
the seed runner

JENNY L. DAVIS

*And whenever they catch you, they will kill you. But first they must catch you,
digger, listener, runner, prince with swift warning. Be cunning and full of tricks
and your people shall never be destroyed.*

-Richard Adams, *Watership Down*

I have always been a runner. Not the athletic, fast kind like Jim Thorpe, or the superhero kind, like the Flash. But the kind that find themselves bolting at the first sign of trouble—running in the opposite direction of everything: fear, responsibility, and if you believe my grandfather, hard work. Running’s how I wound up at the Pratt Industries Detention and Training Program in the first place.

I had been out past curfew a week shy of my 13th birthday—at the library after class to see a real color copy of the Astonishing X-men #17 that had just come in. I had never seen an original color print of a comic—only black and white copies of copies they kept in the library and I spent hours enthralled finally seeing the colors of my favorite world—totally mesmerized by Jean Grey’s red hair and the bright pink of Gambit’s outfit. By the time I left, it was already past curfew and I had to sprint to get home before the patrols caught me. But being a runner doesn’t mean I’m fast—they picked me up less than two blocks from my grandfather’s house and took me to the local detention center. After only three days, I was sent up to Pratt without seeing my grandfather or siblings again. They promised me a letter had been sent telling my family where I’d been assigned, but I hadn’t received any mail or packages since arriving, so I doubt anyone was ever notified. It didn’t really matter, everyone assumed any kids who disappeared ended up at Pratt, or worse, and there was no point in going looking for them.

Pratt would have been worse, if it weren’t for Jimmy. He was the only thing that made that place bearable. We had arrived on the same day and connected instantly. So we signed up for the same class schedules and picked the same dorm room and stole every spare moment to re-imagine it as Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters. We spent all our time together, which was pretty easy, since we were put in the same grade and Pratt was an all boys’ detention program. Beyond that

nobody paid too close of attention to us—there were 300 boys to keep track of and any one of us was pretty interchangeable for another. He had only heard a little about comics, so we spent as much time in class and free time talking about who had what superpowers, who had allied with who, and whether Magneto or Apocalypse was more evil. We teamed up for all of our projects, like helping each other memorize the wording of the 2039 Corporate Sovereignty Act that divided the country into four major corporate zones to avoid conflict between them. Within only fifteen years of extreme resource mining throughout the continent, it became clear that the only remaining land worth having was tribal land—protected for nearly 50 years by strict environmental policies in most tribes. The top corporations soon established guardianship clauses that allowed them to exert “protection” over those territories based on their more extensive resources. Pratt Industries had created the new residential detention program—Strategic Training Units—designed to train delinquent Indian minors within their Corporate jurisdictional boundaries for futures in the company. Any “infractions,” even minor ones, like being out just after curfew, could get you sent up to Pratt for a year, maybe longer. I was there almost 11 months.

Eight months in, the cadets caught us away from the quad, Jimmy and me were just far enough to be out of the visual line of any window in the square, those concrete buildings filled with the residential school students, our teachers, and the guards who watched us all.

We hadn’t even realized we were off the quad—we were too caught up in our game of X-Men, this time Cyclops and Wolverine—to notice the shift from blacktop to gravel and grass under our feet. We knew we were in trouble before they even spoke. I froze, my adamantium skeleton instantly dissolving into dust within my skin.

“And who do we have out of bounds?”

The cadets were only 14 to 16—identified as ideal candidates for the Bureau and brought to “low conflict” sites for training. The difference of those 3 years might as well have been 10.

“No wards are allowed off the quad.”

Their words were marked with glee as their pupils dilated with anticipation. They were focused on Jimmy. He was always the target. Far from the confident Scott Summers that he always picked to play, Jimmy was short, his chubbiness always standing in the way of his deepest wish: to be invisible, unseen by classmates, teachers, and especially the cadets. It was the focus of the directors, who were determined to fashion us into optimal shape—a sign of their excellent guardianship. But no matter how they changed his diet, or how little they fed him, Jimmy's cheeks refused to grow less round, his middle never grew less soft, as though his flesh was carrying out a war against giving up ground fueled only by the tenacity of his ancestors (and the snacks his classmates were sometimes able to squirrel away to share with him in the dead of night). His hair, too, attracted their disdain. It stood straight up along his forehead, and no amount of gel or grease would hold it down all day.

It was sticking up when they threw the first punches, with fists and freshly removed grey helmets, I ran. I could still hear the cadence of crunching by boots against gravel and knuckles against cartilage and bone. Crunch. Shift. Crunch. Smack. The sight of the only person I had left in this world struggling against the knee pad pressing down on his neck yanked the breath from my chest—even as I fled in the opposite direction, I looked back to see Jimmy looking at me. His deep brown eyes begging me to stay—not as a hero, just to deflect even one of the blows. His face contorted by the fear of a child not sure if this might be death, willing me to let him at least die in the sight of friendship.

But I ran. Not for help. No such thing existed there. I ran to ease the terror closing around my throat. I ran to the back hall of sector 2, between classroom buildings 23E and 24A to hide until I could slink back to barracks without being questioned. I don't know how long it took for the pounding to lighten in my ears, and the burning to ease in my lungs, but when I looked up I locked eyes with Ms. Nihi, our biological sciences teacher. My breath, just regained, caught. Had she seen me? Did she know what I had done? But she turned and walked backed into the building that held her classroom.

Jimmy didn't come back to the barracks that night and was still gone in the morning. The buzz among the students was that he was in the medical building. That's when I got myself assigned to latrine duty—easy enough to do if you were willing to take the initial harassment from the cadets. It was their worst official punishment. The barracks had been built in a hurry, and all plumbing for showers and toilets was in the centralized bunkers. No one was allowed to

leave their barrack at night, so everyone was given buckets for their piss. The person on latrine duty had to go through all of the barracks at night and empty the previous day’s pails into a giant drum on wheels that was dumped periodically in the sump pit near the back of the compound. It was exhausting, it took half of the night, and it was utterly disgusting. But it meant having relatively free range at night. That’s when I learned that it wasn’t the uniforms that separated the students and the cadets, it was their urine. The students pee was dark, it came in a range of unfortunate browns and yellows and the smell of it filled my nostrils and refused to leave. In biology, I learned that that came from a general state of dehydration and unfortunate diet. The cadets’ pails, on the other hand, were filled with much clearer, less offensive smelling urine—it was the only good thing about them.

Jimmy was in the med building and had not regained consciousness since the beating. He was barely recognizable with his swollen face turned nearly purple against the clear plastic breathing tube down his throat, his full lips stretched, cracked and dry, around it. I visited him each night for two weeks. I would pull up the only chair in the room so I could sleep with my head and forearms against his thin medical cot, hoping to add a little warmth to the always frigid Pennsylvania night air. I talked to him, telling him he was Charles Xavier, capable of mentally controlling the entire operation from his bed without having to move a finger. And at sunrise I would run back to my barracks before the cadets began their training rounds. Then, one night I came in, sweating from having rushed through emptying all of the pails and practically sprinting the drum to the sump and back, to find him gone. No notes or remnants—just an empty bed. Forever disappeared in one of the pits just west of the barracks where such favorites of the squad always seemed to end up. In his absence, my only comfort was to imagine him as Jean Grey—a phoenix resurrected in some future timeline to save us all.

Ms. Nihi never mentioned the day she saw me, but she did request me to do extra study halls in her section. She was one of only three teachers at Pratt that were one of us but I never knew what tribe, and it was rumored she had even requested the position there. She drowned me with assignments in biology, botany, and even genetics but I didn’t care. I barely noticed when the security started to tighten and we were suddenly marched from class to class in groups led by cadets. The assignments filled the spaces that used to be taken up with daydreams about using telekinesis and teleportation to get me and Jimmy away from Pratt without the required corporate zone authorizations, money, and travel tokens. And the extra study halls meant I was allowed to

stay after class which suited me just fine—the nervousness on site was growing and the cadet presence increased almost every week. The sight of their uniforms made me nauseous and light headed every time I saw them. One day after nearly two months of staying after class for study hall, Ms. Nihi quickly walked up to me and whispered urgently for me to pack my things just before several sirens went off across the grounds. She anxiously checked the area outside her classroom before coming back inside and pulling something from around her neck, shoving it into my hands along with a full backpack I had never seen before.

“What is it?”

I didn’t know what was happening, I had never seen her in any state other than calm and confident.

“It is our oldest responsibility. The seeds and pollen from the first corn. Seed runners have kept them safe for thousands of years. They must never find it. It’s the proof—the link between human, animal, and plant. Once its genome is mapped, they could unlock—and change—anything, and everything they wanted. Everything would be different...lost.”

She draped the small leather bag around my neck, still warm from her skin. A strange contrast to the always cool fabrics of the uniforms I’d worn in the year since arriving.

“You must run. You must never stop running. If you do, you will die, and they will have all of us.”

She thrust a backpack into my arms and pointed South. “Go to the tree line and wait for the flames to reach the clouds. Then...run.”

As I watched stunned and confused, she let down her hair before dousing herself and everything else in her classroom in the chemistry lab’s alcohol. As she struck the spark, she danced—spinning a fancy dance of fire in all four directions at once. I ran.

I ran. I am the seed runner. I was chosen because I have always run—along the edges and in the shadows. Panic grips me with blinding fear, and I run.