

Chapter 1

β Riona was chained to the wall, unable to move. They were throwing daggers at her. Terrified, she closed her eyes as a hundred sharp knives were launched at her simultaneously. She waited for the pain but didn't feel anything. Slowly, she opened her eyes and found herself on an empty island... With Trey. He had saved her, again. Only... it wasn't really how Trey looked. Over the years, through her dreams, Trey's face had started evolving into a different person ... She just couldn't figure out whom her mind was confusing him with... 'Trey... what are you doing here?' 'Rio, I've always been here. Always been with you.' Suddenly he clutched his chest and dropped to the floor. 'Trey!' Rio screamed. She bent down and saw a shiny stained knife coming out straight through his heart, among a massive pool of blood... β

Riona Marionette woke up with a start. Still not used to her nightmares, she trembled on her bed in the darkness, and waited for the pictures in her mind to slowly fade... It was only 1:34 A.M.... Not late enough to stay awake. She knew she'd have to go back to sleep eventually, considering she had a long day tomorrow.

Not being able to handle another sleepless night, Rio tip toed to her parent's medicine cabinet and, hesitantly, swallowed two sleeping pills. Another hour passed by as she lay still in bed, staring at the ceiling, till she finally felt her eyes close into an eventless sleep...

"Mom, I've got everything," Riona sighed, as she carelessly brushed through her brown curls. She quickly tied her hair, put in her honey-colored contact lenses, and threw on a cap. It was eight o'clock in the morning and there was never more commotion in the house.

"Do you have to wear those huge, baggy pants? They don't even fit you properly! They're too short! Can't you dress like a girl for once Rio?" her mother tried tugging the bottom of her jeans to pull them down.

"They're called Harem jeans, mom. And they're meant to be three-fourths. I look fantastic!"

Riona constantly wished that she had inherited her mother's model-like looks. Now as she secretly compared her shorter, athletic frame to that of her tall, lean, and red-haired mother's, Rio grimaced and turned away from the mirror.

"Sherri! I've got the car ready out front! Let her go! We have to be there at eight hundred hours! I don't like being late," Riona's father yelled. He was a tall, big built man with a broad frame. Even with a scar running down his bald head from his military days, he was very good looking.

"What about your blanket Rio, and your guitar? Oh! And your vitamins, don't forget your vitamins darling, you need them every day! Oh dear!" Riona watched as her mother scurried around the place. Considering her only child was about to leave home for six months to play basketball in a boys' team, her mother was quite calm.

“Mom, I’m going to be late! They’re already at the airport! And I’m going to be living in a hotel... with blankets. Also, I don’t even know how to play the guitar and I’m not going to die without vitamins there... so can I leave now?”

Her mother came up to her with an armful of herbal medicines in small bottles and stuffed them in her overflowing sports duffel bag.

“Rio, take this one especially.” She said pointing at a bright blue bottle. “It will help with the night- with your sleep.”

“I sleep well now days mom.” Rio boldly lied, taking the bottle anyway.

"Rio... You can still change your mind. You don't have to go. I mean, you all are just children!"

"Mom, please don't... We're all at least 18 or 19 years old. We're not kids anymore..."

"I just want you to know that you can come back ANYTIME you want... even if it's in the middle of the tournament... If you feel uncomfortable at any point-"

"Mom, you know me... I'm with Jake and all! I'll be fine! Love you!"

"Sherri, don't tear up, she'll be fine. Make us proud Rio." Her dad said, opening the door so that Rio could throw her luggage in the back of the big four-wheel drive.

“I will... Okay, bye Mom! I’ll call!” Riona quickly dived into the car before her mother remembered something else to burden her shoulders with.

“You and Jake take care of each other now!” Her mother yelled after her.

Riona Marionette was the only girl selected to play in the International basketball tournament. Countries around the world had picked their best high school senior

basketball team to compete. After a lot of hard work, the Dubai Thunderstorms had finally made it. They really were an International team in itself, as they had teammates from all over the world. The team was full of her buddies, the same guys that Riona had known since she was around eleven years old. Now that they were all seniors, Coach Carl had them working really hard to improve their game and their hard work paid off. They were flying to a hotel in the U.S.A, where they would stay for the next six-to-eight months, depending on how far they got in the league.

Riona was the last one to reach the airport, so she braced herself for the remarks her Coach was going to pass about her constant tardiness.

“Ahh, Riona! You decided to make it. Good. You’re bunking with Mishone.” Coach Carl was pretty direct.

“Arriona? Huh, sounds like a name I’ve heard before. Do we know anyone called Arr- Oh, snap. Wh-wait a minute! Coach, did you just say... Mishone!? Is *my* roommate? Like, in a serious tone? You playin’ me, right?” Rio panicked.

It was a well-known fact that she and Mishone Shobir were the only two on the team that had never gotten along well. They were always on each other’s case with sarcastic comments and constant bickering. Mishone took particular joy in making sexist comments about Rio, only because of how she reacted to it and Rio, on the other hand, never let go of an opportunity to mock him about something or the other.

Riona looked over at Mishone now, who was staring at his reflection in a shop window. He smoothed over his black, wavy hair and winked at himself with his light

amber eyes. Then, when he finally got his hair to stay in place, he ruffled it up so that it was messy again, smiled, and wandered inside the shop.

Rio sighed, "Coach, there are nine other guys in the team that you could've paired me up with! What happened!?"

"Sorry but I don't monitor the politics around here." He said gruffly with his arms folded and head held high in pride.

Then he whispered, "Mishone was the only one without a partner, and you were too late to pick your own. That's what happens when you let your mother pack all your household furniture into your tiny bag."

No matter what happened, you couldn't pass one ...or two, over the coach. He always knew everything.

"Wait, so you're telling me, that someone even chose Victore, the NEW guy, over Mishone?" Rio asked in wonder.

"Yup."

"Now that's just harsh."

"You're the only two that still fight like little girls. Need to learn how to get along and work with each other!" Coach said, as he checked everyone off his list.

"You put us two together on purpose!" Rio realized.

"Don't know what you're talking about. Let's go."

After grumbling, complaining, moaning and even a little begging... Riona still had the same roommate.

They filed into plane for the seven-hour flight and one by one, the excitement faded...

Although she still felt sleepy, Rio forced herself to stay awake. She looked around at her team with pride.

In the seat next to her, Jake Carlson, Rio's best friend and one of the shorter, fit guys on the team, was smiling to himself as one of the girls on the plane 'eye flirted' with him. Jake knew he was handsome with his tanned skin, dark blue eyes, and model-like Italian looks, and he never failed to take advantage of that fact. He had sharp jaw lines and just enough stubble on his face to make him look rugged.

He waved his hand through his black hair, then, to the girl's disappointment, Jake hid his face with his cap and pretended to fall asleep.

Rio looked at him and sighed. She knew this tactic well.

The random girl turned away from Jake and looked at Mike, who was in the seat next to her, staring angrily at the little screen in front of him.

Rio could see her looking Mike over, taking in his 6 foot 2 frame; light skin, strong jaw and ruffled, dark blond hair.

"Nie! That's one MORE turnover for the books! You really want to go that far!? Oh, ref-er-ee! NO!" Mike cussed aloud, completely oblivious of the girl next to him.

"Hi, I'm May. Where are you from?" The girl asked Mike.

"Tso? I mean, what?" Taking a few seconds to realize she was talking to him, Mike pulled one of his earplugs out to hear her repeat the question.

"Oh. I'm Mike Jancel. Half Polish and half Hungarian. From Dubai." And before she could start talking again, he had his headphones in, and had returned to the game.

Rio chuckled to herself. She knew that the basketball-obsessed Mike would barely acknowledge the girl, especially if he was watching a game.

Suddenly a pillow hit Mike's head and he angrily twisted around to look at Jerricho Bean Boomerang and Marcus. They were both trying not to laugh as they pretended to be asleep. Jerricho was tall, dark and skinny while Marcus Kiffen was only slightly shorter, fair and had a broad frame. They were 'those guys' on the team. Always together, causing mischief and commotion.

"Hey guys!" Roobin Kale, who always tried to fit in with them, pointed at a pillow in his hands and grinned, indicating that he was going to throw it at Mike as well.

Roobin was a heavy-accented Indian with pale white skin and dark brown eyes. He was the tallest and skinniest person on the team, but got teased the most.

Jerricho and Marcus looked at each other, and then wickedly gave Roobin the thumbs up.

Roobin leaned forward to get a good shot of Mike, but the pillow ended up skimming Mike's hair, and hitting his airplane TV instead.

"That's it! That crappy shot HAS to be Roobin!" Mike trudged towards him intimidatingly.

"It-it was Victore!" Roobin said, shrinking back behind Victore who was in the aisle seat next to him.

Mike looked at Victore doubtfully. Since Victore was new to the team, no one really knew him at all. The team had made an effort, but every time someone tried to talk to Victore, he was rude and remained secluded.

Now, Victore, with the most unique aqua, blue-green eyes with a hazel tint, lifted his up his head to give Mike a piercing glare.

Rio was poking her head out from her seat to see the look Victore was giving Mike. It was quite a look. Although Victore hadn't said anything, his expression was full of intimidation and arrogance.

"Roobin, shut up. Annoy me again, and you'll get smacked." Mike, battling with a bit of an anger management issue, walked to his seat to catch up on the game.

For the first time, Rio actually noticed how handsome Victore looked. He had perfectly tanned skin, was clean-shaven with a firm jawline, high cheekbones and black, longish hair that fell just above his eyes and curled slightly at the back of his neck. He was tall, muscly and one of the best looking people on the team, Rio concluded after her analysis.

'I never figured out where he was from...' Rio realized, thinking back to the first encounter she had ever had with Victore Deville. His response wasn't very helpful either.

'You like puzzles, figure it out.' He had said.

And that was the first and last conversation she'd had with him.

'How'd he know I like puzzles?' Rio now thought bitterly as she squinted at him from across the aisle in the plane.

Suddenly realizing that Victore had been staring back at her the whole time, Rio quickly looked away in embarrassment.

Midway through the flight, bored of staring at the tiny screen, Rio gave up and let the sleep consume her.

Two hours later, Rio woke up slowly and in great confusion. She shook her head to clear it of the yet again, terrible nightmare, and looked around the plane.

‘Wait a minute. Didn’t I start out sitting with Jake??? Why is my head on Mishone’s’ shoulder? Eew. Oh my Gosh, there Jake is! Of course! Sitting next to that chick. I knew it. His ridiculous tactic worked again... Where'd he sent Mike to? Anyway, I really need to pee but Mishone's blocking my way. Now if I can just maneuver my way around his legs and try not to wake him up. I'll have to move like... like a ninja. Or I could just...’

She unbuckled her seatbelt slowly, so as not to disturb him, and then... smacked him right on his shoulder.

“Oops, my bad, but now that you're awake you might as well let me pass!” Rio said in an extremely honey sweet, obviously false, manner with a huge, mocking smile plastered on her face. Since Mishone was still in the process of realizing what was happening, she pushed past him and crept towards the empty bathroom stalls (still in Ninja persona).

Squeezing her way in to the tiny bathroom door, Rio looked into the small mirror in and thought about what her mother kept saying.

This outfit doesn't look too ...un-girly, does it? Rio thought as she eyed her black tank top and jeans.

It's the Converse shoes. Mom wanted me to wear heels. Hah. I've never worn heels in my life... It could be the cap. Maybe it is a bit over the top. And my hair could look better... But what's the point? I'll never look like mom. Or any normal girl... I like to

live in comfort. That's not a crime. I don't have to go through the pains of dolling myself up just to impress a few guys! I'm focused on my game anyway. It doesn't mean that I don't have any fashion sense... or style. Cuz I do.

Rio sighed, relieved her bladder, washed her face a couple of times and went back out.

She came back to find Mishone passed out on both seats. After debating whether to push him to the floor or poke him awake, she decided to just find another place to sit. Stepping over Jerricho's foot as he tried to trip her, Rio headed towards the empty seat next to Jellio Maceo.

Jellio had curly black hair, dark skin, matching eyes and was smiling at her widely with his pearly whites.

"Rio, I know you like talking, but don't disturb me. I'm trying to sleep." Jellio said, grinning.

"Get out! I didn't come here to chit chat either!"

Crashing it with Jellio was all right. It was just Rio's sleep talking that ruined things. What bothered her, was that Jellio was listening, recording, making comments and laughing at her throughout. And every time she woke up, he got mad at her because she had ruined his whole entertainment show...

After the hustle to get through immigration and a LONG wait for everyone's luggage, they got to the decent hotel they were meant to live in, and went to unpack.

Riona and Mishone's room, 502, was right in front of the elevator on the fifth floor.

The whole floor, except for one room in the corner, belonged to the team.

The rooms were fairly sized and basic with two medium sized beds, two dresser tables, a TV, a radio and one bathroom. There was a gap between the two beds where a small drawer was fitted with the telephone on top.

Mishone, somehow still sleepy, even though he slept throughout the plane ride, threw his bags on the floor and claimed his bed by crashing into the right one.

"Pig." Riona commented.

He responded by snoring extra loudly.

Realizing that it was no point making faces at his back, Rio threw her bags on the bed and went to the bathroom to freshen up.

She came back out, unpacked and then decided to go see what the rest of the team were doing.

Rio walked out of the room, still a bit hazy from the travel, and suddenly felt the impact of someone's body smack straight into her own. The person had knocked her right down to the cushy concrete and had landed on top of her.

"Blasted! Oh, for Goads sake! Sorry love." The guy immediately got off of her and apologized in a really strong British accent and seemed to be in a huge hurry. From the few seconds that she got a glimpse of his face, Rio could tell that he was around her age.

"Oh, that's all right! I love being reduced to a *floor* mat!" She called out, shocked that he was about to run off, leaving her on the floor that way. He quickly flung her back on her feet, barely even looking, and then continued whatever journey he was on.

"Gravity still works! You don't have to throw people down to check!" Rio yelled after him.

Jerk. Well, looks like leaving the room wasn't a good idea. She thought to herself Rio just stood in the hallway for a few minutes, dusting herself off and wandering what to do when the coach came out of the elevator with a stack of papers in his hand.

"Ahh Riona, I see you've found the *outside* of your room. Glad you've made yourself at home. Now be useful and give one set of papers to each of your teammates. Tell them to try to read it." The coach seemed pretty worn out too.

"Mmm, sure Coach." She replied, glad of someplace to go.

Strangely enough, none of them were in any of the rooms. She figured, starved as they were, only finishing *all* of the food on the plane, they'd gone to the dining hall. She put two copies in every room and then, her own copy in hand, went to look for the guys.

Sure enough, they were in the dining hall stuffing their faces with so much food, you'd think there'd been a famine for years. Rio dumped some fries on a plate, and sat down between Jerricho and Jake.

"You guys, is it just me or do these fries look gross?" Rio asked.

"Nope." Jerricho mumbled, already digging into her plate.

"Jerr, do you even taste the food? The main purpose isn't to just swallow you know."

Rio laughed.

"I have a rep to keep up with. You see, I'm known as the fastest guy... in everything. Running, I'm fast. B-Balling, oh-super fast, talking-pretty fast and eating-well, you get it. They call me speedy." He quickly replied.

“Yeah, the only part that needs to catch up is yo’ brain. That old thing has its own rep.” Rio teased.

“Whachu mean? How can my brain have its own...?” He asked, genuinely confused.

While everyone else laughed, Marcus tried to explain but Jerricho was too engrossed in his food. Having polished off Rio's plate, Jerricho took advantage of Roobin's laughing distraction and started scarfing down his food too.

"Hey! We brothers have to stick up for each other man! You can't eat your own brothers food!" Roobin told Jerricho in his ‘wanna-be-black’ voice.

Jerricho was African-American, Anslo Ferneil was a dark skinned Indian, Marcus was Jamaican and Jellio Maceo was from Africa, so Roobin automatically referred to them as his brothers.

"Furst of all. It's bro. Just bro. Not "brothers". And thirdly, you the whitest person hya!" Marcus exclaimed while the others just cracked up.

"I'm black on the inside yo! You white people, I swear! Just don't understand."

"Oh, get outta here." Anslo, laughed and shook his head.

“Yo, what is that?” Roobin pointed at Rio's copy of the papers.

“Oh yeah, I put your copies on your bed. It’s our schedule. Days of matches, calendar, practice sessions, special dinners, blah blah.” She read. “Can you believe we’re actually getting a celebrity promoter? Who do you think it’s going to be?”

“I don’t know. All I know is, whoever it is, better promote our team well. Better than anyone else’s team.” Jellio said.

“Myph! I gno-who’o shit.” That was Jerricho again, trying to talk with, what seemed like, a whole turkey in his mouth. Everyone turned to look at him questioningly.

“So, who is it?” Roobin asked.

"Damn, Roobin understands stuffed pig language." Anslo whispered.

“*Gasp!* Jerricho! You? Know something? You can’t drop something like that on us so suddenly!” Rio teased.

“Ygou Gnow," He took a big gulp of water and continued, "what? Just for that comment, I aint gonna to tell you which singer he is.” Challenged Jerricho, extremely happy with himself for not revealing anything.

"Someone should capture this rare moment in history." Rio continued ragging on him.

“No way!”

“We’re getting a singer?”

“Whoa!”

"Hahaha, Rio shut up!" Anslo laughed.

“Jerr, who is it?”

“Tell us!”

Everyone started questioning at once.

“Okay, okay,” Jerricho grinned, completely milking in the attention.

“We are getting...” He paused for dramatic effect.

“CJ Mike!”

“All RIGHT!” Roobin screamed with his fist in the air, as if he had just won the championship trophy.

C.J Mike was a very popular singer, and Roobin's ultimate favorite person in he world.

"What? He's a brother!" He tried justifying to the rest of the team as they just stared at him.

An hour later, the still sleepy Mishone and the coach came in to announce that tomorrow was going to be a jet lag recovery day.

"The *only* resting day. From day after, the schedule is going to be very hectic. You're just going to get breaks to eat food, and then it's back to practice. So use tomorrow well." Coach announced.

"So whachu wanna do tomorrow guys?" Jake asked.

"Sleep." Mishone yawned.

"Eat!"

"Practice our drills obviously!" Mike said, shocked that the rest would even consider anything else.

"Nothing?"

"Movies!" Jellio was a complete movie buff.

Came the various responses.

"Wait, isn't CJ Mike supposed to come tomorrow morning?" Rio reminded, secretly dying to meet him too.

"Yaaaaa!" An over enthusiastic Roobin perked up, "We should all wake up early to welcome him!"

“WHAT? Wait, what’s this nonsense about waking up? I was asking about the evening!” Jake quickly put in.

“I tell you whad Roobin,” Marcus snickered, “Why don’t you just sleep at the entrance? Then you wouldn’t miss a second of ZeeJ.”

“Yeee, if you’re lucky, he might even step ON you to get around!” Rio laughed.

"Please! He would not do that to a brother like me." Roobin whined, unconsciously pointing a knife at Rio.

"Whoa, whoa! Roobin, yo! Get that knife away from me, man." Rio said, instantly leaning back and looking away.

"Oh, sorry. It won’t touch you. I can’t even reach you from here anyway!"

"Roobin, haven't you noticed Rio's fear for knives? She even eats with a fork and a *spoon* instead." Jake added to lighten up the mood.

"Ha. Ha. Very funny." Rio smiled dismissively.

Half an hour later, a waiter with the name ‘Troyyolla Sperk’ flashing boldly on his name tag, kindly asked them to ‘get lost’ so that they could clear the table.

Together the team took the stairs up, but halfway there, Rio realized that she had left her papers downstairs. To her, and their pal Troyyolla's irritation, she went back into the dining hall, grabbed the papers and sped up to catch the team.

Just as Rio reached the top of her floor, out of nowhere, she ran into something strong, warm and, later realized, quite humanly.

Although she didn't really feel herself falling backwards she knew it was happening. No matter what people say, it didn't happen in slow motion. It's just that the brain takes a few seconds to process what was going down. (In this case, Rio was.)

One minute she was falling and about to crack her head open, and in the next, someone had grabbed her by her hand and held her in place.

In her, fortunately still intact, head she could just see how this looked. Riona, hand in hand with a stranger's, almost parallel to the floor, only her toes at the tip of the staircase...

Not knowing how strong the guy was, Rio tried to grab the banister with her free hand but he seemed to manage easily and pulled her vertical so that she was staring straight into a big pair of anxious, light-butterscotch eyes. Even in her dissociative state, she recognized... the gravity-testing dude.

'Looks like he wins round two.' Rio thought to herself bitterly.

While she tried to get her head to stop spinning she couldn't help but notice that he was quite good looking with thick light brown hair carelessly pushed to the side, full lips and soft features giving him a perfectly cute, boyish look. He opened his mouth to apologize but wisely shut it at Rio's '*zip it*' gesture. Wide-eyed, he stared at her anxiously, waiting for her reaction.

Gathering her thoughts, she decided to just get out of his way before he knocked her out again. So, to his immense curiosity, Rio held her head high, and stomped off, muttering under her breath.

She headed straight to her room to find the whole team (apart from Victore) crashed out there. According to them, room 502 had the biggest TV and the most space. She shuffled over to her bed where Jake had nicely made himself comfortable.

“You that slow with the stairs?” He inquired.

“Shut up”. Rio knew he'd laugh, but still explained both encounters with her ‘gravity dude’. She was right. He laughed, “Can’t you see where you're going?”

She playfully hit him on the shoulder and turned to watch the movie.

Chapter 2.

Knock, Knock, Knock! A loud banging at their door woke Rio up. She was on the floor between the two beds, all sweaty and pale from one of the longest nightmares she'd ever had.

Mishone, already dressed in casual clothes, went to the door to let Jerricho, Mike and Roobin in. The first two were generally early risers, which was sure to get annoying, and Roobin... was just too excited.

One look at Rio was enough for Jerricho and Roobin to burst into laughter.

"That chick is all over the place!" Roobin laughed.

Mike on the other hand, was subtler, and came over to her, controlling a smile.

“How are you sweating here? It’s February and still so cold.” Mike innocently asked- her basketball pillow in his hand. Before she could justify herself, Mishone coughed, “Ahem, Ahem! I AM in the room. My hotness spreads. Get your head out of the gutter, Riona.”

Rio grabbed the pillow from Mike's hand and threw it at Mishone. Dodging the rebuttal, she got up, grabbed a change and took refuge in the bathroom.

“YOW!” She’d forgotten about the full sized mirror in the bathroom and almost ran out at her reflection. Her nightmares did not help her looks one bit. She took a quick shower, brushed her teeth, changed into a pair of comfortable navy blue shorts and a loose black T-shirt, and was then ready to face the battlefield. But when she came out, her room was empty.

“A truce it is.” She mumbled. Rio took this alone time to analyze herself in the mirror. For a brief second she contemplated dabbing some lip-gloss on her naturally tainted pink lips, but then decided it wasn't worth the effort. Knowing the guys, they would be all up in her face wanting to know whom she was trying to impress.

Rio slipped on her black converse shoes, put in her blue lenses and then struggled to tame her thick long hair into some sort of hairstyle. Losing patience, she tied it into a side ponytail and threw on the cap that she stole from Jake.

Eventually she gave up trying to tuck the many loose strands of curls away and tilted her cap slightly to the right.

"Good enough." She sighed to herself.

Rio walked out of her room to see Anslo gesturing for her to come over quickly.

Roobin, Jellio, Mike, Jerricho, Marcus and Anslo were all outside Jake’s room peeping through the door that was open just a fraction.

“Whacchu guys up to?” she asked suspiciously.

“Rio, you're the only one that can do this!” Jellio said, jerking his head towards Jake.

“What, think? I know- Oh my god, you’ve got to be joking!” Rio instantly understood that they wanted her to wake Jake up... early.

Now, she had woken Jake up before, many times in fact, but only by text or technological presence. She’d eventually receive a reply (after hours of him cooling down, she presumed) saying that he was going to kill her for waking him up. Usually it wouldn’t happen because by the next time they’d hang out, he’d forget about it. However, now that she lived close enough for him not to forget, it was a whole different game.

“Why me?” she hissed.

“You’re a girl.” Replied Mike, shrugging his shoulders as if it was the most obvious answer in the world.

“So is Roobin, but I don’t see HER being thrown into the fire!”

"Hey, I'm a MAN! A deadly brother! Imma cut you!" Roobin defended.

“Anyway.” Anslo turned away from Roobin to look at Rio.

"What about the cheerleaders? Haven't they got here by now?" Rio remembered.

Every team had their own cheerleaders from their school. They had taken the hotel floor below and had a separate itinerary to the teams.

- Madaleen Fernsburg, a.k.a-M`y. She was the sweetest girl on their squad. She was Rio’s confidante and they told each other everything.

Cherry Fruit- Shy, reserved but polite and pretty. Auburn hair, simple face and green eyes. Been dating Anslo for long now.

- Bebop Chua- Kind of silly. Dark blonde hair with brown highlights. Grey sparkling eyes. Stunning face and figure. Openly been chasing Jake for quite some time now...and even after many easy let downs, NEVER gives up. Turns her nose up to most of the other guys on the team but is extra nice to Rio.

- Jennica Lollifos- Calls herself Jlo. Captain of the team. Thin, blond hair, blue eyes and a skinny body. Openly flirts with the oblivious Mike all the time. Secretly hides a heart of gold behind her attitude.

- Aiden Smith- Pale white skin, butterscotch eyes with copper colored hair. She was new to the team and no one really knew her. She was extremely intelligent and was starting up university early so she was only here for the first half of the tournament.

- Flora Margerie Shred- She's extremely gullible and pretty slow. Ironically, has red hair and dark blue eyes. A weird combination, but it works.

- Sue 'The Cop' Sui- Bossy. Bullies everyone in her squad. The 'boss' of the team but Sue can surprise you at times by being really nice. She's also extremely fair when it came to resolving issues.

- Allesta Shree- No one really knew her that well. She mostly kept to herself and stayed out of the politics. She has very soft, simple features that form a very pretty face. Pale skin, straight black hair, black eyes.

- Tina Permer-The classic rich spoilt girl who occasionally got carried away while bragging about her wealth and beauty. It got annoying, but she WAS nice at heart and truly pretty with her coffee complexion and gorgeous face.

- Shine shine-She too was blonde and silly. She usually didn't think for herself and was just a blind follower. She also got picked on a lot.

- Dina Mari- The tattler and the whiner. She's always sulking and pulling the mood down. But, when the squad needs some cheer spirit, she's the most enthusiastic. She had dark skin, brown hair and brown eyes.

- Coach Seleni-So bubbly all the time and very funny. Manages to tolerate all the fights and is loved by all.

"Whoa! Don't be getting Cherry into this!" Anslo exclaimed.

"What? Anslo, contrary to what you believe, Cherry isn't the only girl on the cheerleading squad." Rio replied, shaking her head.

"Please! Who's gonna walk all the way there and get em?" said Jellio, in between a series of coughs.

"I'll walk there!" Jerricho offered over-enthusiastically.

"Yeah, and I'll make sure Jerricho doesn't lose his way." Marcus volunteered.

"Riona, fellow roommate and fair civilian! Just charge in and take one for the team, bro." Mishone said, while patting her on her back.

"What? Dude... shut up. Hold on, I'll be right back."

And so, with a cunning plan already formed, Rio set off to conveniently find Jakes worst nightmare: Bebop Chua.

After quickly making up a very inventive story about Jake mumbling Bebop's name in his sleep, Rio had to run to keep up with Bebop's sprint to Jakes room. Bebop's complete obsession with Jake was common knowledge to everyone. The guys sniggered when they saw whom Rio had brought up and all watched from the doorway as Bebop bounded up to Jakes bed. He was sprawled across the bed face up with the blanket covering only a fourth of his bare muscled chest. Bebop, never having seen him like this before, blushed and giggled as she reached over to touch his (bare) arm and then, to every ones shock, she started singing!

“Rock a bye Jakeyboo on the bed top,
When the wind blows,
My Jakeyboo will freeze,
When the bough breaks,
I'll be right there,
Right there with Jakeyboo to cuddle and please!!!!”

The grins on their faces instantly got wiped away and were replaced with wide eyes and open mouths...

"What is dat!?" Marcus stared at her, in open-mouthed wonder.

"I like it." Mishone snickered.

Her voice kept rising with each note and she was NO Madonna...

Then... It struck home. "Jakeyboos" eyes shot open the same time he bolted upright into a sitting position.

"AaaaHH YIYI! Bebop! What're you doing!?!...Here?!" He asked with his face scrunched up into a freaked out look, much similar to the one they all had on earlier. "And were you just...SINGING?" he demanded in the same confused tone.

They couldn't take it anymore. The rest of them immediately started howling with laughter. Bebop's evil glare at them, as if they had just interrupted a romantic conversation, only made them tear up on the floor harder...

In between the tears, Rio surveyed Jakes reaction to see how much trouble she was in. He was still going through mixed emotions and, at something Bebop said, scrambled to pull up his quilt all the way to his neck.

"That was some funny shit." Marcus said as he left the room... more like rolled out. Feeling a bit bad for him, Rio forced herself to get off the floor. She grabbed a shirt from the top of J's suitcase, threw it around his neck and sat down on the bed next to him. He quickly slipped his arms into the sleeves and shot Rio a grateful look. Still grinning, she winked at him and tilted her head towards Bebop. Feeling more comfortable fully clothed, Jake again asked her what she'd been doing.

"I came to make your dreams come true, silly! Don't think I don't know that you dream about me, so I thought I'd make your day *FANTABULOUS* by being the first person you saw. Oooh, did you like the song, Jakeyboo? I made it up all by myself." Bebop seemed so pleased with herself.

But Jakeyboo's face was priceless. It was twitched in horror and he looked like he was grasping for words. His brain generally worked slowly when he woke up, but this morning, he was blank.

Feeling responsible for Jakes sorry (and funny) situation, Rio casually threw in, “Oh snap! I forgot to tell you, Bebop, when you were SPRINTING over here, The CHOP (Sue) told me to tell you to get back ASAP. She seemed impatient.” With a panicked look, Bebop ran out.

Purposely avoiding Jakes eyes, Rio looked at Jerricho instead, who was crawling his way out of the room, joyfully crying. He probably just got the joke. The rest had just left him there before they got into trouble with Jake, and so, Rio had no one to converse with, so as to avoid Jake's wrath.

“Okaaay then,” she made a popping sound with her mouth, “I’ll just go see where Mikes gone to.” Rio tried to make a quick escape.

“Rio.” It was a quiet, but firm call. She turned to face him with her best ‘I’m innocent’ look.

“Yeah?” she asked brightly and (she hoped) innocently.

“Oh don’t give me that look! Bebop? Really?! Now her voice is going to be haunting my mind the whole day! And it’s-” he grabbed her wrist to look at her watch, “It's ten o’clock! In the morning!”

“But- but Jakeyboo...”

“What?!” he demanded, flinching at his newfound nickname.

Rio was trying to keep a straight face as she said, "I thought the song was quite... creative. Didn't you?" Before he could lash out, she continued, "By the way, what did she say that had you ducking under your covers?"

"Oh My GOD, yeah!! You noticed that? She was like 'I didn't know your chest was so perfect, my name would fit perfectly if you tattooed it across, and I love your PJs'... WTF? I swear Rio, that chick ain't normal." He said shaking his head.

In between her giggles that had openly escaped, she said, "I knew she wasn't the first time she declared he love for YOU!"

Jake smiled reluctantly, "Hey, I'm irresistible!"

"And modest." Rio sarcastically added.

"And modest." He agreed.

Rolling her eyes she told him to hurry up and get ready for break fast. She plopped onto his bed and suddenly, Jake, right into her ear, whispered, "FYI, the next time you plan to set Bebop on to me, just remember, you'll be waking up to your lover, Victore."

"Aww man, way to kill the mood J."

For some reason, apparently beyond Rio's understating, the guys had taken to teasing her with Victore. Behind his back, of course. Even though the two of them barely exchanged a few words, Jake just had to tease her with Victore once for the wild rumors to start and from then, it had just caught on.

"Ohhhh, have you met Aiden? Like, did you talk to her?" He asked from the bathroom while brushing his teeth.

"The new cheerleader? Yeah... you haven't?"

"I didn't even know she was in our school. No, I spoke to her. Love her, so chill."

"Yeah, she just recently transferred. She's leaving midway through the tournament though. I heard she's starting university early."

"Huh."

"That's it? Huh?"

"Shut up. I'm brushing." With that he closed the bathroom door.

Rio knew something was up, but didn't bother to press on. Jake would tell her in his own time. Jake took his time getting ready, going as slow as he possibly could just to frustrate Rio. When they finally made it to the dining hall, there were fifteen minutes left before the buffet finished. Even within those fifteen minutes, it was a wonder how much food Jake could scarf down.

Coach Carl came up to them, looked around at the cluster of clean licked plates, and didn't look surprised. "Okay, I want none of you entering the court today," he was going to continue but didn't bother when he got a chorus of:

"Sure coach."

"Cool."

"We weren't going anyway."

"What!? What am I going to do the WHOLE day?!"

"It's fine Coach, we'll keep Mike busy."

Throwing them an infamous 'Oh God, why am I stuck with these idiots?' look, Coach gave up and ambled off.

It was funny to see their blubbering, sorry faces when some went back for (lost count of how many) more servings and discovered that the food had been taken away.

Roobin kept glancing towards the entrance, and at around the 50th time, he finally saw four dark suited huge bodyguards.

As soon as they walked in, everyone in the dining hall, even the chatty cheerleaders, automatically became silent and turned to look at them. Expecting to see CJ, they were all surprised when the bodyguards stepped aside and in walked- Justin Chase.

Although he was the one of the more popular uprising super stars, Justin had the tendency of getting the worst publicity. Like a volcano eruption, the dining hall blew up as everyone stepped over each other to breathe in the same air as the young pop star. Rio, Jake, Roobin and Victore stayed rooted to their seats.

They weren't going anywhere. After about a minute, however, Roobin's resolve faltered and the weak betrayer jumped up to join the noisy crowd. So much for team togetherness. Rio thought. Rio looked over, but Victore didn't seem like he was getting up for anyone, and as for her and Jake, their famous comedy act was imitating male Justin's exaggerated baby-ish voice.

"Lets get out of here" Jake mouthed, and just as they were about to make a run for it, one of the body guards announced, "Everybody involved in the...uh basketball tournament please Wait HERE. The rest, please clear out NOW."

"This can't be good." Anslo voiced Rio and Jakes thought. He hadn't been so crazy about Justin either. Like a brave troop, Anslo had just gone to hold Cherry back from getting trampled.

“Even though CJ was supposed to be your celebrity, he called on Justin to take over for him,” The grumpy bodyguard continued.

“Until when?” Victore growled. Wow, looks like even he was worked up about this... deep down.

“He is now your promoter for the whole time period. CJ sends his apologies.” He replied, unruffled by Victore's aggressive tone.

The majority of the teams' groans were unheard over the roar of cheer by the squad. Most of the team, unimpressed, turned towards each other and started talking. Roobin on the other hand, looked slightly horrified by the replacement.

“That's all we needed,” Jake wasn't having a good day.

“Tell me about it! Justin? Really? They do know we want to get good publicity right?” Rio continued, completely unaware that Justin was in listening range.

“And you think I'd give bad publicity, girl?” The smooth voice behind her countered.

"Oh snap." She murmured under her breath.

She turned around and, looking straight into his eyes with a steely glare replied, “Oh NO! Absolutely not! I just say things like this for FUN! You must simply do WONDERS with all the GREAT publicity you have! From one crazy rumor stating

you to be a dog in disguise to another saying you have your mom secretly singing for you behind the curtains, it's been quite an achievement according to me.”

There were a few snickers (by the amused team) and a few gasps (obviously the cheerleaders). Justin, not used to listening to such unique ‘praise’ about himself, was taken aback by Rio's directness, but recovered in a quick second.

“Well, looks like that hasn’t stopped my records from being number one on the charts, sweetie.” Came his cutting reply.

Rio gave him her sweetest smile and returned, “Just goes to show that bribery goes a long way now days, huh?”

"You- you don't know anything about me. But you? Shouldn't you be in the kitchen somewhere?"

"Say wha-?" Not being in complete control of herself anymore, Rio lunged towards Justin, going for his throat, but Victore grabbed her by the waist and held her in place. In a second, Justin’s manager, Tony, was by his side pulling the pop star away.

"Shouldn't YOU- "

"Justin, since all your fans are indeed females, I suggest you don't go on insulting their kind. And stop chasing the only one that isn't following you around." Victore interceded, quickly cutting Rio off.

Jake quickly carted Riona away to prevent the humiliation. It was only Justin's first 5 minutes and so Jake felt he had to spare him... this time. He knew that once Rio started, it took a whole army to stop her.

Rio was still annoyed. She didn't really know why she had snapped at Justin. She certainly didn't plan to, but she couldn't have backed down. She did regret lashing out now, as she remembered Justin's stunned look. Add to that, the uncomfortable, disapproving looks Jake was giving her wasn't helping her conscience. Rio was just glad Jake hadn't said anything yet, and that was the thing she loved best about him. He knew how to deal with Rio at all her various moods. They walked in silence, automatically heading towards the indoor court.

Forgetting that the coach warned them not to come in, Jake knew that a game of basketball always sorted Rio's mood out. She seemed calmer already and so, being brave he tried, "So, 'sweetie', looks like you've made a new friend... or fan I should say." Looking at Jake's cautious face made her want to smile... just a bit. Noticing her struggle to stay angry, he took advantage and continued, "Actually, I wasn't talking about Justin, although it applies for him too. I just happened to notice the look of admiration and awe Victore was giving you."

"Such! An ass!" Rio laughed. They were outside the gym when their hearing instantly tuned in to the sounds of many balls bouncing, along with Coach Carl's commanding voice. They peeked around the locker rooms and from the small window and saw a bunch of guys they didn't know, trying out for basketball, with THEIR Coach. Not wanting to be seen, they crept away, hunching down while slowly walking backwards... Very Ninja-ly.

Rio however, with her amazing luck, walked right into... Gravity dude.

Now, further away from the gym, she straightened up to give him the full effect of her exasperated glare. "Of course! Why did I even bother to look at who it was? This day just keeps getting better and better by the minute!"

"Oh my word. My apologies! I assure you, aye had no idea that this was the crawlers lane. Absolutely none!" He replied, a very amused expression on his face.

"GREAT. Well, now you know."

Still a bit tantrum-y, Rio rolled her eyes and started walking away while Jake, all of a sudden his day looking much brighter, stayed back to talk to him.

Deciding to take a walk to get out of her 'irritated' zone, she started heading out, and saw Victore, going in the same direction.

"Hey... Thanks for umm, backing me up in there." Rio said awkwardly.

"Get over yourself. That wasn't an -I got your back- thing." Without even glancing at her open mouthed, shocked look, Victore rudely walked out of the hotel doors.

A second later, Rio recovered and, now even more irritated, she huffed off in the opposite direction.

It took her a while, but eventually, the beautiful scenery and the surprisingly clear pale sky did her good as she managed to cool off and get into a better mood...

The rest of the day went by in complete laziness considering they were an official basketball team. While they were all watching TV in Rio and Mishone's room at night, Jake remembered, "By the way Rii, I found out what the coach was up to in the court today."

"Mmmm really? How?" She mumbled sleepily. They were lying down on their stomachs on Rio's bed and Riona, basically had her head in her hands as an attempt to keep it (her head) up and not snooze.

"Your gravity guy-"

Rio quickly interrupted, "Ugh, Jake! Not another one. I don't w..." And just like that, mid sentence she was out.

Inwardly laughing at the shock she was going to get tomorrow, Jake detached her hands and quickly slipped a pillow under her head. He tried to make her extra comfortable because he knew that she could never sleep well. He was the only one that she told details about her nightmares to. He got the chills just thinking of it...

β She was running, her basketball jersey was soaked in the child's blood. A small boy of 10 years old. He had protected her. And now, she was running. She hit something hard and fell. Someone's breath was on her face. She could feel it. Rio was now in a box. They were keeping her in a small casket type box. But she wasn't dead. She was suffocating. It was dark. The boy! The boy was suddenly next to her telling her not to worry. He yanked her favorite necklace off her neck and used the sharp part of it to

carve a hole in the coffin. Just like before, he was there, finding a way to save her.

Suddenly, the coffin door opened and- β

“Rio!!!” Mishone had finally managed to shake her awake. But she still couldn’t focus. She was miles away.

“I-I’m sorry, but you were screaming and-and you fell so hard! I didn’t know w-what to do.” He seemed terrified.

She looked around and realized that she was on the floor between the two beds, sweating and breathing heavily. She focused in on Mishone’s face and then looked at her watch.

2:17 am.

“I’m so sorry Mishone. Umm...You couldn’t sleep because of me.” Rio was trembling at how real the nightmare was.

She assumed that she must have fallen on her hand because there was a throbbing pain above her wrist on her presumed birthmark. It was a weird shape that looked like four tanned fingers holding her wrist with the little finger bent outwards.

While Rio was occupied with staring at her hand, Mishone was still giving her a look that should only be reserved for mental retards.

“Go to sleep, I won’t wake you up again.” She assured him.

She knew she wouldn't be able to sleep anymore anyway, being blessed with five hours in the first place. The silence in the room allowed her thoughts go back to the little boy. Since she was too chicken to just sit in the darkness on her own while Mishone slept, Rio decided to go out and walk around.

Digging out her iPod, she plugged it in, washed her face and, without a plan, walked into the dimly lit, yellow corridor. She immediately regretted her decision because nothing was worse than the shadows. The loud music blaring into her ears didn't really help either. It wasn't a distraction enough and she could still think...about things...that might jump out of the shadows and she really didn't want to.

She needed someone to talk to, about something... anything to distract her. Suddenly, Victore appeared in front of her out of thin air. The loud music had drowned out any sounds of footsteps or the door and Rio jumped out of her skin when he was suddenly in her face.

'Talk about a quick delivery.' She thought.

"Victore!" She screamed a bit too loudly, trying to hear herself over the music.

"SSSHHHHSSH!!" he automatically reached over to cover her mouth, but at the last minute, he checked himself and dropped his hands. She pressed the pause button on her iPod and yanked out the earplugs before she looked at him. He was a mess too, but she couldn't help wondering how he still managed to look so good... much better than her messy state at least. His clothes were crumpled as if he had just thrown on his hoodie and sweats. His hair was ruffled and sticking out at various angles and there were dark circles masking his eyes- Eyes that were peering into hers with such fierceness, she couldn't look away. His eyes were tired but they seemed to be screaming something at her. She felt a slight shiver ripple through her body.

Victore, look away, she silently willed and, after about a minute, he did. Glancing down at her right (birth marked) hand holding her iPod, he gave her one last beseeching look and disappeared into the shadows.

Ψ§ She almost saw me! She was looking in my direction and almost saw ME. Thank god Victore's freakiness distracted her. I can't let her see me. Can't let her know I'M watching. What's happened to me? I never thought being with her after all these years would affect me this way. I must NOT get involved. § He frantically thought as he watched her from a corner. § The consequences are too disastrous. Especially now, when she's become even more gorgeous, her personality even more amazing, her smile even mo-NO! Stop! As soon as she leaves, I'll go. Till then, I'll keep an eye on her... For her safety. § He tried to reassure himself. § Thank God for Victore. He stops her from finding out... He distracts her without realizing it. § Ψ

“What just happened?” Rio asked herself. She'd never seen Victore look like that, straight into her eyes. Who did he remind her off? She stood still for a minute trying to think of whom he resembled, but came up blank.

Shaking it off, she took the elevator down and went to the common room.

Immediately switching on all the lights and the TV, she settled down on the long couch, and started surfing channels...

Mishone woke up to the sound of the TV. Quite sure he had switched it off, Mishone turned to look at Rio, but saw Jerricho and Mike having a tug of war for the remote instead.

“Shoo ya akhy?! What in the hell are you two doing here?” Mishone said slipping into the little Arabic that he knew although he wasn’t really as surprised as he should’ve been to see them here. They were bound to find a way to get into the room on their own by now.

“Yo, Miso, where’s Riona?” Mike, having lost the battle, asked.

Double-checking the floor, Mishone yawned and shrugged “Bathroom?”

“Nope, not there. What’d you do with her bro?” Mike wondered.

“Shipped her off back home! What the hell d’you think? I keep a friggin’ GPS on her or what?” Mishone snapped.

"Not, much of a morning person?" Mike observed.

Right then Anslo walked in, looked around and asked, “Sup guys, Mishone, where's Rio? Oh, and have you seen Cherry? Can't find either of em.”

“Yeah, Mishone,” Jerricho, thoroughly enjoying himself, asked. “Where IS Rio?”

“Screw you guys.” Mishone stomped off to the bathroom.

"I don't get it." Said Anslo, not involved in the joke. "Whatever, I'm going to go check with Jake."

Just as they were on their way to the dining hall, Victore called out, "Jake. I found her."

"Who? Cherry?" Anslo asked eagerly.

"No. But I do know that Cherry's in the dining hall." Victore informed him.

Jake walked into the common room to find Riona curled up on the couch with her iPod, still playing, loosely held in her hands. Some cartoon was dancing around on TV, but Rio was fast asleep.

"I don't think you should wake her up for breakfast. She didn't sleep well last night." Victore voiced.

"Mmm, I'm not sure- wait how'd you know she didn't sleep well?" Jake asked suspiciously. But before he could reply, Justin made the decision for them.

He sauntered in screaming, "Hey, I LOVE this show!!" turned the volume up to ear blasting level and, aware or not, jumped onto the same couch Rio was on, making it shudder. Startled, Rio's eyes snapped open and saw Justin studiously ignoring her and stupidly grinning at some fugly half dinosaur half girl on the screen.

"Jake!" Rio screamed, still staring at Justin, wide-eyed.

She hadn't seen him at the door yet but just knew he'd planned this. She turned around and saw him... with Victore.

"Joy. Revenge times two." She mumbled.

Just before she got mesmerized in Victore's eyes again, she tore her gaze away and moved on to glare at Jake.

"Ohhh you complete ass! Jake, you said the *next* time I set Bebop on you, and then you do this?!"

"What are you saying?" He asked, confused, but then Rio saw the change in Jake's face as he realized how funny the situation.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Victore staring at her with a small smile on his face. Jake was now pointing at her with uncontrollable laughter and blubbing, "I didn't even know! And-and then, hahahahaha you- whoohahah!" Looking at Jake, Rio couldn't help but to smile.

"NOOO!!! DORNEY, forget KEN, he's NOT RICH!!!" Justin exploded, getting on his knees and clawing his face.

"Looks like Mishone has *'weird freak'* competition." Rio commented, nodding towards Justin as she walked out the door and headed for the stairs.

Even Victore gave a small genuine smile for that one.

As for Rio and Jake, their day started in complete laughter...

Later in Rio's room, Jake constantly harassed her while she was getting ready, complaining, right outside her bathroom door, about how he missed breakfast yesterday. They reached downstairs just in time for the Coach's announcement-

'Whoa, wait a minute, what is gravity dude doing at our table?' Rio thought, scowling over at the guy who'd made himself comfortable right in the centre seat.

"All right you lazy lumps, while you all were so busy doing *squat* yesterday, I took the opportunity to recruit our eleventh teammate. You- "

"BummBOclatt, Cooach, WAD we need A-NUder player fow' MUN? Reasclattin we good wid aar original theme-" Marcus often broke out into this strange rant where he spoke really quickly with a very heavy Jamaican accent. It never failed to amuse the team to hear him talk like that because no one completely got what he was saying.

"Ya, M-AAN, Fow' whad??" Roobin tried to mimic.

"We were actually supposed to be twelve of us but with Baberaham and Gleher in the other league, we fell short."

“Whoa, Coach...” Everyone started blabbering at once.

“Hey, shut up, the lot of ye’. S’not like I picked up some trash off the road! Mason is a very good player. Now, get along. Practice starts in an hour.” Looking at their overflowing plates, he added, “And a half.”

To Rio’s dismay, in the one hour of breakfast Mason, demonstrating his extensive knowledge about basketball and all the other hobbies that the team was interested in, had managed to get on every ones good side. He proved to be extremely polite, funny and smart.

Rio, however, put on a good act of not getting sucked up into his ‘magic’ and had a sour expression plastered on her face the entire time.

She saw Victore get up and walk towards the gym and, because she had a few questions of her own, she decided to follow him. Feeling the need to make small conversation first, Rio asked, “So, what do you think of the uhh, new ‘new’ guy?”

He turned his head sideways to look at her and she slowly moved her eyes to look straight ahead, away from him.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him shrug.

“You like him.” He couldn’t resist adding.

“I didn’t ask you what I thought of- Well, I-not really- I just.” She stuttered trying to explain herself.

“I wasn't asking. I know. You're trying not like him, but you're failing. Miserably. You're trying to prove that you can't easily be swayed and that you're tough. That you don't trust people so easily. That way, others would be cautious and not fool around with you. They'd have no choice but to stay out of your business and you wouldn't have to get too close to them because it scares you... for some reason. That's why you wear different colored lenses everyday. You feel like it prevents people from looking into your real eyes and truly knowing you.” He stated. This made her look at him. He was right... to some extent, obviously, but she opened her mouth to prove him wrong, just the same.

He was quicker, “I can read your facial expressions and your light, green eyes... very easily. So easily, it's almost a joke.” Victore said, coming closer to her, piercing into her hazel eyes and stopping only inches from her face. “So the next time you plan to lie to me, you’ll remember this, right?”

Rio couldn’t answer. She had forgotten her whole argument and her face felt hot and her heart was pounding too loud, too fast. There was something about his eyes, something that brought up a flash of déjà vu.

‘Why do the simplest conversations become so... intense with him? Stupid know it all. Why'd he have to be so good looking, too? That certainly doesn't help things one bit! Now what was I going to say?’ She struggled to keep her mind in track.

Victore was still standing there, too close to her, when they heard Jake's voice a bit far off.

Rio, eyes still locked onto Victore's, turned her face to look at the place Jake was going to come from. But Victore, ignoring her hint, didn't move.

Cutting it quite close, Victore's smug smile disappeared and his face settled back into the hard mask he wore around. He stepped back, and left her with what she assumed was a warning, "Next time Rio."

'Shit, there's going to be a next time.' She didn't move. Something in her memory was trying to break out. 'What is it about him? A ghost? What? Seemed pretty real to me.'

A little too late she realized that Jake was talking to her.

"Sup whichoo? Seen a ghost?"

'Oh, so that's where the ghost idea came from.'

"Blimey. Aye reckon me arrival must 'ave given her the shivers." An amused Mason said, waving his hands in front of her face.

"Please! You're not *that* good... What does that even mean, anyway?" Snapped Rio, brought back to reality.

"Ahh, knew that would get you to come around... Mason Matthews", he grinned, politely holding out his hand to introduce himself.

"Yeah, I'm Rio." She said, turning the handshake into their basketball greeting five.

“Just Rio?” He asked, amused at her greeting.

“Yeah, just Rio. What, you want my whole address?”

“That would be nice.” Mason grinned.

“Hey J, what color are my eyes today? Did I not wear the colored lenses today?” Rio asked, ignoring Mason and looking at Jake wide eyed.

“It's uhhh- golden.” Jake concluded.

“How can-”

“He means light hazel... kind of like mine.” Mason smiled.

Rio scanned Mason’s eyes for a brief second to realize it was exactly the same color as his. “Ew”, she said and then turned away.

“So, youse the cheerleading head, init?” Mason asked, obviously unaffected by her hostility.

Rios face instantly fell into her ‘Say WHAT?’ look. She examined her uniform and couldn’t see how Mason didn’t realize that she was part of the team.

“Ooooh, just as she was starting to like you.” Jake sighed and patted Mason on the back.

“Do I **look** like head of *cheerleaders*?” Rio demanded, annoyed.

“Come over it, love. You didn’t make it to head, that’s awlright, buh aye reckon yer a swell cheerleader regardless of yer position.” He’d completely misinterpreted her reaction.

To Rio at this moment, he sounded like a complete prick with his British accent, acting all smug.

Deciding to give in she said, smiling sweetly, “Aww, *thank you!* Yes, I **am** pretty good at what I do. I’ll be in the gym, practicing my-‘*cheers*’. Coming, Jakeyboo?”

Grinning, Jake replied, “*Any*. Thing for you, *sweetie*.”

Mason, slightly confused over their exchange, shrugged it off and followed them into the court.

“So Rio, you like basketball, is it?” Mason tried to understand. Completely into character now, she made a disgusted face.

“No, but I’ll probably be good at it.”

Jake recognized the evil glint in her eye and, chuckling, he said, “Yeah, let’s see if you’re good at basketball. Rio, do a layup.”

“Umm okay,” She turned to give Mason a blank look, “What’s that?”

“Jake, you ol’ diff, don’ give her something ‘ard to do. ‘ere Rio,” Mason gently handed her the ball and led her to a little in front of the free throw line. “Now, ‘eres what youse wanna do, righ’. Just try shooting, it’s quite simple really.” Mason instructed. She felt a bit self-conscious as she realized Victore was sitting in the bleachers, watching her. He had never seen her shoot or play, as he too, was new to the team. Oh well. She took accurate aim, positioned herself perfectly and shot...an air ball. “*Ooops!*”

“Oh my god. You suck like hell Rio, outta my way.” Jake criticized, taking the ball from her hands and bumping her away. Jake took a half court shot and the rest of the team, along with the Coach, entered just in time to see it miss. The ball bounced off the rim and was heading to Rio's waiting arms when she heard a “Watch out!!!” and saw Mason practically flying to stop the ball from hitting the ‘*weak cheerleader*’.

“Ooooh what a hero! You saved her *life!*” Anslo gasped in fake amazement.

“You idiot!” Mishone said, tried to be funny... again. “I could've gotten my own room.”

“All right, get to the base line.” The coach growled.

“Me too, Coach?” Rio asked, for Masons benefit.

“What, you think you get special treatment? Once you step into my gym, you’re mine. Base line!”

For the entire warm up, Mason was giving Rio, ‘I'm sorry you're stuck in this mess’ looks. When the Coach started setting up teams to start a match, Mason asked,

“Coach, don’ you think Rio should be heading to the cheerleaders righ’ bout now?”

“What?!” Jerricho, the only one who didn’t catch on, demanded, “If she gets to go, then so do I!”

"Oh God." Rio sighed. There was a groan around him.

“No one is going anywhere! What is wrong with all of ye’? Sassy bunch a’ girls!”

Coach quickly acted. “Right, teams. Jake, Jellio, Mishone, Victore and Rio- you're team one. Anslo, you're sitting out for now. The rest, since I have to tell you, team two. Now move!”

Team one started the game and Rio purposely went to stand in Mason's zone of defense knowing he wouldn't cover her. Jellio brought the ball down and passed it to Jake, who had cut to the center. Double-teamed, Jake passed it to Rio who was completely free. She took a shot from the 45° at the three point line. It hit the board and sank into the net.

"Mason! Take your post! She doesn't bite... anymore." Coach insisted. Mason was still reeling in from the shock as his team ran in for offense. Before anyone could blink, Victore had snatched the ball off Roobin, passed it to Mishone, and while running past, Victore couldn't help but to mock Rio, "If only Mason could read you as well as I can."

"Oh, *yeah*, then we'd have two Victore's around. *What fun!* And you can't read me, so stop it!" she hissed. It was easier to snap back when she avoided his eyes.

Mason received a huge shock that game. He continued to leave Rio free to do her thing and got yelled at by pretty much everyone on his team. Eventually they switched players and Mike started guarding her instead. By then however, Rio's team was way ahead.

"Hit the showers ya' stinky mutts." That was Coach C's way of telling them that practice was over. Rio's team had won the game by 12 points and Mason came out of it utterly confused.

"Wha' in the bloody hell is goin' on? For the life of me, aye caunt understand it. Why can she shoot be'er than any of you guys?" Mason asked out loud inside the locker room.

Sniggering, Mishone said, “Yeah, Rio, what the hell was that? Why didn’t you get your rebounds?”

Rio, not having had any rebounds during the game, gave Mishone a ‘boy you’re *really* stupid’ look, winked at Mason, and left the locker room opting to shower in her room instead. Noticing Victore coming out of the locker room behind her, Rio sped up to avoid another eye locking ‘conversation’.

That’s pretty much how the next two weeks went.

Mason finally got over the shock of having a girl on the team.

The Coach got more relaxed as they settled into a routine and practiced harder each day. The team continued to have fun and joke around with each other.

Mike was all hardcore basketball now more than ever before, which was shocking as no one thought he could get more obsessed.

Victore... was just Victore, still a bit secluded and changing expressions only when passing random, frustrating comments to Rio... but had now started joining them in room 502 in the evenings, so improvements were being made.

The cheerleaders had also decided to hang out with the team more and now, Rio and Mishone's room was extremely crowded at any given time of day.

It turned out that Mishone only liked to act foolish with Rio. Ironically, he seemed pretty shy in front of the other girls. Rio found it extremely amusing and finally had one over Mishone.

Anslo and Cherry managed to find the perfect balance between their practices, friends and each other. They were still so cute together.

Bebop still hadn’t given up the chase, and Jake was seriously running out of ways to avoid her.

The chase continued, the fun and jokes continued, the weirdness continued and the nightmares... continued.