

Chapter 25

The chapter opens with Theo and his companions settling for the night in a forest, with Theo and Rolf sleeping on the ground while the others take refuge in the car. Theo's rest is marked by the rustling of leaves and distant voices, followed by a rising wind that hints at the forest's quiet vitality. Upon waking, he finds himself surrounded by the earthy scent of loam and the crispness of fallen leaves, though his makeshift bed has hardened overnight. The group gathers for tea, using Jasper's coronation mugs, creating a strangely festive atmosphere amidst their precarious journey.

Theo and Rolf work together to fix the car wheel, their collaboration eased by daylight and renewed energy. Their conversation shifts to the absence of Julian and Luke, who are off praying privately. Rolf expresses indifference to their religious rituals, though he tolerates them for Julian's sake. Theo questions the wisdom of separating, but Rolf dismisses his concerns, revealing his own loss of faith in childhood and his pragmatic focus on survival. The exchange highlights Theo's unease and Rolf's cynical view of religion, contrasting with Julian and Luke's devotion.

Theo's irritation grows as he searches for Julian and Luke, fearing their exposure to potential threats. He finds them engrossed in a makeshift communion service, their solemnity evoking childhood memories of his own exclusion from religious practices. The scene is intimate and almost childlike, with Luke officiating and Julian deeply reverent. Theo watches from a distance, feeling both alienated and nostalgic, before retreating to the clearing. Their devotion underscores the group's fractured dynamics, where faith and pragmatism coexist uneasily.

Back at the camp, Theo reports Julian and Luke's imminent return, prompting Rolf's sardonic remark about their brevity. Rolf's tolerance of Luke's role as a chaplain hints at unresolved tensions—whether out of practicality, superstition, or deference to Julian's pregnancy. The chapter closes with Theo's lingering discomfort, reflecting the

broader themes of belief, survival, and the fragile bonds holding the group together. Their interactions reveal the complexities of faith and human connection in a world teetering on collapse.

