they get to be in charge 'cause they got the power, but they don't got nothin', they don't got—"

"Shut up," says the big one. He looks into my eyes. "You know who we are?"

They're words. I've spent so much time in silence, but right now noise is a lot easier to deal with. "You're Listeners."

"I'm Derek," says the big one. "That's Terry."

"Yo," says Terry.

And Derek tells me, I'm not the only one this has happened to. The cops have been going around, taking away guns and dignity and control. It started off quietly, just a week ago, and the cops said it was to keep the scared and the infected from killing each other, but it only took a week, Derek says, for the real goal to show itself: theft, control, power. The protection they offer is a lie, and maybe the food, too. All their words are lies.

"It's hard to find the truth in the lies," says Derek. "But if you listen closely to the silence, the one voice that's clear, the one voice that's really there—that's the truth. You just have to learn how to listen for it."

He puts his hand on my shoulder. No one's ever done that. I feel protected.

"We're here to help," says Derek.

And I believe him.

* * *

"They let you take your robots?" Katie asks.

I'm sitting down now, against the rough and bumpy wall by the closed door, like a frozen frog, and I look up at her. "What?"

"Your robots. They let you take them, wherever it is you guys hide out?"

I can feel smooth bits of colored plastic against my hands, and the way my rough fingers would scratch against each other after a few hours spent on designs and concepts. I see preliminary sketches as they appear in my notebook during third period when I'm supposed to be focused on pre-calc.

"I didn't bring anything," I say.

"Remember who got you the first set?" she asks.

I think there's a trail she's trying to lead me down but I don't want to remember that I know the way. Hers isn't the voice I should be listening to. "It was your mom," I say, letting my eyes wander up towards the paint-speckled ceiling. "I think, I think . . . were we at the mall? And, yeah, and I saw them in the window, and she saw me staring—"

"My mom," says Katie. And then she doesn't say anything, like she wants me to connect the dots myself, but the image she's got in mind just isn't there.

Finally, she says, "You're breaking us up, you know."

"What?"

"My family. My mom, my dad, and they have *always* been there. For you."

When we used to get into these epic pillow fights, for the fate of the world or something, when we were younger, Katie would always nail me, absolutely nail me, by getting a shot in from out of nowhere. I mean, she'd be sitting perfectly still, like she is now, and with her hand behind her back she'd clutch the pillow tight, then suddenly whip it around before I could react.

This feels a lot like that.

“We’ll take care of you, man, we will,” Katie says. “I mean, God, if we’d known what happened to your mom we’d’ve done everything we could to get over there and get you here with us. Danny, are you listening? Danny.”

I look up. I’m listening.

“You’re not—you’re not *alone* here, Danny, you don’t need these guys, you don’t—we’ll be your family. We *are* your family.”

The cold tip of the gun hits against my palm. It’s smooth, like plastic. I tap and I think and for a second I believe what she’s saying. I remember a time, when I was eleven, that we had my birthday at Katie’s place, I think because the walls in mine were being painted, some lavender thing Mom liked at the time.

I blink and I’m back there, in the living room just behind the door, and it’s a little hot because it’s June and the air conditioning’s broken down, and Katie’s dad is trying as hard as he can to salvage the cake he’s spent the morning making, dripping more and more frosting on to make up for everything that’s melted off. It’s a chocolate cake, and I don’t like chocolate, but I eat it anyway.

Katie’s mom leads me to a bunch of presents stuffed below a bush in a pot, kind of like a really cheap Christmas, and she pronounces it a “Daniel Bush.” I unwrap a bucket filled with model pieces, jumbled totally at random, no instructions, perfect. And I distract Katie by staying just how perfect it is while I grab one of the harder pillows on the couch and, finally, get in the first good shot.

“I didn’t . . . I didn’t know it was your house we were coming to,” I say, now, to Katie.

“You know now,” she says.

But here's the thing she doesn't realize: the Daniel Bush and the robots and the pillows and the extended family the Raymonds found in the MacDonalds once my dad left are part of a world that doesn't exist anymore. The pieces started to fall away once the school we went to was no longer a place we went to or could even see, when the four walls of our apartments became the four walls of our lives, when my mom walked out the door and never came back and when the phone stopped working and Katie faded out of existence.

Leaving the place behind, the old apartment, was the last piece, the last little shard of a world that had broken up entirely. For like a second I was like an exile from some country that'd been taken over by a new regime and given a new name, but just for a second before I was adopted into a new home, a new country, a makeshift hideaway in the basement of the Giant Supermarket. The world of noise and voices and childhood had been infected by the sickness that cut them off from me, replaced by a group of guys, strong guys, who would never leave me or abandon me or fail to protect me, who would guide me through the post-plague world, past the end of most things and the beginning of new ones.

Katie means well. But we live in different worlds now.

"I have a family," I say, and meet her gaze.

She takes her eyes away from mine, and for some reason it feels very cold in here.

* * *

Things are more comfortable when they're recognizable, and I think that's why I've never done well with change. Or maybe it's because I never got used to it.

My mom and dad moved into our apartment on Redford when I was three, and my dad left a little bit after that so I don't remember him at all. So since I was three I've lived in one place, with one person. I met Katie when I was eight and she's still my best friend. I picked up soccer when I was five. I've had one hobby since I was nine. When I graduate . . . when I was going to graduate, when graduation was a thing that happened . . . I was going to spend a couple years at the community college, and I'd still be at home, in my room, in my world.

It's been two weeks now since I walked out on the last piece left of that world, but I still feel some vertigo every morning when I open my eyes and find myself near the corner in a row of uniform beds, surrounded by cold granite and illuminated by a dim overhanging lamp with a half-faded bulb. (It makes a humming sound at night that makes it really hard to sleep.)

I open my eyes and the ceiling's supposed to be white, but it's grey. The mattress is too stiff and it makes my back hurt. There aren't any windows so I can't get oriented enough even to tell if I'm facing the same direction I used to, and that's when I get dizzy. Once during the first week it scared me enough that I tried to stand up and fell right out of the bed, onto the cold floor, like a sidewalk in January, but everyone else was asleep and no one noticed.

This is a place but it isn't my place. This is a world but it isn't my world. I wake up—I'm always the first up, my internal clock's been all screwed up—and I look around at the sleeping faces, a bunch of two-eared kids about my age and a little older, and

further down the hall the one-eared Listeners, mostly older, initiated, and I feel like there's a big bubble around them and I'm as detached from them as I am from the world that got blocked off to me once the disease started spreading.

It's a lot like the one summer I spent at sleepaway camp, Milldale, when I was maybe twelve. Mom thought it'd be a good idea, spending some time away from the house and hanging out with someone other than her and Katie, but it was a nightmare because I couldn't understand it. I'd wake up and there were a bunch of kids I didn't know sleeping, and I was worried I'd be too loud and they'd all wake up and yell at me and hate me. And there was this skinny counselor guy, and every morning I was just a little surprised he was still there and not sure what to make of it.

The new kids are supposed to get used to it but I never did. I went home after four weeks. I want to go home now, but there is no home, and the only thing I'd do in that place that used to be my apartment is sit around and hope the cops bring me something to eat and leave me with enough stuff to keep me occupied until the plague creeps in through the crack under the door.

Morning comes, and I recognize that by the sights and sounds of men rolling out of bed and stumbling over towards the pile of food, "the Pantry," or to the corner of the Giant basement we've designated "the Bathroom." And I follow suit, and I keep to myself.

Later in the day I'm sitting on my bed, reading one of the Daredevil comics a couple of the guys pulled down from the store, and Derek sits down on the bed next to me. He's different from the others, he's not one of the kids in the bunks, he's not a counselor

doing his job, he's a guy looking out for me and sticking to me and this whole thing feels different when he's there.

"I know how you feel," is the first thing he says, and he probably does. "This is a disorienting place, Daniel," he continues, "because on first glance things don't quite add up. One ear, one voice, but you hear a lot of voices and don't know what to make of any of them. A new world for us, our own rule, but right now this world's just a cramped basement. It doesn't make sense." And the funny thing is, when he's talking about it, and staring out at the far wall like there are hieroglyphics on it I can't see, it makes more sense than it ever has before.

"The place was a lot emptier when I joined," Derek says, "but just as strange. The life I had before, it wasn't one I could have anymore, not 'cause of some plague, just 'cause. I don't think I really got it," and now he turns and looks me in the eyes, "'til I realized what I was part of."

"I know," I say. "We're thrown off by all the voices we hear, and the lies we hear, and we need to—"

"You know, but you don't know," says Derek. "Look, Daniel, see that guy over there?" He points to a little guy, whose name I know is Loren. "See him?"

"Yeah."

"That's your brother. See that one, over there, in the red shirt?"

"Yeah."

"That's your brother. That's your brother, that's your brother, and me? I'm your brother, too."

I don't know what to say, so I say, "Okay."

“Ain’t just a word,” Derek says. “These guys are your brothers because every single one of ‘em would give up their life to save yours. Terry and me could’ve gotten killed just going out into the open and breathing the air looking for you, but we’d do it again in a second if you went missing. This place is cramped, but, Daniel, listen.”

And he puts his hand on my shoulder, in a way that’s kind of unfamiliar but really assuring, like he’s a leech sucking out anxiety. “It’s cramped ‘cause we’re all here together. Family isn’t something that happens, it’s something that’s made. We’re family here. All us brothers . . .”

He points to Adam, our leader, the one they say saw all of this coming and stocked up on food and supplies in preparation for the new world to come. He’s talking to Terry. They’re laughing. “. . . and our father,” says Derek.

I look at him, and I look at the concrete around me. I rub my hand along the rough wall. I keep it there.

* * *

There’s silence for a few minutes, but the loud kind, the kind that tells you it’s there. Katie’s retreated to the head of the bed, lying there like she’s trying to sleep, and I’m just sitting back, half on the door and half on the wall, switching the safety of the gun on and off for the clicking sound. Click, click, like a pen you can’t help but play around with even when you’re not using it. Like a red rod to a grey connector.

The quiet looks a little hazy, some kind of mist that stings your eyes closed and is thick enough that it’s hard to see through anyway, and it’s a little bit disconcerting

because I've been seeing things particularly clearly in the last few days. It hasn't even been a week since I felt my right ear sliced off by an expert metal blade, and it's only been a couple days since I learned how to really listen like that.

When I talk to Katie, I wonder, just for a second, what I'm listening to. A familiar voice sounds different through one ear instead of two. She's mono. And I hear her clearly, and I know she's who I always used to trust to tell me what was really going on.

Even about the Listeners. We used to see them walking around the school every now and then, looking in the windows from a distance, retreating quietly before anyone could go out to investigate. We made fun of them—I did, too, bunch of one-eared thugs, but that was before I knew them. Katie mentioned some blind vendetta against cops like her dad, and how they'd been stealing guns and food for a war only they could see, but *she* didn't know them. I want to listen to her, but I'm better informed than she is now; I see this world for what it is and what it's going to be, and what Adam and the rest of us will make it, and I know she's another of the voices I have to block out. It's hard but I have to do it.

She sits up again, and looks back down at me. For a moment she stares off to my right, then she asks, "Did it hurt?"

I rub the bandage stuck over the right side of my head. "Yeah, but it feels better once it's done." I tap it. It tingles.

"Why do you do it?" she asks.

"One ear, so that we may hear only the words of our brothers," I say. "One ear, so that the lies of the world may be drowned out by the truths of our brethren." Adam's

words. They sound unsteady when I say them, but from Adam's mouth they're truer than anything I've ever heard.

"Danny," Katie says, but then she stops and looks at the door. I turn towards it, and I hear it too, though I missed it at first: the creaking of the front door, long and extended but quiet. I can imagine the scene, like in any one of those hour-long cop shows on CBS or NBC: one man, quiet, creeping through the apartment, apparently empty, with gun raised up at his chest, pointing towards his ear. The footsteps I can't hear, quiet against the soft carpet of the main room, but I hear a hand lightly brushing against wood when he pushes open the door—the other door, not this one.

And the next thing I hear loud, real loud: *bang! Bang!* Gunshots, clean, decisive. And then, behind me, Katie, screaming. I look at her, she looks at me, and I've never wanted more a voice to guide me. It's a TV show with just the audio and I don't know what to make of it, and there's nothing else there to give me a hint, no matter how hard I listen.

Katie keeps screaming, maybe she has a better idea than I do. I'm supposed to threaten her or tell her to be quiet but everything's focused on listening, trying to psychically pull the disparate sounds that have to be out there into my head, but nothing happens and all that fills my ear is my best friend, panicked. I've gone selectively deaf.

Suddenly the door flies open and cracks against my ear. I reel and roll back against the wall, then to the ground, and find myself looking up at Katie's dad, my uncle, covered in blue and badge and blood. His gun is trained on me but it's paused, like it knows where to point but not what to do. His lips are moving but I can't make out the words.

The red on his uniform I understand, vaguely, and it's probably a lot like the red gushing from my ear, but what catches me off-guard is the bright red blotch under his chin, at the top of his neck, in the middle of where the little black hairs of a growing beard are starting to sprout. It's tiny but it's familiar, though it doesn't fit his face, but I recognize it because I've been trained to see it, part of the lessons with my M-1911, when not to shoot, when to fire away, when to recognize the plague and deal with it before it spreads.

I'm down on the ground and backed in the corner and my brothers may be dead but he's paused, Katie's dad, he's talking and not acting and not listening and I may not be able to hear but I see my opening. I see that dot, that little red dot, and know from what my brothers have told me that it will spread across his face, transform him into some deranged circus freak, make him a risk to everyone, even Katie, and I know what I have to do and I have to do it fast, and *now*. I point the gun and I fire, *fire*, like at the targets down in the basement, the private firing range Derek and I spent time on every day. I hit the chest, squarely, and he loses his balance and stumbles and flies back. My legs return to me and I climb to them, slowly, and I hear sound coming back, a little fuzzy but there, and it's all screams and echo, a loud metal slap that echoes through all the walls and halls in the apartment where I once made my second home.

Katie leaps off the bed and grabs her dad, the cop, the killer, the amateur cake-baker. For a moment I stand there, frozen, and try to add this to the list of things to explain to her. He was infected, I want to say, it was only a matter of time, and you have to get away from him before it gets you, too, but she's clutched to him like the world's

strongest magnet and things have played out the way they're going to play out. People die in a war.

I'm out of the picture, irrelevant, and there's only one voice my best friend can listen to now, so I walk out the open door, through the main room where the Daniel Bush once stood, past the couch we used as ammunition, nowhere near the bedroom where Derek and Loren, caught unawares, distracted, attention focused elsewhere, have become the first martyrs to the cause.

I don't know what's happened to Katie's mom. I don't want to know. I listen only to the voices of my brothers, and my brothers in here have been silenced, so I just head for the door we kicked open on the way in. There's nothing left to hear.

* * *

Adam lets the silver blade fly through the air like some kind of bird. He swings it down at this perfect angle, like he's done a thousand times before, but it looks a lot different from down here. He swings it up, and for just a second the light from the lamp hanging a little bit above me reflects perfectly into my eyes, and I squint, I blink, but only for a second.

Then he suspends it well above me, and I see myself reflected in the bright metal, like I'm one of the others, watching, like I'm me, watching. I'm lying back on a thin table, gazing up at the knife. I look scared. I bet I am. But there's nothing to be scared of, 'cause this is everything I've been waiting for.

“In a world that grows forever darker, forever more frightening,” Adam says, his voice clear and strong like a ringmaster, “we need to know, always to know, whom to trust, whom to believe in, to whom to listen. We are misguided, distracted, destroyed by the inconsequential, contradictory sirens of parents, of television, of organized religion and media . . .”

He’s a showman, a master showman, but he really means it. You can’t act that kind of feeling, you can’t make up these things, and that’s why we’re all together. That’s why he’s my father. I’ve watched the whole thing, the whole ceremony, a couple times before, and I glance up now and see my family, here, for me.

But not watching me. I may be the one on the table, it may be my initiation, my Listening In, but when Adam speaks you can’t focus on anything else. You just can’t. You’re drawn in by the voice and the words, and you find yourself addicted to the truth. His message is magic: he’s not a magician, but he knows all their secrets.

“. . . to break away from the outside world, to tear ourselves apart from the corrupting influences of those who would seek to disunite us, and tonight, tonight, we give the gift of freedom to yet another of our children. We close our eyes,” he says as he punches his fist into his open palm, the knife pointing up towards the basement roof, “and open our ears.”

I’ve heard that this whole thing is like some kind of communion, and once you limit the things you hear the world becomes a brighter place, reality a clearer thing. I see Loren there, and Terry, engrossed by the message they’ve heard a thousand times, true believers. That’s what I want, and I may be scared, and I can’t imagine the new world out there, but it’s waiting for me, and I’m waiting for it.

I'm changing. I'm almost there.

"One ear, so that we may hear only the voices of our brothers." Adam steps forward and places his open left hand on my chest. I've always wondered what this part feels like. It's calming, and I know, I know, it's part of the ceremony, but it's a bond, a chain-strong connection. I'm part of all of them now.

"One ear, so that the lies of the world may be drowned out by the truths of our brethren." He removes his palm, and I breathe. He clutches the knife in both his hands, and he twists it around, so that everyone can see it. Derek, my mentor, the big brother I never had, comes up from my left and brings the cup to my mouth. The symbolic drink. For a second I consider that, in the old world, I'm underage, but that's the past: I take the sip.

"Daniel Raymond," says Adam, and I feel honored to hear my full name from his mouth, "do you now choose to dispose of the lies of your past and embrace the singular truth of your future?"

"Yes," I say. No hesitation.

"Do you accept the responsibilities set forth by this family, to follow your brothers wherever they need you, to lead those who hear too much?"

"Yes."

Derek puts a small wooden rod in my mouth—something to bite on. This is the part that hurts, but I'm ready for it. The pain is great, but the reward is greater.

"The pain is great," says Adam, "but the reward is greater. This is the path you have decided to choose—the correct path. The true path. One ear." He raises the knife so all can see, then brings it down so that the blade is just barely touching the spot where

my right ear juts out from the rest of my face. He raises it again. "Welcome to the Listeners."

And the knife comes down, and for half a second the light bounces into my eyes again, and then the white hot is inside me and I'm free.