

Chapter 1: Not Such a Normal Day

Richie

People have always said I'm paranoid, but I promise I'm not and I can prove it. Walking through stores, staring outside my window, or even sitting in school, I always felt someone's eyes burning into the back of my head. The most insane part about it; the tall, dark man in a hoodie and jeans staring at me like he had a vendetta against my soul. I would always shrug off my anxiety only for it to return a few moments later. I used to love the outdoors. The warm breeze blowing against my face as I faced the deep blue ocean of the Florida coast. I still recall the golden sun burning my face as I did my homework in the lawn, calmly eating pretzels like there wasn't a care in the world, until I turned 16. I was a natural born athlete; always in my pool, playing tennis, or running. Being a Floridian, this was no surprise as everyone could swim, run, or play a sport, but there was something unnatural about it- no not unnatural, trained. Oops I almost forgot! Where are my manners! Hello, my name is Richie Forbes and I am the world's top teenage spy.

No one knows I'm a spy; not even my family. Only my team and the Organization know of my situation. It's hard to keep secrets, but it's even harder to keep them from your family, especially when you're living a double life. My secret life all began on my 16th birthday when I filled out an application. My family knew I always loved spies. Whether it was James Bond or the Cold War, I found spies so incredible. I researched the CIA and the FBI since I was a child. Black Widow was my favorite Marvel superhero and every Halloween I was either a ninja or a secret agent, but I never thought I would actually become one. For my 16th birthday, my parents got an application form for the CIA which I found funny. It was too good to be true, like one of those joke scratch off tickets from the gag shops. So, when I filled out the forms and mailed them to the address listed on the paper, I was most definitely not expecting an acceptance email from the CIA.

It was a bright and sunny Tuesday morning that changed my life forever. I woke up just as I did for any other school day, grabbing my usual t shirt and jeans, rushing upstairs to fix my messy caramel hair. I quickly ran to the kitchen to fix my bowl of Cheerios, where I was greeted by my incredibly annoying sister.

"Hey stupid, you ready yet? We have to go soon" she asked.

"Calm down Ri, let me eat before you start bugging me".

"Well hurry up, I'll be waiting in the car" she said as she casually walked out the door.

She left me alone, sitting at the glass dining table calmly chewing on my Cheerios. Mom, Dad, and Becky were all upstairs, getting ready for work and school. Just as I was about to leave, Becky came down the stairs in her elementary uniform and her sparkling bow that she wore every day.

"Bye Richie! See you later." She exclaimed with glee.

"Bye Bec, I'll see you as soon as I get home." I quickly yelled back.

"Don't be late like always! I need you to help me with homework!" she answered.

"Don't worry, I have nothing to do today so I'll be back right after school".

"Sure, you're always busy" she quietly answered back.

The amount of melancholy and sadness in her voice hurt but it was true, with school and friends, I was never home, and when I was, school took most of my time. I speedily closed the door before I had to hear anymore of Becky's sad retorts that definitely should not be coming from a small girl like Becky.

With my headphones in my ears and my music playing, I strode down the sidewalk, getting closer and closer to school. My normal route down Mulberry Street and Flamingo Road became the familiar palm trees and overpasses that I walked past every weekday for school. Just as I passed the corner that turned onto the street of West High, my phone buzzed inside my pocket. Expecting it to be Sydney or Alex texting me, I swiftly lifted my phone out of my pocket and stared down at the dim screen. The title read Urgent Acceptance for Richie Forbes. Puzzled I looked at the sender only for it to read CIA, Washington D. C. At this point I was thoroughly confused. Just as I was about to disregard that email and continue my stroll to school, I felt a light tap on my shoulder. I turned to see a tall and buff man smiling behind me.

"Hello" he said, "Would you mind coming with me sir".

All those times when my parents had told me about stranger danger and just walking away finally applied.

"I'm sorry, but I don't talk to strangers sir" I quickly replied, eager to get as far away from him as possible.

He looked like a business man in his suit and tie and neatly combed blond hair.

"Very funny Mr. Forbes but you're coming with me" he explained.

Faster than I expected, he grabbed my waist and lifted me towards the hidden black SUV parked in the alleyway I just passed. My instincts of self-defense took over, biting his arm, kicking him away from me, and sprinting desperately towards school where I knew I could find someone to help me. Suddenly my feet flew out from under me and I was face down on the pavement.

"Help!" I screamed but there was no one in sight.

Of course, the one time I need help there are no classmates around. Before I can flip myself over and prepare to fight Blondie again, I'm lifted sky high, over Blondie's

shoulder, and thrown into the trunk of the SUV. Panic sweeps over me as I take in my unfamiliar surroundings, blank white walls line the inside of the chamber. Along the back wall three separate seats stood with seat belts around the chest and straps around the armrest. There was no way I was sitting in that electrocution style chair. Laying in a corner, I found my escape tool, a screwdriver. I rushed over to it, gripping its slender blue and black handle. However, just as I had begun to punch holes in the wall with it, a white gas began pouring out of small holes in the walls. Just as I felt the wheels begin to move, I dropped to the cold floor, the words knockout gas ringing in the back of my skull. Trying my hardest to stay focused, but the floor grew softer and comfier. I felt my head unconsciously lull until it hit the ground, the sound of rotating tires putting me to sleep until I entered a deep, unconscious sleep as the SUV and Blondie drove further and further away from West High.

Page Break

Chapter 2: Meeting the Squad

Richie

The first thing that hit me was the bright light. It shined directly in my eyes, hanging from a small cord coming out of the ceiling just above where I sat tied down to a small wooden chair with my hands tied behind me and my legs restrained out in front of me. The second was the sound, completely quiet, with only my breathing resonating off the walls. Last was the smell, dank and moist like it had just rained, but that was impossible as we were inside. No, it didn't rain, it was hosed down, purposely wet to prevent my escape. I quickly scoured the room, a plan formulating in mind as I saw a large wooden door on a small ledge, high above me. It suddenly clicked what I had to do and, do it quickly.

"Damn this is going to hurt" I moaned just before I tried to stand up, but instead slammed the chair quickly back to the ground.

A loud crack echoed as the chair shattered below me. Using my teeth and some sharp chair splinters I managed to pry the ropes off my wrist and quickly untied the ropes on my ankles. I took in my surroundings, the silver pipe hanging overhead, the large walls enclosing me into this small room, and the doorstep just above the pipe. My instincts immediately kicked in. I sprinted towards the wall, jumping and kicking off of it as leverage. I launched myself up onto the pipe, balancing on it as if it was a playground balance beam from grade school. Quickly and carefully, I walked along the slippery surface, reaching the end, just below to doorstep. I jumped and caught the doorstep, swinging my leg over the ledge. I pulled myself up and gripped the cold door handle. Without hesitation, I threw the door open, prepared for another

challenge to await me on the other side. As I stepped through, the room was pitch black with darkness, only the light from the previous room illuminated where I was standing. I sensed something move further down the hallway. Just as I was prepared to fight my imagined assailant, several lights flickered on, blinding me. My hands flew from their defensive positions to shield my eyes. Once they adjusted, I could make out seven people standing in an arrow formation in the center of the room.

"Who are you?", I asked.

Their blank faces showed no emotion towards the terrified and confused boy standing in front of them.

"Why am I here?", I yelled.

"Richie!", someone yelled from the back of the group.

The seven people standing in front of me parted in unison to reveal a tall and brooding woman striding towards me.

"Well, well Mr. Forbes, welcome to Hell, otherwise known as The Side. You are part of TOTS, The Organization of Teenage Spies. I am Rebecca Lubelski, but you can call me the Headmistress. Let's get down to business, shall we?" She wrapped her arm around me, leading out the hall and into a long corridor.

She pointed at several doors and crossroads, naming off what they contained.

"These are the dorms, all students share a dorm with three others of the same gender", she said as we walked past several large doors.

Headmistress and I, followed by several heavily armed agents, wound through multiple hallways where she showed me the many, many rooms as we passed.

"And last but most definitely not least, the training grounds or Robo Dojo if you prefer to call it that. Here you will train with your team."

"Wait. I have a team! And, where am I? Why am I here? Who- "I questioned, but Headmistress cut in.

"Richie, I promised you will have all of these questions answered very soon but please, let me finish".

She explained how I was being watched for a long time after I enter that "fake" CIA contest. She continued to say how she needed five major aspects for the ultimate team; strength, intelligence, tactics, technology, and memory. I was one of the many people under scrutiny for the spot of intelligence.

"Well, now that you know why you're here, let's meet the rest of your team shall we?".

She shoved open the large double doors blocking the path in front of us. Behind them was an extension of the Robo Dojo, where in the four corners of the room, four teenagers practiced their various strategies. Closest to me was a short girl in glasses. A long braid ran down her dark brown hair and drooped over her shoulder as she sat at a desk surrounded by books and files. She quickly glanced up as we approached to

reveal her dark brown eyes hidden behind her glasses. She looked confused until she saw the Headmistress walking next to me and must have known something was up.

"Hello", she said cautiously and outstretched her arm in a friendly greeting.

"Richie, this is Astrid Oristano and she is our spot of recollection. She has a photographic memory and can recall almost any detail flawlessly.", Headmistress explained.

"Speaking of which, have you guys seen my keys?", Astrid questioned.

They two guards standing behind us shrugged while Headmistress shook her head and look straight up in the air.

She turned back to look at me, half laughing and half disappointed, "I did say almost, right?"

We left Astrid to rummage through her desk in her desperate attempt to find her keys while Headmistress and I strolled to the next corner to find a tall teenage boy playing baseball. However, as we walked close I noticed he wasn't hitting baseballs, he was hitting small spherical balls. The slugger hit ten balls repeatedly perfectly on point. He then stopped, turned to face us, smiled at Headmistress, gave me a confused stare, and continue over to what looked like a military training ground. He proceeded to do pushups, pull ups, and other various exercises. He then walked over to a large screen in the background with a colorful floor divided into squares that lit up on contact making it look like a giant Dance Dance Revolution game. Once he stepped onto the glowing platform a huge soldier popped onto the screen and began to yell commands at him. He followed them flawlessly, or at least I think he did because every time he moved, I could hear "Perfect" or "Good", making it seem even more like Dance Dance Revolution.

"That is Mitchell Factor, our tactician. Military trained and one of the best covert teenage operatives out here.", Headmistress explained.

He sure seemed like the leader type but I already knew his weakness, he couldn't diverge from the rulebook. Mitchell seemed like too much of a robot to me. He may be the best operative but that is just the problem, a leader has to take chances; something that Mitchell couldn't do.

"If he's super militaristic, why was he practicing baseball?", I asked.

"Dude, don't you play a sport?", said a new voice behind me.

Mitchell calmly strode toward us, stopping in a fierce halt a foot away from us. Decorated with many military ribbons and medals across his chest, he stood confidently and in perfect formation.

"Sergeant Major Factor reporting for duty, ma'am", he recited.

"Thank you, Sergeant, you're relieved.", Headmistress said.

He relaxed and began walking back to where we came from, back towards the dorms. Back where Mitchell came from, was a short and stocky girl pounding at a

bright red punching bag. With a mighty swing, she knocked the bag off of its handle and let it fly into the opposite wall. Several training robots rose up out of ground in fight stances. They sprinted towards her but she swiftly ended them in several punches and kicks. The last robot rushed towards her but she turned around like a whirlwind and punched its head clean off. The ball of steel and electrical circuits flew straight towards us, but Headmistress and I sidestepped it. It continued to fly behind us as Mitchell was walking behind us. His fast reflexes came to his aid as did his baseball expertise and he caught the robotic head just as it was about to hit his face. "Jenna, when you're kicking butt, please be wary of people around you", he called. "Sorry Mitch.", she called back.

Headmistress approached Jenna, but I kept my distance. After seeing what she just did to that robot, I'd prefer to keep my head.

"Richie, this is Jenna, our strongest and fiercest fighter".

She pounded her beefy arms together and flashed her gleaming gold rings in a sign of dominance.

"I'm Jenna but people call me the Knuckle Walker", she said proudly and fiercely.

I couldn't help but smile and say sarcastically, "Well, you are very gorilla-like".

Mitchell held his mouth agape, obviously surprised by the sudden turn of events.

Jenna angrily stared at me in a sort of questioning expression.

"Well, well, we finally have someone on the team that can confront me without losing their lunch, right Mitchell".

Mitchell blushed, clearly embarrassed, "Of course the day I am picked to be on the squad I eat bad fish and get sick in front of Jenna".

She turned back to face me, clearly wanting to make me just like one of those robots, dismantled. Her emotions changed so fast, it was almost sudden. She stuck her hand out in a friendly gesture, clearly wanting to shake my hand, but her eyes showed the direct opposite; murderous rage and revenge brewing inside of a pot of humiliation.

Acting purely out of instinct, I stuck my hand out to meet her's in a handshake. She quickly thrust out her hand, squeezed my hand with the strength of an elephant, and threw me over her back like a sack of flour. One second I was in the center of the training room; the next I was against the wall with the wind knocked out of me.

When I regained my vision, a short dude in short brown hair and dark eyes stood in front of me.

"Wow dude, you got owned!", he said half concerned and half hysterical with laughter.

He extended his hand to try to help me up but, still wary of Jenna, slipped my arm behind myself and pushed off the wall. While I tried to clear the black dots from my vision, the kid looked me up and down, checking to see if I was ok.

"Well, seems like all your circuits are in order. I'm MMBird24, but just call me Zach".

Behind him was a desk, similar to Astrid's but far more complex. Surrounded by screens and wires, was a dark wooden desk with circuit boards and modems creating a wall around it. A large cushioned chair stood next to the desk, obviously tossed aside hastily in Zach's rush to come check on me.

"You definitely got wrecked. Haven't you learned to never take on a higher XP than you can handle. That was a noob move, bro".

Jenna laughed hysterically behind us, "Higher XP? I'm more of a boss level!".

Without even thinking of the consequences I yelled back, "Yea in Donkey Kong Adventure!".

Jenna whipped around so fast, she looked close to getting whiplash. Her braid billowed behind her as she hastily marched towards Zach and me.

A few inches from my faces she whispered, "You better watch it newbie, The Jester isn't the only bad enemy you have.", and angrily stomped away to the dorms.

Headmistress hurried over, "Are you okay? Now you know one of our first rules; never mess with Jenna".

Page Break

Chapter 3: Couldn't Test Me If Your Name Was Pop Quiz

Jenna

New initiates suck. Being the first initiate I have a rep to keep, especially being the strongest one here. I used to be able to sit in the Dojo all day with no one except the training robots, a big bottle of blue Gatorade, and my babies. By babies, I mean my Garanga knuckles, or Power Gloves as I like to call them. Given to me the second I walked through the Organization's doors, I pretty much sleep with these (although Mitchell doesn't need to know that, even though he has a sweater for his bat). While we are on this topic, these new kids have to learn the rules before they get hurt, most likely by me.

Zach was the first to learn, and lucky for him, he's a quick learner. When he first came, about 4 months ago, I thought nothing of him, a short average build kid, kind of shy and nervous, but jeez! hacking into the New York Stock Exchange and almost giving himself thousands of dollars, nice touch! When he came to greet me, he shook my hand, but didn't look me in the eye. What kind of disrespect is that?! I let out a small shock from the gloves, just to show him who's boss. He quickly learned his place, staying in his room most of the time either playing on his Xbox or trying to hack into assigned websites. Of course, we get a jock in the group, thinking he's all high and mighty. The first day Mitchell walked in he seemed so official, his army uniform, the countless number of pins plastered across his chest, and oddly, and

baseball bat in a sleeve slung over his shoulder. He had a smug look on his face, one that I immediately disliked, like he thought he was the best, that arrogant son of a gun. The first thing you learn here at the Squad, there is always someone better than you, namely me, so don't underestimate them. The second thing, don't test me. The only testing you'll do with me are those quizzes in Weaponry. So, when Mitchell strode up to me with his smug smile and chill buzz cut, I did what any teenager like me would do, punched him straight in the stomach. A nice quick jab, not even with my gloves, much less electricity, Mitchell doubled over in pain, surprised by the sudden blow. Even better, a brown liquid spewed from his mouth, apparently the sandwich he'd had for lunch. That was by far the best reaction I've gotten from someone. Normally it's "Oh please Jenna have mercy!" but throwing up was a wonderful touch. Now it was me bent over, but rather than from pain, laughter. I fell into the sofa, pretty much dying from hysteria. Once I gathered my composure again, Zach and Headmistress were knelt next to Mitchell who was still on the floor, trying to regain his breathe.

"Not cool, Jenna, not cool at all." Zach said wrapping his arm around Mitchell and helping him into a chair.

"Thanks" Mitchell retorted, still heaving.

"The name's Zach, I'm not exactly muscle and hustle like you and Jenna, but if you ever need your phone jailbroken, I'm your guy."

Mitchell nodded appreciatively towards Zach. Zach smiled and sat back down, snatching up his Wii controller and continued his game of Super Smash Bros. I'll admit, it's not a bad game, mostly because the purpose is to beat the crap out of your opponents, but nothing beats reality. The only reason I know about the game is because Zach brought it here and wouldn't stop bugging me to play it.

The new girl, Astrid, isn't half bad either. Quiet, keeps to herself most of the time, but she's overly nice and man does that get on my nerves.

"Hi Jenna!" or "You look really nice today Jenna!". Why does she have to be so perky? I mean I know I look nice, but *today*? I look nice everyday. I didn't think much of her until I saw her practice. She no match for me but wow! She dances and kicks butt at the same time! Mitchell almost got killed once from her spinning pirouette kick. I don't know why but watch people get hurt is kind of fun. Mitchell quick reflexes grabbed the spinning robotic head out of the air just before it hit him in the face (must have been catching practice, lucky him).

And of course, there's the newest upstart, Richie. "Intelligence", please more like "ignoramus". I saw him walk in with headmistress and he didn't look very special. He still doesn't by the way if you were wondering. Looking around the room with that stupid, dumbfounded face and his eyes shining with awe. Give me a break. What super spy walks into a training camp wearing jeans and a maroon polo? Did he get

picked up off the street or something? A real spy (me) walks in a lacrosse jersey and workout shorts, otherwise ready to go to work. And he had the audacity to look at me with his stupid charismatic smile and friendly attitude! Ugh, people can be so annoying sometimes. Hopefully me throwing him into that wall knocked some sense into him. Even two weeks after he arrived, he's all buddy-buddy with everyone. Zach and he are pretty much inseparable, always playing video games or sparring together. Astrid and he are constantly studying and practicing. He even plays baseball with Mitchell! He never spars with me! I mean sure every time he tries to talk to me, I push him away, but what's the problem in that? A girl's allowed to show her feelings, right? Sometimes I just want to punch him in the face! In fact, I know exactly what to do. It's time for Richie to see just how cool I am!

"Mitchell! We have business to do!"

Page Break

Page Break

Chapter 4: A Friendly Enemy

Richie

Sweat dripped down my face from the grueling hard exercises. Several hundred pushups, pull ups, and crunches all folded into a mere hour. Mitchell and Jenna had absolutely no problem and finished before anyone. Zach was surprisingly good for someone who sat behind a computer most of the day.

"COD really gets that adrenaline pumping. All those tense moments when I hold in my breath and scream must've given me some serious muscles dude".

He jokingly laughed and went back to finish his quota and as he put it "pwn some noobs". It was Astrid that was really struggling. I tried my best to help her out, shouting encouraging words, showing her how to place her hands with the least stress, but none of it worked. It took her two hours to finish what everyone else did in one.

"Sitting in the chair all day and studying really hinders muscular strength", she said.

"How about this?", I asked, "Come by the dojo around six and we can practice for an hour after chemistry class".

"Sounds good, Richie", she retorted, "Hopefully I can be as good as everyone else".

She quickly walked away, clearly flustered and embarrassed. I grabbed my gym bag with my clothes and shoes and pushed open the doors. Just as I stepped through, someone grabbed my shirt and I was suddenly slammed against the wall. I let out a small wheeze and grunt of pain as the wind was knocked out of me.

"Well, well if it isn't the pip squeak", said a familiar voice.

Jenna held me by my shirt high above the ground. Mitchell stood behind her, trying to look tough but clearly following Jenna's lead.

"What do you think we should do Mitch? Maybe lock him outside past curfew? The guards will show him a good time. They love those batons and Tasers".

Her fist hurled toward my mid-section, connecting just below my ribs. Her blow knocked the air out of me and my sight began to go fuzzy. She hit me again and again, in my stomach, face, and gut. It was a good thing she was holding me up because there was no way I could stand, much less walk. She smiled evilly while Mitchell stood behind her, clearly conflicted about what he should do.

"Mitchell, come on man, we are friends! Quit following this bully and help a bro out here!", I yelled.

Mitchell looked as confused as ever, obviously questioning whether to help me and get his butt kicked by Jenna, or let Jenna beat me up and save himself.

"Sorry Richie", he said meekly, "Part of being a tactician is to know when to fight and when to surrender".

Jenna's knuckle rings began to whirr with energy as blue sparks arced across the top of the metal.

"Sleep well bozo", Jenna crooned.

The last thing I saw was Jenna's steel rings coming straight at my face with her smirk smile broad against her face and Mitchell's smoke grenade exploding in front of us. Every bone in my body hurt, especially my face. When I woke up, it was clearly becoming morning. The window next to me showed a beautiful blue and pink sky and an incredible sunrise growing over the horizon. I tried to stand but my face and torso hurt too much; Jenna had definitely broken a bone or two. I slowly crawled down the dark hallway until I reached my room. Lights glowed from under the door; Zach was clearly awake. I slowly pushed open the door but just then all my energy gave out.

"Jesus!", Zach screamed as he clambered out of his chair and helped me up.

He threw one of my arms around his neck and lifted me to my bed.

"Who did this to you? What happened?", he exclaimed.

I tried to talk but couldn't, all my energy was drained. He ran to the bathroom and grabbed a wad of paper and pressed against my bleeding face. He then hurried over to the phone and dialed a number.

"We have a hurt student in Dorm 2, thank you".

He then grabbed some paper towel, grumbled on how COD actually taught him medics, and pressed the wet paper against my bruised eye. It was definitely alcohol, no doubt about it. The burning was so intense, so terrible that it reminded me of when my mother pressed it against my scraped knee when I was three. The door burst open and four women dressed in white nurse gowns hurried over with an already prepped gurney. My head began to feel fuzzy and the room began to spin. Suddenly, there were three of everything; three blonde nurses strapping

me onto the whiteboard I was stretched across, three Zachs stressing out above me, and three open doors where Astrid was barging through, clearly shocked about my injuries. She leaned above me, her braid falling just above my face. My sight and hearing began to dim as I feel into a deep sleep or possibly even a coma. Astrid panicked, screamed for nurses to come, and leaned into my ear to make sure I hear this, "I know exactly who did this to you, and they will pay severely". I tried to answer back, to tell her no, she'd just get herself into more trouble, but it was useless, I was completely out of energy. I looked down at the pool of red brewing on my bed. I was clearly bleeding out and losing consciousness fast. I tried my best to stay awake but my efforts were futile. I looked at Astrid and Zach, running alongside me as the gurney was wheeled down the hallways towards the infirmary. Just as I slipped into unconsciousness, the door next to me opened, Mitchell's surprised face and Jenna's sneering smile was the last thing I saw as slipped into unconsciousness and was wheeled into the clinic.

Page Break

Chapter 5: Astrid or Aphrodite?

Zach

Having your best friend crawl into your room with a black eye and half beaten to a pulp is slightly scarier than Night Seven of Five nights at Freddy's. Just kidding, it's A LOT scarier. Trying to remain calm while I dialed emergency service was probably the most stressful situation I've been in, well, reality at least. I had just finished helping Headmistress track the Jester to an old warehouse near Orlando when I reached my room for that night. Normally, I'd have a few hours to spend with Astrid and Richie, either studying, practicing, and sometimes playing video games, actually, most of the time playing video games. Instead, Headmistress called me aside for a "special assignment", otherwise meaning "more work". Don't get me wrong, I'm the best hacker there is, well with few exceptions, but age wise, I'm the best. But, Richie had promised Astrid with some help with working out. Astrid isn't the strongest person, but jeez is she flexible! It's actually kind of scary how much of a contortionist she can be.

Anyways, I was down in Headquarters with Headmistress who asked me with her over polite smile and charismatic attitude, "Zach, we need you to decode this cipher. We think it could lead us to the Jester."

It was quite easy really, just hidden behind some firewalls and other "classified" systems. I'll save you the excitement and just say it landed us in New York city, a couple blocks from the One World Trade Center Memorial.

"Well that's not as inconspicuous as I thought it would be." I said, questioning my hacking skills.

"It's absolutely brilliant!" Headmistress said excitedly behind me. "We can bring in the Jester now! Thank you, Zach, you can return to your schedule."

Anyways, after Richie's "incident", Headmistress sent everyone back to their dorms, and can I just say, winning has never been so depressing. There was a small knock on my door, and I quickly flicked off the TV and ran to unlock the door. Astrid stood there, in tears and standing with a box of chocolate. That last thing might seem off topic, but chocolate is Richie's absolutely favorite food. He almost bit Mitchell's head off when he found out Mitchell hated the stuff. He always has a cup of it next to his desk. I thought my health decisions were bad, and then I met Richie.

"I thought we should go see how Richie is doing, do you want to come with?" she asked through her sniffing.

"Of course."

Looking down at my best friend from the end of his hospital bed while he has several broken ribs, a black eye, and is hopelessly passed out, well I was about to join Astrid in her crying. She put the box of chocolates on the dresser next to him, carefully moving over several figurines (I didn't know Richie kept figurines). Astrid and I sat down on the couch across from Richie's bed. Astrid kept switching between the couch and the chair, looking over Richie to see if he had woken up. A nurse in full white clothes, I'm not even kidding when I say full white; her gown, her shoes, even her hair was white, walking into the room.

Surprised, she said, "I don't think you children should be here. Visiting hours will be available once your friend is at a stable condition."

"Please ma'am, can we just stay a little longer? We are very worried about him." I said, as kindly as possibly could. I'm no people-person so I just tried to be overly kind. It obviously did not work as the nurse crossed her arms and frowned.

"I'm sorry but rules are rules young man, you and your friend will have to leave until you are allowed back."

"But-" I started, but Astrid interrupted me.

"Excuse me" Astrid said behind me. I turned to see Astrid stand up, flashing her most beautiful smile, all tears magically gone. "We understand how hard your job is, so stressful and noble, we will leave but first, please tell us, how are you so incredible?" The nurse was thoroughly confused but still blushed. "I don't know what you mean, child, thank you of course, but you must leave immediately."

Astrid strode up to the nurse, flicked her braid over her shoulder, her face filled with awe. She walked around her studying everything about the nurse. I didn't understand what she was saying. From what Astrid has taught me about cosmetics,

her make-up was too obvious, her hair had too many split ends, and apparently, you're not supposed to wear white after Labor Day and yet it was October.

"Your hair is so...unique and you are absolutely rocking those scrubs. How do you do it!" Astrid said with awe, hugging the nurse's shoulders.

The nurse giggled and blushed, "Thank you dear! Let me go get my products and I will fix you up too! You and your boyfriend can stay here with your friend."

Boyfriend? Ha-ha, no. Astrid is great but *definitely* not for me.

The nurse hurriedly rushed out of the room. I turned, shocked and found Astrid back in her chair staring worriedly at Richie.

I leaned on the edge of Richie's bed, now looking more at Astrid than Richie.

"Since when do you use guile and charm tactics?" I asked.

She looked up at me, her braid falling over her shoulder as she leaned back and pushed her glasses up.

"Since I read a book on it of course. I don't spend all my time reading educational books, Zach. I still have to look fabulous." she said as she flicked her braid back over her shoulder and looked back at Richie as he began to tremble in his sleep.

"You just never struck me as the beauty type of person." I said

"Thanks, sometimes looking great comes with not caring as much, I obviously make it work." she said laughing and flashing that incredible smile again.

"Definitely" I said laughing.

Richie was still shaking, rather rough now. But Astrid and I ignored it.

"I need your help" Astrid said angrily.

"Ok, with what?" I asked nervously. Astrid's sudden change in tone was just as frightening as Jenna's gloves.

"Revenge. For Richie's sake. I know exactly who did this, and I intend on repaying the service."

Richie shuddered violently now, shaking the bed.

"Ok... I'm all for defending Richie, but I'm not sure revenge is the right option. Who do you think even did this?" I asked.

Luckily Richie is not Slenderman, although he is tall and skinny, otherwise it would be game over. Richie screamed, nearly jumping out of his bed. Honestly that was the scariest thing I've seen since that stupid haunted house I went to about a month before I came here. At least we knew Richie was okay now. Hopefully, he actually was.

Page Break

Chapter 6: The Jester is Mental, Literally and Figuratively

Richie

Out of the darkness rose several random colors; red, white, blue, and green floated around making little orbs or splatter marks against the darkness. A pattern began to emerge as the red solidified and the other colors dissolved. Soon I was in a room of red and black diamonds. The walls, the floor, and the roof were all red and black diamonds. Curiously, I wondered around and to my despair, found no clue to where I am or why I am here. *I must be tripping out! What did the doctors give me?!* The diamond suddenly began to shift; turned and moving around to form words.

"Weak, small, and stupid" crowded the walls.

"Well that's not very nice." I said frowning as the words become more visible, crowding the walls, ceiling, and floor.

Voices murmured from undisclosed places. "Failure", "unimportant", and "futile" filled my head.

I began to be too much, all of the voices clouding my thoughts. I quickly stuck my fingers in my ears to block out the sound, but that was exactly what not to do. The voices were *in* my head, literally. I sat on the ground, still unclear of what was going on when the voices suddenly stopped. It became oddly silent, only my heart beat and breathing filling the empty room with sound. My hands quickly flew to my ears just in time before the scream shattered my ear drummed. A loud, female scream filled the air, blowing all the color off the wall. The room suddenly became plain white, like a mental institution. I scooted into the corner and stuck my head between my knees, trying to block out as much sound as possible. The screams quickly turned to laughter. Laughter so infectious I had to fight back a smile, but there was also something off about it, something ominous, but not only ominous, *insane*. The room began to fill with color again. Green, red and purple shapes flew around, above, and through me. They plastered themselves against the wall in front of me to create a silhouette. As it formed more and more, I could piece together what it was, but it made no sense. The giant Renaissance style jester silhouette began to move and speak, her thoughts filling my head just as the voices did previously.

"Small, weak, insignificant child. Do you really think you can defeat me? Your team is divided, their leader injured, and poor Headmistress can do nothing about it".

The shapes moved to form a maniacal smile, growing larger and larger as time passed.

"Who are you?" I shouted, nearly deaf from her deafening voice.

"I, my dear, and your worst nightmare. The combination of brilliance, ingenuity, and, of course, humor".

She let out another set of loud insane laughter. Her laughter seemed so familiar, but I knew it couldn't be.

"Jenna?" I asked.

Her smile quickly changed into an angry sneer, so ugly and full of hate, I knew I was wrong.

"Even the smartest member of the group still couldn't be brilliant enough to know me. Don't worry Richie, you will know me soon enough, but it's okay, I'll make our meeting fun".

She said fun so evilly, that I knew that couldn't be good.

"Okay, well, I'll leave you to do that, and I'll just go back to my friends".

She laughed once again, "I honestly don't know how you are the smartest, you are already with your friends, in fact, you'll see them in just one second. Before I go, however, let me say this, why did the chicken cross the road?".

The corners of her mouth rose to a smile as if she was making a joke.

"To kick your butt", I answered.

She giggled again, "To get hit by a car", she quickly answered back.

She suddenly exploded into laughter, quite literally too. The shapes blasted outward in all directions. Several purple, green, and red triangles blasted towards me, pinned my shirt to the back wall. I was stuck high above the ground, my shirt and shorts punctured and pinned into the walls by the points of the triangles.

"Aw, poor little Richie, helpless and confused in his own mind. Well, ta ta little hero, I have some more evil business to tend to".

The colors began to fade just as I pieced everything back together. The colors, the jokes, the laughter, the silhouette, it all made sense now.

"The Jester", I murmured.

"What?" she answered back.

"You're the Jester, the enemy Jenna mentioned!", I asked back.

The triangles that still pinned me to the wall melted away and I fell to the floor. I walked closer to the silhouette, growing more and more angry and confident.

"I don't know who you are or how you're doing this, but I will defeat you and this evil plan you say you have will be over".

The Jester's face began to contort into a form of thought and surprise.

"Well, well, it looks like he does have some intelligence".

She smiled again, but this time there was nothing happy about it.

"You will soon know about my brilliant plan, but understanding it, I'm not so sure. But it's ok Richie, don't be afraid, let's have some fun instead", she sneered back, clearly determined to beat me and my team.

"There's one problem with your brilliant plan, though, Jester", I answered back, a smile now growing on my face, but not from laughter or the Jester, pure mania.

"You're in my head now, and only I control my thoughts, especially as a prodigy of intelligence".

I thrust out my hands, thinking hard about getting the Jester out of my head. Thinking of my team, the academy, and my family. I have no idea what the Jester's maniacal plan is but I know, no matter what, no one I care about is getting hurt. Thoughts flew around in my head, random facts and knowledge, memories, but most importantly, my determination to get rid of The Jester. I screamed, louder than the voices, louder than the Jester, and louder than I ever have before. The Jester exploded once more, but not from her laughter, my control forced her out of my thoughts. The colors and shapes melted away, now I was falling into an endless pit of black, still screaming, suddenly a blinding light rose up towards me and my eyes flew open.

Page Break

Chapter 7: Did I Just Get Offered the Matrix

Richie

I woke up screaming. Astrid pounced out of her chair next to me, fully surprised by my sudden alertness. She carefully laid me back into the white and yellow gurney I was seated on.

"It's okay, everything is okay", she said softly, trying to relax me and prevent any further harm.

Everything hurt, even with the anesthesia. The beeping of the heart rate monitor was sort of relaxing. As I slowly reclined back, I felt pain growing in my abdomen; I clearly had a broken rib or two. I opened my mouth to talk but only small squeaks came out.

Astrid leaned over and put her hand on my arm. "It's okay I brought a board for you to communicate with and some books for you to read. I know I'm the librarian of this place but I figured you being an intelligence prodigy and all, maybe you'd like to read too".

I accepted the board and Astrid left the brown box of books next to the bed. I slowly settled back into my seat when Zach walked in.

"Aw dude, are you okay? If this was one of my games, I'd totally give you a MedKit and you'd be back in the game".

He looked terribly worried and rushed over to the side of the bed.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

I grabbed the bright red sharpie that Astrid had just given to me. I scribbled "Terrible" on the whiteboard and showed it to Zach.

He smiled, "Even in pain he has a sense of humor".

Headmistress appeared in the doorway.

"Astrid, I need to speak to you, immediately. You as well, Zach".

They quickly exited the room, leaving to myself. I closed my eyes, partially from the pain and partially because I was tired, but mostly because I was hoping I could listen

in on everyone's conversation if they were close and loud enough. Outside, Astrid and Zach's voices were just a small whisper, then they suddenly stopped. I heard their footsteps recede down the hallway, but there was also a pair walking towards me. I pretended to be asleep, but carefully left one eye open, just enough to see who came into the door. Jenna appeared in the doorway, and I quickly shut my eyes. "Don't panic, do NOT panic", I said in my head, trying to calm myself and control my breathing.

"Aw, poor little thing, so small and fragile", She said as she slowly walked around the room. "You actually seem less dorky when you're asleep". I felt the bed shake as she sat down next to me. She leaned in close to my ear, her long braid running back and forth along my forearm. "Mitchell may be easily swayed, but I swear to you, no one will accept you as our leader until you show that you are our leader. Also, quit getting beat up, I understand you're a newbie and all but I need a challenge. I know you'll never beat me but I'll try you on for size. Mitchell is getting too easy, and Astrid and Zach aren't even having me break a sweat. Hopefully, you feel better soon, just so I can send you back here". I knew she had her familiar smirk across her face, even though I couldn't see it. "By the way, I know you're awake and listening, otherwise I wouldn't even be here". The bed lifted as she got to her feet, her steps echoing throughout the room until I heard the door close.

I opened my eyes, but didn't move. I tried to process what she had just told me. Why would she tell me what's going on? What does she mean no one will accept me as their leader? However, I understood one thing perfectly; she wanted to fight me, a fight that would determine if she would respect me or not.

I leaned forward, using most of my reservoir of energy to reach a point of nearly sitting straight up. Looking around the room, I knew I had to get out of here. I stared at my surroundings trying to formulate a plan. Just then, Headmistress walked in the room along with the two guards that had greeted me when I first came to the Academy.

"Glad to see you're awake Richie. We need to talk immediately," Headmistress said. Her brisk and concise attitude shocked me, telling myself to listen carefully. "Another one of your teammates has been injured. Mitchell is a few doors down from you, if you would like to visit him, but we have extremely urgent things to speak of". She nodded to the guards behind her, who shut all the doors and windows, locking and sliding closed the white blinds. The dark room was only illuminated by the bedside lamp, just enough to see Headmistress and the guards in front of me. "You are incredibly important to this team. You are the glue that holds the two sides together, physical strength and mental strength, without you this team *will* fail. I need you to understand that revenge is never a good answer, especially with your own team. Right now, your team is divided and only you can unite them. Just remember, the

best spies don't rely on their gadgets; they use what is near them to conquer their challenges. I am relying on you Richie; do *not* let me down."

She swiftly exited the room, twisting on her heel flanked by her two guards. On her way out, she whips a black flashlight out of her coat pocket. But it was no flashlight. A blue light illuminated in a spiral out of the top opening like a Star Wars lightsaber. It grew to form a hand, which flew around the room, stretching and shrinking to room various ends of the room and fix it just as it had been before. Bright sunlight illuminated the room with all of the blinds and decor back in place. A blue light flashed down the hall as Headmistress's light saber looking gadget turn off and return to her. On the silver tray next to me, was a bright red pill as well as a blue one adjacent to it. A bright yellow note hung just above them. It read, "I'm counting on you Richie. Take the blue pill and you can return to your normal life, your friends, and your family. However, if you take the red pill, you will explore the depths of what you can really do as a human, yourself, and most importantly, a spy. You have five minutes to choose or else a nurse will come to retrieve these pills and you will be expelled from the school. I know you will chose correctly. -H".

I sat back, thinking about everything that had happened since my arrival. Meeting the team, my run ins with Jenna and Mitchell, and Headmistress's long conversation about being the leader. I stared at the wall in front of me, questioning the opportunity I have. Should I leave my team and return home, to Mom and Dad, Ri and Becky? No, I wouldn't be leaving my team, I'd be abandoning them. I didn't need to be a prodigy of intellect to know what I had to do. I glanced at the camera in the top corner of the room, looked back at the silver tray, and made my final decision. Before I could question my decision, I reached out my hand onto the silver plate and ran my fingers over the blue pill. I mouthed "I'm sorry", said my final goodbyes to my family, and quickly stuffed the red pill in my mouth, feeling it slip down my throat, leaving a taste of chemicals and, oddly, cherries. As soon as I knew the pill had slipped down my esophagus, running footsteps echoed down the hall.

Headmistress appeared in front of me and smiled, "I knew you'd choose correctly." I began to convulse, horrid uncontrollable shaking over my body as if I was having a seizure. Headmistress ran to my side as she saw the panic in my eyes.

"Don't worry," she said, "it is a side effect of the pill. You will feel dizzy, paralyzed, and freezing cold, but this pill will heal you from all your injuries. Well, most likely. If so, the symptoms will wear off within an hour."

Most likely?! What did she mean by "most likely"? I tried to talk or even move, but that was impossible, I had lost all control of my body. The shivering worsened, I violently rocked the bed as my body and limbs shook. I began to feverishly sweat, even though I felt extremely cold. My mouth become very dry, but there was no way I could swallow water.

I closed my eyes, "Don't panic, this is helping you. You'll feel better any moment." I told myself.

Then, it stopped. Not gradually or slowly, just all together. My legs and arms fell back onto the bed, it stopped sweating, and my fever magically disappeared. I began to sit up, but Headmistress quickly pushed me back down.

"Wait! We must see if it worked. Slowly, follow me." she said as she turned and began to walk towards the door. Just as I was getting out of the bed and Headmistress walked through the door, steel bars barricaded the door and an iron door slide down, clicking as locks loudly slide into place. The pill had obviously not taken full effect as I still felt weak, but I could at least stand and walk now. With a slight limp and pain in my legs and chest, I strode over to the newly locked door. "Headmistress?" I called.

A loud crackle sounded from the loudspeaker above me. Headmistress's voice rang out, "Richie, this is the test we must commence. Find your way out of this room. Good luck! You may need it."

"What? How? Where do I go?" I asked yelled back, expecting an answer back. No further crackle to signal an incoming speak or sometime of hidden message appeared.

"Time to go to work," I told myself. I began looking around the room, until my sight concentrated on the guards still standing by my bedside.

Page Break

Chapter 8: The World's Largest, Most Annoying Game of Sudoku

Richie

"Hey! You! Help me please! Did Headmistress give you any directions for me?" I asked as I walked as quickly as I could towards them, which wasn't very fast, in fact I felt like a sloth. They had no reply not even a slight movement. Either they were well trained soldiers, or they were robots. As I got closer, I could tell something was wrong. "Hello?", I asked as I looked them up and down. In desperation, I ripped off their coats, easier than I thought I would, to reveal a metal skeleton. "I knew it," I whispered to myself. Now I had to find another way out. I perused the room, looking for any exit or hidden door. The bed, the technical examination machines, the locked windows and doors, and an old dresser with some knick knacks on it; there was no escape. "Maybe the robots could help me though." I thought. If I could rewire it to find an exit for me, that would be wonderful. Wait, I don't know how to rewire these though! If only Zach was here, he could help. Headmistress's voice echoed in my

head, "The best spies don't rely on their gadgets." Suddenly I knew exactly what to do. Who keeps a dresser in a hospital? Slowly making my way towards the dresser, I examined every side, the drawers, and the wall. If I were a spy academy, what would I use to hide and open a secret passageway? The knick-knacks. They weren't mine, so maybe they were the Academy's. But what academy keeps knick knacks? I stared at the multiple children's figurines. Little superheroes, Ninja Turtles, and several ditsy toys that looks like the cheap plastic ads from Burger King, all with no secret button of lever to open some type of hidden door. I was so engrossed in finding this stupid door, I didn't even notice the robotic guards boot up sounds. Not until I saw one move out of the corner of my eye did I notice that they were being reactivated. "Is this part of the dumb test too?!" I yelled, knowing Headmistress could hear me. Before the one closest to me even activated, I grabbed a small figuring of Hawkeye off the shelf and used the end of his bow as a spear and jabbed it into the center of his chest. I quickly spun, throwing my foot with all the force possible, to smash his head against the wall with the roundhouse kick I'd been practicing for weeks. Just as I regained my bearings, I felt a sharp object jab into the side of my hip. The robot stood there with a small steel rod jutting out of its hand like Wolverine. I kicked it away and removed the steel rod. It didn't go to deep and surprisingly, didn't hurt. I knew the pill would heal my wounds but did it help me heal past that? I charged towards the robot, pelting it with the toys and tools around me. Captain America, Iron Man, and several sharp needles from the doctor tray all broke against the robot or stuck in the small openings of its exoskeleton. I grabbed a framed picture off the wall, smashed it over the robot's head where it stuck around its wiry neck, and spun it. The robot's head flew off, spinning into the air and landing cleanly onto the floor in front of its body. I laughed as I thought of the old fighting game I used to play on my Xbox, "Fatalita", I whispered to myself and walked back towards the dresser. There was nothing that I could see to open a hidden door. I stomped around the room frustrated, trying to think. *Nothing I could see!* That's it! I slid down onto my knees and ducked and tried to see below the small crack between the desk and the floor. I could just see a small stick stuck between the crack. I quickly got to my feet and tried to flip the shelf but it wouldn't budge; it must have been bolted to the floor or something. I looked around the room, trying to find something small and slender to reach the lever below the desk, but everything I could've used was now sticking out of the robots. Maybe I could yank one of the sharp needles out of one of the robots. I began to walk over to the robot that I had barraged with the toys and utensils. Just as I reached the robot, it began to beep. Normally, beeping would mean it needed to charge, but as a spy, beeping could only mean one thing; a bomb. "Are you kidding me?!" I yelled as I ran for cover. I quickly jumped over the bed, kicking out with my leg, knocking the bed over. Just as I landed on the floor, the

robot exploded throwing shrapnel and toys everywhere. I peered over the bed where a black scorch mark now blackened the wall where the robot previously laid. "Well that went from zero to a hundred real fast." Just as I threw one foot over the bed, the second robot began to beep as well. "Goddammit!" I yelled as I threw myself back over the bed, just in time before the second robot exploded as well, leaving a second scorch mark on the other wall. If those windows weren't barricaded, they would've surely broken, and even as a spy, I hate being stabbed in the back, especially by shattered glass. I peered over the toppled bed again, half expecting the doors to open and an army of mechanical fiends to attack me. After a minute of it being completely clear, I hopped over the bed and sprinted to the dresser once more. I carefully made my way around the room, scrutinizing every nook and cranny for anything long and slender to shove under the desk and flick the switch. Aggravated, I stormed around the room, pushing over equipment and punching the wall. On my third punch, the wall gave out revealing a silvery stick which was probably part of the building's infrastructure. "*That's it!*" I whispered to myself. I put my hand on the wall nearby the newly made holes, carefully feeling for a hollow spot to easily punch through. But there were no more, only the hole the size of my fist. That silver rod was how I could get out of here, but there was no way to get it, I wasn't as strong as Jenna, I couldn't devise a plan to find the quickest escape route like Mitchell, I couldn't even use the wires and parts from the robots to build some crazy mechanical contraption like Zach. Even Brianna has probably read about the building and has some way to know where this secret door is. But that was exactly it, I'm not super strong Jenna, or tactical Mitchell, or tech savvy Zach, I'm Richie, smart, creative, and able to overcome any problem like a puzzle. *A puzzle!* I suddenly got an idea. That lever was all a distraction. It probably didn't do anything. This room was a puzzle, one that could be solved with strength, tactics, tech, memory, and intelligence. This room was like a Sudoku puzzle, waiting for all of its numbers to align. *Align? Align! That's it! This room was literally Sudoku!* The desk being bolted down wasn't to hide the false lever, it was a hint like the free numbers they give you at the beginning of a game. "But how do I organize this?" I quietly asked myself. I examine each of the nine structures in my room: the bed, the dresser, shelf, the door, the windows, the couch, the TV, the IV fluid machine, and the chair. *Start with the desk Richie, that's a given.* "Wow, thanks Me, look who has all the brilliant ideas." I told myself. Striding over the desk, there was something that struck me a little off about the drawers. I only saw it for a second, but I knew that had to be the answer. But what was it about the dresser that had surprised me? The one difference that I saw earlier but passed it off as being old and missing pieces. *The knobs!* In a three-by-three grid of drawers, a knob was missing on the end of the central drawers forming an odd pattern that looked suspiciously like a reverse

E. *How is an E going to help me? It's not. But what if it was a 3 rather than an E!* That was my key to solving the Sudoku puzzle. Looking around the room, I began to see a pattern, the bright red chair where Headmistress was looked like an 8, the pattern on the white door looked like a 4, and the windows formed a sideways 6, although that last one should've been a given. But I needed a grid to organize them into a Sudoku pattern. I locked eyes on the black scorch marks and ash left behind by the robots. In a matter of seconds, I had divided the room into nine sections. *But how do I place them?* Tapping each tile, I noticed that one was loose in every square which must have acted as a pressure plate of some sort. I walked around the room, seeing what furniture I could move around that would allow me to get Sudoku. At first it was hard, trying to notice numbers in the various forms of frames, furniture, and figures. Finally, I managed to find all the out of place, numerically shaped pieces of furniture. The bed seemed to make a 1 where the frame acted as the ends and the mattress as the center. I carefully scooted the white frame and mattress into the crude square against the left wall. Ever so carefully, I lifted the frame and carefully set it down on the loose tile, hopefully registering enough pressure to activate the door. As soon as I let go of the frame and it relaxed on top of the tile, a loud click from behind the far wall, right next to the pile of dust and robotic ash, clicked, like a part of a lock opening. *One down, five left to go.* I ran over the next piece of this impossible puzzle, the IV. I carefully unhooked the bag of fluid and set it down on the floor as I slowly wheeled the curved, white metal into the square adjacent to the bed and the dresser. As the metal rod rolled onto the tile, I heard another click, from the same corner of the room as the first. I carefully fit every piece of furniture into a square, either lifting it or rolling in into place. Just as I lifted the shelf from the corner of the room where the door pattern made an odd 4, I prayed to every deity I learned about in my old history class. *Please, please, please, let this solve the puzzle. I must have been in here forever!* With every step I took, more and more books slid off the shelf, making a mess on the floor. That hardly mattered, but I just had a feeling I'd need these. I grunted and set down the shelf, now lighter since all its books were now a trail on the floor. I inspected my work, looking carefully at the chair that looked like an 8 or the couch shaped like a 7. Everything appeared to be in place. I bent down and used my remaining strength to lift the self on the tile in the final square of this ridiculous Sudoku puzzle. I set down the incredibly heavy mass of wood, waiting for the lock to make the small click like the previous times and open the door, but nothing happened. I backed up, hoping to see that I needed to be in the center of the room, only nothing happened. Just as I was about to scream in frustration, a loud grinding of old gears and hinges made an almost unbearable noise. After several minutes, I noticed a small part of the wall next to the door begin to lift. The noise continued to grind getting louder and louder until it abruptly

stopped, signaling that the wall was fully open, only that couldn't be. The hole now in the wall was no bigger than the bottom shelf that I had just moved. Maybe just big enough for me to crawl through if I got on my stomach, but even still, I'd be scraping my back against the roof. "If this gets me out of this room," I grumbled as I squatted down and onto my stomach. *Wait a minute! This is a test!* Just before I could stick my head through the crack in the door, I scooted out, getting to my feet. I had no idea, but I felt as though this was some sort of test. *The books.* Unconsciously, I strode over to the trail of books I previous left, grabbed a few, and began to stack them underneath the hole, making a sort of wedge. Now I had a space the same as an Amazon box but at least I had a safety feature and couldn't get trapped in the small corridor in the wall. I crouched down and looked back in the room. I carefully scooted into the darkness, slowly crawling towards the tiny square of light several yards away. The cold and darkness swept over me, growing creepier as I edged myself along, hoping for nothing to go wrong. But to no avail, I'm a spy and therefore nothing ever goes right.

Page Break

Chapter 9: A Very Dangerous Game

Richie

After what felt like eternity, I finally reached the end of the corridor. There's nothing like solving the largest game of Sudoku and then having to crawl through a corridor the size of the Chuckie- Cheese playground area. As the hole grew closer, I began to squint my eyes, the difference in light blinding me. I peered outside of the hole, taking in the new surroundings; huge computers spanning the sides of ten foot walls, multiple gathered around one computer in the far corner clearly immersed in what lay on the screen. I quietly exited the hole, careful to not make a sound. Tiptoeing slowly across the wooden floor, I noticed who was in front of the screen just before she turned to face me. in unison, the scientists surrounding her swiveled on their heels to face me.

"Well done Richie! The test was such an incredible success! It's incredible how quickly you solved it; half of an hour, absolutely remarkable!" she remarked, her arms outstretched, whether she was hoping for a hug or maybe showing how well I did; which one, I'll never be sure.

"I was only in there for 30 minutes?! It felt like eternity!" I screamed, shocked that it only took me 30 minutes to solve that puzzle.

"You bet! The other quickest was Astrid, and that was only because she read up on the entire layout of this building." Headmistress said admirably. "She probably knows the school better than I do." she said with a smirk. For some odd reason, fear rose in

the back of my mind but I quickly shook it off. There was nothing to be cautious about.

"So, it's still Monday morning?" I asked.

"Yes! And luckily for you, you ended just as class is about to start! Go meet Coach Harley in the Dojo, she said she has some "special" training for you guys." she said with that odd smile again.

I quickly exited the room, walking as fast as I could without sprinting to the Dojo. Hopefully Coach Harley wouldn't make me do 100 push-ups or even worse, make me listen to her stupid puns while we jog.

Just as I was about to reach the doors, a voice called down the hallway, "Slow down honey!". Ms. Tick slowly made her way towards me, aggravatingly taking her leisurely time. "Time is always on your side, honey," she called.

"I just need to get to class ma'am." I called back.

"Oh," she said, her face quickly contorting from a friendly smile to an angry frown. "Punctuality is everything my dear. Punctuality is a very big part of first impressions, and it appears that ours is not going well so far."

"I'm sorry ma'am" I said, in a hurry to get out of this conversation as quickly as possible, "I'll get to class right away."

I began to slowly back away, putting my hand on the steel door handle. Just as I was about to push the handle and run through, she yelled "I don't think so mister. You're coming with me." She made her calm stride towards me, covering a few feet within a matter of seconds. There was no way I was going with her. First of all, I was already late to class and being even more late doesn't fix the problem. Second, she would most likely take me to Internal Suspension, which is basically detention. For any other high school student, detention was a room where you'd sit and do nothing for half the day. I.S. is ten times worse; we don't do nothing, in fact it's the direct opposite. See, I know you're thinking "Oh well that sounds wonderful Richie!", believe me it's really not. Zach and I once got in trouble when he said we could sneak out and grab pizza (long story). Long story-short, Headmistress saw the damage we caused when Zach's gun accidentally went off, blowing up the restaurant and probably almost started The Great Fire of Miami. Anyways, A spy's idea of "doing nothing" is fighting training simulators. And to make it even better, their set on Avengers mode, which is basically the best operatives in history. Being in there is *way* worse than Coach Harley's puns and workout games.

She moved to grab my hand but I stepped back. "Excuse you?! You will follow orders Agent!"

"I'm afraid your order has been declined!" I yelled as I reared back launching a swift roundhouse kick into the fire extinguisher next to us. With a sad and anticlimactic clank, the tin dented but did not explode.

"Nice try, but time's up. Your coming with me to I.S." she said gripped my arm like iron.

Depressed, I took a step forward when a loud pang exploded next to me. Ms. Tick lost her grip, a large red object blasting into her stomach, pinning her to the wall adjacent to us. Shocked as the extinguisher gas fogged my vision, I lost sight of Ms. Tick and the broken fire extinguisher. It looks like my plan succeed; the room was fogged so Ms. Tick couldn't see me and I could escape, but I'd don't my job a little too well, I couldn't see the door either. I ran opposite to Ms. Tick, straight into the solid wall. I grunted, my head spinning from the small concussion I probably just gave myself. That left forward and backwards, one which would lead me down the hall, most likely into more trouble, the other into the Dojo. Footsteps sounded from in front of me, letting me know the door was behind me. "Thank you fellow agents" I said to myself as I threw myself into the metal door, determined to not get caught again. The doors flew open, white smoke billowing behind me while the doors slowly closed back. Zach, Astrid, Jenna, and Mitchell all stared at me from the training areas. Zach trying to hack into a set up database, Astrid flipping through 2 books at once, a stack more next to her, Jenna standing in a pile of broken parts and her gloves buzzing with electricity, and Mitchell yards away from targets, most of which were blown up from his grenades, one in his hand, most likely about to unlatch it (thank goodness, he didn't or else he would most likely be dead by now).

"Hey everyone." I said nonchalantly.

Coach Harley marched up to me eating her usual chocolate bar, this time a Milky Way. " 50 minutes late, thank you Richie for putting the late in my chocolate bar. For that, you can be defender in today's games!"

My fake smile quickly fell, being defender is never fun in games unless your Jenna. She typically keeps her staff (not the sharp one, thank god), so she can defend from a further distance. Even Mitchell, just lobs stun grenades at anyone who comes close enough. I'm stuck with a measly knife and strategy. Normally I could get a gun or a poisonous paint ball gun (my personal favorite) but no all because I'm late from Headmistress's experiment. Even better, Monday was Capture the Flag day, but not the capture the flag you play as a kid with a football and freeze tag. This involved lasers, explosions, and pretty much anything as long as we didn't get seriously hurt. Next time you say you hate Mondays, think us.

"Jenna and Mitchell take the North side, Astrid, Zach, and Richie take the South side." Coach called as we ran to the able filled with guns, grenades, and other very dangerous items that should never be given to teenagers. Jenna strapped on her gloves while Mitchell stretched over, filling his belt with grenades of different varieties. Jenna stormed away, discussing attack plans with Mitchell while he

practice swung his bat. Coach stopped them just as they were about to walk into the arena." Where do you think, you're going with those?" she asked.

"To the arena" Jenna fired back. You *never* stop Jenna when she is getting prepared for a game. I learned the hard way when she had a sticky bomb stuck on her back the first week I came. I tried to get it off her but she whipped around and I got a chest full of shock gloves.

"I said today's games would be a special. You won't be using your usual equipment. Today's game is all about using the field to your advantage. You will find a few hidden weapons in the arena but you will have to adapt, survive and win all at the same time. All your weapons will be stun-based, use this to your advantage. You have 1 minute to prepare. Go!"

We quickly dropped our weapons and ran onto the field. Every week the field changes different climates, desert, plains, we even had underwater one time. This time we were surrounded by thick trees, a small river snaking next to the exit, and the heat of the synthetic sun burning my skin. Jenna and Mitchell disappeared with a crash through the dense foliage, every now and then more branches breaking or Jenna barking an order rang out from the opposite expanse of the forest.

"Okay, first things first, examine surroundings. Astrid, survey the area, see if you can find any hidden weapons or supplies for defense. Zach, use vines from the trees to make snares. If they try to sneak up on us, hopefully they'll get caught. I'll guard the flag while you're gone. Come and meet me once you're done."

Astrid and Zach sprinted off into the trees, splitting up into different directions and hopefully not running into Jenna or Mitchell. I stuck the flag in the ground, a small patch of grass and rocks surrounded by a river. *Now I can definitely hear them coming.* I walked around the flag trying to see if Jenna or Mitchell was perhaps spying on me through the thick foliage. Loud crashing through the foliage on my left was faint, sounding like someone was running in my direction but they were far away. I stared deep into the woods, hoping to spy them before they spotted me. The noise grew louder and louder. I grabbed the nearest weapon, a large stick, a ducked behind a tree. The crashing continued growing louder and louder until it was right behind me. I took a deep breath and swung the stick as hard as I could.

"Whoa!" a male voice said surprised behind me.

Mitchell? I thought. But that wasn't Mitchell, this voice was too high pitched. Zach, most likely in defense slashed his sword across my shirt, cutting it open and leaving a gash along my chest. Still in shock, he thrust his new taser at my stomach, but stopped himself inches away from me. I stood back up against a tree, the cool breeze blowing up my shirt from the newly made hole with cold blood slowly running down my chest. The electricity arced between the two metal prongs on the taser, almost

touching my billowing shirt in the wind. I looked dead into Zach's eyes, confused and surprised.

"Richie! I'm so sorry! I thought Jenna and Mitchell made it over here already! I didn't see you or Astrid anywhere! Let's get you fixed up and then I'll show you what I found." Zach said, clearly shaken from hurting his teammate.

I laughed as he gave me his hand and pulled me away from the tree.

"Dude, you scared the crap out of me!" I said still laughing from the shock.

Zach ripped down some vines off the tree we just came from and tried to rap them around my chest.

"I got it. Go get your stuff so we can organize it." I said.

I silently walked over to where a small pile of leaves and branches, returning with a little bag made out of vines, leaves, and branches, blending in perfectly with the environment. I finished wrapping the vines across my chest, making it look like a jungle sash. Now that I looked like Tarzan had given Rambo fashion tips, Zach began to go through everything he found.

"Two tasers, vines, a handful of leaves, and makeshift baskets made of leaves with water. Oh, and my sword, but you figured that out I guess" he said, looking at my band aid/Tarzan-Rambo vine sash.

Looking at his haul, it seemed pretty good, we just needed to wait for Astrid to come back. Zach handed me a taser and put one aside for Astrid.

"I'm really sorry about the sword and all" he said glumly, looking down at the sword strapped to his side with a vine.

"Its fine dude." I said laughing glancing between my cut and Zach.

"What are you laughing at? I'm trying to apologize for cutting across the chest and nearly zapping you with a taser, but you decide to laugh at me?!" he said, confused and angry.

"I'm laughing because you don't need to apologize. You got me good! As spies, it our job and you did really well! I'm laughing because you're being so humble for no reason."

He stared at the ground, clearly ashamed of himself. I scooted over to him, moving in front of him, forcing him to look at me.

"There is nothing to be ashamed of, Zach. You fought incredibly. It's our job to fight people, and if we get hurt in the process, oh well, I don't care that you cut me with a sword, I care that you *can* cut me with a sword."

"Thanks" Zach said, still staring at his sword, the tip reflecting sunlight and a red tinge, my blood.

The leaves across from our miniature campsite rustled. Zach and I jumped up fumbling for his sword and throwing me a taser from his makeshift bag. Dark blue jeans stepped through the tall grass as Astrid made her way into the clearing.

She looked at Zach and I confused. "Are you guys supposed to be defending the camp?"

"That's kind of the point of having weapons, Astrid" Zach said, lowering his sword. I looked over at Zach, partly laughing, but also disappointed. "Dude, that was a terrible pun. You've been near Coach Harley for way too long."

Astrid laughed, "So this is lovely and I love how much we found but I saw Jenna and Mitchell. They're not too far from here, maybe half a mile north. Also, why do you guys have only electrified weapons?"

She looked down at the taser Zach just gave her. Just then a crackle rang out from above us. A loud beep sounded as Coach Harley's voice filled the area.

"Hello trainees! As you may have noticed, this battle is electric themed! It'll make for quite a *shocking* experience!" Coach Harley burst into a laughing fit, taking a minute to regain her composure. Through little giggles she said, "15 minutes have passed! Hurry up or else I'm going to have to make this area really *electric*!" she burst into another laughing fit, however this one was quickly cut off with the buzz and crackle of the speaker.

Zach, Astrid, and I stared at each other, silently devising plan.

Astrid may be smart, but sometimes she can be blind as hell. She looked me up and down, my shredded shirt and blood covered vine band aid. Her face quickly turning from confusion to shock.

"Richie, what happened?!" she asked surging towards me, careful to notice touch my wounded chest.

"I'm fine. Just a little accident but everything is okay." I said, glancing at Zach, still looking guilty but at least he wasn't beating himself up over it.

"Okay, now that we are all back, Astrid, take the left flank and make a distraction. Maybe your dancing skills will come in handy as you can climb a tree to evade Jenna and Mitchell. Zach, take the right flank with your sword. You have the extra reach, use it. I'll stay here and guard the flag. Let's move out team!"

Zach and Astrid smiled, signaled a thumbs up for understanding, and sprinted off into the woods. I made my way back to the flag, standing in the small island in the center of the stream. *This isn't a good place to be. You don't wait for a fight Richie, you get the advantage, the surprise.*

"Let's find a better vantage point."

I turned in a circle, scanning my surrounding to monitor the area for Jenna or Mitchell, but also searching for a good vantage point. My eyes came to rest on a familiar figure in the distance. A place where I ran into trouble would possibly save me. I made my way as quietly and as carefully as possible towards the tree and began to climb as fast as I could.

Chapter 10: The Game of Tactics

Mitchell

If you thought Jenna was scary around the campus, you've clearly never seen her in practice. The sheer intimidation she imposes when she fights is mainly what makes me lose. Honestly, she has a big head because of it too. She grumpily walked into the training station. Richie, Zach, and Astrid were already there, talking to each other, likely forming a plan. Jenna grumbled under her breath, something about suggestions of where Coach Harley could stick a training dummy. That was good, Jenna getting angry before a game: it normally meant winning. A loud bell sounded from the speaker above. Richie, Zach and Astrid sprinted off into the woods as the computer created the forest around us. Jenna sprinted after them, I wasn't far on her tail. She suddenly took a sharp right, nearly causing me to trip over myself. She didn't even turn around, she just kept moving deeper and deeper into the woods. We ran deep into the woods, probably a long distance from where Astrid, Richie, and Zach made camp.

"Hurry up Mitchell!" Jenna screamed back as she grabbed a small black object out of a tree hole. "Score!" she said slowing down next to a large rock in a small clearing surrounded by the forest.

She showed me her prize, a small taser.

"Great! We should scout around and see if we can find anything else: more tasers and maybe a pair of gloves for you and a bat for me." I said already moving into the woods.

Jenna stuck the flag into a hole in the rock in one swift stick into the ground. She looked around, clearly excited about something.

"No need, Mitchell." she said as she slowly pulled a large pair of gloves out of her jacket.

Shocked I said, "What?! First of all, how did you fit that in your jacket. Second, why are you breaking the rules? We are all going to get in trouble. Third, did you bring my bat?"

A flurry of emotions and thoughts flashed through my mind. I was clearly annoying Jenna by questioning her because she put on her "Bruh" face and looked at me like I had just asked if the ocean was salt water.

"Are you an idiot?! I found them along with the tasers! I had the mechanic guy down stairs, Leo I think, make me a bag. He talked about a ton of technical stuff that I didn't understand. Basically, it can hold almost anything using some super cool spy tech. " she lashed back.

When she said that, it was obvious that she hadn't found them, but her face said, "challenge me if you dare" and you never challenge Jenna, especially in a game. Don't get me wrong, it was ridiculously cool, but Coach Harley gets a little grumpy when her games aren't played correctly. I grabbed the bat she gave me. My arm sagged, I wasn't used to its heavy metal surface with only a rubber handle for me to hold. Electricity arced up the side when I touch the butt of the bat, otherwise it was a heavier, metal slugger like my baby I had left in the training room.

"We need a plan." I said, so blatantly and calmly like in the Academy when an officer greeted us.

I still remember the day Headmistress came to pick me up. I was actually doing something quite similar to this. We had what we call "War Games". Of course, they weren't actual war games, though. Simple childhood games like Freeze Tag, Helicopter, and Red Light Green Light were turned not army activities using various training weapons like bombs, bullets, and wires. They weren't actual wires but they still hurt. I still recall Kernel Pruitt yelling in the background, "Hurry up maggots!" as we ran through electrical wires with wet mud causing us to slip and fall. Only I had the bright idea to cover myself in mud and run through. The mud helped to block the shocks. It wasn't a perfect solution but it allowed me to be promoted to Sergeant Major, my current and probably last rank. I was kind of nice to be out of uniform, but I do miss Ringer, Zombie, and Teacup, my friends in my company. The uniform got a little heavy sometimes, especially on hot days. The medals and pendants would hurt in the burning sun and the heavy cotton would stick to my skin as we exercised. However, there was always sometimes joyful about wearing the uniform, something that made me proud. I do wear the uniform sometimes like the first day Richie came. Jenna snapped, waking me from my daydream.

"Well, what's your brilliant plan, Sergeant Stupid?"

I ignored that comment. Jenna wasn't pushing me around anymore. I didn't want to bully Astrid or Zach, I didn't want to hurt Richie, and I definitely wasn't going to let Jenna win again.

"You stay here and guard the flag while I go scout the area and look for Astrid, Zach, and Richie."

Jenna stared at me for several seconds, processing the plan and probably any outcomes that could possibly happen.

"Okay, but you come back as soon as you find them and we attack. the faster we attack the faster we win."

"Jenna that's not necessarily true. We have to attack tactically and strong. You can't fight intelligence with pure strength."

"We can't or we won't?" she asked, clearly a rhetorical question but I answered back calmer than I ever have before.

"Both."

Jenna stared back with an incredible poker face, clearly mad, but she hid it really well.

"Go before I bash your face in." she snapped back as she turned on her heel, walking towards the flag.

Before she could change her mind, I ran into the woods, pushed leaves and branches aside as I crashed through the forest. I came to a halt with my chest heaving and sweat growing on my forehead; my shirt already soaked. My long black track pants were definitely not helping to keep me cool. I rolled the black fabric up to my mid-calf and began to jog again. I came across a small river, not very wide or deep, in fact, I could probably step over it. I cut around several trees making a little trickle. I scooped some up in my hands, even though it fell through my fingers, I managed to get a good gulp before I heard a familiar voice. It was distant, but distinct, one that if Jenna heard, she'd run towards it like a rhino with guns blazing. Richie wasn't too far off and hopefully, he could lead me directly to their flag. I carefully followed the sound. It wasn't back and forth like a conversation, more like thinking out loud. Whatever it is, he better keep doing it. Every now and again he would stop as if he was looking at something and then start again. Something about wishing Zach and Astrid would hurry up, wondering how long we were in here, and long the *it* would last. What is *it*? I finally got close enough to clearly see Richie standing next to a giant rock. Their flag was nowhere to be found; it must be on the other side of the rock. I walked through the trees, staying on the edge of the bush and the dense foliage. Richie was still walking along the river and the grass. Just as I was about to be completely out of his sight, red fabric flapped across my peripheral vision. The flag glittered bright red with little water droplets on the pole and the fabric from the flowing river. They stuck it in the center of the river. The water made little ripples as it flowed around the pole while Richie walked back and forth in the grass nearby, occasionally walking into the water. I sat in the brush, moving a little out of cover to get a better view. Suddenly, Richie looked towards me, in fact, directly at me. *Oh shit, cover blown.* I didn't move, I held my breath, not even flinching as Richie bent down as grabbed the knife from out of his leg pocket. He ducked behind a tree a mere foot away from me. I heard a loud crashing behind me, like someone was running through the woods, only I wasn't and there's no way Jenna would leave the flag unguarded. that meant either Zach or Astrid was charging full speed straight towards me. As fast and silently as I could, I crawl to a deep hole covered by thick enough leaves to hide me. Hopefully, Zach wouldn't fall down a hole, even though it would be funny, it would likely mean my death; not from Zach or Richie or Astrid, but rather Jenna. If I ever got captured in games, Jenna would kill me, quite literally too. Several branches parted to reveal Zach barreling towards the clearing. I breathed a

sigh of relief as he ran past me. Then I remembered Richie hiding behind a tree with a very sharp knife as Zach barreled towards him with who knows what! It took all my willpower to hold myself from tackling Zach to the ground. They were my friends but I was still going to win. All of the sudden, Richie jumped out from behind the tree holding a giant stick. He swung it harder and faster than I ever have. If Zach had been a baseball, there was no doubt that Richie would've just hit a home run. Except for the fact Zach sidestepped his shot, whipped out a long-curved sword, and slashed down. It all happened so fast, Richie had barely enough time to jump out of the way to only get a cut across his chest. He stood pinned against the tree, his white shirt growing redder, billowing in the wind with Zach's new sword's point pressed on the center of his chest. I couldn't hear Richie or Zach anymore, they talked in hushed tones, clearly surprised by each other. They moved away from each other with Richie still bleeding. Zach climbed to the lowest part of the tree, ripped off some vines and tried to wrap them around Richie. Richie pushed him away and began to wrap himself in vines as Zach picked up a clump of leaves which he was apparently carrying. Zach put his arm around Richie and began to help him walk towards the rock. Due to all the excitement, I didn't even notice the EMP grenades I was sitting on as I moved to get up. Three EMPs laid below me. Luckily, they weren't motion sensitive otherwise, I'd be either blown to bits or paralyzed. I carefully stood up, stuck the EMPs in my pocket, and climbed out of the crevice, careful to not let Richie or Zach to see me. Although they were kind of preoccupied, but it's better to be safe than sorry. I ducked into the thick trees and began running back towards Jenna and my campsite.

I was probably about half way to camp when everything that could've gone wrong happened.

I was sprinting through the woods still, pushing away thick foliage. It did a great job of hiding me, not too great of making a path though. I pushed away a large branch which was bent towards the ground making an odd upside U shape. How stupid could I be? It was obviously a snare set up by Richie or Zach. I pushed aside the branch still, my foot landing in the center of a tied vine camouflaged on the forest floor. Within a second I was twenty feet of the ground, dangling by my foot. Goddammit! How long have I been gone? Not that it matters, Jenna's reaction would either be anger or excitement whether I came back after 2 minutes or 2 hours. I grabbed the hunted knife out of my pocket. An EMP rolled out of the open pocket. I fumbled in the air struggling to catch it. After several attempts to grab it, only successfully juggling it, the EMP fell to the ground. I didn't move a muscle. Hopefully the EMP wouldn't explode; I'd prefer to not be blinded and possibly even paralyzed. I grabbed foot and began cutting at the rope. No doubt I would've been out of the rope in no time, but cutting a rope while you're dangling 20 feet in the air

is about as hard as doing a drill routine and hitting a home run at the same time. After several swipes at the rope, the rope began to fray. Now normally, "fray" isn't a word you want to hear when your dangling 20 feet in the air, but I needed to get down. After one last swipe, the rope finally snapped and I plummeted towards the ground. I rolled into a ball, like in training, and transferred all of the weight of me belly flopping onto the ground, off of me, landing safely. I pulled branches out of my shirt and hair, walking over to the EMP. When I bent down to pick it up, I heard a soft ticking.

"Shit!" I screamed, as I ducked behind a tree. The EMP exploded sending out a shock wave of of electricity and a loud boom. I stepped out from behind the tree, the ground scorched where the EMP was.

"I should hurry up, Jenna is waiting. Hopefully she didn't hear that bang."

I rolled down my pant legs, brushed leaves and branches off of me, and sprinted towards the clearing. My bat clanked against my back. I carefully made sure all of my grenades were carefully secured in their bag. The last thing I needed was an incendiary grenade going off because that would *really* add some spice to the games.

Page Break

Chapter 11: What Happens Between Us Stays Between Us!

Astrid

Wow Mitchell can talk! Why do all the guys get such long chapters? I will never know.

I can't even leave for 2 minutes without my two best friends nearly killing each other. It only took about 15 minutes for me to find Jenna and Mitchell's camp. It wasn't too far from ours', in fact. I was expecting to find Richie standing on the river bank with Zach holding Jenna and Mitchell's flag, instead I burst through the bushes to find Richie injured, Zach with Tarzan's satchel filled to the brim with weapons and vines, and barely a fire lighting up the small indent of the rock we previously took shelter next to. I never understood them, always trying to show off and be the best. We already knew the best, Me, at least I think. Ever since the incident, I've been so unsure of myself, so confused. That's a conversation for another time though. Right now, I just need to vent about Zach and Richie's stupidity.

The last thing I ever expected to come back to was to find Richie had a huge gash across his chest and, because that wasn't a shock enough, to find out that Zach caused it. Honestly, I accomplished more than Richie in Zach did in half the time. Of course, my incredible memory helps.

I heard Jenna from a mile away. Don't tell her I said this, but let's just say she has a very loud personality. I could hear her screaming at Mitchell, even through the trees and several yards away. Every now and again, I could see Zach's snares hidden in the brush. I made a mental note of where they were. You definitely didn't want to get caught in one of Zach's traps. Luckily, Zach wasn't into pranks otherwise, we'd all be dead, or at least seriously injured. Some would explode at your feet, or launch a pack of hungry animals at you, or just simply hold you 2 stories in the air while you dangled upside down. Either way, don't get caught by Zach.

After a little more walking, I ran into a small snag, well, a huge snag but a small problem. A huge downed tree blocked my path. I couldn't go around because Jenna and Mitchell were on the other side of the log. How do I know? First, Jenna was clearly yelling. Not screaming like she normally does, but just yelling which is like whispering to her. Normally, I could easily vault over it, maybe even through a few flips in for style, but getting captured by Jenna was not on my to do list. Also, Jenna takes games a little too seriously and interrogation is *not* fun, especially by her.

A tall tree rustled in the wind next to me, its huge branches expanding outwards. I could hear Jenna, but I also needed to see them. It would do nothing to attack without knowing exactly where they were. I carefully climbed up the tree, searching for knots and footholds in the bark. Lucky me, I found an electrified net with one of the knots. I grabbed it and stuffed it in my jean shorts, hopefully it wouldn't randomly turn on and shock me like my phone. Just fragile glass screens breaking so easily. What's the point of having headphones if you can't dance without your phone shattering! Right before the intersection of the tree and its branches, a 2 foot gap between my food hold and the intersection stopped me in my tracks.

"Crap!" I yelled, not loud enough for Jenna and Mitchell to hear, but loud enough to make my point.

At this point, I realized why Richie decided to send me out here for recon. I went back to my Swan Lake performance a few years ago. I swung my leg out from under me, over my head as if I was doing a table, only several feet in the air off the side of a tree. I took about 3 more flips for me to make to the intersection, landing flawlessly with a small flick of my wrists. Like I said, style points. I edged myself onto a large tree branch overlooking the small meadow. I hid back on the branch a bit so I could still be hidden within the thick leaves. Just as I peered into the field, I saw Mitchell sprint off into the woods, running beneath me. If I was ready, there was no doubt I could've dropped my net on him. He quickly sprinted by, back the way I came, most likely going to spy on Zach and Richie. I mean, it is our job after all.

Jenna was walking around the grounds, circling the flag slowly while peering into the forest.

She was mumbling something, "Gonna kick his ass.... little twat...".

I have a strange suspicion that she was talking about Richie. I carefully back down from the tree, sinking into the foliage. Jenna was right below me now, quietly talking to herself. I had to stop moving or else there was doubt I'd be caught; the branch was bending and shaking under my weight. Jenna began to walk back to the flag, still talking to herself about the most random things, fights she's planning, people to track down, the best way to get Richie back, just normal violent spy things. I released a heavy breath that I was holding in. Relief swept over me. Now, I'm not superstitious in the slightest, but it was at this point I jinxed myself. I small move backwards, and the branch began to shake violently. *Oh no you don't! I swear if you break, I will crack your trunk in half with a flying split straight down the center of you.* Apparently, silent promises have no effect on nature because the branch continued to shake and crack. At this point I was terrified, not from falling (I do that all the time; clumsy Astrid), instead, the chance of Jenna finding me could probably kill me. Jenna and I are normally on okay terms. More like you stay away from me and I'll do the same to you, but hey, I'm still alive! Luckily, Jenna did not turn around or else a shivering tree would no doubt get me caught. I looked back at the base of the branch which had white bark now exposed, slowly sank closer and closer to the ground as gravity pulled it to the floor.

Stupid spacial physics nearly getting me killed! With one last final shudder, the branch came unloose and fell to the ground. It took all my will to not scream as I fell 2 stories into the open meadow. I don't know how, and I'm not going to question it, she didn't hear it, but Jenna was still rambling on walking towards the flag. My brain told me to get up and hide but my body decided otherwise. I groaned and rolled around in the grass. After what felt like hours, which probably meant a few seconds passed, I rolled of my back, picked twigs and leaves off myself, and crawled back into the brush. I tried to walk a few times but that never worked, my legs felt like complete jelly. Every time I tried to get up, I would struggle to stand, wobble a few steps, and fall flat on my face. I was nearly into the brush when Jenna turned around. Fear struck my heart: I couldn't move, I couldn't breathe, I couldn't even think. She wasn't screaming though, she didn't sprint towards me in her stance ready to nearly beat me to death. She was just there looking at the ground. She suddenly began to shake and move. Did she just stink herself with a taser or something? When she turned in a circle, I saw the white cord coming out of her suit, winding across her neck, up to her ear. She was wearing headphones?! She had the audacity to wear headphones! Since when did this happen?!

Taking advantage of the situation, I crawled back into the brush. I sprinted deep into the woods again. Suddenly a loud boom! rocked the woods. Did Jenna throw a bomb at me? I'm fairly sure she didn't see me, but regardless I kept moving. *Don't think about it Astrid! Not another one!* I slipped out of reality, falling into another one of

my daydreams. Luckily, I've been pretty good about hiding them. The last one was the day Headmistress picked me up from the Library. Books are always so relaxing. Being able to go anywhere in the world is a power I'd treasure. But instead I got the ability to remember the worst day of my life!

I felt myself stumble into a tree, breathing heavily. Don't slip Astrid, don't do it. I feel deeper and deeper, fully falling into a daydream.

Ariel's voice echoed around me, "Which way?"

We were sprinting down hallways while alarms blared behind us. Guards weren't far behind, sprinting down corridors with their boots echoing.

"Right!" I screamed.

I had memorized the schismatics of the bank, every exit point and turn. A flawless plan really, of course I planned it. However, that also meant I planned my best friend's death. We turned right, left, straight, following my mental map of the underground tunnels of the National Bank. Large gates slammed down behind us, iron bars blocking any chance of us turn back. Guards turn the corner I front of us and we ran down the opposite direction.

"Shoot them! Recover the money!" an officer screamed.

Bullets whizzed by us, breaking off pieces of the wall. We came to the final fork in the road. I remembered this from the map.

"Which way now?" Ariel asked calmly, well as calmly as you could be in a bank heist.

"Umm." I said hesitantly.

"What do you mean um?! Which way!" she yelled.

The guards were getting dangerous close now. Gladly, they had the aim of Stormtroopers.

"I don't remember!" I yelled back.

"What do you mean you don't remember? You remember everything!" she yelled back.

She was right I remember everything, except the path to safety. I can't remember how to save my best friend but I remember the bullet piercing her jacket, throwing her against the wall. *"You are the best robbers in the US, you don't need bulletproof vests"* Izzy's words rang in my ear. I came out of my dream just as Ariel fell to the floor, her face stricken with surprise as she died, shot through the heart, just like me.

I was still leaning on the same tree, sweating and breathing heavily. You need to keep moving, I said in my head.

"Damn right I do." I said as I jogged back to Richie and Zach.

By the way, no one finds out about our little tree adventure there. When I say no one, I mean NO ONE! Of course, I thought my mission was a disaster until I got back to camp and saw Richie. Gotta love my job. I'm going to need a good book after this.

Page Break

Chapter 12: Revenge is Sweet

Jenna

The best thing to do during games is to listen to music. Sticking my earbuds in my ears and just cranking Twenty-One Pilots up to max is the best way to spend Training Tuesdays. I love Tuesdays; the days where I'm allowed to destroy stuff. Whether its King of The Hill, ManHunt, or Capture the Flag, Tuesdays are awesome! Also, Tuesdays are my rant days. I'm not even going to use the excuse of being on my period, I just like to rant. Normally it's about Richie being a fucking twat but sometimes it's about missions or just normal life. Normal life meaning breaking the Digital Dojo and not being able to fight the Holograms. Punching through the Holograms is by far one of my favorite things. Seeing the pieces of digitally generated people fly everywhere after one swift punch to the stomach, there's nothing better. Sorry for the detail, hopefully you weren't eating lunch.

Mitchell always tells me that my music blocks one of my senses and that's bad, unfortunately a few broken ribs is bad as well, which I threaten him with each time he tells me. Lately he's been a bit pissy and I have no idea why. I'm so kind and smart so it's obviously something to do with him. I don't know what his problem is. He's a boy and I really don't understand boys so it's not my problem. Neither was Preston, but you'll see how that turned out soon enough. Now, Jenna watches out for Jenna only. Don't ask why I just talked in the third person, it's my chapter! I can do whatever I want!

Anyways, it's nice to just play deadly Capture the Flag and listen to Adele and Twenty-One Pilots every now and again. That is until the incredible loud explosion knocked out my IPod. After the explosion, it refused to turn on, only blinking white every now and again. Stupid downgraded technology not working well. I knew I should've waited for the iPhone 6 but Headmistress banned cell phones ever since Astrid and Zach basically overtook Instagram and got every celebrity to post pictures of Astrid on their wall.

"What now?" I said grumpily, marching over to a group of bushes. A huge broken branch lay just outside the trees.

"Must've been a weak branch" I said. A thought came to mind, so funny I couldn't resist saying it. "Or maybe a *really* fat squirrel."

From that same direction, someone was pushing through the foliage. Loud footsteps echoed throughout the forest. The crunching of dry leaves grew closer. I hid behind the tree with the broken branch getting into my fighting stance. I heard someone push through the bush just as I finished winding up my arm. A stiff arm blocked my

punch. Mitchell stood in front of me, his shirt ripped to shreds and his pants riddled with holes and twigs.

"The hell happened to you?" I asked still surprised Mitchell blocked my punch so easily.

"Their camp, EMPs, traps, nearly plummeted to death, how's your day been?" he asked kind of nonchalantly.

"Terrible, I haven't beaten anyone up today!" I complained. You should know by now that beating people up is kind of my thing.

I followed Mitchell to the flag where he placed his new EMPs with his other stash of bombs in his little fanny pack.

"I've got good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?" he said. Last time he asked this he got a punch to the face for telling me we were out of chocolate cake. He back up, making room for him to dodge a possible strike.

"Good first then bad, that way I'll be prepped to kick the shit out of them."

"OK" he said with a heavy sigh, preparing himself for the strike destined to come.

"The good news is I found their camp, it's by a creek a few hundred yards away."

A smile crossed my face. My revenge was coming soon, and when it came, it was sure to be painful.

"The bad news, Richie is hurt." he said as carefully as he could.

Curiously, I asked "how exactly is that bad news?"

"Because he is a person, a teammate, and our friend."

I burst into laughter, so lively and fitful, it gave Headmistress competition.

"He's the enemy, Mitchell! You better not be going soft."

"I'm not going soft, I'm playing the game." he said stubbornly, crossing his arms.

We stared each other down for a while, glaring at each other for at least 5 minutes. I had no idea where this newfound stubbornness in Mitchell came from, but I liked it.

"Fine!" I said. Even though I liked Mitchell's stubbornness it wasn't okay, my reputation was at stake. "I'll go get the flag, you stay here and guard it from Astrid and Zach. Do not lose that flag before I get back!"

With that, I stomped into the woods. After all, you have to make a great exit, you never know who's watching. I was fairly sure I knew the creek Mitchell was talking about, if anything, I'd surely stumble upon it eventually. I grabbed a long vine hanging off of a tree a tied my gloves together and threw them over my shoulder, I wouldn't need them just yet. Oh, I couldn't wait to get my revenge on Richie! Even though it had been several months since our initial meeting, I wasn't going to let him one up me again. Brawn over brains bucko, my dad always told me. The Great Capo wasn't the greatest mentor, a few trips to JUVIE proves that point. Each time he came to get me he'd say, "As long as you proved your point sweetheart." My dad is a sweet guy under all his tattoos, muscles, and bad attitude. Like father like daughter I

guess. Although my latest and last adventure hadn't ended so well with anyone, the cops, my dad, and even worse, myself. In fact, it wasn't even my fault! Stupid Preston playing with my feelings! He got what he deserved and justice was my dad's number one rule.

I know what you are thinking, no my dad isn't Batman!

Preston is too personal though, and besides, I have a game to win. Marching through the woods helped, you know the typical blowing off steam. I broke a few trees but hey, they're digitally created, it's not they're living creatures. After breaking a few trees in half, I finally focused on finding Richie. The little prick was about to get an ass whooping he wouldn't forget.

I don't know how or why they were being so quiet. I must've came across the team at the perfect time because Astrid and Zach just sprinted away from Richie, running off into the forest. I couldn't blame them, I'd do the same to Richie, but if I had to guess, they were off to find Mitchell and fail at retrieving the flag. By far the hardest thing in this game was stopping myself from jumping out from behind this bush and ripping Richie limb from limb. But alas, I'm a civilized person. Besides, I could him talking shit about me and it's always nice to get feedback on your personality, especially when it's from your worst enemy.

"I'm going to be so ready for Jenna! I need to get a better visual though".

He strode over to the tree I hid behind. Oh, how naive and clueless he is! I could've jumped him right there but where's the fun in that? He began to climb the tree grabbing holds and hoisting himself up. I followed behind him, doing some horror movie type shit. Just as he was about to get to the lowest branch, I pulled his leg as hard as I could.

"Holy crap!" he screamed as he fell. Just for your information, his face was priceless. He landed with a thud on the ground, clearly the air knocked out of him, after all, he just fell 10 feet to solid ground.

I jumped down to the ground. I was so pumped with energy, so ready for my revenge. Richie groaned, rolled over a tried to get to his feet. I kicked him back down, knocking him face first into the dirt. I couldn't help but laugh, the first true laugh I'd had in a long time, as if someone told me a hilarious joke. Well, at least I was looking at one.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" I said, walking around Richie as he struggled to his feet. He whipped out the knife from his pocket and a taser from its holster. I strapped on my gloves, the electricity coming to life as they sensed my hand. We squared up, circling each other, waiting for someone to make the first move. This reminded me of the old Street Fighter game my dad had on his Dream Caster, us circling each other, waiting for the first strike.

As if the old announcer from the game had said "ATTACK!" in the back of my mind, I sprang forward as Richie sprinted at me. My fists moved so fast, I had to go purely on instinct. Richie managed to duck and dive between my punches landing a hard punch at my stomach. I slid back for the momentum of his hit, nearly slamming into a tree behind me. Richie waved his hand, inviting me forward. The little twit had the audacity to taunt me! I lunged forward, faked out a strike at Richie head. He dodged sideways but I was ready. I vaulted around him, turned on my electricity and landing a flawless punch to his shoulder. He went down in a heap, shaking from electrocution. I walked calmly over to the flag, ripped it from the ground and held it up valiantly. Now I just needed to get it to the other side of the field. Just as I was about to sprint into the woods, Richie stood up, his eye still twitching.

"You're not leaving with that flag Jenna."

"Oh yeah? And who's gonna stop me?"

Richie sprinted straight at me, flipped over my head, and blocked my path.

"Me." he said defiantly.

With nothing but a taser and a knife, he stood in front of my quickest way back to Mitchell. I threw down the flag. What can I say, I can never resist a good fight.

"Let's go Wise Guy"

"Sure thing Hood Rat"

We launched at each other, only one of us to make it of this fight and I didn't plan on losing.

Page Break

Chapter 13: *Mortal Kombat voice* FIGHT!

Richie

There is nothing scarier than an extremely violent teenage girl with electrical charge metal gloves launching herself at you, fully intent on killing you. Also, falling 10 feet off of a tree to solid ground was fairly terrifying too. If Jenna's mission had been to scare me, it surely worked.

I definitely jinxed myself. While I was climbing the tree, I thought to myself "Boy, I'll be totally safe up here! I can see everything!" Yeah, everything except the 150-pound girl lumbering up behind me. That was the point when I felt something grab my ankle and I was jolted off the tree. Not to mention, I have a fear of heights. It's not terrible enough to stop me from climbing trees but still I get a little sick. So, falling a story and hitting the hard ground was definitely a shock. Getting the wind knocked out of me by Jenna for what? The third time? She is so not getting away with that flag. I won't let her win this time.

"Give me the flag Jenna."

"Give you the flag? And why exactly would I do that?" she asked quizzically. She smiled in a confident, sarcastic way.

"You're not leaving here with that flag Jenna." I was now on my feet, twigs and leaves still stuck to my clothes.

"And who exactly is determining that?"

I absolutely hated how stuck up she was. I understood that she was battling me in the game, but it was clear we had a deeper problem. We were supposed to be a team, working together to win, not battling each other for attention. In fact, I have no idea where the flip came from. I don't know where the energy came from either. My adrenaline must have been working overtime. I felt completely exhausted just a second ago, after all, I just fell out of a tree. Suddenly I was in front of Jenna, blocking her path to the other side of the field.

"Me" I said so confidently and stubbornly, I knew I wouldn't lose. My parents always said I was extremely stubborn, this was the better side.

I grabbed my knife and taser. I knew Jenna would have her gloves, there was no way she'd leave them out of a game. Electricity arced across her knuckles as if she was some sort of video game boss. We circled in a small ring of leaves where I landed. Jenna lunged at me, trying to get an easily path way to her side of the field. I dodged and dodged again. I knew I couldn't fight Jenna with strength, that was her thing. I had to outsmart her and I knew just how to do it. Jenna prided herself on being the best, her narcissism would be her down fall.

Jenna was still going like a well-oiled machine, sending various punches kicks and jabs my way. I blocked all of them, occasionally blocking and striking with my knife and taser. She got lucky a few times, managing to just get me with a quick jab in the stomach or knock my legs. She finally got lucky enough to knock me off my feet. She stood over me, smiling. "Just like I thought".

There was no way I'm letting Jenna win that easily. I screamed, kicking my feet out, knocking Jenna's out from under her. She collapsed in a heap into the dirt.

"Gah!" she screamed, pounding her fist into the dirt.

I scrambled to my feet, flicking my taser on. I ran to the flag, still laying in the grass on the end of the meadow. I grabbed the metal rod, my taser still in my other hand. I turned around just in time to see Jenna sprinted towards me like a crazed bull. I sidestepped and swiped with my taser, barely scratching Jenna across her back. She stumbled, shaking from the electricity, but still standing.

"You indignant little piece of-"

She didn't get to finish. I threw the flag as far away from Jenna as I possibly could. I then sprinted towards her, launching into kickboxing mode. Punch, kick, block, dodge. Just various combinations of four moves flying back and forth between Jenna and me. I jumped above her low kick, knocking her knee hard as I came down. Jenna

crumpled and I wrapped my arm around her, getting her into a headlock. She struggled, screaming insults at me as I tightened my grip. She threw punches where she could, my legs and hands, trying to get out of my head lock.

"Jenna, stop! Stop it!" I said, trying to calm her down. I'd prefer not to suffocate my teammate in a game.

She kept squirming and kicking. Finally, she got lucky, landing a hard blow directly into my side. It felt like getting T-boned by a trucker trailer. I sat down hard in the grass, trying hard to move. Jenna stood up in front of me, trying to catch her breath as well but smiling.

"Give me the flag and you might just survive this."

I gather enough breathe to say two words, "Not today".

Jenna's face turned red with anger. She screamed in aggravation and threw her fist directly at my face with as much force as she could. I fell into the grass my face numb.

My nose was definitely broken, I could feel the blood rushing down my face and into my mouth. The only things I could feel was the blood on my face and the coppery taste in my mouth. I felt myself get thrown in the air only to hit the ground once again. Over and over, I don't remember how many times but I definitely blacked out. I woke up to someone slapping my face. No doubt it was Jenna. I have no idea why she didn't just take the flag and win like she was supposed to. I was just able to open my eyes. Jenna was sitting on top of me, her legs on my arms, pinning me to the floor.

"Sleeping-Not-So-Beauty finally wakes up!" she said laughing. "That was only the beginning. I'm about to make your life a whole lot worse."

I heard Astrid's voice but I couldn't see her. She was somewhere off to my left screaming my name.

"Jenna! Stop it please! We already won! The game is over!" she said over and over begging her to stop.

This only enraged Jenna even more, causing her to lift me up and throw me into a tree. She held me by my shirt, punching me repeated in the stomach. At this point I couldn't even move, much less protect myself. I could hear Zach and Mitchell too, yelling at Jenna to stop. All of the sudden Jenna stopped. I don't know what happened, but I dropped onto the ground. I could still hear Jenna yelling, whether it was at me or everyone else I don't know, but she seemed exceptionally mad. I was just able to turn and see Astrid and Jenna fighting. Not yelling at each other but fighting. Astrid doing kicks and flips I've never seen before, Jenna just able to dodge them. All of the sudden I felt someone on top of me. It was Jenna again.

"If I can't win, neither will he!" she said, winding up her hand for a hard punch.

I tilted my head and saw Astrid looking terrified. I signaled to her to a small black object lying in grass near Jenna. *Get the taser! Please Astrid understand me!* She understood!

"Jenna. Don't do this. Why do you want to hurt him so bad? Being aggressive isn't bad, but you need to know limits!"

That seemed to freeze her in her tracks. She looked at Astrid and saw her inching towards the taser. She picked it up and laughed.

"Really? You're telling me to stop and yet you're moving towards a weapon?"

She flicked the taser on and thrust it at my chest. I can't even describe what being electrocuted feels like, but here's the best way to put it. Imagine touching an electrified fence. Now imagine touching that electrified fence while being in a kiddie pool filled with electric eels. I guess that's pretty close to how it feels to get punched by a taser with Jenna being the one punching you.

I screamed for several seconds after she took the taser away. The look on her face told me she no longer took pleasure this. She lowered the taser to the ground, but I guess Astrid thought she was going to shock me again. Astrid grabbed the taser out of her back pocket and ran for Jenna. She jumped Jenna and thrust down at Jenna. There was a bright flash and Jenna screamed. I felt her get off of me and stand up, looking at 2 large black objects in her hands. The black object looked kind of familiar, like gloves, but that's not possible, Jenna's gloves were blue. Jenna was weeping in the grass.

Astrid and Zach knelt above me.

"Richie?Richie! Are you okay?"

"Yeah I think. Just help me up." I said. Each word hurt, my entire face hurt, but I had to stand.

Astrid and Zach looped their hands beneath my armpits and carefully helped me up. The whole world began to spin, there were multiple of everything: multiple Astrid's and Zachs walking with me, multiple Mitchells running towards me, and multiple angry Jenna marching in my direction.

"You!" she said angrily. "Look what you've done!"

My eyes finally focused, just in time to see Jenna in Astrid's face.

"Enough!" I screamed.

Everyone stopped, shocked by my sudden outburst. After all, I was just getting creamed a few minutes ago. I could walk again, in fact, I felt perfectly fine. *The effects should last for an hour after you take the pill.* I could feel myself healing, my broken nose, my hurt chest, and pretty much every bone in my body. Everyone moved out of the way; no had ever spoke, much less walked, after getting their butt kicked by Jenna.

Only now I saw the problem, what the bright flash was. Jenna's gloves were completely blackened, their leather material scorched from heat. They were destroyed and nothing could repair them.

"Jenna, I'm so sorry maybe we can fix-" I started.

"Don't. Just don't." Her voice cold, like a frozen bullet to the heart. "Don't ever talk to me, don't look at me, don't even come near me." Her face showed extreme rage, but her eyes said otherwise.

"Jenna, please-"

"STOP! JUST STOP!" she screamed, tears coming down her face. "Just leave me alone."

She stormed towards the entrance, the digital simulation slowly disappearing behind her.

"It'll be okay", Mitchell said, " She just needs to calm down. I'll talk to her in a bit."

We watched Jenna walk to the door, but she suddenly stopped. She turned her head and murmured something. "I q-" was all I heard.

"What?" I asked, hoping she was calm enough now so we could talk.

"I QUIT!" she yelled, her braid flying around her face, billowing in the wind.

Everything went silent. We all stared at her in shock.

"I'm quitting the team. See ya losers later." she said as she angrily marched out into the hallway, nearly steamrolling Coach Harley in the process.

"Well done everyone! Go get ready for Tactics and I will see you tomorrow!" Coach Harley said, somehow unfazed by Jenna's anger.

We cleared out, walking back to the dorms to gather our books for Tactical class.

Jenna's door was the first in the dorm hallway.

"I hope she's okay." Zach said

"She'll be fine. Jenna's stronger than any of us." Astrid said, although it sounded more like she was trying to reassure herself.

But that was the one thing I was worried about. As we passed her door, I heard a soft whimpering, like a child who had been crying.

"Hey guys, I'll catch up with you in a bit."

Astrid and Zach looked at me worried.

"Are you sure?" Zach said.

I must've had a really serious expression because Zach turned around and said, "Yeah you're sure."

I had a job to do, and no one hurts a teammate, even if they hurt me.

Page Break

Chapter 14: May The Truth Set You Free

Astrid

That was by far the best and worst game of Capture the Flag I have ever played. I've studying every play in sports, every trick in the book, and every secret maneuver to winning, but scaring the crap out of the defender, having your teammate steal the flag, and come back to see your team defender being tortured by the other team. The single most surprising thing was that Jenna actually quit the team, because of what? A pair of gloves? That's absolutely absurd! Well, that's coming from the girl that has a panic attack when a book in her library is out of place. I bet you're wondering about the "scaring the crap out of Mitchell part". It's actually pretty funny, but still dangerous.

I led Zach back to where I was spying on Jenna and Mitchell before. The jungle seemed to be changing, more trees I didn't remember, new paths to follow. Of course, this was completely possible; Coach Harley was sitting in the tech room eating a chocolate bar and designing this course. What was extremely odd was the scorch mark on a tree we passed.

I turned to Zach, "Hm, this is new. Did you do this?"

He looked just as confused as I did. "Not that I remember."

I decided to just ignore it. Whatever it was, I wouldn't kill us. We finally came to the downed tree.

"Okay, they are camped right behind this tree. How are we going to do this?" I asked Zach. If his video games taught him anything, it strategic capture.

"Left and right flank maybe? Although that big field is going to make it difficult to sneak up on them."

He paced back and forth, making loud crunching sounds. I wanted to silence him but pacing helped him think. The kid is brilliant but it's going to kill him one day. Before Richie, we used to play dodge ball, but 20 times more dangerous of course, and Zach almost got beamed in the head by a ball from Jenna because he stepped out of cover while pacing back and forth. As funny as it would've been, it would be 10 times more painful, no doubt.

Quite honestly, Zach was taking too long. I looked throughout the trees, looking for a spot to sneak up on Mitchell and snatch the flag. That familiar tree loomed in front of us with the broken branch still bent under my weight. Look Mother Nature, I understand I'm not the best at diets, but I'm trying my best.

"I have an idea, just follow my lead."

I looked up at the broken branch again. An idea popped into my head. I thought back to the circus camp my mom sent me to when I did gymnastics. Another nearby branch swept low over the meadow, right over their flag.

"Zach, I need a distraction."

"What type of distraction? Wait, what's the plan?"

At this point, Zach was thoroughly confused. Perfect!

"Just be as annoying as you possibly can and keep Mitchell occupied."

"Okay, that's my expertise, but what are you planning?"

"Let's just say, I'm gonna get the drop on Mitchell."

Nearly falling out of a tree probably should've scarred me for life, but alas, I never learn. Hand over hand, foot over foot, I slowly made my way up the trunk. Finally, after what felt like several hours, I made it to the crook of the tree. I could see the whole meadow clearly. Mitchell was walking near the brush, trying to spy, most likely, either Zach or me. There was one branch that stretched into the meadow. Well, there was two, but we know what happened to the other one. *Not one word.* Mitchell was pacing just outside of an area I could get him from. But that was perfect! Mitchell wasn't what I was after. I needed the flag, and I could probably do it if nothing went wrong. That was a long shot though. I heard rustles a little further down the forest (probably Zach's idea of a distraction). Mitchell carefully made his way over to the rustling, a small cove opposite to the flag, leaving it perfectly open for the taking.

I inched myself slowly on to the branch, praying to every deity in existence that this branch wouldn't break. As quietly and as fast as I could, I made it to the end of the branch just over the flag. I wrapped my legs around the branch and flipped upside down. I wrapped my hand around the steel bar of the flag and yanked with all my power upwards. Only, it wasn't enough. I needed something to push off of to get the power.

Suddenly, a loud sound of a twig snapping and Mitchell's scream that almost made me fall off my branch. Suddenly several rocks pebbled (sorry for the pun) Mitchell in the face. He backed up to the flag, defending it while every now and again getting a pebble to the face.

"Crap!" I whispered.

I missed my chance to snatch the flag. I hovered above Mitchell trying to not make a sound.

"Come out at fight!" he yelled at the grass.

He had no idea that I was here! Oh, this could be fun.

Mitchell inched around the opposite side. I saw Zach hiding behind a tree, rock in hand. I rubbed a finger under my nose: our sign for "okay". He threw the rock at Mitchell, hitting him in the stomach. Mitchell looked at where the rock came from and began to move that way. I suddenly dropped in front of him.

"Hey!" I screamed.

Mitchell fell on his butt, obviously surprised by my sudden appearance. I gripped the flag and yanked up with all my might. With a satisfying "shink", the flag rose from the ground.

"Zach, to me!" I yelled in his general direction.

To my surprise, he came up behind me.

"Time to go?" he asked.

He looked at Mitchell recovering from shock.

"Yeah, time to go."

We sprinted through the woods, Mitchell's grenades exploding behind us. I had no idea what types they were and I didn't intend to find out.

"Follow me! We are almost there!" I yelled to Zach who ran alongside me.

Jumped over stray logs and dodging trees, we sprinted through the woods. A small black object sailed over my shoulder and hit a tree trunk in front of me. I stood in surprise at the grenade laying below my feet. Out of nowhere, Zach tackled me to the side into a small hole.

I couldn't hear anything. Zach was above me, waving his hand, trying to get my attention.

"Astrid? Astrid, we have to move!" Zach suddenly looked behind him.

"Stay still and don't make a sound." he said as he covered me with leaves, leaving small holes for me to breathe and see out of.

I shook my head weakly as he got up. He took out his sword, shouted something unintelligible and ran off towards our base. A tall dark figure came into my vision. Mitchell had grenades at a bat in his hands. He looked around searching for either Zach or me. No doubt I would've knocked him on his butt again but I could speak, much less move.

He must have spotted Zach because he threw a grenade in the air, smacked it with his bat, and watched it explode in the distance. Mitchell ran after his grenade. I groaned and slowly got to my feet. Every part of my body ached. I knew walking would be terrible but I had to move. With the flag still in my hand, I headed after Mitchell and Zach.

Mitchell must really like his grenades because they were going to town. Explosions rocked the forest. Every now and then, I passed a fire from one of Mitchell's incendiary grenades which I had to stomp out. This place may be digitally generated, but I'd rather not fight two of the strongest teenagers in the world while a fire rages around us.

Normally I have to track footprints, with Mitchell, I track detonations and fires. Of course, guys just like destruction, don't they? After stomping out several fires and

finding multiple scorch marks, I finally found Mitchell. I ducked behind a tree, peering around the corner. Luckily, Mitchell back was to me, but why was he looking down at a tree. I moved around to the tree to the left of Mitchell, giving me a perfect view of my injured friend.

Zach lay in the crook of the tree roots, clutching his leg. Mitchell must have gotten him with a grenade. For someone with flawless aim, we could evade his grenades fairly easily, but it was the fact that Mitchell could guess people's movements before they even happened that made him dangerous. He held a grenade marked with a yellow line.

"Sorry dude but I have to do this. What did Coach say? This will make for a shocking experience? Well, I can assure that."

Zach didn't say a word. He didn't move didn't even fight. Strangely, he blinked a lot. Zach not really the crying type though, so I don't know what he is doing. Of course, the one time I pay attention in Communications is the time we learn Morse code. Blink after blink, I finally made out the message: Sneak attack.

Don't worry Zach. I'm coming.

Thanks to ManHunt for teaching me how to move silently. I stepped out of the shadows and Zach saw me. I rubbed my finger under my nose. *Okay?* He rubbed his nose back. Almost there.

"Say hello to move little friend" Mitchell yelled, ripping the pin out of the grenade.

"Not today Mitchell" Zach said gleefully, noticing me gripping my taser and standing behind Mitchell.

I jabbed the taser into Mitchell's back. Mitchell spazzed erratically falling to the floor. The grenade rolled out of his hand, falling into the grass.

"Thanks" said Zach, with a huge smile across his face.

I stretched out my hand to him, lifting him up of the ground.

"Time to move" I said.

We ran into the woods as Mitchell's bomb exploded behind us, making one awesome looking exit.

It only took us a few minutes to sprint through the woods and arrive at our camp. We crossed the border, the flag billowing behind Zach and me. We cheered, roaring loudly as the bell to signify the end of the game sounded. The flag and Richie were nowhere to be found.

"What happened? Where's Richie?" Zach asked. Sadly, I was just as puzzled as he was.

I heard someone talking very low, very quietly, a voice all too familiar.

I ran around the rock, prepared for the worst. I clearly didn't prepare myself well enough because the sight of Jenna on top of a knocked-out Richie nearly moved me to tears.

"Jenna! Stop! The game is over!" I yelled.

She didn't even flinch. She just sat on top of a very dead looking Richie. *Quit it Astrid. There is no way Jenna killed Richie.*

I walked towards Jenna, trying to compose myself.

"Jenna, it's all good. The game is over. It's time for lunch. Do you want to head to Chick-fil-a again?" I asked, trying to get her off Richie.

This got her attention. There's nothing like food to grab the attention of a warrior, or a hungry teenager. Clearly Jenna wasn't hungry for French fries though, she was hungry for vengeance.

"If I can't win, he can't either!" She screamed back.

We always called Jenna anger management, but we had no idea she could get this brutal. She lifted her fist again and again, punch Richie in the face repeatedly.

"Jenna, stop!" Zach screamed.

He ran towards her but he tripped falling face first into the mud. He pounded his fist in the dirt.

"This stupid leg!" Zach yelled.

I saw what Mitchell did to him, why he was propped against the tree. Zach leg had a huge hole on his calf, his skin bright red. Mitchell must have nailed him with a grenade.

"It's okay Zach, don't hurt yourself more. I'll deal with Jenna."

"And what exactly do I do? Watch?"

"Glad we've met an understanding" I said and marched away.

No doubt Zach would've followed me but it seemed like Zach couldn't walk all too well. Quite honestly, I don't know how he managed to run through the forest.

I marched towards Jenna. She finally finished punching Richie. His face was bloodier than Zach leg, with a bright purple broken nose and a stream pouring down the side of his face.

Nobody hurts my friends. Squad means family; family means no one gets left behind.

I saw Richie turn his head and a sigh a relief passed through me. At least I know he isn't dead. His eyes were staring at a small black object in the grass, his taser. I knew exactly what I had to do.

"Jenna, don't do this. Know when to be aggressive!"

Jenna looked up, clearly displeased. Hopefully it because she was done beating the crap out of Richie. I looked at the Taser lying in the grass and dove to grab it but Jenna was much faster and closer. She ripped the taser away from me as I fell onto my face and slid right next to Richie.

"You're telling me to stop and you're trying to grab a weapon! I'll say Astrid, you're an okay spy but not that great of a negotiator."

Jenna uncapped the taser and flicked the switch to turn it on. I knew exactly what she was going to do. That SOB was about to fry my friend.

"NOOO!" I screamed as Jenna pressed the taser hard against Richie chest.

He convulsed in grass, even after Jenna pulled it away. Someone was screaming although I'm not sure if it was Richie or me. So, naturally, my training kicked in. I pushed myself to my feet as Jenna slipped her gloves back on. She pounded her fist together.

"Unarmed, in pain, and without a friend to help. Right Zach?" Jenna teased.

Zach was still standing in shock next to the rock. Thanks bud. I know hand to hand combat isn't his forte, but he could do something to help. He looked at my pocket, but not looking staring pointedly as if to say *Come on girl, I can't do all the work around here*. I felt my pocket and gripped the taser that Zach gave me earlier. I flicked open the cap and turned the taser on.

"Let's dance Donkey Kong." I said. Never before have I been so confident.

I sprinted directly at her, which, honestly, isn't my style. Jenna was clearly surprised too because she moved back to Richie rather than towards me. I don't know what came over me but for some reason, I grand jeted over Jenna's head. When I was directly over her, I pointed the taser directly down at her arm. Of course, I missed but it actually turned out better. The instant the tip of the taser hit Jenna's gloves, they exploded in a bright flash of light.

Naturally, I landed flawless (thanks to 12 years of practice) while Jenna lied in a burned pile of grass. Her gloves were strewn next to her, burnt to a crisp. I couldn't tell Zach's expression but he looked rather happy; that could also be shock which I won't blame him for.

I ran over to Richie who was sitting up, clearly bewildered to what was happened. I helped him to his feet.

"How you feel?" I asked, surprised he could even stand after being assaulted by Jenna and zapped by a taser.

"Surprisingly well." he said back, completely nonchalantly.

He nearly gets killed by Jenna and he has the guts to brush me off like that; I swear, he's cool but he really knows how to piss a girl off.

Zach walked over and pounded him on the back.

"That is how we win capture the flag ladies and gents!" he said joyfully. This clearly was the most exciting game we've had.

"YOU!" a voice behind us screamed.

Jenna stormed towards us with Mitchell on her tail. She shoved the burnt carcass of her gloves in my face.

"LOOK AT WHAT YOU DID!" she screamed.

Richie stepped in front of Me and Zach.

"Jenna, it okay, maybe we can fix them." he said as calmly as he could.

"Fuck that! Zappy here is going to pay!" she said, more furious than I have ever seen her.

Richie tried to calm her down, trying to telling her we could repair her stupid gloves, but Jenna didn't want to hear it.

"JUST STOP!" screamed and stormed away towards the exit.

Mitchell sighed and looked at us sadly, "She just needs time guys. Nice win."

He began to walk away when we heard Jenna's furious mumbling. I had no idea what she was saying, my ears still recovering from the explosion.

"What?" Richie yelled back.

Jenna suddenly whipped around and furiously yelled, "I QUIT!"

We all stopped in our tracks, surprised, not by her anger, but her incredible outburst.

She stormed out of the door, straight past Coach Harley who held the game flag.

"Well that went well." She said, happy as ever.

It was just Richie, Zach and I walking down the corridor to the dorms when I finally made up my mind about Jenna; something was seriously wrong and I was going to find out cause like I said earlier, I hate seeing my friends hurt.

"I'll see you guys later. I have something I need to do." Richie said as we past her door.

Zach and I stopped. I stared at him, confused.

"You know what, so do I. I'll catch up with you guys later." I said.

Zach looked at both of us. "Okay, well, if you guys want to join me in Super Smash once you're done, you're welcome to."

"Maybe." Richie and I said simultaneously.

We looked at each other and laughed and went our separate ways. I stood in front of Jenna's door. Please, please, please let me not get punched today. I knocked on her door.

"Who is it?" she yelled.

"Your number one fan." I responded. Jenna went quiet for a long time.

"Go away Astrid. I know Headmistress sent you here."

Honestly, I was never good at listening. I twisted the door handle and it easily unlocked. Jenna stood next to her bed, packing a suitcase full of stuff.

She looked at me with her infamous death stare. "I said go away. We have nothing to talk about."

"Clearly we do." I said looking at her half-packed suitcase.

She let out a deep sigh and sat on her bed. She looked up at me, but rather than her usually angered appearance, she had something completely unexpected: sadness.

"You wouldn't understand how it feels, Astrid, to let everyone down, to be a complete hypocrite."

I didn't say anything, not because I wasn't listening this time, but because I didn't know how to respond.

Jenna carried on. "I just need some fresh air. I need to go back to my regular life. No missions, no training, no reminders."

"Reminders? Reminders of what?" I asked, carefully prodding the bull. Jenna still sat on her bed, staring at the tile floor.

I slowly walked over to her and sat next to her. We didn't say anything for a long time and the awkward silence continued to grow.

"It's something I can't talk about, Astrid. It's a huge mistake, a transgression that can never be fixed."

"Well that's not dark and mysterious at all. Believe me Jenna, we all have things to hide. Except maybe Richie, but even he's too nice."

"I know right!" Jenna exclaimed. "Sometimes he is just so annoying!"

"Sometimes? More like 24/7." I said. That finally broke the ice between us. We launched into fitful laughter for at least 3 minutes. Jenna fell back on her bed and let out the jolliest, most contagious laugh I've ever heard. I was actually shocking to hear the girl whose resting face is a sneer, laugh harder than Headmistress.

"Do you love someone Astrid?" she asked, just all of the sudden stopping the laughter.

"Umm..." I said hesitantly.

"Not having a crush. Actually, being fully in love with someone."

"I'm not sure." I said, still in shock from her sudden change in tone.

"Well, it's the most incredible feeling. That is, until you find out the person isn't who they say they are." Jenna looked up at me solemnly. I just stared back, completely speechless. For once, words abandoned me.

"It's literally Beauty and the Beast except the characters are constantly changing. It's all Preston's fault."

"Wait? Who's Preston?"

Jenna looked at a picture sitting on top of her suitcase. "Something that can't be fixed." She said solemnly.

A tall boy with bright blue eyes and long brown hair stood next to Jenna. He had his arm wrapped around her as they stood in front of the Academy.

"There are always new beginnings, Jenna. It's obvious Mitchell is crazy about you."

"Yeah I've noticed." She said laughing. "I'm still deciding on that."

I tried to grab the picture, but Jenna swatted my hand away. The usual fire in her eyes had returned.

"Hey!" I screamed as she hit my arm. It wasn't even hard but rather shocking.

"You have no right! No right to touch my stuff! Especially not this you thief!"

I must have looked really surprised because Jenna's sneer had returned.

"That's right Catwoman. I know all about your little excursions you used to take. I must say, some of them were quite impressive. The National Bank was a nice choice, not the smartest, but I have to respect your bravery."

I slowly backed up towards the door.

"That's right, I read your file. You're an incredible teenager Astrid Oristano, a thief, a spy, but there's one thing you're too afraid to let everyone else know. You're a murderer Astrid, killing your own teammate in action."

Jenna stood up from the bed, tears streaming out of her eyes.

"You have no idea what he did! You could never understand the pain of killing someone you love, especially when you did it yourself, even if they deserve it! That's right, go hide in a book Astrid because that's what you do best!"

I backed out of the doorway, straight into Mitchell who stood just outside of Jenna's door staring at me in shock. Jenna stomped up to the door. "AND STAY OUT!" she screamed and slammed the door in our face.

"What happened in there?!" he said, thoroughly confused by Jenna depressed anger.

"Let's just say a leopard never changes its spots." I said as I stomped away.

Page Break

Chapter 15: A Gift and a New Old Friend

Zach

I swear, I will eventually develop something to ban every 12-year-old from online games because they are, honestly, the world's greatest enemy. Another thing I need to do is clean my desk because these new contraptions are really pesky. Mitchell's phone that I still needed to rewire, Astrid's eReader still needed to be upgraded, and now, Richie and I had to try to fix Jenna's gloves. She's a bit of a bully, but we are still a squad. As usual, the screen flashed with *Captain Falcon: Winner* when I easily felled Kirby off the edge. Richie sat on the couch in the corner, trying to

plan how we could repair Jenna's gloves. I could hear him grunt in frustration every now and again followed by a piece of paper flying over my head and landing in the garbage bin.

"Dude, have you thought about the NBA? You've made almost every shot!" I said to him, partially focused on the TV.

"My dad used to tell me the same thing, but I prefer tennis." he said without even looking up from his paper.

I paused the game and sat down next to him.

"You really think Jenna is quitting?" I asked. He was way too focused on these gloves and I needed someone more challenging to play instead of the easy computers.

"Jenna is pretty stubborn. Normally, once she makes a decision there is no swaying her." he responded, twiddling the pencil in his hand before writing down some lines and numbers on his paper.

He sighed. "Nope. That's not going to work either."

He crumpled the paper and threw it blindly at the bin. It hit the rim and fell to the ground.

"Mmm. Brick. There's goes your career."

He looked up at me, smiling, and then frowned again.

"Hey! That was a funny joke!" I said.

"Sorry dude. I was trying to think of something that I could do to fix this but everything I try, fails."

He threw the paper across the room, onto my desk next to Jenna's scorched gloves. I walked over to my desk and looked at the blackened material.

"Richie, there is no way you can fix this. Other than the nearly disintegrating leather, the wiring is completely fried! You'd have to get a whole new pair of gloves."

"There is always a way to fix stuff, Zach."

Jenna may be stubborn but Richie is as stiff as a tree (although Astrid begs to differ). I walked back to the couch, sat down, and snatched the pad away from Richie.

"Hey!" he complained.

"Richie, as your friend, I'm going to be nice. You're a really nice person."

"Zach, give me the pad back." he said as he stretched across me, trying to reach the pad.

"Upbubbub! No interrupting!"

Being over 6 feet tall, Richie almost reached the pad even though he was on the opposite side of the couch. I threw it onto the desk where Richie would have to get up to reach it.

He sat back in the couch, waiting for me to continue.

"As your teammate and fellow squad member, and I'm going to say this as bluntly, but kindly, as possible: you're more stubborn than Bethesda's creating crew."

He sat up giving one hell of a stare. "Thanks. I think? What exactly is your point?"

"My point is that we can't solve this through brain puzzles and super smarts. In fact, we can't solve this at all."

"Zach, how much Mountain Dew did you drink last night?"

"A lot. That's beside the point. Throw away your pad and pen. We are going to go make some new friends."

I grabbed Richie's arm and ripped him from the couch, his pen and paper falling to the floor. I pulled him to the door, grabbing Jenna's gloves off the desk on the way out. I pulled Richie down several corridors while he struggled to loosen my grip.

"Zach, where exactly are we going?"

"You're going to meet the best mechanic in the world, like Iron Man's alter ego, if Iron Man had an old car garage: Grease Monkey."

I pushed Richie into the elevator and we descended floor after floor, 52...51...50... Richie stared at the descending number for several minutes. Low elevator music played in the background.

"Well, I can't wait to meet your sweaty, motor oil and flour covered boyfriend."

"Very funny, Richie. First of all, I'm not gay. Second, don't call Grease Monkey a him unless you want to offend the person holding several heavy metal objects. Third, Grease Monkey is not your typical downtown mechanic."

We continued to watch the numbers fall, B25....B26....B27...

"Zach, why are we in the basement?"

"We aren't going a basement. It's more of a garage. Just wait and see."

Finally, we reached B44, Grease Monkey's garage. Thank goodness because if I had to listen to 60s remix one more time, I'd jump down the elevator shaft.

We stepped out into the workshop. Lifts held vehicles high in the air, loud music played through the speakers changing from Taylor Swift to Imagine Dragons to Fall Out Boy. you could just barely see sparks flying from something behind one of the lifts. Of course, Grease Monkey was still working on her supersonic car/plane. Last time I came, I nearly blew it up by giving her the wrong screwdriver but hopefully she's let that go. We ducked under a half open Academy car, literally ripped in half with steel and wires all over the place. Grease Monkey was under the chassis trying to attach a retractable wing to the side of her car.

"Hey Greasey!" I yelled.

She didn't hear, doesn't really surprise me though, the number of explosions and loud music she's heard has probably destroyed her ear drums. I grabbed the megaphone off a table next to me. A ton of screws fell out the front. Grease is a lot of things, but one thing she isn't is organized.

"Richie cover your ears for this next part." Honestly, he looked so overwhelmed I don't think he could comprehend what was going on.

I screamed as loud as I could into the megaphone, "YO GREASEY."

Grease's feet jerked up and there was a loud clang from under the car. I walked to the back of the workshop and found Grease's old radio. I hit the big red OFF button on the side, unplugged it, and hit it behind a cabinet. Besides, Grease has a phone, she can just get Spotify off of that.

I walked back to the car. Richie was wandering around the workshop, mesmerized by all of the mechanics.

"Don't touch anything," I said, "I have no idea how functional and explosive Grease's stuff is."

"My stuff is fully functional, thank you very much!"

Grease slid out from under the car, covered in oil, as usual. She flipped her short hair over her shoulder and stuck her favorite monkey wrench in her pocket.

"So, what do you plan to blow up now Zach? I have a jet in the back that has your name on it."

Ugh, girls.

"First of all, that wasn't my fault. Second, I'm not here to blow anything up."

"You're a girl?" Richie said behind me, still in a dumb stupor.

"What do you mean *you're a girl*? Did you expect a big burly man with a beard and a cigarette? Surprise, surprise, girls can be mechanics too."

Grease gave Richie a death stare and he just looked back at her, completely stupefied.

Grease strolled up to him, and even though she was half his height, slapped him across the face.

"Whoa! Grease!" I screamed.

"Relax, Volts, I'm just waking him up. Do you prefer I use Monkey here?" she said, patting the monkey wrench at her side.

"I told you to not call me Volts." I muttered. I do not want to get into that story right now, so don't even ask me about it!

"Sorry Sparky." she said giggling.

I just sighed. It seems like to be a spy you have to have an aggravating stubborn attitude.

"Okay guys. I think I'm good." Richie said leaning on a work table. I don't know if it was because Grease slapped him or he was trying to look calm. "So, what is your actual name?"

"Grease and if you call me anything else, you'll end up on one of these lifts. Got it?" Richie laughed. "You got it." he said smiling. I think Grease smacked him a little too hard.

"So, Grease we need to ask a favor of you." I said. I had to move this conversation along because Grease could talk all day.

"Anything for you Zappy." she said putting her hands on her hips. She really knows how to push buttons, mechanical and emotional.

I shoved the burnt gloves in her face. "Can you fix these?"

"Of course, I can. What were they?"

"Jenna's gloves" Richie quickly responded.

Her gaze became heavy. "What did you do to my gloves?"

"Your gloves? These are Jenna's." Richie said, confused once again.

"No I made these for Preston who gave them to Jenna. The little sucker gave away a perfect weapon. Well, *apparently* not perfect."

"What is the deal with this Preston kid?!" Richie asked.

"You go here and don't know the history of Preston Greene?" she laughed. "Go check the library you idiot. He is the biggest traitor to exist in the U.S."

"Grease, can you fix them?" I asked.

"Sure, I can. But that would require making a whole new pair. I have something better." she said, walking towards the back of the workshop.

We followed Grease to the back of the workshop to a blank wall. Just when I thought Grease had inhaled too much gas fumes, she hit a button on the side of the generator. The wall rumbled and flipped inside out, screeching as the steel ran on the gears.

"The thing needs some WD-40" Grease murmured.

The entire wall became an arsenal, organized and labelled by people. A soft blue light glowed behind each hanging weapon. Things for everyone in the team, weapons, computers, and gadgets galore. A big bronze plate with my name on it held multiple guns, knives, and odd looking lightsaber type things. I picked up a small knife and turned it in my hand. Grease came over to me.

"That's one of my favorites. Press the buttons on the bottom."

There were 6 buttons on the butt of the knife like a bracelet. I went to press the dark maroon button, but Grease stopped me.

"Do not point that at me unless you want to have fried Grease Monkey."

Fried Grease Monkey?!

I pointed the knife at the line of small practice targets on the wall and pressed the button. The knife glowed bright red. I could feel the extreme heat coming off the blade.

"Slash the target" Grease commanded.

A huge gash marked the target where the knife cut through but also left a huge black scorch mark.

"Fire? This thing has different elemental functions?" I asked, marveled by its pure awesomeness.

"Exactly. Red is fire; its gets hotter than an oven so don't touch it. Blue is water and ice; it depends how long you hold down the button. Green for earth; you can blind people with dust, dirt, pretty much any earthy substance. Yellow is for electricity; it will zap the nearest thing metallic and shoots lightning bolts when you hold it down. White is for wind; it will release a huge gust of wind as long as you hold it down. Lastly, and my personal favorite, is black. Basically, the knife will split into 6 different smaller knives which are made for throwing. Are you accurate with throwing sharp objects?"

"I'm accurate with pretty much everything." I said, still twisting the knife in my hand, basking in its glory.

Zach stood over where a large black sign read Zach Hogan above a different array of weapons. I picked up the sheath off the hanger, stuck my new knife in it, and walked over to Zach who was holding a huge blue gun.

"Ah yes, I call that one Megaman. It's fashioned after Megaman's arm gun. Basically, just point and shoot. You can charge it up for bigger, stronger shots too."

"It's incredible!" he said, clearly as shocked as I was.

"Now to attend to our business." Grease said as she bumped Zach out of the way and began walked to Jenna's secret vault.

She grabbed a lacrosse stick off the hook and handed it to Zach. "This should be a fine replacement for those gloves."

"What does it do?" Richie asked.

"It can only be activated by Jenna, but I'll tell you what, you don't want to end up on either side of this stick."

"Cool!" Richie said. Great! Now the most level headed person on the team was going totally fanboy.

Grease took a little remote out of her pocket and clicked a button. The wall began to slide back and slowly go back to their plain steel look.

"Well, if Jenna is really leaving the Academy, I'd better go see her."

Everyone was waiting for us up at the front. Headmistress, Ms. Tick, Coach Harley, and the rest of the squad surrounded Jenna.

Astrid saw us first and ran up to us crying. "Guys, I didn't think she'd really do it! I watched her walk into Headmistress's office and resign."

She wrapped me and Richie in a huge bear hug and cried on both of our shoulders. She lifted her head, still sniffing. "You must be Monique. You're the world's greatest engineer, right?"

Richie stared at Astrid, dumb founded.

"As far as I know." she replied, as if Astrid and she were old friends. A few minutes ago, she wanted to rip me to shreds. "Yes, my name is Monique, " she said, giving Richie the old *don't you dare* glance, "but I normally go as Grease Monkey."

"Well, it's very nice to finally meet you Grease Monkey."

"You know her, Astrid?" Richie asked, no doubt surprised that the only engineering Astrid has paid attention to is fabric design.

"Of course! I've read about her everywhere! She made the world's first usable hover board that actually flies instead of the cheap excuses for mini segways! Maybe if you came to the library instead of playing video games with Zach every night, you'd actually know some of this stuff, Mr. "Smartest Person in the World"."

Mitchell walked up to us in his usual basketball shorts and T-shirt with his baseball bat in hand. "I'm so sorry guys. I tried to talk her out of it but, well, you see how it went."

"It's okay Mitchell, there's nothing we could've done about it." I said, patting him on the back.

Jenna was waiting in the center of the courtyard with a backpack slung over her shoulder. She looked like a normal girl I'd see in high school.

Richie met her first. "Whatever I did Jenna, I'm sorry, just please don't leave."

"You didn't do anything. I just need a break. I came here when I was 13, Richie. After 3 years, I need to go home for a bit."

They fist bumped and that was it, final words bound by mutual respect and a fist bump. Therefore, I don't interact with other teenagers. Video games are so much easier: you do what you want and if you mess up, hit the restart button.

Grease walked up to her next.

"You finally came out of your hole." Jenna said smiling.

Grease smiled back, "Of course. I have to say goodbye to the one person that uses their fist as a hammer!"

The girls hugged.

"I almost forgot!" Grease said. She pushed past Astrid and Richie and ripped the lacrosse stick out of my hand. She ran back to Jenna who was clearly surprised by the gift.

"Grease, this is awesome!" She said, twirling the black stick in her hands, getting a feel for her new gift. "Why?"

"It's something to keep you safe. If you ever anything, you know my number."

They hugged once more and Grease stepped back, standing with Astrid and Richie in front of the doors.

I just noticed Ms. Tick and Coach Harley were gone when Richie pushed me forward, signaling that it was my turn. Of course, I had to be last. Naturally the quietest and most awkward person should go when everyone is watching.

Jenna smiled as I solemnly made my way forward.

"It's okay Zach, I'll only be gone for a bit." Jenna said smiling. "You know, you were always my favorite of the brainy part of the squad. You're quiet and level headed. That's good. Most often, they're the most dangerous ones."

"Thanks Jenna," I said blushing. The only time she's complimented me was when I hacked into Mitchell's phone and made all of his workout music Taylor Swift songs. I still haven't decided if that was sarcasm or genuine friendliness. "I'm a huge fan of the way you punch things into submission. It's really cool, like a video game."

Jenna laughed. ""That's good to know I guess." We hugged and I backed up to join the rest of the group. Astrid, Mitchell, Richie, Grease, and me all standing in a big group with Jenna about to leave.

"I have one last gift." Headmistress said. She strode calmly up to Jenna, holding a small black box in her hands. "Here you go, dear."

Jenna lifted a shimmering silver chain from the box. It had a small quiver and a single arrow on it, one small charm.

"Thank you, Headmistress, It's beautiful!" Jenna said, marveling its shine in the early sunset.

"It's a tracking device. If you ever need any assistance, put the arrow in the quiver and a blue light should appear and that means help will arrive shortly."

"Thank you, Headmistress! Thank you everyone! I'll be back before you know it!"

"I'm sure you won't dear. Have a nice vacation!" Headmistress said waving Jenna off. We all watched the strongest member of our team walk into the town.

We stared at the sunset, even after Jenna was long gone.

"Okay students, we have a big day ahead of us! Everyone back to your dorms."

Headmistress said, herding us through the doors. We all walked through the doors and down the halls solemnly.

"So, Grease, where's your room?" Richie asked.

"My garage, of course."

He must've been asking because there was an entire floor of dorms, but not seen or heard Grease upstairs in the weeks he's been here.

Headmistress lagged behind all of us, locking the doors as we came in.

"Good night everyone!" she said cheerfully as we marched to our rooms.

I was half way down the hall when I remembered I had a drive for Headmistress on every known location for possible recruits sitting on my desk that was due 2 days ago. I ran to my room, grabbed the USB off my desk, and ran back to the Lounge where Headmistress was talking to her Communicator.

"Mission Accomplished ladies!" she said. "The muscle has been removed from the group. One down, five to go."

I hugged the corner of the wall. This was not possible; Headmistress is the nicest, happiest person to walk the Earth. I'll talk to her about it tomorrow. Maybe I heard it out of context.

Page Break

Chapter 16: Mission Impossible

Mitchell

Okay, I'm going to be honest, Jenna leaving the Academy is the worst thing to ever happen. Even the Preston situation wasn't as bad as this. Even though it was only Zach, Jenna, and me, we at least solved that problem relatively easy; even if the end was a bit... frosty. At least Jenna recovered from Preston, but that was almost a year ago; a broken heart takes a long time to heal. It doesn't just scab over and then magically disappear one day; its constantly bleeding, reopening, and being stitched up again.

I sat in my room, which was dirty as usual. We have maid services but the young Russian lady who used to serve me, Maria, had mysteriously disappeared. One day she just stopped coming; maybe she just gave up cleaning the room that was dirty the second you left it. Come to think of it, I haven't seen many staff members recently. Maybe they went on vacation? Do spies have vacation days? I'll put that on my list of things to ask Headmistress about. A soft tick of a clock came from above my head. 11:30, ten minutes until Games. Seeking Saturdays are never fun, let's get that straight right now. Astrid memorizes the entire field, Richie knows exactly what play everyone is likely to make, and Zach loves setting up traps. Luckily, I'll be seeking this time. A few well-placed grenades and everyone scatters; easy pickings. It's just not the same without Jenna though. Her incredible smile after beating a practice dummy to a pulp, the way she is always so energized, her amazing tough girl attitude, I really hope she comes back as soon as she said. *Tick tick* 11:40. I grabbed my bag and my bat off my bed. I'll clean this place up after Games, maybe. I made my way through the clothes, empty pizza boxes, and baseball cards clustered in piles across the floor until I finally made it to the door. I grabbed the handle and swung the door open to find Astrid staring at me, shocked.

"I was just about to knock!" she said, flustered from my sudden appearance.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Richie, Zach, and I were going down to the cafeteria before the games. You want to come?"

"I think I'll go to batting cages for a few minutes before games. I may as well practice my aim if I'm seeker."

I began to walk away from Astrid. Quite honestly, I needed some time to mourn Jenna. Her being gone was even worse than her being dead. At least when a person is dead you know they aren't coming back, but there's the small voice in the back of my head going insane just waiting for Jenna's return. I reached the end of the hallway and went to push open the big metal doors to the gym but something made me turn around.

"Astrid wait!"

She turned on her heels, a smile across her face.

"What's up Mitchell?"

"What are we having for lunch?" I said, smiling back.

"I'm so glad you asked."

We walked into the elevator.

"So, I've memorized the next few months of lunch plans. What is it you want to eat?"

"I'm really in the mood for Italian food. Maybe pizza?"

"Well, Pizza Hut is open downstairs or Headmistress might allow us to order something."

I pressed the glowing button the read Cafe across the top. The elevator lurched and began to descend.

"We may as well order something." I said. "I'll call Linguini's. Do you want anything?"

"We should just get a pizza for everyone. Actually, get 2. Richie and Zach will probably stuff one down themselves."

I couldn't help but smile. I grabbed my phone out of my back pocket. Linguini's was already a saved contact. What can I say? I like Italian food.

"Hey, Antonio its Mitchell. Yep just getting my regular order. Also, 2 cheese pizzas. Yes sir, the same address. 30 minutes is perfect. Thanks dude."

Ding. Floor Level Cafe

"And here's our stop." Astrid said.

We walked into the big white room, pretty much an exact replica of the Pink Flamingo Mall's food court. Chick-fil-a, Subway, Little Tokyo, pretty much heaven to me.

We walked out of the elevator, making our way through the tables until we reached where Richie, Zach, and Grease were already sitting. Richie smiled when he saw us walk over.

"Hey guys! Grab a seat." He said, waving us over.

The cafe was surprisingly empty. Normally, there's a ton of staff on their breaks. Now that I think about it, I haven't seen very many staff members recently.

Anyways, Astrid and I grabbed 2 chairs from the next next to us and pulled them over next to Zach and Grease.

"So, what are you guys getting for lunch? I ordered some pizza if you guys want that."

"Mitchell, that sounds awesome. Thanks." Grease said

An awkward silence settled over us. Without Jenna, the table was remarkably quiet. Even if she did threaten people, it was nice to have a laugh and some noise than awkward silence.

"So, anyone want to go to the Dojo and practice a bit after this?" Richie asked.

"Sure, but you're going to get your butt beat again." I said.

For some odd reason, Zach and Richie looked at each other and smiled.

"Are you sure Mitch? We have a few new tricks up our sleeves." Zach said with a strange condescending smile.

"Good" I said. "I need a challenge."

With Jenna gone, someone needs to keep up the smack talk. Sadly, it's not really my strong point. At the Academy, we learned drills, not how to drill.

Saving us from the awkward silence, the emergency bell rang. It's loud sound and flashing lights filled the cafeteria. *All students report to the briefing room.*

"Time to go to work ladies and gentlemen!" Richie said as we ran out of the cafeteria to the briefing room.

Normally, briefing is everyone sitting down at a table of holograms and computers while Headmistress gives us the low down on what's going on. Nope! This we got a folder! Not even a hologram! A plain folder with some papers in it and an empty room. The life of a spy.

"Some briefing." I said as Richie flipped through the folder. Every now and then, he hummed or sighed.

"So, what are we dealing with?" Astrid asked.

He passed the folder to Zach who was practically leaning over his shoulder. Zach opened the folder and scanned through the papers.

"It's the Jester isn't it." I asked.

Richie looked me square in the eye. "Yes, it is, Mitchell."

"Perfect." Astrid said as Zach passed her the folder.

"Astrid, make sure you memorize those files." Richie said.

"Already did."

She passed me the folder. I flipped through the papers. It was pretty much nothing: a paper from 2 years earlier and very little data on the Jester herself. I don't know about Zach or Jenna, but I will never forget her insane laugh, the disturbing look in her eyes. Poor Jenna had the toughest job of all, killing her boyfriend who was actually a traitor, and I watched the whole thing unfold: the fight, the takedown, and the execution. Zach and I had to fight the Jester while Jenna fought Preston in the prison.

"According to the file, the Jester was recently seen in Kansas, but you guys will never guess where." Richie said.

"An abandoned amusement park! Seriously? This is a really stupid joke guys." I said. Like honestly, I'm waiting for the punch line.

"We aren't joking Mitchell. It's in the file. Go to the last page." Astrid said.

I flipped through the papers until I got to the last page.

The Jester, an unknown villain who previously attacked the Academy with Preston, her accomplice, was recently seen in Wichita, Kansas. Kansas PD believes she is hiding in the abandoned amusement park Joyland.

"An amusement park sounds fun." Zach said.

"Except for the fact its abandoned." Astrid responded.

"Well, let's go catch her. We already know where she is." I said.

"It's not that easy Mitchell. We still need to wait for Headmistress too." Astrid said.

"I'll give her 15 minutes otherwise, we are leaving." I said as I sat in one of the large chairs around the table.

Everyone grabbed a seat around the table. Richie and Zach were discussing something, most likely a plan because they were having quite the quiet debate. Meanwhile, Astrid was flipping through magazine, occasionally shaking her head either in approval or disappointment. I whipped out my phone and began playing Home Hitter 2. Just a little something to pass time every once in a while.

Those 15 minutes felt more like 30! I kept checking the time on my phone and whenever it seemed like 15 minutes had passed, only 2 minutes had gone by! Maybe I can get Grease to make something to control time....

"OK! It's been 15 minutes and Headmistress still isn't here, so I'll see you guys in Kansas one way or another."

Astrid stood up. "And how exactly are you going to get to Kansas on a moment's notice?"

"Duh, the Squadjet!"

"You don't have the keys!" Zach said jumping out of his seat.

I pulled the keys out of my back pocket and waved them in front of Zach face. Richie raised his eyebrow in surprise

"Never mind" He said, sitting back down.

"So, we have a plan, we have the keys, but there's no pilots here to fly us" Richie said.

"Sure, there is!" I said smiling.

"Uh, no there isn't Mitchell. No one is here except us. Headmistress is gone, Coach and Ms. Tick are gone, and all the staff are gone." Astrid said, closing her magazine.

"Guys, I've been flying jets since I was 10!" I said.

"Seriously?" Astrid asked.

"What did you expect me to do in military school? Push-ups?"

"Well, yes." Zach said.

I turned and glared at Zach. He smiled and tried his hardest to not laugh.

"Well quit staring and let's go!"

We all sprinted to the top of the Academy building to the hangar. Zach basically gave us a lecture on the mechanics of a jet. Astrid practically recited the entire history of flying machines from Archimedes to the Wright Brothers.

Richie suddenly appeared next to me. "With Astrid's memory of the file, Zach understanding of the jet, and your knowledge of flying it, this mission should be easy."

I really didn't feel like talking right now, I just want to finish the mission. "Yep, let's get this done and over with."

The hangar was not pretty, at least not today. Normally, it gorgeous with pristine white walls that are lined with helicopters, jet, and airplanes. Now, it was completely scorched, all of the planes were destroyed. We were all in shock and I think I saw Zach cry but I'll leave that to himself.

"Perfect!" I screamed. "Because why the hell not!"

"Mitchell, calm down." Richie said.

I paced back and forth. "Let's just throw a bomb into the cafeteria too! Let's have a party! Everything seems so damn destructible lately! Let's just blow up the Academy while we are at it!"

"Mitchell, you *need* to calm down!"

"Calm down? I need to *calm down*? What I *need* is for something beneficial to happen for once! That's what I need."

"Hey guys?" Zach called.

"Not now Zach!" I screamed. "I'm so tired of making a plan and it getting crushed the second after!"

"Well maybe if you stopped crying about it we could fix it!"

"Look, we all need to calm down" Astrid said, slowly moving in between us.

"Guys you should see this." Zach said again.

"Not now Zach!" we all turned and screamed.

"After this I am leaving. I'm joining the military! Maybe I'll go back to the army or I'll try the navy! I just need to get away from you people."

"Are you guys done?" Zach said from across the hangar. He was leaning out the door of a partially destroyed jet. We all stared at him. "While you guys have been fighting like kindergarteners, I've fixed this jet enough that we can fly it to Kansas."

"Nice job Zach!" Astrid screamed and jumped through the door. "Hurry up guys! We have some butt to kick!"

Richie and I looked at each other. I sighed as Richie shrugged.

"Let's get to work" he said as we walked to the jet.

I got into the cockpit, looked over the controls, and started up the jet.

"Awesome!" Zach whispered. He was so jittery, I almost thought he was getting a spaz attack. Let me tell you, there's nothing better than the feeling of flying a plane to mortal danger, especially when you and your friends are going to kick some serious butt.

Page Break

Chapter 17: The Lone Wolf

Jenna

Leaving was definitely the hardest thing I've done. I would've preferred to fight Preston 20 times before having to do this again, but I need a break. After being stuck in there for 3 years, just training, a girl needs a break. Quite honestly, I had no idea where I was going. It's pretty dark and the closest place is a small outdoor mall a few miles away. I must say, it's nice to walk around outside, feel the cool Florida breeze and smell the salty beach. Walking along the side of the road should probably be terrifying, especially when you're a 16-year-old teenage girl that has no idea where she's going. But the fact that I can basically pulverize someone in a few punches counters all that. You know what? I'm going to use this night to be a normal teenage girl and then go back the next morning. Just a small break you know? I picked up my pace a bit. After all, I have to get to the mall before it closes. That a normal girl problem, right? Shopping and all that? I could see the lights growing closer. It took me nearly 30 minutes to walk about 2 miles? I need to practice sprinting when I get back! Man, I'm getting slow.

The mall was absolutely packed. Mom's walking with their kids who held ice cream cones bigger than their faces, a big group of girls who walked past laughing about some guy they all liked, and a couple walking into an incredible smelling pizza restaurant. Ahhh food! Don't judge okay? I walked into the restaurant and ordered a pie. A large. Hey! What happened to don't judge?! Well it was delicious, thank you very much. I walked outside with the box in my hand. I strapped my lacrosse stick to my back and pulled out piece by piece until I was about half way done. I walked past Fleek, my favorite store, and a beautiful fountain. There was a loud commotion behind the pillar next to Fleek. Now I'm not the nosy type of person, except the fact I like knowing things, therefore, I am extremely nosy. Behind the pillar was probably the worst thing there could be, a group of friends sitting at the table laughing at their

friend who just spilled a drink on herself. It's crazy how similar that is to lunch at the Academy. Astrid always knocking something off the table, Mitchell and I dying laughing, Richie trying his hardest to hold back a smile, and Zach trying to clean it up. Good times, good times. Someone screwing up always makes me laugh. Then I stopped. In contrast, I should've been laughing because I screwed up really badly. I never should've left the Academy. Looks like my vacation is being cut sort because it's not a vacation without my team, even if they are incredibly annoying. I stuffed one last piece of pizza down my throat, threw the box in the garbage, and turned around.

For once, I was actually excited to see my team. I know how terrible that sounds and I'm not a heartless person, you just don't appreciate something you love until it's gone. Wow, that got somber real fast! I could see the tower up ahead! If these empty fields weren't so creepy, this would be like a walk in the park.

Sadly, hindsight is always 20/20, and in retrospect in may not have been the smartest idea, but hey, I'm a teenager! Three goons in hoodies came out of the tall grass from the sides of the streets.

"Very funny guys. Mitchell, Astrid, Richie, I thought you guys would come up with something more creative. Where's Zach robots and holograms?"

"Put your hands behind your back. You're coming with us" Goon 1 said.

That was *definitely* not Richie, Mitchell, Astrid, or Zach.

"Yeah okay just don't hurt me please!"

Now don't freak out on me. There's no way I'm going with these guys. Maybe if I wasn't such a complete badass, I could be an actor. I'm just kidding. No one this cool could be an actor. Well, except maybe Jennifer Lawrence but she probably doesn't know how to disarm a guy with just her thumbs. Not disarm as in take away a weapon either. Disarm as in dis arm. Let's just say there's a reason why we got training robots instead of the teachers we used to have. I know you can't tell but I'm smiling right now.

I put my hands behind me back as one of them stepped forward. He took out a pair of handcuffs and tried to put them around my wrist. I already planned out my attack, the punches, the kicks, maybe a few slaps just for good measure. Psh, and you thought Mitchell was the only one with tactics.

When the goon bent down to handcuff me, I socked him straight in the face. The two other goons stepped back in surprise. The other laid on the ground, groaning with two hands covering his nose. One down two more to go.

"So, who next?" I said, smiling.

One guy charged me. Just sprinting straight at me. I grabbed his arm and flipped him over my back. He landed on the ground with a satisfying thud. I turned around to face the last guy. He was slightly smarter than the other two because he backed up a

little bit. I was about to leave him, but he must've lost a few brain cells within the span of seconds because he took a gun out of his pocket. He lifted it pointing it at my chest.

"Down on the ground now!"

Why do criminals never learn? Oh well, it's him who's suffering the consequences. I popped a piece of gum in my mouth, blew a large bubble, and said "Come at me". He fired off a few shots but I dodged them easily. I grabbed my bag off my back and threw it at him, hitting him square in the chest. He backed up, off balance, and dropped his gun. I ripped the lacrosse stick off my back and jabbed it at his stomach. He doubled over. I looked over the buttons on the lacrosse stick. I really needed to get Monique to label these things. I pressed a small green button on the head and the lace in the head of the stick began to glow.

"Oooo! Pretty!" I said. I stuck the lace over the goon's head and he shook violently.

"Grease's tech is pretty shocking, isn't it?" The man groaned and turned over. "Wow, tough crowd."

I pressed the small red button in the center and the stick broke into two pieces. "It's detachable too! Very nice." The man was on his knees now. There was one last small black button at the bottom of the shaft.

"Aw! A button to match my soul. How thoughtful."

When I pressed the button, a small, sharp point jutted from the butt of the shaft.

"Awesome!"

I spartan kicked the guy to the ground and put one foot on his chest for good measure.

"So, who do you work for?" I asked.

"I'll never tell you!" the goon shouted back.

"I figured you'd say that."

I jabbed the point just above his kneecap. He yelled out in pain.

"Let's try this again. Who do you work for?"

"Do you really not know?!" he said sarcastically.

"I really don't take kindly to sarcasm." I said as I leaned hard on the stick. He screamed louder as the stick dug further into his knee. "So, you can tell me and I'll let you go or you can make this difficult and a very bad night for both of us."

"Fine! I'll tell you what you want!" he yelled.

"Good. So, let's do this one more time. Who do you work for?"

"The Jester of course" he answered back. I had to admire the guy, even in mortal danger he kept his humor.

"Next question. How did you find me?"

"You're outside your home. Where did you think, we'd go?"

I pushed hard on the stick. He screamed again.

"Not the answer I was looking for." I said shaking my head. Man, I love interrogations!

"Sorry! Just being realistic!"

"I can respect that. Thanks for the info." I said waving goodbye.

"So, I can go free?" he asked, obviously excited.

"Well, I'm not an animal! Of course!"

I bent the stick back hard, and heard a nice, loud pop. The man stopped screaming and stared shocked and his knee which was now an odd shaped lump. He must've begun to feel the pain again because he screamed even louder.

"WHY DID YOU DO THAT?!"

"Well I said I'd let you go, I didn't say in what condition. Now I hope you and your friends will have enough sense to stay away."

"You-you little..." his eyes rolled back and he went limp on the ground.

He totally passed out. I'm not heartless, I don't kill people, even if they attack me. I jogged the rest of the way to the Academy. The tall building rose in the distance, some lights still ablaze. Strangely, none of the room lights were on. Curfew is at 10 PM but Astrid always stays up to at least midnight reading a book. It was only 9:30. Zach should be in his room tinkering with something, Richie playing video games or reading a book, Astrid studying the newest magazines, or Mitchell practicing batting with my lacrosse balls. Nothing. Only the lounge's light was on with the TV playing something I couldn't yet see.

I swear, after this, I'm getting this field made into a track or something because it's so bleak, barren and ugly. Luckily, it was a quick jog so I didn't have to kill myself before the something else kills me. I finally made it to the door. The TV was on South Beach Tow so I knew Grease was the one watching it.

I pounded on the door. "Grease! Let me in!"

She didn't even budge. She must've been messing with something and had her headphones in or whatever. Normally, I could've easily broken down the glass, but the door is made from reinforced glass, like the type you see on armored cars. I swear, if I had on of Mitchell's EMP grenades right now, I'd knock the power out. That'll get her attention. I had a better idea, and just for your information, most of my ideas include destruction.

I was really not in the mood for this BS today. First, I realize I'm an idiot. Second, I get attacked on my way home. Third, I get locked out of my house. What's next?

Everyone leaves me for a super awesome mission?!

I hit the black button and the knife popped out again. I jammed it between the hinges of the door. Now, I know you're like "Jenna wait! You're gonna break it!" but you don't know Grease like I do. She makes these things to survive a nuclear blast, it can survive breaking a door off its hinges. And what do I say! The door popped off

with a loud bang and fell to the ground. I stormed in, determined to roast the hell out of everyone, especially Grease, for not opening the damn door. That's how petty I am right now.

Grease practically fell out of the chair. "I see you figured out the lacrosse stick" she said, trying to play off her scared expression.

"Where is everyone?! First I have an apology to make and then I'm gonna chew everyone out for leaving me to fend for myself."

"Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Yes! Don't change the subject."

"Fine, Headmistress disappeared and everyone went on a mission because the Jester was spotted in some theme park in Kansas."

"You have got to be kidding me."

"You wanna watch South Beach? Linda is about to cut a bitch."

"I'm going after them! I can't just leave them there! They need me!"

"Personally, South Beach is better, but okay."

"I need the keys to the car."

"Car? You'll never make it in a car."

"Well how exactly am I supposed to get there in time?" I really don't have time for Monique's beat-around-the-bush talks. I need an answer, pronto.

"The planes of course!"

"Yeah! The planes! Oh, I'm so stupid! I can totally get one of the planes that Headmistress cares more about than us and keeps under lock and key!"

"Jenna, now is really not the time for sass." She said with her hands on her hips. How dare she tell me not be sassy when she's sassing me right now.

"You know what, forget it I'm getting a plane and getting out of here."

"Wait!" Grease yelled behind me. I kept walking. I have friends to rescue and, surprisingly, no time for sass.

Luckily, the hangar was open! Unluckily all the planes were destroyed. Quite honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if Mitchell accidentally exploded a grenade in here.

"Perfect! Now what am I supposed to do?"

Grease came up the stairwell huffing and puffing. "If- you would've - waited- I would tell you..." she caught her breath. "I'm building an elevator up here! I would've told you I was building a helicopter!"

"Well, where is it? Let's go!" I began back down the stairs.

"Down to my warehouse! Quickly!"

Poor Grease barely made it to the warehouse. She looked like she was gonna pass out. On our way through the door, she picked up a remote and click a button. The

ceiling opened and revealed a huge plane slowly being lowered to the ground. The side wall also slide open revealing the plains right outside the Academy. I hopped in the cockpit and began the engine.

"Be very careful" she warned me, " It's still in testing so don't try anything fancy."

"You got it. I'll be back before Linda cuts that bitch."

She smiled. "Awesome. You'll also need these." She handed me a handful of ear pieces.

"Thanks? I'm pretty sure I won't be listening to Twenty-One Pilots while I kick the Jester's butt."

"Jenna- okay never mind. These are headsets. You can load a map and hear one another, just make sure everyone has one and they are turned on!"

"Thank you, Monique. We will be back before you know it."

"Whoa wait! One more thing." She pulled a small bag off a table behind her. "You'll need these."

"What are these?"

I opened the bag and there were my practice lacrosse balls.

"Monique, I'm not gonna subdue the Jester by lobbing lacrosse balls at her face."

She gave me a hard, but friendly stare.

"You should because we won't have to deal with her anymore. These explode on impact. I figured you need something as powerful as yourself with you."

I decided to take that as a compliment.

"To infinity and beyond!" She said and waved her hand goodbye.

I revved the engine, just for a little aesthetic, and blasted off. Poor Grease must've gotten a mouth full of exhaust, but I have to hurry. I think I know exactly who they're up against and it could cost them their lives. I've learned the hard way, people you're closest to are the most dangerous.

Page Break

Chapter 18: Operation Kick-Butt

Richie

Missions are always fun. I'm not the violent type, but there is a certain rush in beating the absolute crap out of a bad guy. I really shouldn't have been that nervous, especially since I was basically team leader, but hey, I pretty much the new guy even though I've been at the Academy for a year. No pressure though! Nope, just a couple of teenagers flying a jet a couple hundred miles towards a psychopath waiting in an abandoned amusement park. It's still better than Calculus homework, though!

Normally our missions were small, taking out trouble makers, spying on suspected criminals, occasionally stalking the Dunkin Donuts for fresh donuts and coffee. For

some reason, I was just the unspoken leader of the group. Astrid is too quiet and unsure, Jenna is too jumpy and trigger-happy, Mitchell is too plan based, and Zach is too tech dependent. I guess I can figure things out quickly? I just wing it though. So far, it's turned out well, all suspects caught, missions finished, and fresh donuts eaten. My biggest worry is always that I'm the reason that someone gets hurt. Besides, Jenna has more experience than any of us, so in my opinion, she should be team leader. Then again, you see where her temper got us. Hopefully, she isn't mad about us leaving her behind, she does love beating people up.

I must say, these jets are incredibly nice. Personally, me and my fat ass stay in the kitchen. I must be two people combined because those poor robotic chefs have to work double time to take care of me. Nonstop pizzas, ice cream, and celery (gotta have some balance) keep flowing my way. Occasionally I'll add a few chicken wings just to get my protein, but the worst is when I'm stressed, i.e., now and forever. I'm not kidding, my stomach is probably just a void in the center of my body. I should probably get that checked out. Zach sat next to me discussing plans for neutralizing the Jester as quickly and, of course, using the new tech he invented. Although I know he didn't want it make it obvious, he stared at me for a while, marveling at how those mozzarella sticks disappeared and never reappeared again. Astrid sat in one of the hammocks, our "beds" of sort, reading something. At this point it could be anywhere between Tyra Banks latest fashion trends to the Oxford Dictionary and World Atlas. When we get back, I'm requesting Grease to build Astrid and bag to hold all of her books. Instead of a pistol, she can throw heavy books at people. No that's a terrible idea; she'd throw them at *me*. I haven't seen Mitchell since he entered the cockpit, hopefully he's okay. I know as team leader I should help him or at least be his copilot, and he's chill, it's just we don't have anything to talk about. He's super athletic and calm while I'm frantic and nerdy. It's not good pairing at all. I saw out of the corner of my eye; a big figure sit behind me. "Hey." Mitchell said. Speak of the devil.

"Hey dude. What's up?" I responded. Great conversation so far.

"I just need to talk strategy with someone who will actually understand instead of just following blueprints or sending in cameras." He ordered a chocolate milkshake and turned back to me.

"Absolutely! So, I sort of had a plan, but I'm not sure if it would work."

"Hit me with it"

I grabbed the napkin I had drawn out all of my thoughts on. It looked messy but I could still understand it, so that's really all that mattered. Don't judge me either! I grab the closest thing to write on once I have an idea in my head.

"Basically, we could scope out the park one area at a time. There's an open field to land towards the back of the park where we can land. We can start at the roller coasters and work our way forward to the Big Top at the front."

"The thing is Richie, the rollercoasters are too exposed to be a hideout, unless she's hiding in the concession stands or something. The most probable place would be the Big Top."

"Ha, I get it."

"Get what?"

"Come on Mitchell! The pun! Big Top. The Jester. A jester is a clo-"

"Yep I got the joke Richie."

He spun the chair away just in time to grab his milkshake sliding across the table, old diner style.

"I have a bad feeling about this, Richie."

"About what? We go in, blow stuff up, lock up the criminal, and leave. Easy as pi."

"Pi is not easy."

"It's a metaphor Mitchell, just relax."

He turned back to me, half of his milkshake already down in one sip. Zach would've had fun watching him too. He sucked the rest of his milkshake down without a breath and jumped up from the stool.

"I suppose you're right. We are almost there by the way. Tell Zach and Astrid for me?"

"Absolutely. Wait. Who's flying the plane?!"

"Dude, seriously? We're teenage spies that live in a secret building and fight crime with technology the American president doesn't have yet. We totally have autopilot on this thing."

I couldn't help but laugh. I have to give it to him, Mitchell is definitely the person to keep you grounded in a crisis. He turned around and walked back to the front of the plane. I heard the door open from all the way down the hall with a soft *whoosh*. I stood up, grabbed one last fry, and left the kitchen.

Astrid was, of course, reading. This time it wasn't a dictionary, thank goodness, it was another book from a series she's been reading. She was so engrossed, she didn't even notice me until I was standing over her.

"Hey" she said nonchalantly.

"Hey" I replied.

We have such great conversations in this group of friends, am I right?

"So, what's this one about?" I asked, trying to get a conversation started.

"A group of teenage heroes that try to save the world from an evil super villain attacking their home city."

Now, I love books, especially fiction, but who would ever read a book like that? Dumb idea if you ask me. Of course, I wouldn't tell her that.

"Cool, cool. Speaking of attacking, we are almost in Kansas. Get ready, make sure you have your gun loaded and the blueprints memorized." I said.

"I just finished them." She said, pointing to a rolled-up scroll on the table, not even diverting her attention from the book.

"Great. Meet up at the briefing room in 10 minutes."

I was just getting through the door when I heard a book slam shut. "Richie?" Astrid said from behind me.

"What's up?" I replied, walking to the chair by her desk.

"Are you scared?" she asked, finally putting her book down.

Honestly, I didn't know what to say. A good leader would've reassured her, told her everything was going to be fine, but as her friend, I needed to be honest. Plus, it's me we are talking about. I'm the furthest thing from perfect and reassuring.

"I'm absolutely terrified. I wouldn't tell anyone else on the team, but I have a very bad feeling about this mission."

"Why don't we turn this bird around then? Just cancel the mission, you're the leader after all."

There's the problem with being the leader, all responsibility falls onto me. Don't get me wrong, I love my team, the thing is someone has to do the job.

"No. We need to find Headmistress and bring her back. We aren't leaving until we complete the mission."

That was that. I was fully determined to find Headmistress and go home. Jenna would be back soon enough and everything would be restored to order.

"Richie, wait." Astrid said.

"Astrid, I really have to go, we're about to land."

"Richie there's something-"

"Astrid, we'll talk after the mission. Everything is going to be perfectly fine."

I walked out of the room before she could respond. I didn't mean to be rude, but I still have a job to do.

Of course, Zach was in his room working on another faulty invention. In the past months, I've seen him build (and destroy) incredible creations. Somehow, they all crash somewhere whether it's missing parts, some engineering failure, or literal crashing and exploding. Let's just say no one is going to be using the extra rooms for a while.

Originally, Zach tried to create a defense system for the school by making mechanical griffins to patrol the building. They eventually turned on us, and began attacking some staff and even Headmistress once. Jenna, Mitchell and I took them out with a few hard punches, well placed grenades, and several decapitations. We actually

found one on the track field burned by chemicals, but no one is really sure what happened to it. The only way is if someone ran to the Chemistry department and managed to race back to smash it on top of it but we would've been there by then. Maybe Headmistress, but that's very unlikely. She was in a meeting with the other staff members. I still remember her shocked face to look out her window and see Jenna holding the head of a metallic eagle on the front lawn. The next incident involved tiny metal bugs we were going to use for reconnaissance and undercover missions, but some faulty wiring lead to them going haywire and running around the building while the shocked people. Oddly enough, Astrid, who's terrified of bugs, sprayed them with one of her terrible smelling couture perfumes and shorted out their circuits. Our most recent one involved Zach's creation of a cryogun that could freeze people. It's similar to my knife, but you don't have to impale people to freeze them. I'm not quite sure what happened with that one since Mitchell and I were on a mission in New York, but as far as I know, we now have a winter wonderland room. In fact, Zach lost that a few weeks ago and he was begging me to help him find it. Whether it's a good or bad thing, I hope we never find out. Zach is incredible with technology, but his inventions could use a little work. No one's perfect after all. "Hey dude." I said as I walked through the door.

"Hey! Perfect timing! I need your help."

"What with exactly?" I asked apprehensively. Please don't say *to test my newest invention!*

"To test my newest invention, of course!"

Dammit! I really don't have time for this.

"Sure. What do you need?" Please don't say *stand over there.*

"Just stand over there and you'll see." He said a little too happily for my comfort. Right now I'm 0 for 2 so I'm really hoping he's not trying to open a portal to an alternate dimension or something. He pressed a ton of buttons on his makeshift keyboard and looked up expectedly at the wall next to me. I looked exactly where Zach was but didn't see anything. Suddenly the wind started to pick up, which is odd because we are inside a plane. I saw a small black dot starting to grow on the wall. I began extremely small and slowly grew to the size of about a quarter. I stared at Zach in shock.

"Zach what is this?" I said cautiously. He just continued to stare in awe.

The dot continued to grow and the wind picked up more and more until the hair and clothes were whipping towards the center of the dot.

"Zach shut this off." I said steely. He looked like he couldn't move. I had a very bad feeling about this.

It become extremely quiet. Just the wind whipping and shaking everything in the room. There's no way Astrid and Mitchell aren't hearing this. Then, the weirdest

thing happened: I heard voices. Not just any voices, Jenna and Mitchell's. The were very faint but there's no denying it. I heard some voices I didn't know too, what sounded like a ton of people talking at once. A ton a screaming girls and guys from this strange ever growing hole in the wall.

"ZACH!" I screamed. "TURN THIS OFF RIGHT NOW!"

The black dot was now the size of my head and starting to show some color. Bright green, blue and red in then streaks. The strange thing, not that this wasn't strange already, was that it actually had depth to it. My idea was confirmed when the nightstand suddenly flew from the bedside into the black dot and disappeared.

"ZACH TURN THIS OFF! THAT'S AN ORDER!"

And with that, the dot vanished. No more wind, no more colors, and no more voices. Zach and I just stared at each other in awe. His machine was sparking and sizzling, the lights flickering. That thing must've used a ton of power.

"That. was. AWESOME!" he slowly turned to me and screamed.

"What was that?!" I asked because between the ever increasing black hole, the random and slightly ominous wind, and Jenna, Mitchell, and some random people's voices coming through some strange portal, I've reached my limit of weird.

"This is going to be a lot but, a few weeks ago, Headmistress asked me about the possibility of hypothetical self contained realities."

"Headmistress wanted you to investigate alternate universes?!" I screamed. You can tell that this is serious stuff because I'm about to rip Zach's head off for not telling me.

"Yeah! Isn't that awesome?!"

Judging by the way he recoiled, I must've given him quite the glare.

"Nope, never mind. It's totally not awesome. It's super lame, actually."

I sighed. "No it's absolutely incredible that you managed to make a working portal, I just wish someone would've consulted me on this."

"I'm so sorry, Richie. You know you'd me the first person I'd talk to but Headmistress said this was Class-I-fied."

Now, I know what you're thinking, cool it's classified, super secret, nobody touches, spy business, right? Wrong. There's very few things I know of that are Class-I-fied. The I stands for If-anyone-finds-out-you're-buried-alive-as-we-dance-on-your-grave, so it's fun stuff. For example, the whole Preston situation is supposed to be Class-I-fied but you really can't hide something that big, especially when Jenna pretty much breaks down into tears even hearing the guy's name. So if Headmistress found out I knew about this portal, there's a very good chance Grease Monkey is getting a promotion.

"Don't even worry about it, Zach. This will be our little secret."

He expression changed faster than the weather. In Florida, that means in a blink of an eye.

"But," and here we go with the expression change, "Headmistress can never, ever know about this, especially since its Class-I-fied."

"No problem, Richie! You'll be the first person I come to about questions."

We first bumped like the bros we are and that was it. I walked out of the room while he continued to fiddle with the portal making machine. Perfect timing too because we had to meet in the briefing room before the mission began. As far as Mitchell said, we probably have about 5 minutes until we land. I knew it would be hell to Zach out of that room while he was concentrated on that machine, anyways, so I went to the front of the plane.

Okay, so we don't exactly have a "briefing room", normally it just takes place where ever we feel like it. Besides, it gets the job done. Sometimes its in the bedroom, or the kitchen (now banned due to my nervous snacking and I can't eat and talk at the same time), but mainly its in the cockpit. This time Mitchell flew the plane while Astrid and I talked because, as usual, Zach was late.

About 5 minutes later, Zach walked into the room as if we were meeting for lunch. "What's up?" he said giving us his "All right- time-to-kick-butt-and-maybe-mess-around smile.

"Let's get the briefing started."

Our briefings aren't the briefings you see in movies where everyone is in a soundproof room while some British lady talks through a hologram with maps popping up like she's the Channel 6 weather lady, in fact, think of Study Hall but with battle plans and strategic weapon decisions. To be honest, Study Hall in high school was nothing like that making this my favorite Study Hall ever!

Everyone sat in their chairs facing the front window, Mitchell as the pilot, me as the co pilot, and Astrid and Zach sitting behind us. I tapped the buttons on the handy dandy keyboard which popped up in front of all of us.

"Okay team! We are landing at the back of the park which is right here." I circled a large open field which must've been an old picnic area. " We are paired together, Astrid with Zach and Mitchell with me. Astrid and Zach take the left flank and investigate the petting zoo and animal exhibits. Mitchell and I will check the roller coasters around the right side." I zoomed in on the map to circle the area designated to my team. "And lastly, we will meet at the front of the Big Top, right here." I drew arrows to the front of the park and little people (us) in the front of the bright red and white dome, just for aesthetic. "If you find anything, call us on the walkie talkie but do not engage!" I looked back at Astrid and Zach, "Any questions?"

Zach slowly, and awkwardly, raised his hand as if we were in kindergarten.

I sighed. "No, Zach, you cannot stop for cotton candy while passing a concession stand."

He slowly put his hand down and sunk into his seat.

"Alright team let's move it!"

Mitchell set the plane in park and lowered the back landing door as we piled out. Zach and Astrid split to the left while Mitchell and I split to the right. Mitchell's bat banged against his back as we sprinted through the roller coaster beams. I had my knife out, following close behind. Every now and again, I saw Astrid and Zach running through the zoo, passing by empty animal cages. I saw Zach eyeing an old concession stand. It took all of my training and willpower to not sprint across the field and slap Zach across the face. If there's one thing we agree on, its that food is the most beautiful and precious thing, but there's no way food would still be there. This park has been abandoned way too long and besides, its probably spoiled by now. I must've sent some psychological brainwaves to Zach because he left the stand. Then, I saw Astrid walk in front of him and appeared to be scolding him for his insolence. Really, we are a fantastic team as you can tell.

We carried on, looking around the rollercoasters and ultimately finding a few old soda bottles, some fliers billowing in the wind, and a pair a sunglasses. We met Astrid and Zach at the front of the striped Big Top.

Zach turned around when he heard us coming. He was obviously fighting with Astrid, no doubt about something related to the concession stand, but they dropped it quickly.

"Petting zoo is clear" he said in a hushed tone.

"Rollercoasters are all good" I responded back.

"You guys ready?" Mitchell asked.

Before anyone could respond, he already had his flashlight on, baseball bat off his back, and walked int the Big Top.

Zach mumbled behind him, "No but sure lets just walk into the evil psychopath's lair because why not?!"

The Big Top was unbelievably dark. Even with the flashlights, we could barely see anything. The stands rose around us, an eerie silence filled the room.

"Is this a bad time to say I hate clowns?" Astrid asked.

A familiar voice from over the PA system said, "Indeed it is, dear."

Zach powered up his Megaman gun, Astrid whipped out her gun, Mitchell nearly threw the bat off his back, and I unlatched my knife from my belt. We stood around each other in a circle. Slowly turning, watching for the infamous villain who was now

stalking us. Even worse, only Mitchell and Zach had a small idea of what she looked like, but Astrid and I were completely clueless.

"About time you five, oops, I mean four." She began to giggle uncontrollably and talk to some people in the background. "After all, Operation: Expedition worked flawlessly."

"Operation: Expedition? What exactly was that?" I asked. Now that I think about it, it was a rather stupid question.

"Think about it Richie, you are the smart one in the group after all. What could that possibly mean?"

We slowly made our way from in between the bleachers and towards the center ring.

"Where is Headmistress?!" Zach yelled.

"Well, Zach, straight to point aren't we?"

The voice was getting closer and closer, or someone could be slowly turning up the volume, but I have a hunch my first guess is correct. A blinding lights flashed on at the other end of the tent to reveal an all too familiar face. Dressed in purple leggings, a dark red skirt, and a black and white checker board crown, Headmistress stood in between the bleachers on the opposite side of the entrance. Honestly, she looked like nightmare but its better than her being dead. I couldn't see clearly, but she had some sort of face paint in green, red and purple, but no matter, she is safe and we've completed the mission.

I sighed in relief as if all of my stress had magically lifted off my shoulders. I ran towards her, like a lost child running to their mother. I felt Zach and Mitchell's hand touch my shoulders, but they couldn't get a well enough grip to grab me. I should've known as soon as I looked back something was very wrong. Mitchell and Zach looked horrified, while Astrid looked completely perplexed. I was no further than a few feet from Headmistress when I finally stopped and froze in place at my sudden realization of why the rest of my team was not overcome with joy that our mission was finally completed.

Headmistress raised a bright red, conical loudspeaker to her mouth and said, "Mission accomplished" with an all too well described familiarly menacing smile. "Congratulations, dear! You've found The Jester."

Page Break

Chapter 19: Back to Square One

Astrid

I stood there frozen in either shock or fear, or maybe a combination of both. We had completed our mission and found Headmistress, but also found our evil maniac/ attempted homicidal villain. If that is not the utter worst mission failure in the history of mission failures, a city better have been blown up.

She lifted her left hand, cocked the gun and pointed it at Richie's forehead. "Say cheese!" she yelled joyously. We all knew there was no way to dodge this, it was less than a foot in front of him and traveled, well, at the speed of a bullet. Needless to say, you don't need to be the smartest teenager in the world to know when your best friend is about to die. I should've done something, shot, thrown my gun, something! But I couldn't bring myself to it. It was all too overwhelming; the shock, Richie in peril, our utterly failed mission, something definitely wasn't right here. "Richie!" we yelled simultaneously.

I heard the click of the trigger, Richie closed his eyes, and prepared to die. Of course, the most angering, anti-climatic, stupidly cinematic possibility occurs. It a toy gun the shoots out and flag with the words "kaboom" on the side and some confetti. The Jester began to laugh hysterically, throwing her head back and she slowly walked closer and closer. The Big Top must've had a really bad echo because it sounded like several other voices were laughing with her, all at different octaves.

Richie backed up into Mitchell, Zach and me as we formed a line in front of the entrance.

Mitchell was silent with shock. I was more surprised by the fact Headmistress was wearing a clown costume than that our old mentor was, in reality, our worst enemy. I can't even describe my feelings, whether its shock, heart-broken, or disbelief, something was seriously wrong. There is no possible way Headmistress could be the Jester! Why would she create the Spy Squad if she was going to get rid of us anyways?

We stood bunched together, Mitchell stone-faced as always, Zach shivering from shock or under the weight of his massive gun, and Richie, nearly expressionless. However, I know how to read people, especially a person like Richie. He wasn't shocked, terrified, or depressed; he was thinking. That brilliant idiot was trying to think of a way out of this and all he needed was something we didn't have: time. Luckily, its Astrid we are talking about. This is the girl who's held up banks by talking a guard into letting her inside the vault. For once, my gift of gab would be a benefit to my team.

"What exactly do you plan to do with us, Headmistress?" I asked. Hopefully Richie's big brain could think fast because I'm fairly close to shooting this gun and making a run for it.

"First of all," she answered. "It's Jester, not Headmistress. Don't focus on the past, sweetie." Second of all, that's for me to know and for you to find out. Don't worry,

I'm not going to kill you if that's what you're thinking. You guys will meet some new friends, though. See, after spending a few years at the Academy, I've constructed a list of possible candidates for my experiments. In fact, you four were some of the first along with that idiotic bodybuilder and that insufferable mechanic. All of you are very special, intelligence, strength, creativity, and beauty: all the things a human being values. My experiments won't kill you, but they will be very, very painful." She said with a very ominous smirk. I looked my partners now determined faces. We all were trying to formulate plans, something that could allow us to sneak back outside to the jet. I could tell by everyone's expression, we mental knew what we had to do: Zach was searching for an escape path, Mitchell looking for any weaknesses, Richie trying to figure what tools we had at our disposal, and I get to do what I do best; talk and distract.

"Now, children, let's not delay the inevitable. Drop your weapons and walk towards me one by one." Headmistress said. In that moment, I knew Mitchell had figured out her weakness; she is too cocky. She thinks she has already beaten us, little did she know, I know her biggest weakness, and her name is a dead give away.

"Hey Jester!" I called.

Her smile contorted into a horrific sneer. "What now you torturous child?!"

"Wanna hear a joke?" I asked.

Her expression changed faster than Richie's when we go past a pizza restaurant. Before she could open her mouth, a strangely familiar voice called out, "Yes please!" We looked at each other confused, but The Jester looked exasperated more than anything.

"You had to ruin the surprise?! You might as well come from your hiding spots you idiotic toddlers!"

The shock apparently never stops because two more loons stepped forward. The first looked like a circus clown that got hit by a train and raided a Halloween store. Multi colored face paint was smeared across her face, she wore a puffy yellow suit covered in polka dots and held a disemboweled brown suitcase which was bulging out the sides with what looked like corny props. She was glowing with excitement, as if she enjoyed sticking her fingers in electrical sockets before performances.

The other looked like Elsa gone rouge. She had long white hair, straighter than mine, which says something because I've never had to straighten my hair a day in my life. She had a long baby blue dress which rippled as she walked. Strangely, her dress moved in different amounts of time, her left remarkably fast, but her right was like watching a pond ripple. Even her skin had a weird sort of light blue tinge to it. When she walked it was kind of hard to follow too; she walked at totally opposite paces, sometimes extremely fast and and occasionally slower than a turtle. These three

definitely fit the description of "freak circus show". I just hope there's only three because I was originally prepared to deal with one.

Behind their strange costumes, the two new maniacs looked vaguely familiar. Sadly, the trend of headmistress being evil lead me to my worst fear, finding out where the rest of the staff was, including Coach Harley and Ms. Tick. Of course, I jinx myself!

"Guys, I know who they are!" I said.

Judging by my team's overwhelmed faces, they already knew.

"How rude of them to destroy the surprise, but these are my assistants who I'm sure you'll recognize." Headmistress sneered.

"So who are these wackadoodles?" Mitchell asked.

The strange bipolar clown stepped forward and introduced herself, "You kiddos knew me by my code-name, Coach Harley, but in reality I am Harlequin. Wanna see a trick?" she asked.

Before Zach could answer, because I knew he'd say yes and that would be very bad for either our memory or health, I declined.

"Well," I said, "It was lovely to meet more insane people but we really must be going! Carry on being your sinister selves."

"Not yet!" the woman in blue screamed. "I haven't gotten to introduce myself!"

"What a tragedy that is!" I whispered.

"At long last I get to be myself rather than that wretched security guard! Ms. Tick is no more! I am the Time Queen! I control all elements of time: speed, reality, I can make you starve with a meal half way down your throat! Bow in terror!" She screamed.

Richie was about to say something but I stepped in front, motioning for everyone to follow my lead.

"Wow! You guys are super scary, like I shaking in my shoes right now! Sadly, we have some business to attended to!" I put on my saddest face and motion for everyone to follow. Zach and Mitchell looked more constipated than anything, but they aren't actors so I won't judge.. too hard.

"Not so fast!" Jester yelled. She lifted a small sunflower pin out of her lapel and pointed it at my face. "No one is leaving."

Mitchell, the gallant idiot that he is, stepped in front of me. "I'm afraid you're wrong." He said defensively.

"If you insist!" Jester responded. A dark green liquid squirted from the center of the flower. It looked like one of those three dollar gag gifts kids get each for their birthday, but judging from Jester's attitude, there was nothing funny about this gag gift.

I ducked, the green goop flying over my head, narrowly missing Mitchell's shoulder. His jacket was smoking, the fabric peeling away and sizzling like someone had put a

hot rod onto it. He tore it off, stomping it into the ground. His camo *Army Proud!* shirt and old dog tags flapped in the wind.

"Did you just burn me?!" Mitchell said shocked.

All three of the crazy clowns laughed in harmony. "You bet I did! Just a little something from my brilliant mind! Don't worry children, you'll see plenty more of that soon. Now Time Queen!" she commanded.

The Time Queen looked us straight the eye with her sinister smile. Her hands began to turn a brighter shade a blue until her body was the color of a clear sky. Her eyes slowly froze over, like those horror movie where the demon turn their victims' eyes completely white. Then, I couldn't move anymore. I tried to talk but I couldn't move. My body was completely paralyzed! Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw my friends struggling as well. Richie was slowly getting his knife from his holster, Mitchell barely able to reach his bat, and Zach's gun slowly forming around his arm, the metal pieces coming into place as quickly as my dead grandmother moves. I could hear those lunatics talking outside of this weird bubble but it sounded like they were speaking through water.

"Let's go! The sooner we get them to Base, the sooner the tests can start!" I heard the Jester saying.

"What's the rush? They aren't going anywhere. Let's have some fun!" Harlequin said. She joyous bounded towards us, careful not to touch the blue mist which must've been our confines. "I want this one!" she said, pointing at Mitchell. "He looks like he can withstand the tests! I'll make them extra hard for him!" she said with her creepy bipolar smile.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Time Queen said. She walked over to Richie who hadn't even reached his holster yet. She stared him down, examining him as if he was some test subject. "Yes, this one will do nicely." She said smiling maliciously. Her skin and eyes which still glowing which meant the only way to get rid of this time-fog, would be to get rid of her.

I have no idea how much time passed, but I finally got a grip on my gun. Really, it wasn't smart of me at all to holster my gun.

"Now then, we can either do this the easy way or the hard way, children. Time Queen will unfreeze you and you will all drop your weapons, if not, I will burn you all slowly with every chemical on the periodic table. Okay?" The Jester said happily.

"Now!"

I felt the Time Queen loosen her grip on us, mostly because I could wiggle my fingers; it felt like I was in a pool of honey, but wiggling none the less. Jester looked at us expectantly. Zach folded up his gun, Mitchell dropped his bat, and Richie laid his knife on the ground. Jester stared me down. Sadly for her, I'm stubborn as all hell. We spent a minute staring each other down and finally, Mitchell nodded at me to

down my gun. If the guy known for tactics and earned a purple heart for a special ops mission gives up, that's a good indication that the fight is over. I shook my head. "No!" I mouthed. Jester smiled, she knew she had won, my team had given up. As they say, if you can't beat em, join em.

I slowly lowered my arm. I couldn't believe we are just surrendering like this! Except we weren't. Like hell I was going to submit to these two psychopathic clowns and their freak of nature friend. I winked at Richie, giving him the signal to execute my plan. "I'm sorry Jester, but we already have plans for this evening!" I shot directly at her face and bless my life, she ducked. My bullet shot behind her, right into the fire extinguisher hanging behind her. It exploded it a large cloud of white dust. "Mitchell! Smoke grenade!". I heard the canister land on the floor just as the words came from my mouth. I grab two people hands, whoever was closest to me, and sprinted for the door. I hope to every deity in existence that someone grabbed the last person's hand or that they were right behind me.

"NOOOOOO!" I heard Jester scream somewhere in the big cloud of gas. I made it out of the tent, still dragging two people behind me. I didn't even bother to look back and my passengers in tow or the tent, I was fully focused on making it back to the jet and leaving. It's not like I could see who's behind me because apparently, abandoned theme parks get incredibly dark at night! But I couldn't be bothered with that; all four of us are going home to gather ourselves and finally take down the Jester once and for all. Sadly hindsight is always 20/20.

I ran past all the roller-coasters, concession stands, and rundown stalls until we arrived in the plains where the jet sat, parked just as we left it. I blindly led my two, breathless comrades up the ramp into the jet. It's quite ironic how I couldn't wait to get inside to finally be able to see everyone aboard the jet so we can get away from this hell hole, yet I'm blinded by the lights of the Squad-jet. After wildly blinking the spots from my eyes, I could see Richie at the controls of the plane and Zach breathing heavily on the floor of the entrance-way.

Here comes the hard and incredibly terrifying part to talk about: I couldn't find Mitchell anywhere.

"Mitchell?" I yelled. Despite how tired I was, I ran through the entire plane trying to find him. "Mitchell?!" I screamed frantically. I tore through the kitchen, his bedroom, even the bathrooms in search of him. After about 5 minutes of nearly tearing the plane to sheet metal, I ran back to the entrance to find Zach standing in the doorway. "Do you know where Mitchell is?!" I asked.

"I'm not sure." he said blanking looking around. I grabbed him by the cuff of his shirt and lifted him off the ground. I had no time for his stupid antics. "Zach I need a definite answer. Where. Is. Mitchell?" I said steely.

I felt bad I had to terrorize him, but the truth occurred to me moments before The Jester exposed it to me.

"NO!" I screamed, dashing out the door and back into the meadow. Just outside was a jet, stamped with the seal of the Academy, hovering high above us.

A loud speaker came on, echoing through the open plains. "Looking for something?" The Jester said.

"What have you done with Mitchell?!" I yelled.

"Nothing yet, my dear. Any final words?" she replied. A bright light flashed on a steel cage hanging from the bottom of the jet. Inside, Mitchell stood tied to the side of the metal bars, not moving.

"Mitchell!" I called, hoping he'd wake up and miraculously escape from his bonds.

"Don't even bother, child! I gave him something that'll make him sleep until we get to our destination." she said joyously. I raised my gun, hoping to take down the jet with a few well placed shots, but it was no use; even if I manage to shoot down the jet, Mitchell would die in the crash. "Don't fret my pet! You already know where we are going. Where your journey began, and where your worst fears lies. I'd hate to bring a damper on our lovely party, but as you said my dear Astrid, we already have plans for this evening!" The Jester left in the stream of smoke and light, leaving me in tears in the meadow with Richie and Zach standing silently behind me.

"If we know where he is, we need to go get him, right?" Zach said.

I slowly stood up still facing where the jet was. That was the final straw. I had no idea where they were going but I swore there is no city, no base, no crevice that the Jester could hide in and I wouldn't find her. "Not yet. Get on the jet guys."

"Astrid-" Richie began.

"I swear if both of you aren't on the jet in three seconds, you'll be walking the 5000 miles home." I said steely.

I didn't need to turn around to see Zach and Richie scrambling through the doorway, they made plenty of noise doing so. I looked up at the sky once more. It was my fault Mitchell had been taken, and I'm getting him back. I stormed into the jet. I noticed Zach and Richie carefully avoided me as I walked past them and into my room. I heard the jet begin, Zach and Richie trying trying to figure out the jet, and the engine starting. Only they, the smartest teenager on Earth and one of the best tinkerers ever, have trouble starting a jet they own. Ugh, Boys. I settled into my bunk with my book. Reading always calms me down, my Achilles heel I suppose. Nothing like being a book nerd to tarnish my hard earned bad girl image. I just need to get back to my room and take a break before we find Mitchell.

Although the thought of the Academy is reassuring, it also has an underlying terror to it. Not because of the immanent threat of the Jester and her team or because Jenna is going to rip me to shreds once she finds out Mitchell got captured, but

rather that they will finally know the truth about me and how I became who I am.
A thief. A spy. Astrid.

Page Break

Chapter 20: The Nightmare Dressed As A Daydream

Jenna

As the mature, responsible woman that I am, my team is my highest priority. However, once donuts enter the equation, my priorities shift. Therefore, I don't want anyone being a bitch and saying that I don't care about my team just because I stopped at *Holy Donut!* to grab a dozen. Make that two, actually. Now I know all you weird health crazies are saying " But Jenna, that's bad for you!". Well guess what softies? I don't care! I'm going to die anyways, might as well die happy with a few dozen donuts in my bloodstream while I'm at it! Surprisingly, parking wasn't terrible; although the fact that I went through the fly-through may have made a difference. Who knew they serve jet pilots?!

Still, arriving to an abandoned amusement park where there's a good chance your friends could be dead is quite the downer. Don't judge me, but I stuffed a few chocolate donuts in my pockets before I left the cockpit. These bits of serotonin may be my last source of joy for a while.

Logically, it would've been better to have my donut break in Kansas, but I'll leave the logistics to Richie. Besides, I need some time to digest! Being super fit and strong doesn't necessarily mean I have a high metabolism.

From Mississippi to Kansas is a surprising short trip, although the sonic jet I'm flying probably has a big impact on that. Once again, a job for Richie! Thanks to the incredibly annoying GPS, I finally found the abandoned park. I hovered over the grounds trying to find a good place to land. I finally settled on a small patch of grass in a field. The jet settled in between a ring of park benches, probably for picnicking. I stepped out the door, the wind hitting my face. "Its a beautiful day to kick some butt" I told myself. I made my way down the stairs and onto the soft grass. This area looked pretty nice for an abandoned theme park, not to mention the hidden evil base within it.

My team has to be around here somewhere. I set my mind on the center of the park, the Big Top, because if I was evil, that's the best place to control from. See, Mitchell isn't the only one with tactics. Kicking ass is a complicated scheme that takes planning and knowledge. Don't quote me on that, though. I am the type of person to just go in with guns blazing.

The park was covered in overgrowth: vines and leaves cascading from the roller coasters' peaks, the concession stands filled with rotting food (no doubt which Zach would still eat), and buildings and windows broken and painted on. Apparently

someone named "Lil Biggie" had to let everyone who comes to this abandoned theme park that he was here. There's a plus to being the freak of a teenager that I am; I don't have to worry about delinquents being next to me, although the guys are a close second.

Honestly, abandoned theme parks aren't scary at all, in fact, they're fairly interesting. I'll have to come back here and punch through a few walls! Although I never do stick to my plans. I didn't need Mitchell or Sherlock Holmes to understand what people were going to do before they did it, the silver bat lying alone on the ground said everything for me. The Jester took my team, and even if she didn't, something terrible happened because Mitchell never lets that bat out of his sight. I needed to find them and fast, I don't even want to imagine what they could be getting themselves into right now. I would never tell them this, but I hope they're okay. When I find them, I'm going to bitch slap Richie first, then take them out for pizza and give them a hug. I can't stand my team and I hate them with all my heart, but what family doesn't.

First, I need to get back to Monique and see if she has found them yet. Without Zach, we really don't know how to work the computers but Monique is the next best person for the job. Sprinting to a jet with a metal bat in my hand is not fun. I have no idea how Mitchell endlessly carries this thing around; it's dreadfully unbalanced. Regardless, I boarded the jet, and took off. I need to get to the Academy as fast as I can.

Surprisingly, flying a jet alone isn't as bad as you'd think. I get to blast my music without anyone complaining, the robotic staff constantly delivers me pizza, and I don't have to worry about Mitchell breathing down my neck about my flying! I need to do this more often! The only problem with it was that I couldn't stop thinking about my team. Although I may seem like a bitch to them, I really do care. I just need to talk to Grease; she'd know what to do. Also, I like her style of using large guns and explosives to solve problems. I couldn't help but smile. Seeing my team was finally filling me with joy, or maybe it has always been there. Nah.

After the longest hour of my life, I could finally see the huge tower that I called home. In hindsight, a gigantic tower probably isn't the best base, but oh well. Home sweet home, you know? I drove into the helicopter garage, hovering past the scorched walls, debris, and most importantly, another intact helicopter that wasn't there when I left. I took a deep breath as tears nearly welled up in my eyes as I felt a rush of relief come over me. My team is fine after all! Mitchell must have left his bat in a panic, but everyone could be okay. I at least hope Richie is okay so I can still get the slap in that I've been waiting an hour for. I practically jumped from the doors of

the jet and sprinted for the elevator. The entire way down, I couldn't decide between anxiety and relief. "What if they aren't okay?" I asked myself. "Of course they're okay you idiot! The Jester must have failed because their jet is parked next to your's!" I contemplated how I should play this: either with the Surprise-bitches-I'm-back! or the Oh-my-god-how-dare-you-leave-me-behind! trick. Honestly, as long as I get my revenge on those little pricks I'll be fine.

Zach must have changed the elevator music because it was playing some upbeat jazz, which is kind of surprising because Zach really does not strike me as a jazzy person. Sadly, I know exactly who does.

I don't know if you have ever had that feeling of knowing you're in a daydream but not being able to break out of it because let me tell you, it is weird! Before I knew it, I wasn't standing in the confines of the Academy elevator anymore, now I was sitting in the middle of the field. There was a picnic basket by my side and a plate of bread and cheese over a flowery blanket. For some odd reason, I was sitting by myself, that is until I saw him. Preston walked towards me with a bouquet of flowers, their roots still covered in dirt. I remember this perfectly, the day after Mitchell arrived, the same day the Jester attacked.

Preston sat down next to me, the red, blue, and purple bouquet matching perfectly with prim white shirt and bright pink shorts. He had a small patches of dirt on his white shirt, I couldn't help but laugh because I knew he'd have a fit if he saw it.

"These are for you," he said sitting next to me, "a beautiful bouquet for a beautiful girl" he said with his incredibly hot smile.

"Preston, where am I?"

"Smith Park, of course! Apple?" he said, handing me a bright red apple.

A strange ding sounded in the distance, like someone rang for a bellhop down the road.

I looked around frantically, whipping my head back and forth just hoping I could find someone I recognize.

"Where's Zach, Mitchell, Astrid, and Richie?!" I said.

"Zach and Mitchell are back at Headquarters, remember? They said they rather die than third wheel. And I've never heard of Astrid or Richie. Are you okay Jenna?" he responded, furrowing his brow in an obnoxiously cute way.

"I'm fine! I just need to see the team!" I said, pushing myself up and off the blanket. I felt Preston grab my hand, harder than I remember.

"Please Jenna! It's our day off, can't we just enjoy it?" he pleaded.

This is not how I remember this at all! But I must say, Preston does an incredibly convincing begging cat face: the whole teary eyes, frowning mouth, and staring right back at you until you give in. Two obnoxious people really do make the perfect couple.

"I suppose you're right." I said, slowly lowering myself back onto the blanket.

"Great!" he said with his brilliant smile as he wrapped his arm around me.

The park was gorgeous with families chasing each other and down hills, people barbecuing and laughing, and the sun rising beautifully in the distance. There's nothing like a cool Florida autumn day where you can sit with your boyfriend in a calm park while the day before you were in Manhattan battling an anonymous villain's robots. No. This isn't possible. Preston isn't the wonderful boyfriend I thought he was, he's the traitor that nearly killed Zach and Mitchell.

We sat together for a few minutes, just enjoying each other's company when Preston turned and said the most bizarre and impossible thing to me.

"So, choosing to freeze me for all eternity rather than shoot me in the head huh. I guess I should say thank you."

I instantly responded, "Preston, you have to understand-" but stopped suddenly.

"Understand what? You choosing to torture me forever rather than finish me when you had the chance? Rookie mistake Kalinowski."

There was no way Preston could've known that and I definitely don't remember that happening in the park. I knew I was dreaming but could I be changing my own memories? Definitely not. I need to wake myself up somehow. I pinched my arm as hard as I could, recalling what my dad used to do to me if I spaced out during his long monologues of how I need to grow up to be a proper young lady. Bleh, that's a conversation for another day.

"Pinching yourself to wake up from a dream! Classic! You always did crack me up, Jenna!" he said. "I'm afraid those days are over." He pulled his favorite weapon from beside the blanket, his old bo staff, and pointed the tip at me. "Fifteen years of bojutsu, karate, and capoeira have prepared me for this, Jenna! I'll betray you later tonight, may as well do it now!"

He whipped the stick around, smacking me across the face. My eyes snapped open and I was back in the elevator, the doors just sliding open to the lounge. That was by far the weirdest flashback I've ever had. It's also the first so it surpassed incredibly low standards but amazingly odd regardless.

I don't have time for any of this! Preston is frozen and locked in a cell in the basement! I have to find my team, rescue Mitchell (if he needs it), kick some evil clown ass, and bitch slap Richie across his dumb face for making me to Kansas and back; not necessarily in that order though. The lounge was completely empty, the televisions turned off, the couches bare, and only a half eaten slice of pizza (no doubt either Zach's or Richie's) to show that we were here. I took the stairs to the next floor up, the briefing rooms. Don't ask me why we have an entire floor dedicated to briefing offices when it is just six of us and Grease rarely leaves her garage, much less the building. A bright white glow came from the first room, and given all the other

rooms were dark, it seemed pretty clear that someone had to of been in that room recently otherwise the computers would have shut off by now. I may not be the tech genius of the group, but I'm not completely clueless!

I quietly made my way down the hall, the glow emanating through the small windows in the double doors. I was no less than 5 feet from the doors when I heard an oddly relieving voice.

"We need to hurry." Richie said from somewhere in that room.

"I'm sorry! I'll just attach a few more wires to the computer to make it run faster!"

Zach responded sarcastically.

I could here Richie pacing, the clump of shoes echoing. Something must be wrong because he only paces when the cafeteria is closed or when something is seriously wrong, and the cafeteria should be open.

I had to stand on my toes to peer through the window because I'm, apparently, ridiculously shorter than everyone else in the world. Through my limited view, I saw Richie's six foot frame blocking a glowing computer monitor, Astrid by his side. She leaned on a rolling chair in front of her where I could just barely see Zach's head poking above the cushion. I could hear Zach furiously typing, trying to do his nerdy hacking thing.

I pushed the door open slowly, hoping to sneak into the room. The door let out a long creak. I ducked in the corner of the wall, hidden by the door frame. I heard someone just on the other side of the door. They have to be looking out the small window, looking for whoever (me) pushed the door open.

Now, I know you guys are asking, "why are you hiding from your friends, Jenna?" As a spy, you learn that people keep secrets, especially since we live off of them. I'm just going to see what the situation is before I jump into it. You have to think smart if you're going to work with professional liars!

I could hear someone breathing heavily, no doubt, contemplating whether or not to investigate the sound.

"Richie," I heard Astrid call, "please don't lose it on us right now. We can grease the door later. Right now, we have to find Mitchell."

"I swear I heard someone!" he retorted. I didn't dare stand up; knowing Richie, he was still peering through that window just waiting for someone to appear.

"Maybe that's because there are two other people in a room with you?" Zach said.

"I know what I saw." Richie grumbled as I heard his footsteps echo further away from the door. I waited a few seconds, just to make sure there was no sign of anyone, then, I poked my head up again. They were all leaned over a computer again, their shadows casting brightly against the wall, partially glowing through the glass.

I inched the door forward, careful to not make a sound. Naturally, no such luck. The door creaked and moaned as I slowly forced it open. I made a crack just big enough

for me to slip through, slide past the icy cold steel, and hid in the shadows of the room. There was no way they should be able to see me from where I was. A huge closet blocked all the light the broadcasted my way. I could see through small holes in the metal, hear every word they said, and even had a plan in case I got caught. How did I not get spy of the month?!

I hunched down in the corner of the room, trying to make myself as small as possible. Sitting on your honches while wedged behind a locker is surprisingly comfortable. I'll have to remember this for future spy excursions.

Back to the point, Zach furiously mashed the keys on the keyboard. I heard the nonstop clicking of him rapidly searching the database, most likely for information on The Jester. I really wanted to pop out, scream surprise, scare the living crap out of my teammates and roast them for leaving me out of a mission, but I wanted to see where this was going. Maybe another day.

Finally, I heard the clicking stop. Peering through the holes, I could only see my team's back but half of the computer monitor reflected onto the wall in front of me, just barely letting me gather small amounts of information.

"Eureka!" Zach screamed.

"Really dude? That isn't cliché at all." Richie sarcastically responded.

"Great job. What next?" Astrid asked.

"Well, here's the part where we either band together or tear each other apart." He said.

Even though I couldn't see her face, I knew Astrid was making one hell of a curious face.

"Once I break this encryption, everything the Academy and the government knows about us will be revealed. I don't know in what order, but no doubt every secret any of us have ever tried to hide will appear on this screen."

"Great!" Astrid said, without a doubt flashing her winning smile. Then, the strangest thing happened: Astrid turned, and I saw the fear in her eyes. Not fear like seeing a spider on the wall, fear like the world would end; an expression I knew all too well. Just as fast, she turned back around, probably happy as can be.

I had to get a better view, some way to see their faces. I carefully tip-toed out from behind the closet and into the far corner of the room, hidden just out of reach of the emanating light.

Now, I could see only half of their faces, but it is better than nothing I suppose. What am I supposed to do, hide behind the computer they're using?

"Ready?" Zach asked as he hovered his finger over the button.

"I suppose." Richie answered, Astrid looking increasingly worried by the second. Are boys really this blind?

Zach pressed the enter key and a series of numbers raced across the screen until they all lined up and blinked as if someone had won the lottery. Then, the numbers disappeared and the screen went black.

"What happened?" Astrid asked. Just like that, the screen exploded in a flash of light as data raced across the screen, different files and folders being uploaded over each other until they were buried in a stack of open pages. I could barely read the different subjects race by: employee payroll, robotic settings, exercise plans. The list just went on and on.

"Gotcha!" Zach screamed as he chased a file across the screen. Once he blew it up, I could clearly read "Recruit information" as the title.

Perfect. I said to myself. The last thing they need to know is my birthday.

The file opened and I saw a big picture of Mitchell on screen. Sprawling text floated up the screen, no doubt information about him from West Point. Eventhough I could only read half of it, I knew what it said: model student, excellent candidate, brilliant tactician. I wasn't surprised how flawless his transcript was, most because he made sure we knew it. He's pretty much Captain America without the modesty. Then, Zach stopped scrolling. Honestly, I wasn't too surprised that he stopped because I was shocked when I read it. It was an expulsion from West Point after Mitchell broke another student's rib and gave him a black eye. All this time and we thought he had just transferred to the Academy. I thought I was the only one picked from detention! There goes my bad girl rep!

Richie and Zach were completely speechless, their mouths agape as they read through the description.

Astrid stopped them before they could say anything bad, and lucky for them, before they could say anything to make me mad. "We don't know the full story guys. It could be self defense."

Richie turned and said, "She's right. We will have to ask Mitchell after we rescue him. Right now we need to concentrate on finding where The Jester went."

They all turned back to the computer, continuing their search. As time passed, it became increasingly troubling to control myself from walking up to that computer and finding Mitchell's location myself. But the wait wasn't unentertaining.

Zach happened to stumble onto his own file, embarrassingly admitting he hacked into a restaurant's server to get free food for life. Even better, it was his first time! He had gone all over Miami, hacking into databases to get free goods: food, clothes, even a bike. That is until he was arrested on South Beach for trying to impersonate a police chief. Funny enough, he joined the Academy before he got persecuted, escaping unscathed. I have to admit, the kid isn't as dumb as I thought. The best was when Richie's file popped up. An unexplainably large smile crept across my face when he said he had sassed a teacher for explaining a math problem wrong, proved

the teacher to be incorrect, and proceeded to accept the teacher's sarcastic invitation to teach the class. Smart, sassy, and ridiculous. I hate him but he continues to grow on me. How obnoxious is that?!

However, with every file, I began to notice a pattern. Between Mitchell expulsion, Richie's and Astrid's rebellious attitudes, and Zach and my arrests, something was definitely off about our squad. The thing is, I knew why I'm a terrible person, but what's Astrid's story?

It didn't take much more research to find the next file. I should play the lottery after this because it just so happened to be Astrid. She turned away in shock, staring right at me, the amount of sadness in her eyes was appalling; a feeling I knew all too well. She had to know I was standing here, looking me directly in the eye, even though there was no possible way she saw me. If she did, why hasn't she said something? I've been such a terrible person to her, if I caught her spying, I would've ratted her out by now. Before I could decide what to do, she walked away from the group, the boys completely oblivious, and leaning on the opposite wall. I knew she was trying her hardest to hold back her tears; I did the same thing in Juvie. All the boys could do was stare, horrified at the computer screen. What could she have possibly done that was so horrific?

Richie slowly turned, Astrid's back still facing them, "When were you going to tell us?" he asked. "Astrid, -" he began.

"Brianna." she interrupted. Richie stood, agast by her unpredicted steely tone.

"What?" he quietly asked. Please, as if he didn't hear her!

"Brianna. My name is Brianna." she said, turning to face the group. She leaned on the broken locker that was previously hid behind, her face contorted in pain; not like she had been punch in the gut, more like someone had punched her in her soul, unleashing all the rage she's supressed for so many years.

"Okay, Brianna. So-" Zach started, but Astrid death stare froze him in place.

"Just let me speak becasue you boys will never understand. None of you will ever understand. Not you two, not Mitchell, and not Jenna. You will never understand the pain of losing someone you love. And just when you think everything is okay again, the second best person breaks you heart. I can't believe I could be so naive, but it was my only chance. How could I trust two strangers who said I was too good for my prissy life. I had a nice home, two parents who obsessed over my 89% in Algebra, a little brother who blew me a kiss every morning before school, and a crappy job at a Chick-fil-E. I was normal, but I was so tired of being poor. So I made friends. Not the friends that you go to the mall on the weekends with, or talk shit with about other girls around you, or go to prom with in ballgowns. Nope. My friends went to the mall

to shoplift diamond necklaces, and fight fuckboys on the side of the street who try my patience, or crash a ball for people who own multiple mansions. It was just us three: the three musketeers, the trouble trio, the A.I.A. . We weren't robbers or harden criminals. No, we were better than that. We didn't con people, in fact, they practically gave us what we wanted and we didn't have to do any work. We stole from banks up and down the East Coast, racking in millions. We made Jesse James look like a petty thief. That is until we got cocky. The worst part is is that it was my idea. Steal from Fort Knox, the ultimate heist, and get away with it. Talk about a way to make your mama proud."

Then, she turned, Richie and Zach slowly walked away from the computers to be in her line of sight, but she wasn't looking at them. She looked me dead in the eye and said, "I caused the one I loved to die. I'm the reason Ariel was shot."

"Astrid. Who's Ariel?" Richie asked. Zach ran back to the computer, scrolled through a few things, and read, "Ariel Hemmings; age 14; convicted felon; died May 19, 2015 due to gun wound... Astrid, I-"

"Don't bother!" she said miserably. "She died of my stupidity! I'm the one who couldn't remember the maps! I'm the one who lead us into a dead end!"

Then, a single tear leaked from her eye, smudging her black eyeshadow, as she looked my way and said, "I'm the one who let her take a bullet for me."

Those few words, only one phrase, made me go beserk. I was so tired of holding in my rage. I was never mad at anyone in this academy except myself. I stormed from my concealed corner, straight through Zach and Richie, who I trucked apart, and strode right into Astrid's crying face.

"You think you have problems?! I wasn't in Juvie for theft like you! Watching someone die is nothing compared to killing them! I watched my father die in a rundown gas station on the side of a small road! I watched the color drain from his eyes!" Then, for some strange reason, I knew I had to finally address the problem I've been avoiding for years. I stared Astrid dead in the eyes, completely forgetting about the boys behind me, my eyes filling with tears, my heart filling with melancholy, "I'm the reason my father died, all because he wanted me to have a nice birthday!"

I whipped around nearly in Zach's face. "Go ahead, scroll through my file! I'm sure it says all you need to know about me!"

He moved to check the computer but stopped himself as he realized my sarcasm. All my anger turned to sorrow. The memory of my father is a depressing one; something a girl never forgets.

"I can recall the night perfectly. Not through melancholy, though, through trauma. My family isn't like yours: my mom left us when I was 4, my father struggled to keep a job, and I lived in 6 homeless shelters and under 2 bridges. My weekends weren't waiting for a friend to call or going to the mall, I waited for stores to close so I could

dumpster dive. Still, my dad tried his best to make me happy. He used to bring home little knick-knacks that he found wandering the street, even though I was twice the age they were meant for. He never gave up and neither did I. I got a job at a small clothing store and everything started to get better. On my fourteenth birthday, my dad thought it would be fun to take me on a trip. He showed me a small Toyota Corolla he borrowed from a friend he met. Little did I know our trip was to rob a gas station. I had no idea my dad and his friends got into criminal activity until he pulled into the lot and handed me a Glock. I was too terrified to abstain, too scared to watch this blow up in his face. So I played along. Until my dad shot the cashier and high fives his buddy. It's the people you love, the people you think you know that surprise, terrify, and hurt you the most."

As usual, I began to get tearyeyed at the next part: the part where I become a murderer at the ripe old age of 14.

"I had no idea what the button would do. My dad said search every inch of the store, so I did."

Now, I was full out bawling. Tears streamed down my face. I made no attempt to brush them away. My dad used to say "Big girls don't cry". Well, looks like he's wrong about one thing.

"I triggered the silent alarm. Within minutes the police were outside surrounding the building. My father refused to give up, the stubborn prick that he is. We hid behind counters of Twinkies and Snowballs for a few minutes, refusing to surrender.

Eventually, the cops got impatient and stormed the store. When an officer grabbed me, my dad shot him in the chest, only to be shot himself. I can still remember the deafening sound of his lifeless body hitting the floor, my insane screams filling the store, and the cops wrestling me off of his body. That was when I shot a cop. I

became one of the most famous criminal in America when I was 14. What did you guys do? Algebra homework? You still think you're the only monster on the team?"

I began to bawl, tears profusely inching down my face. All the emotions I've been hiding since Julie were finally coming out. The protective bubble I'd worked so hard to create had finally popped.

The stupid behemoth that Richie is finally discovered that I'm here, despite me screaming in his friends face and knocking him senseless.

"Jenna! You're back!" he said stupidly surprised.

I stormed over to the idiot who was still recovering, leaning on the desk. He stood up just in time for me to do what I've been waiting for since I reached Joyland. Just as he was about to open his mouth and, no doubt, say something stupid, I backhanded him as hard as I could, throwing all of my anger into that one swing.

He toppled over (it was even more gratifying than I imagined!) and fell sprawled on the floor holding his jaw. I stood over him as he struggled to stand. Although I'm a foot shorter than him, I could still beat the crap out of him with one swift slap. It took him a minute to stand, readjust his glasses and look me in my obviously pissed off face. "Okay," he began, " I definitely deserve that."

I could not believe this six foot two gallant S.O.B. had the guts to say that to me. I slapped him across the face again, apparently this time not hard enough because he didn't drop to the floor. At least his glasses got knocked off his face, though. He scrambled to grab them from the floor, check if they were broken, and fix them back on his face.

"In all fairness, I probably deserve that one too" he said shamefully.

I swear I hate people like him: a know-it-all who knows they're good and tries to act all nice about it. I stared him dead in the eyes and he just stared back, clearly sorry for what he did. In that moment, he reminded me of the exact person I didn't want to think about. With his tall, skinny frame; brilliant brown eyes unafraidly staring me down; and his short, curly hair which fell partly into his face, he had the same expression as Preston when he betrayed us for The Jester: the depression of knowing you've done something terrible and understanding that nothing can ever make up for it. Suddenly, I became overwhelmed with emotion, whether it was remembering Preston or the melancholy of finally seeing my team again. I leaned into Richie, looking into his beautiful brown eyes, noticing a small scar next to his right eye. How strange is that for a place for a scar. How strange is it that I'm leaning into him?! Our lips touched for the briefest moment, barely enough to feel it, but it was definitely worth it.

What am I saying?! This kid was driving me crazy a few seconds ago and now I'm having my first kiss?! I quickly pulled away, Richie's deep brown eyes sparkling. I could see Astrid and Zach standing off to the side, completely flabbergasted.

"I'm not sure if I deserved that one, though" Richie said wittily.

And there's the boy that I hate again. I despise his existence but I have to admit, the kid is punctual. On the inside, I was low-key smiling (don't get excited, I'm still questioning my sanity), but I still have a reputation to keep.

I returned to my normal resting bitch face, "Don't get too excited Steven Hawking, I won't say I enjoyed it."

The snide piece of shit chuckled and rubbed his now bright red cheek. Let's just hope the boy has the same amount of sense as he does random knowledge (he doesn't). I strode over to the computers, Zach and Astrid standing in my way. Astrid has one upturned eyebrow, clearly shocked but not nearly as much as Zach.

"Now that that's done, we have work to do" I said as I passed by. I stuck my hand under Zach's still open jaw, and pushed it closed for him. "You're catchin flies, buddy."

Page Break

Chapter 21: SCIENCE!!!!

Mitchell

My heavy breathing echoed through the dank chamber. I had no idea how long I've been knocked out, but I knew exactly where I was. My jacket, bat, and bag were gone; either with The Jester or on the ground in Arkansas, but that didn't matter. I could find a way out of here without Grease's tech. The room was pitch black, the only light emanating from a slit in the bottom of the door. I could barely move, my legs and arms atrophied from however long I've been lying on this wet, moldy floor. I was absolutely drenched in sweat, or maybe water? This must be an old well or something because no place underground could be this damp. How do I know I'm underground? Super secret spy and army training. Also, the large wall of dirt I'm tethered to is a big give away.

I have to find a way out of here. My head was killing me, throbbing from whatever The Jester did to me in that plane. All I remember is feeling someone's grip slide through my fingers. The fog surrounded me, making it impossible to see in front of me. All of the sudden, I couldn't breathe. Someone knocked me to the ground, tied my hands together, and dragged me away. I must've passed out from suffocation because when I woke up, I was high in the sky, flying over the Squadjet. I could see Richie, Astrid, and Zach on the ground, trying to flag me down. I still couldn't move, no doubt Time Queen keeping me from escaping. Regardless, I was in some sort of cage, hanging from the bottom of a jet. Then, the engines kicked up and blasted off into the night, the wind whipping at my exposed face. I felt the cage slowly being raised into the body of the jet, coming to a haunting stop, nearly throwing me to the ground. After the floor was sealed, I shouted for The Jester to let me go. There was nothing but silence for a long time. I couldn't do anything, not even sit down. The cage I was in was so claustrophobic, the metal bars barely allowing space for me to slip my fingers through. After what seemed like forever, a low hissing sound filled the chamber. At first, I thought it was a door opening, maybe The Jester coming to make a joke about how I'd been caught. Of course, no such luck. Barely visible at first, I could see a light green gas filling my cage. Now I may not be the smartest of the squad, but I've seen enough movies to know that green gas means toxic. I pinched my nose and held my breath. My chest began to constrict as my oxygen reserve began to deplete. I can recall my eyes tearing up, my head feeling like it was going to explode, and eventually leaning against the cold metal bars as I slipped into unconsciousness. There's the story of how I ended up in this hell hole! The question is, why am I here?

Like clockwork, a steel door across the room creaked as it slowly opened, flooding the cavern with bright light. Even with my eyes shut, the light was blinding. I felt the chains move, becoming slack as someone loosened it off the wall. I felt myself struggling to breathe like my lungs were exhausted. I knew the only person in the world who could do that, and she just so happened to want me dead.

Time Queen whispered into my ear, "Try anything and I will freeze your heart."

I meant to reply but with my lungs barely operable, my response was mostly an exhale. The light was still too bright to see; I must've have been in that room longer than I thought! She jerked me to my feet, which also refused to work, most likely from being sprawled on the floor for who knows how long. I wobbled down a long corridor, Time Queen pushing my back. I tried to think of a way out, some way to incapacitate her and escape, but there was a few problems. First, I'm adjusting to the light, but it is still fairly difficult to attack a prepared person while you're half blind. Second, Time Queen could stop all of my major organs if I missed. Lastly, I have no idea where I am and I have no doubt that The Jester and Harlequin are somewhere watching. Just as I decided *screw it!*, Time Queen practically picked me up and threw me in front of her. I landed on the floor with a hard thud, smacking my face on the cold tile flooring. I could feel like difference in the floor, the corridor squeaked as I walked, like wood. Now, I had no doubt in my mind I was some place else. Not necessarily better, but still better than being chained to a dirt wall. My eyes were finally adjusting to the light, perfect timing for a loud clang to echo through the room, the sound of a heavy metal door shut behind me.

I pushed myself up off the floor, my head still hammering from the impact.

I leaned on the desk next to me, nearly falling over as I tried to walk. I felt my forehead, feeling something warm and wet. *Shit*, I told myself. I must've hit the floor harder than I thought. Once I finally came to my senses, I gathered my surroundings. I was in some kind of laboratory, beakers and glass bottles filled with neon colored liquid sat on every desk. A strange elevated table was nailed to the wall in front of me with a metal tray attached to one side, like an evil doctor's office. I carefully walked from desk to desk, checking my back to make sure an evil clown didn't suddenly appeared, ready to strike me with a giant needle.

Every desk was the same, several beakers full of probably explosive chemicals, some strange science equipment that Richie would've had a field day with, and a very large array of needles which all contained slightly different shades of green liquid. *Let's just avoid those*, I said as I went to inspect the odd testing table. It was reflective, its steel design shimmering from the ceiling lights. Oddly enough, it went strangely well with the white walls and shiny metal flooring. Its tray was full of syringes, clamps, and other odd surgical tools. I snooped around the rest off the windowless room, trying to find any clues of where I was. The crackle of a PA system echoed through

the room, filling the once quiet hall with the familiar and obnoxious evil laugh of the women who want me dead.

"Hello Mitchell! I'm so glad you could join us!" she said cackling.

"Not like I had much choice." I muttered. "What do you want?" I asked.

"Only to finish what I started!" She quickly retorted, laughing again.

I backed up slowly, reach the large metal door. It had no handle, only a keypad with a combination code. A loud creak resonated from above me. I looked up just in time to see a huge glass box drop on top of me, surrounding me in a see through cell. I banged on the walls, hoping to break the fragile glass. No such luck. Several clicks echoed from above. Great! Now I'm trapped in a glass, air tight cell!

"I'm not going down without a fight!" I screamed.

The Jester returned with her insane laugh once more. "You think I'm going to kill you?! You aren't so lucky Mitchell. A scientist's work is never finished."

Just my luck to be trapped in a glass, air tight cell by three hyena-like women, and the cell isn't soundproof. I pounded the glass, striking in the same spot over and over, just hoping to even crack the glass. No such luck. I collapsed to the tiny floor of my transparent enclosure, heavily breathing from exhaustion. Then, 3 long silver rods lower from the ceiling and began to dispense a familiar yet unwelcome green gas. I was too tired to restrain myself and collapsed in a heap from The Jester incapacitating gas.

I awoke once again in an all too familiar scene. My eyesight blurry, although this time not blinded by darkness or light. In fact, I could see perfectly. However, I was restrained again, this time, trapped by several Velcro straps from my neck down to my ankles on the operating table I was just inspecting. I pulled and jerked my body to try to break my bonds, to no avail. Just my luck, all I managed to do was alert the three doctors sitting across the room who were previous engrossed in their computer. The three familiar women, now dressed in lab coats, joyfully strolled over, laughing and studying me like a caged animal (although I kind of am). I still struggled with my bonds, pulling every muscle in my body to try to escape.

"Don't bother!" Harlequin said happily, "I tied those so tight, I'm surprised you haven't lost circulation yet!" All three let out a huge guffaw and her joke. Was that even a joke? Honestly, I don't think they know what a joke is.

"Where am I!" I retorted angrily, hurling myself forward but barely moving an inch. With every struggle, I felt the Velcro tighten around my neck, choking me.

"Somewhere safe, child!" The Jester exclaimed. She walked over and sat down on the small stool next to my table, pulling the extension tray close to her. She rummaged through the various needles on the desk. The other two lunatics pulled

forward rolling chairs and sat intently, as if I was some show for them to watch. "You're really going to interrogate me? Go ahead. There's no way you can break me." I said confidently. I've been trained for years against interrogation tactics! This woman really is mad.

"Interrogate you?! Why on Earth would I interrogate you?!" The Jester said shocked. Now I was confused. If she didn't want to interrogate me, why was I here?

"I told you, boy, a scientist's work is never done." She said as she raised a long slender needle, tapping the glass ever so slightly. The other two sat in the back, nearly falling off their seats in anticipation. I looked the Jester in the eye as she leaned over me, positioning the needle in the center of my neck.

"Now sit back, relax, and don't struggle. This will hurt.... a lot."

She plunged the needle deep into my skin, pushing the lever to release the green goop into my bloodstream. I felt myself shaking, my vision beginning to blur, and the lab starting to spin. I heard the henchwomen clapping and laughing in the background. Then, before I could scream, my blood ran cold and I feel asleep, unaware to the horrifying world that I was in.

I don't think I've ever expressed my hate for needles, especially when they're being repeatedly stabbed into me by three insane scientists. Being knocked out is weird enough, but the dream that came with it just took it up a notch. I stood in a dark purple room while accents of green, pink, and black along the walls. It was covered entirely in different geometric shapes, all different colors. I felt paralyzed, only able to turn in a circle. But the strangest part, I felt someone watching me. That isn't possible though. No one was in the room with me.

The shapes been the quiver on the walls, at first subtle but soon made it look like I was having a seizure. The Jester must've injected me with every drug NIDA warns you not to take. The walls began to morph, slowly forming a familiar face. The Jester let out an explosive laugh, giving me a huge headache.

"Mine. All mine!" She said with her overly joyous laughter.

My headache grew increasingly painful, so much so I had to slowly lower myself to the ground.

"Leave me alone!" I screamed, shaking from the pain.

"Do not resist, child. Resistance is so much harder. Just accept your fate."

Now I was flat on the ground, barely able to move. It took every ounce of energy to speak. "Go to hell!"

She let out another round of laughter, only hurting me even more. "There's no question why I chose you! Stubbornness is my favorite heroic quality after all!"

I began to shake, the pain was too much to bear. My throats began to constrict, my

brain squeezing from the pressure, my lungs collapsing. I sat in the darkness, looking up at the colorful, yet dark mosaic of The Jester face.

"When you wake up, head my advice. Struggling will not help you."

She let loose a final booming laugh, the mosaic shattering from the force. I watched as the ceiling collapsed on top of me, the falling shapes positioned perfectly to pierce me as she fell. I closed my eyes, prepared to die from fear. Then I woke up.

The last place I expected to wake up was frozen in a tube of ice. Maybe on a raft in the middle of the Atlantic or six feet under South Beach, but the world's largest popsicle is one for the books. Just like my dream I was frozen in place, although literally this time. I must have been frozen while I was still struggling because my eyes were wide open, my teeth clenched, and my back arched like I was still struggling against those Velcro straps. I could only move my eyes, and let me tell you I surprised me when I didn't have to blink for 5 minutes straight. It was hard to see through the refractive glass but I was able to make out several other tubes. Mine was located perfectly in the center of the room, one of many which lined the walls. However, I could only see 2 which contained other people. The first was across the room from me making it extremely hard to see through. I saw a huge mop of long brown hair swirling through liquid. I'm going to guess it is a she, but at this point of 2016, for all I know it could identify as a bicycle. She was standing like me but was occasionally bobbing in the liquid, making me think she was alive. Speaking of which, how in the world am I alive?! I'm frozen in a block of ice, therefore, unable to breathe. According to the laws of nature, breathing is a fairly important rule of living! Regardless, I was alive. It must be another weird scientific experiment by The Jester. To my relief, I saw the other pod was frozen like mine. I could only see it out of my peripheral vision and the condensation and warp of the glass made it even more challenging to see, but I managed to identify a boy: fairly short, with short cut hair(longer than mine), and a normal pair of jeans and a t-shirt. Odd enough, he kind of reminded me of that pop star that became famous before I moved to the Academy. What was his name? Dustin Fever? Yeah I think so! Funny, you think of the strangest things while being held prisoner in a tube of ice by three insane female scientists.

Speak of the devil, Harlequin jumped in front of my field of vision just as I was looking away from the trapped boy. If I wasn't frozen in place, I probably would have jumped back. Still, she must have seen the fear in my eyes because her mouth opened in no doubt hysterical laughter. Though there is a bright side to this! I can't hear those weirdos inside this ice! Dreams do come true!

As always, The Jester and Time Queen weren't far behind. The Jester pushed

Harlequin out of the way, apparently yelling at her. She recoiled, slumping behind her. The Jester tapped a few buttons on a console in a front of me. In no time, I was floating in the same liquid as the girl across from me. I stifled a breath, forgetting I could breathe even though I should be drowning: force of habit I suppose.

The liquid didn't make it any easier to see through and, naturally, my luck had run out: I could now hear their squealing voices again. Yippee!

"I bet you're glad to see us!" Time Queen said happily, her voice distorted.

I tried to speak, but I managed to suck in a huge gulp of liquid. The tube quickly drained, leaving me soaked on the floor and coughing up strangely breathable, yet not drinkable, tube juice. After a few seconds, I managed to push myself onto my hands. Before I could get to my feet, the tube filled with the dreaded liquid again. In a few seconds, I was floating once again. *What the hell?* I wondered.

I heard The Jester's obnoxious laugh (even distorted by liquid it sounds awful) ring through the room.

This type of communication is much better, right? She asked, but this time in my head.

Now you can listen to our lovely voices all day, everyday! Harlequin said gleefully. And of course, their dialogue is followed by an eruption of squeaky and painful laughter.

Let me go! I internally screamed, pounding on the glass as hard as I could. The water slowed me down too much which made my hard punch into a little tap. My failure of an attempt made the three laugh even harder. The poor girl across the way must have been able to hear too because she was staring at me, shaking her head and rolling her eyes.

I only wish I had a mirror so you could see how wonderfully stupid you are! The Jester said joyously. *Now, I have something I want to show you.* The liquid receded once again, leaving me gasping for air once again. The glass around me lowered with a long and loud squealing. I crawled out of the cage, dragging myself across the smooth marble flooring until I had reached the center of the room. While I coughed and reched on the ground, the three psycho scientist happily skipped around me, laughing. Just as I had begun to collect myself and regain some strength, The Jester happily strode to my side, standing over me. Before I could do anything, she kicked me in my side, knocking me off my hands and knees, back onto the cold floor. This incited even more laughter, which died down just as I regained myself once again. Harlequin leaned down next to me, whispering in my ear, "You're going to hate this." Nothing like a maniacally clown whispering in my ear how much I'm going to hate a forebodingly ominous event! As soon as I felt my heart beat slow and my breathing become a whisper, I knew Time Queen and The Jester were taking me somewhere. The Jester and Harlequin looped their arms under mine, forcibly dragging me out of

the room. I turned back just in time to see the girl watching me pass, her terrified look not lost on me, as the door shut and someone blinded me.

Page Break

Chapter 22: Grease-Mart

Zach

Normally, working with my friends is exciting. Chasing down criminals, searching for clues, hacking into enemy electronics to see what they see; talk about exciting weekend plans! Now I'm just frustrated. I've spent the past three days searching for a needle in a haystack. I've brought several metaphoric industrial sized magnets, a flamethrower, and multiple gallons of water, and yet I haven't even found a clue. I've gone through every criminal record, all The Jester allusions available, and every circus that has opened on Earth, but I still have no sign of where Mitchell could be. I slammed my computer closed, twirling around in my desk chair. I closed my eyes, trying to find something peaceful in the hectic life I live. It wasn't very long until I couldn't see straight, the world spinning from my whipped up equilibrium.

I inched myself off the chair, laid on the floor, and tried to regain my senses.

"Is this a bad time?" a familiar voice quietly asked. Jenna stood in the doorway, staring down at me sprawled across the carpet.

"Not at all." I said, pushing myself up even though my balance hadn't fully recovered. Jenna extended her arm. I reached up and got ready for her to throw me up.

Surprisingly, she carefully lifted me off the ground.

"What's up?" I asked, the nervous look on her face telling me something was wrong. She giggled, "Honestly, too much. But that's beside the point. Grease asked for me to get you. She said she needed your help downstairs." She looked around, frowning at my organized room. Nothing like your friend getting kidnapped to make you do a little spring cleaning, even if it is October.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I've never been in here." She said, still gazing at my video game posters and books that neatly lined the walls. "It isn't even close to what I expected."

"What did you expect? Pizza boxes, game cartridges, and dirty clothes?"

She laughed again, "Quite honestly, yes."

I couldn't help but smile. I have to be the direct opposite of a stereotypical gamer: tall, skinny, and a neat freak. What can I say? Can't hack into foreign networks if you can't find your mouse and keyboard.

Thinking back to a few days ago, my smile disappeared. "Just don't touch anything!" I said on my way out. Halfway through the door, I stopped, leaned in and said, "If you hurt my best friend in anyway, you'll have a lot worse to deal with than The Jester.

OK have fun!"

Halfway down the hall, I heard Jenna yell back, "Well tell 'a lot worse' I'll be waiting." I couldn't help but smile. Having kick-ass friends really is the best.

The trek to Grease's garage is always fun. Luckily we have that sonic elevator otherwise the trip would take forever. Don't even get me started on the time when the elevator broke and I had to walk down 40 flights of stairs for Grease's urgent problem: her broken scanner. A day without being able to scan her creations for flaws is like hell on Earth for her. Why am I such a kind person?!

I walked past the dozens of doors I haven't even explored. I've been here for almost a year and I haven't even looked in a quarter of the rooms of this place. Grease's garage is easy to find, though; just listen for loud clanging, banging Top 40 hits, and an extremely sassy girl who's screaming at the top of her lungs at broken contraptions.

The first thing that hit me stepping through the doorway was the sound. Even with the door closed, I could clearly hear Taylor Swift belting out her newest song, although I didn't realize what the door was holding back until I opened it. You know those stickers on the sides of CDs that tell you not to listen above a certain decibel point. Yeah, neither has Grease. Second, was the smell. Honestly, I've been down here so many times, I'm surprised I haven't been desensitized to the stench of oil and fire. Last, was the light. The hallways are well light of course, but Grease's garage is like the Times Square Christmas display on steroids. Ceiling lights, desk lamps, and not-so-subtle subtle wall lights made the place brighter than my future.

I made my way through the winding walls of scraps, which Grease claims she organizes in some odd fashion. At this point I've just stopped questioning her. I found her under her newest and probably favorite invention: The Squad Mobile. I have no idea what makes it so special, mostly because Grease refuses to tell me, but she did ask me to wire an electric shotgun on all of the wheels so I have a good feeling about this one. I nudged the gurney she laid on, pushing her just enough to alert her of my presence. Apparently, I pushed a little too much because she screamed and pushed herself out from under the car. Her face and shirt were drenched in oil, the transparent liquid dripping down her face. She pushed the draining liquid aside from her eyes in one smooth swipe. She promptly kicked me in my shins, ripping a towel off the rack next to her. I even with the music blaring, I could hear her mumbling how much of an idiot I am.

"You know that isn't coming out, right?" I said as she tried to dab away the oozing oil.

She marched past me again, making sure to bump me across the shoulder and

tapping several buttons on her smart watch.

"You know you just pissed off a girl surrounded by an arsenal of weapons she created, right?" She retorted angrily.

"Touché" I said back.

"Anyways, I have something for you but first, I need you to add firewalls to the car's radio."

"You have the best teenage hacker in the world at your fingertips and you want him to guard your playlist?" I said sarcastically.

"Well, unless you want The Jester to decode Y-100 and drive our car into a ravine, by all means go back to Super Smash Bros.!"

You can tell that we are big on sarcastic remarks in our loving family.

"Relax." I said calmly, "I know better than to argue with you."

She didn't bother to turn around while she dug through a pile of parts. "No you don't, just fix the machine."

I held my hands up in surrender, although she still didn't turn around. I gave up, shoving past the scrap metal that littered the floor. I tapped the watch on my wrist which unfolded into my computer/gun/adopted child. Grease liked to call it The iGun because Steven Jobs can, and I quote, "Eat his heart out". Personally, I liked to call her Kindness (Yes it is a she) that way, if anyone asks, I can say I kill people with Kindness. Anyways, it didn't take long to place a firewall and practically every electrical and Internet connected component of the vehicle (which was a lot. Why on Earth Grease needs Netflix in the drivers seat, I will never know). Perfect timing too because as soon as I shut down Kindness, Astrid briskly burst through the doors.

"You wanted to see me?" She asked, carefully making her way through the junkyard.

Grease popped out of a helicopter shell she's been designing. "Yes! Follow me!"

There was no way I'm missing one of Grease's invention introductions. I followed behind Astrid until we reached the weapons vault at the back of the room, the same place where I got Kindness and Richie got his knives. Grease punched in some numbers on a keypad and the walls retracted, just as ear piercing as I remember. We made our way through aisles of finished weapons; Jenna's, mine, and Mitchell's overflowing. Richie's was a bit scarce but that's probably because he was the newest. Then we came to Brianna's, racks of things that I won't even try to guess what they do. Brianna immediately grabbed for a classic Polaroid camera.

Now, I know all of you are like "Polaroid camera? Is that even English?!". Well, in fact, it is! A Polaroid camera has a tape real inside in which it would develop pictures after you shook it! Magical, right?

Brianna pointed it directly in my face just as I grabbed a drone off the wall. "Say cheese!" she said happily.

Grease immediately turned, knowing exactly what would happen. "Wait!" she yelled, but she was too late.

Brianna clicked the shutter and a brilliant light flashed in my eyes, temporarily blinding me. Once I regained my senses, I had no idea where I was. I'm not kidding either. I completely forgot everything before the picture. I had a killer migraine which made me stumble around until I tripped over a spare part on the floor. Brianna caught me just in time for my head not to smack into the cement. "Who are you? Where am I? Why is my watch glowing?" I stupidly asked. Grease stormed over, mumbling about why we can't have nice things. She snatched the camera out of Brianna's other hand, ripping the film from its ejection cartridge. She wildly flailed the image, trying to make it develop quickly.

"What did I do?!" Brianna asked urgently.

"You erased his memory, not that it makes much difference in his intelligence capacity." Grease responded angrily.

"What?! Why would you have something like that lying around?!"

I could only look around dazed, trying to take in the overwhelming environment. I blocked out Brianna and Grease arguing in the background, focusing on my glimmering watch. At the time, it had been Richie messaging me if I had found anything new about The Jester. Instead of pressing the answer button, I accidentally put Kindness into attack mode in which she spiraled out, surrounding my arm in metal. Normally, this would've been nothing, but to amnesiac me, seeing my arm being enveloped in steel really freaks out a person. I can only recall flailing in Brianna's arms until Grease smacked my face with something smooth and cold. When I came to, Brianna and Grease were laughing wildly while I was sprawled on the floor, the Polaroid picture stuck to my forehead. I pushed myself off the floor, grabbing onto a shelf to keep myself balanced. I grabbed the camera out of Grease's hand and put it back on the rack. "Not a fan." I said, leaning on the wall until their laughter died.

"That wasn't what I wanted to show you but it was pretty good." Grease said giggling.

"Very funny. Just get to the point." I coldly responded which only made them snicker even more.

Grease removed a black horseshoe from the lone stand in the center of the display.

"Put this on your head." She said, handing it over. When I reached to grab it, Grease smacked my hand away. "Not you, you imbecile! Brianna."

"Fine." I said, crossing my arms. "Why is she putting a horseshoe on her head?"

They both turned to me, Grease giving herself a nice face-palm while Brianna glared at me like *you've got to be kidding*.

"Just put it on!" Grease said, clearly struggling to restrain herself from slapping me. If I'm making her angry it means I'm doing my job correctly.

Brianna slipped the horseshoe on top of her head, adjusting her dark hair and glasses.

"Alright. Now move that engine." Grease said nonchalantly.

"Funny joke, Grease. Really though, why did you give me a headband?" Brianna asked. (My bad, *headband*. Sorry, I don't know female accessories).

"To move my engine! Now go!"

"How the hell do you expect me to lift an engine? I'm strong, Grease, but not superhuman."

"I swear I'm working with idiots! With your mind! Not physically!"

"You expect me to use telekinesis?! Save it for April Fools, Grease."

"Brianna. Just. Lift. The. Stupid. Engine." Grease said coldly.

"Fine!"

Brianna stuck her hand out, not doubt imagining a floating engine. Whether the hand was to be funny or not, it actually worked. It was slow at first, but the engine soon wobbled and began to magically scoot itself across the floor. I could see Brianna grimacing but she was actually doing it!

"Now lift it!" Grease yelled.

Brianna just grunted in response, raising her hand higher while the engine followed her command. It almost reached the ceiling until Brianna suddenly dropped it and collapsed to the floor. The engine plummeted into a huge pile of part, landing with a thundering crash, throwing materials everywhere. The pile then ignited, sending Grease into a frenzy in which she ripped an extinguisher from the wall and sprinted over to the pile of burning trash, leaving me to help Brianna. Something about fire caused the gears in my mind to turn, but that was probably just the smell of burning oil.

She laid across the floor, holding her hand to her head and grimacing. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"I'm fine. My head just feels like it's going to explode."

"Not surprising, really." Grease said, returning from her mission to extinguish the flames. "After all it is your first time using telekinesis."

"How did you invent telekinesis?!" I asked, fully curious. Although, I am experimenting with portals so maybe scientific superpowers shouldn't be so fascinating.

"Well, I figured that with all the synapses and nerves in her brain, she could possibly create a large enough energy field..." Grease began.

"... If she had enough focus and something to amplify it! That's brilliant!" I happily responded.

"I'm really glad you're both bonding over your nerdy science stuff but there's a girl dying on the floor!"

"You aren't dying," Grease plainly responded, "your brain is just recovering from over stimulation. The more you practice and stronger you get, the easier and less painful it will become."

"Well that's nice to know." Brianna said, shoving me away as she stood up. "The last thing we need is more fiery explosions, right Zach?" she said pointedly.

Of course, she was referencing the day before Richie arrived when I nearly burnt down the chemical lab because I was messing around with some loose wires. I made a small spark which ignited the beaker of pure hydrogen in front of me. In the hysteria, the beaker was knocked off the table and exploded. Thus, when we were supposed to be having a lesson on nuclear fusion, I made it a lesson on fire bombs and fire retardant. On the bright side, I managed to make a moving doll with the wires in the chaos!

Nonetheless, we all laughed. Something still bothered me but I couldn't place it. Something about that event and Brianna seemed to connect. I struggled to associate the two events! I sat on a heap of scrap metal, trying to focus.

"Zach? It was just a joke." Grease said.

"Zach?" Brianna asked, inching closer. I pushed her hand away and pounded the shelf next to me. Even with my eyes closed, I knew they were worried.

"There's no need to get fired up over a dumb joke, Zach." Grease angrily retorted.

That's when it all clicked. Brianna's accidentally fiery explosion, my science class incendiary bomb, Grease's horrible fire pun; there was one common detail: the fire. I can recall the classroom perfectly, especially people in the chaos. While I fooled around outside and the rest of the team desperately tried to quench the flames, Headmistress stood petrified at the front of the class. That was the key to finding out who Headmistress is and the key to discovering Mitchell's location.

My eyes flew open, both literally and figuratively. I jumped from my makeshift chair, scaring the crap out of Grease and Brianna. "Follow me!" I yelled back, sprinting for the door. I ran down the hall, Grease and Brianna hot on my trail. I punched the elevator button, the light began to glow and count down from lobby level.

B1...B2...B3... I don't have time for this, by the time it reaches B50, it may be too late. Yes that is a little over dramatic but I don't care. And yes it is a hyper elevator, but I can use the workout!

I ran down the hall further, taking a heavy left, kicking open the door and nearly jumping up the 100 flights of stairs to reach L1. I could hear Grease and Brianna panting a few flights below me as I ran up the stairs as fast as I could. It took surprisingly less time and energy than I would've imagined (thanks adrenaline) but I made it nonetheless. Grease or Brianna must have sent the elevator back up because

it was open and waiting for me. God bless because I don't think I could've made it up the rest of those stairs regardless of how much adrenaline was pumping through me. I ducked into the elevator, Grease and Brianna just barely able to jump in before the doors closed.

"Meet me in the main computer room, I'll get Richie and Jenna." I said, waiting for the elevator to reach L15.

Grease and Brianna nodded in response, obviously out of breath. "I need to make this elevator faster and get rid of those stairs!" Grease struggling to say as she slid to the elevator floor.

"You can rest once you get to the room. Just hurry! I'm not sure how much time Mitchell has left..." I solemnly said as I exited the elevator.

I ran down the hall, sprinting to the last door: Richie's room. I quickly poked my head in, shouting, "I think I've Mitchell!"

In my rush, I failed to notice Jenna who sat next to him, her eyes obviously red from crying. My face grew extremely hot from the awkward silence that followed.

"That's wonderful!" Richie said, jumping off his bed and helping Jenna up. She walked for the door, right past me without saying a word.

"Jenna, are you-" I started.

"Fine." She said, cutting me off before marching down the hall.

"What happened?" I asked Richie who oddly took his time walking from the room.

"Not my place to say. Besides, we have a friend to find." He softly responded, following Jenna down the hall.

I burst through the doors, hitting them so hard they nearly slammed back into me. Brianna and Grease nearly jumped out of their seats.

"Sorry", I said shyly, "Probably too dramatic but this is an exciting moment."

Richie and Jenna ran in directly after me, taking no time to find a close seat to the computer. I squeezed my way through the crowd and took a seat. I began to furiously type, trying to open a search.

"So what exactly did you find?" Richie asked.

"It isn't what I've found, it's what I've remembered. It's been right in front of us this entire time." I said in between my frantic typing.

"Can you stop speaking in riddles and just answer our question! Where is Mitchell?" Jenna said, obviously growing angry.

"I don't know." I responded.

Jenna looked pretty close to punching me in my face (not that she doesn't regularly) so I included a safe little 'yet' in there. That seemed to calm her down for the moment.

"But, I do know who The Jester/Headmistress is." I said confidently.

"Yeah so do I! She says it every time a new member comes. How does Rebecca Lubelski help us?" Brianna sarcastically responded.

"She doesn't, she kidnapped our friend remember?" I fired back quickly. "In fact, Rebecca Lubelski can't help us at all!" I said dramatically as I found the article I was looking for.

The headline "Flames Destroy R.E.S.C.U.E. Laboratory! 2 Dead!" were sprawled across the screen in big, black, bold letters.

"How does a crispy Los Angeles science lab from..." Brianna began, leaning into the computer to see the small date scrawled under the huge title, "1976! How does that help?!"

"The lab was owned by the CIA, sort of like a pet project, it was used for experimental drugs and chemicals. Records show that it was run by two of the most regarded governmental scientists in history, George and Kate Arena! They were known for their unwavering dedication to science! On the night of the fire, George and Kate were working over time, trying to complete something the government demanded. The lab's mysterious blaze sent unknown toxins in the air, killing tens. But the most dangerous thing that come out of that museum was what the police had rescued. Their daughter, Gia, was found in the front parking lot, staring at the inferno. The paramedics had found multiple injection sights and signs of inhuman treatment. They came to the conclusion that Gia's parents had been testing substances on their daughter on had been running trials on her. Her absence from public appearance and her inability to communicate affirmed this. She was processed into the foster care system, her family name lost its credibility, and the government covered up the truth behind the dangerous toxins." I said without looking at anyone around me.

"And how does that lead to Rebecca Lubelski?" Richie asked, trying to move things along.

"Because Gia Arena is Rebecca Lubelski!" I exclaimed, throwing my chair in a circle until I faced my team. I looked Richie straight in the eye and said, "And I have the evidence to prove it."

I quickly turned my chair again, going through more records.

"Think about it! Here's this little girl who suffered an extremely traumatic experience and was tortured her entire life, who just so happens to be the same possible age as The Jester. Coincidence? I think not!" I shouted excitedly.

"Zach, that still isn't hard proof. We need DNA samples, birth records, something other than a newspaper article. By the way, how did you even know to find this?" Jenna asked.

I could feel the huge smile stretching across my face. Jenna: always one step ahead of me. "My dear, I am so happy you said that I could kiss you! On second thought, I'll save that for Richie. Anyways, after the first attack from the Jester, Headmistress asked me to erase some important files she thought were too dangerous for the Jester to get a hold of, little did I know she was The Jester at the time, but that is a story for another day! Normally, I would've just encrypted and erased the files and happily eaten the Thursday buffet, but I noticed that one of the files was a newspaper article, hence our situation, and curiosity got the best of me. So, instead of deleting the files, I secretly sent them to an anonymous account which I used to study the files as time ran on. About a month later, I saw no connection between them: mostly possible recruits, Academy spending records, and boring stuff like that. Thus, I forgot about them as Halo and CoD tactics filled in instead. But, the last and most difficult to crack file contained this document and a missing person report for Gia Arena!"

"Zach, that's just one instance! What are the chances this is where Mitchell is anyways? The building was burnt down." Richie said solemnly.

"Ah yes Mr. Brains! But, I can do you one better! Jenna, do you remember the day I nearly burned down the chem lab when I spilled those explosive chemicals?" I asked excitedly.

Jenna snorted, "How can I forget?! It was great!"

"Well, in the chaos, I noticed something important: Headmistress's expression! It was pure terror! Like a nightmare come true!" I responded, practically on the edge of my seat.

"I think everyone would be terrified if a teenager sent off a firebomb in front of them." Grease said doubtingly. The team shook their heads yes in response.

"Please! I know I'm right! This is our only lead. We have to try!" I exclaimed.

Richie backed up and raised his hands in surrender. "Alright. It's worth a shot.

Everyone pack your stuff, Squadjet up in 20."

We collectively stood and began to walk towards the door, that is before Grease blocked us. "You guys aren't going anywhere without gear." She said happily, a creepy smile spreading across her face telling she'd planned for this.

This time, I gave everyone a break as we took the elevator, even though we need to get to Los Angeles as soon as possible. Grease practically pulled us into her garage where she happily equipped everyone with weapons. Apparently being armed to the teeth wasn't enough! I had enough smoke and EMP grenades to make the U.S. Army jealous, but Grease insisted that I wear her new suit. She handed every one of us a jet black suit which fit everyone flawlessly. She forced us into tubes which dressed us in a flash, like something out of The Jetsons. And one final surprise, Grease was coming too. She stepped out of a tube wearing her, so called, "mission suit" and a

large satchel slung around her shoulder. Brianna tried to hand her a pistol, but she just turned it away.

"I've got everything I need in here." She said smugly, patting her bag.

I had no idea what that meant, but knowing Grease, it meant some crazy contraption that could and would probably blow up.

"Everyone good to go?" Richie asked, obviously wanting to leave.

"Wait!" Grease yelled, "I almost forgot!"

She sprinted through her junkyard to the back wall again, stopping for a minute at Mitchell's section. She lifted a large drawstring bag and a slender silver bat off the display and ran back to us. By the time she had walked back to us, she had managed to stuff the bag inside her satchel, but was still working on the bat.

"Grease, there's no possible way you can-" Jenna began, until Grease shifted the bat at a certain angle and it easily, and impossibly slid into the bag. "fit that." Jenna finished, astonished by the bag.

"New invention!" Grease said happily. "I can fit or grab anything mechanical or that I put in here, it just has to fit the bag's opening."

Everyone's mouths hung open, staring shocked at Grease's latest invention.

Honestly, I thought today couldn't get any stranger, and yet I'm wrong again!

"And my final gift," Grease said with suspense as she dug through her bag,

"everyone gets one of these." She handed out miniature Bluetooth headsets. I

strapped it to the side of my ear and clicked the flashing green on button. "Testing!"

rung through my ear as Brianna fidgeted with her's. I recoiled from the shockingly loud words, ripping the earpiece off to adjust the sound. It only took me a minute to fix the settings so that I could hear my team without giving myself Tinnitus. Now that we were fully outfitted; our sleek black mission suits, our upgraded weapons, and our state-of-the-Grease headsets; everyone wound their way through Grease's garage until we finally met in the hallway. We jumped in the elevator, hyped by our new clues, and exited onto the auto-floor. We found the lone jet once again and prepared for take off. Richie popped open the lift and said, "Time to kick some ass", confidently as we all piled into the Squad-jet for our, hopefully, final mission. It's about time we saved Mitchell and took down our long standing foe.

Page Break

Chapter 23: Prison Break... or not

Mitchell

My life has become a series of bad dejavu: being poked with needles, being constrained to a tube almost 24/7, and three insane scientist eagerly awaiting test

results from my forcibly taken blood. But no matter how hard I try, this is no dream. There are breaks in the cycle still, like how I'm currently being dragged down a corridor, half beaten and frozen in time, while three doctors sing strangely ominous classic rock songs.

They must've taken me a room over because it wasn't long before a long creak echoed through the hall and I was limply dragged into another experimenting room. I'm familiar with the shiny silver desks and trays that The Jester constantly uses to draw blood and inject serums into me, but this room was different. It smelled earthy, like where I was initially tied to a dirt wall. Before I could gather my surroundings, Harlequin and Time Queen tossed my limp body onto a lone wooden chair in the center of the room.

My rattling breathing echoed throughout the empty room, along with the rattling chains which tied me into place. A lone light shone directly over my head, spotlighting myself in the center of the room. I tried to look around and find something recognizable or to use in an escape, but the room was dark and bare. Then, hysterical laughter ricocheted through the room, which should be rather foreseen at this point. The Jester stepped out of the shadows, just enough so I could see her face. The rest of her body was still enveloped in darkness making her look like the Cheshire Cat.

"So what's the schedule today," I asked casually, "the daily tests followed by further torture and maybe a few hours of contortionism in a tube?"

The Jester smiled in return. "I must hand it to you! A week of testing and torture and your sense of humor hasn't failed! Quite remarkable really! The others only lasted a few days, mostly of sarcasm instead of jokes, but you're special. You have a certain fire in you. I must respect that."

I can't believe I've spent a week in this hellhole! My team must be struggling to find me. Still, I refused to show my emotions to this psychopath. "You didn't answer my question."

"Indeed I didn't, but I'm sure this will."

She flicked a switch, flashing every light in the room on. I squinted my eyes, trying to adjust to the sudden light. The Jester's footsteps echoed around me as she moved across the room. It was difficult but I could make out some details. No doubt this was another laboratory: pristine counters lined with dull and glowing liquids, scientific tools that I can't even begin to comprehend, and a strange earthy wall outlining the

entire room. It seems all the rooms they sit me in now are either underground or just old. My eyes finally adjusted to the light, but The Jester was nowhere to be found. That is until someone yanked the head of my chair back and dragged me to a large wooden closet in the back of the room. The Jester's head suddenly popped in front of me, her half overjoyed - half depressed features less than a few inches from my face. She threw both doors open with a loud roar and pushed my chair to the front of the baseboard.

"Where are you taking me?!" I screamed.

She only laughed, waved goodbye, and said, "Have a nice trip!" as she spartan kicked me into the closet. I crashed through the back of it with a heavy thump, landing on the floor of a secret room as if I'd gone through the Narnia wardrobe. I sat sprawled on the cold floor, trying to catch my breath and pull the wooden shards out of my shirt. It felt freezing cold in the room, yet I was drenched in sweat. I pushed myself up, noticing the giant hole in the wall I'd just broken through. I clutched my arm which was bleeding slightly from the shards of wood piercing my side. But before I could take a step, a loud *kerthunk* echoed from the other end of the dark room. A huge orange blob blasted my chest, launching me backwards. I slammed into the wall and stuck there, suspended a foot off the ground. My eyes were fuzzy from the blunt force of the bullet and my arms ached from being pinned to my side so suddenly. Of course, familiar giggling echoed through the room as The Jester made her typical entrance from the darkness. She waved around a plastic folding chair, slamming down on the floor in front of me. She happily sat, looking up to face me. I'm already six feet tall, the added foot made me crane my neck to see her.

"So this is how you test now? By glueing your subjects to walls?" I asked sarcastically.

"Oh no! You aren't so lucky today, soldier. By the end of this, you're going to wish we were just running tests". She fired back, still holding her favorite grin.

I don't know how long I've been here or even where I am, but I sure as hell remember The Jester's experiments. I didn't show it but the fact that she thinking what's coming next is much worse terrifies me.

Awful squealing echoed through the room as she adjusted her chair, scooting forward so she was nearly directly below me. Now, I was practically breaking my

neck to her calming sitting there, giggling and untying my shoelaces.

"I'm guessing you think I'm insane?" She asked calmly.

"Well, you have me dangling and glued to a wall, you test chemicals on me daily, and I've been living in a test tube for who knows how long after you kidnapped me! You're more than insane, you're psychotic!" I angrily yelled back.

A hard footstep echoed off of the solid tile floor in the distance. I couldn't see through the darkness, but I knew exactly who was there.

"Have your guards positioned on me? Afraid I'll break out?"

"Honestly, yes. I did recruit you after all."

I flexed my fingers, the only part of my body I could move except my head and feet. But damn am I happy The Jester thought it would be funny to give me my Academy jacket back, even though she doesn't know the tricks I have up my sleeves. After all, the first thing they teach you in the army is to always be prepared. It was slow going so it's good thing The Jester likes to rant.

She quickly stood, pacing throughout the quiet room with just her footsteps and my heavy breathing making noise.

"You think I'm a horrible person don't you?" She asked.

It was really hard to wiggle the Bowie knife from out the small pocket inside my jacket and to try to look like I'm the paralyzed victim I'm supposed to be, but I'm managing. "No actually! Because my opinion of you has changed in the last ten minutes!"

"You kids really do love your sarcasm. Would you like to hear a story?"

"Do I have a choice?" I asked blatantly.

"There once was a little girl-" she began.

Guess that answers my question.

"-who had an unfortunate childhood."

I continued to flick the hilt of the knife back and forth with my middle finger. It came increasing loose, but not enough where I could grab it.

"This young girl lived with her parents who were both exceptional scientists. An international company confronted them about creating something very special for a very special client. He promised them everything they ever wanted, a successful child, but there was a catch. The child would be the test subject, the child would be successful because of the experiment. My parents weren't crazy, they declined the

offer immediately because their baby girl meant the world to them. So, the scientists' lives carried on as they worked mediocre jobs for a small research facility and made a livable wage. They were the normal family everyone saw them as, but looks are deceiving. The parents wouldn't accept the companies offer, so the little girl did. At just ten years old, she negotiated a deal in which her parents would unwittingly create the serum R.E.S.C.U.E. was looking for. Then, the girl would inject herself with the serum and she would be nicely compensated. The sudden influx of money scared the parents, but the girl convinced them it was donations from their employer. For years, the girl continued to test the serums, some yielding no results, while some had awful side effects."

With just a few more flicks, the knife slipped from the pocket and into my hand. I carefully began to cut through the gelatinous substance, poking and prodding small holes near my hand. "Lovely bedtime story, although, despite it's spiritless plot, I don't feel very tired."

"I am the little girl! I am the greatest experiment ever conducted, even though most of the world doesn't know it yet, but they will soon enough."

The news stopped me in my tracks. I froze mid slice, the knife stuck halfway through the blob.

"What do you mean? What did they test on you?!"

"The future, Mr. Mitchell. I am not clairvoyant, but allow me to show you the future."

She sharply snapped her fingers and out came Harlequin from the darkness. She happily sat in the chair, awaiting further instructions. Time Queen then wheeled out a metallic silver cart with only one needle on it. The Jester carefully lifted the dark green serum. "The world will soon suffer like I have: they will watch the world as they know it burn and see the basic necessities of life betray them."

"Stop! Don't do this!" I screamed as she plunged the needle into Harlequin's neck. The green liquid slowly disappeared as The Jester forced it into Harlequin's neck. At first, nothing happened. Harlequin questionably looked around. "Did it-" she began until she started to shake. It started as a small, nearly unnoticeable quiver, but she soon began to violently convulse. I looked on, absolutely horrified, while The Jester joyously laughed. Harlequin fell to the floor, continuing her seizure. Then, she stopped. Her body thumped to the floor and became eerily still. The Jester looked on excitedly, staring at Harlequin's lifeless body.

"You killed her?" I asked terrified. If The Jester would kill one of her own for an experiment, I can't imagine what she'd do to me. I slowly slid the knife back into it's pocket. I have a feeling I'll need it in just a second.

"No child, I saved her." The Jester said a little too happily for my liking. Harlequin suddenly jumped up and sucked in a huge gulp of air. Time Queen helped her to her feet and sat her back in the chair.

"How do you feel?" The Jester asked, nervously.

"Powerful." Harlequin said carefully.

The Jester grinned and waved her hand to me. "Show me."

I looked on horrified as Harlequin tentatively stood and stared me down. She then raised her palm to me as a wave of anguish washed over her face. The blob began to dissolve, small pieces at first, then chunks of the blobs freed my hands and feet. The pieces swirled around Harlequin's fingers until they became water. I fell to the floor, trying to get blood flowing back into my sleeping legs. Harlequin wondrously stared at the orbiting particles, fascinated.

"Nice trick." I said. I was finally on my feet, about ready to take down these psychos once and for all.

"That isn't all, boy." Harlequin exclaimed, throwing the droplets of water back in my direction.

It formed a huge bubble around me, encasing me slowly from my feet until my head was fully submerged. I tried to swim out of it, but Harlequin kept it rotating, locking me in place.

"This is the serum, Mitchell. Marvelous, isn't it? It flows to the frontal lobe and adapts itself to super humanize what makes you human. Dependent on one's personality, it can do incredible things. Harlequin is fluid, unpredictable, and unstoppable, just like the liquids she controls. Time Queen is inescapable and controlling, finding even the best hidden foes eventually, like the time that bows to her will. Let him go."

I dropped to the floor, wheezing and coughing from all the water I inhaled. The Jester planted her boot on my chest, compressing my lungs.

"Myself: I am inquisitive and relentless. I am complicated to most and simple to some, just like the poisons I withstand. Pick him up."

Time Queen and Harlequin yanked me up and dragged me out of the room, The Jester in tow. My feet scraped against the pristine floor as The Jester faced me.

"You, Mitchell. You see through deception and understand what people are thinking before they themselves know it. You never miss your target."

I was still catching my breath and heavily coughing, but I managed to squeeze out a sentence. "Don't you ever inject me with that serum!"

The Jester smugly smiled. "I'm afraid it is too late for you, Mitchell."

I stared on horrified at the realization that in one of those many tests, The Jester had injected me with that serum. I had some super power that adjusted to my personality.

I felt the heat rising in my chest, the anger festering inside of me. Someone opened a door which flew open with a bang. I was suddenly thrown backwards into the stasis tube chamber. I landed on my back which knocked the wind from my lungs. Clapping heels strode over and landed a hard kick into my stomach. I curled into a ball, letting the anger grow inside of me. I wouldn't become like Time Queen or Harlequin. I refused to become monsters like they had, using their abilities to torture people like me. I have no idea what mine is, but if I have one, I need to find it. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the girl staring at me getting pulverized in the middle of the room. There was a small bronze plate at the bottom of her tube that read "Nicole". Well Nicole, I'm getting you, me, and the boy out of here.

The Jester and her crew backed off. "Get in the tube, Mitchell. You have a big day ahead of you tomorrow."

Every part of my body hurt, but I rose to my feet. I held my right arm which was in excruciating pain, both from being held in one place for so long and for being repeatedly beaten by them. Still, I sat sprawled on the floor, every breath causing excruciating pain.

"You need some incentive I see." The Jester cooed.

She plopped a small laptop in front of me, it was a camera feed of somewhere familiar, but I couldn't place it. Honestly, my brain was too preoccupied with not dying. That was until I saw my team burst through the doors. I was looking at the hangar and a live video feed of my friends. I knew they'd find me! Now, I just need to escape and rescue my two cell mates.

"Get in the cage, Mitchell." She said, more forceful this time.

"Make me."

I whipped out the Bowie knife, slashing Harlequin across the face in one swift swipe. I landed a hard kick into Time Queen's stomach, sending her toppling into an empty tube. I stormed over to The Jester, who happily stood in a corner. I pressed the knife against her throat, forcing her against the wall.

"Give me one reason I shouldn't kill you!"

Her eyes darted around for a few seconds and then she stared me in the eyes.

"Because you're too late."

I roared in anger and threw her to the side, cutting the side of her face in the process. Next, I ran to Nicole's tube and feverishly began trying to release her. I pressed almost every button, hoping one would open the case. Nicole was pounding on the glass, trying to break her way out. There was a rising pain in my chest, but I pushed it aside. We have to escape and fast. If we could just hold down the fort for a little while longer, the squad could finally rescue us. The pain continued to grow until it became unbearable, like my heart had given out. Nicole looked terrified as I ceased

to type and began to slowly fall to the floor. I sat I leaned against Nicole's stand, struggling to breathe.

Time Queen stood over me with strange looking sunglasses on. Time Queen was freezing my heart, giving me an untimely heart attack. The Jester angrily stormed over and socked me in the eye, knocking me to the floor. I heard Nicole pounding on the glass, yet I still couldn't move.

Harlequin bent over my face, " This is for the mean kick!"

She clawed at my face, leaving several scratch marks like an angry cat. I sat dazed against Nicole's pod, my left eye swollen shut and the other half of my face bleeding. I knew I looked as terrible as I felt: my favorite West Point shirt and jacket practically torn to shreds, my face looking like a Halloween costume, and increasing pain with every breath. I distantly heard Nicole knocking on the glass, trying to get my attention, but I knew any attempt to move would be pointless. Hell, it may be better if Time Queen would freeze me in place! Unluckily for me, the three of them were angrily chatting on the other side of the room. They must've come to some sort of agreement because The Jester marched over to me with her angry frown more prevalent than her smile.

"You've messed the entire plan up!", she screamed. "I was supposed to explain my evil plot to you, and then you'd have a brilliant revelation and join me!" She began pacing back and forth, quickly stopping to punch Nicole's tube which violently shook from the force, tossing her around.

"Stop..." I said weakly, my lungs blaring from the pain.

"I didn't want to hurt you." The Jester said, surprisingly depressing for a homicidal maniac. Her sadness quickly changed, the terrifying anger returning. "Now, you've ruined it!"

She lifted me by my collar, making my entire body feel like it was on fire, and pulled my face close to hers. I groaned as she violently shook me, throwing a rushing pain throughout my body. She then practically slammed me against the wall next to Nicole, who looked on completely horrified. With her surprisingly strong grip around my neck and the, no doubt, fractured ribs I have, I felt myself suffocating. She must've seen my face in this midst of my pain because she sighed and dropped me, sending me sliding to the floor.

While I sat shivering, The Jester anxiously searched for something, and even though I couldn't hear what she was saying, she yelled at Time Queen and Harlequin for something. I don't know what scared me more, that The Jester was feverishly looking for something while I sat half dead on the floor, or that my hearing was disappearing. Richie once told me that the first sense you lose when you're dying is hearing. Even my vision was becoming blurry, Time Queen and Harlequin became colorful blurs frantically moving around the room, Nicole was just a looming dot in my peripheral

trying harder to come closer, and The Jester was now only a blotch of green and purple surrounded by an increasingly black world. The blotch of color grabbed me by the color and lifted me high, shoving a needle into my side. I watched her press the injector but can't feel a thing.

In fact, the longer I try to feel my hands and feet, the less I feel over all. The more I try to keep my eyes open, the more bright light and black I see. A funny oxymoron isn't it?

The Jester carried me singlet handedly to a blurry glass cylinder: my tube.

"Our work isn't done." She said solemnly, before tossing like a rag doll into my cell. One problem, she overestimated my weight. Instead of landing in the cell, I hit the wall. As if I need more broken bones?!

She grabbed my legs, pulling me back onto the silver plate. She stepped off just in time for the defending glass to miss pinning her to the floor (even dying I have no luck!). I looked up into the bright light shining from the roof. I could feel myself slowly rising from the tube filing. Even though the pain was excruciating, I felt myself relax. *You're not dying in vain*, I told myself. I watched the green liquid fill around me as I floated to the center of the tube, calmly laying on my back. I closed my eyes just as the ice slowly began to cover them and prepared to die.

Page Break

Chapter 24: The Dynamic Duo

Brianna

Peace. Something I used to know, understand. Something I used to take for granted. Take for granted. Like my family? Like my friends? Yes. Something I didn't know I loved until I lost it. Something I'd do anything for to get back.

Footsteps echoed through the hall, coming closer to my room. Then, they stopped. And just as quickly they retreated.

"You're fine." I said.

Richie stopped halfway through the doorway, frozen with his back to me. "Are you ready?"

"More than I will ever be."

"Good."

Richie turned on his heel, revealing the colorful makeup on his face. Only, it wasn't his face.

"Not many are ready to die." The Jester said as she raised a gun and fired directly at my head.

That is until someone knocked.

My eyes flew open and I was back on my bed, sitting cross legged with my latest book face down in my sheets. Richie stared at me from the doorway with a worried expression. Worried by either the terrified look on my face or the objects hovering off the shelves. With the past few months we've had, I'll go with the first.

"This is a stupid question, but are you okay?" He asked carefully.

"Never better!" I said, putting on my best fake smile. With a single thought, all of the floating objects dropped to the floor.

"Could've fooled me." He responded sarcastically. He carefully made his way through the minefield of knick-knacks, taking a seat at the foot of my bunk. "I'll ask again, are you okay?"

I couldn't help but chuckle. "Define okay."

"Thinking. Formulating. Using that big, brilliant brain of yours."

"You know biology. I'm still breathing and pumping blood aren't I?"

"Yes. And you're still dodging questions" He said eyeing me.

I untangled myself, gingerly pushing my book to the side. "Nothing gets past you."

Richie flashed that annoyingly amazing smile. "Glad you've noticed. Now, since you aren't stupid, you'll cut the bullshit and tell me what's wrong."

I sat silently on the edge of the bed, refusing to even look at him.

"I see. Well, once you want to talk, I'll be in the kitchen getting our french fry stach."

He slowly pushed himself from the bed and began to make his way back to the door. Before he could exit, I quietly asked, "How?"

He stopped in his tracks and turned. With an upturned eyebrow, he asked, "How what?"

"How are you like that?" I pushed, inching myself off the bed. "How are you so calm?!"

"Well-" he began.

"I don't understand how you can be so serious and relaxed with everything going on?!" I said, my tone growing increasingly angry.

"Brianna-" He tried again.

"There are three insane scientists on the loose, who just so happen to have our best friend captured and doing hell-knows-what to him, and you're *calm*?!"

I stormed toward him, kicking aside the various items littering my floor. I got into his face, holding back my instinct to punch him right in his unruffled expression. I substituted the punch to the face for a nice punch to the chest. "How?" *Punch.*

"How!" *Punch.* "How?!" *Punch.* With every punch, I knocked him back a few inches. I kept punching, and punching, and punching until I backed him into the wall.

By this time, my rage had disappeared, tears were streaming down my eyes. Richie, still unchanged, embraced me, leaving me crying on his shoulder. We stood there silent for a few minutes, only my sniffles echoed through the room.

"How are you not falling apart?" I said quietly in between sniffles.

For a minute, he didn't answer. I could feel the gears turning in his head, even though his face didn't show it.

Then, he whispered either the most encouraging or the most depressing thing I've heard him say.

"I don't have the luxury of falling apart." I unwrapped my hands, backing away from him. Still, he leaned against the wall with the same cold face. "If I fall apart, the whole operation does. That is how I stay calm. Because if I fall apart, Mitchell stays lost forever, The Jester wins, and I lose you guys. I can't afford any of that, so I suck it up and keep my shit together."

I tried to process that. I sat quietly on the edge of my bed while Richie stood, no doubt thinking about my state of mind. He slowly began to peel away from the wall, making his way out of my room.

"You aren't a robot, Richie." I said, stopping him just before he could leave. "You can't bottle up all your stress and anger and act like it doesn't exist."

He turned, his face stuck in that obnoxious straight expression. "I know I'm not and I'm not bottling my emotions to hide them; I'm just waiting for the right time to unleash them."

In that single phrase, I saw every ounce of anger, sadness, and worry in his eyes, and it scared me more than The Jester.

"Get ready. We land in ten." He sternly said, and strode out the door.

"So what exactly is the plan?" I yelled as I marched down the hall to the group gathered in front of the exit.

They all turned, Zach spoke up first. "We march in, rescue Mitchell, take out The Circus, and grab pizza."

Jenna and I looked at him with a questionable expression, causing him to throw his hands up in surrender.

"Fine. How about Chinese takeout?" He said. From his appetite, I couldn't tell if he was joking or not, but I'll let it slide.

"Since when do you assign the weird nicknames? And you couldn't think of anything better than The Circus?" Yelled Grease from the front.

"I'm more in the mood for Indian, but we can talk about dinner later." Richie said sternly.

I really hate serious Richie. He's actually quite terrifying, and that knife strapped to his side doesn't help, although Jenna has an extremely lethal lacrosse stick and I can move things with my mind.

The jet jerked as Grease set us down to land. I looked out the door window to see the cement of the building's roof rising rapidly toward us. She came running out of the cockpit, slipping a piece of paper into her pocket.

"Who's ready to kick some butt?" she asked excitedly.

With a hard, no doubt overly dramatic punch, she popped open the exit and we all climbed out into the warm and breezy air.

We strode to a small door at the other end of the roof, an access door to the top floor.

"Okay," Richie commanded, "Group 1: Grease and Brianna, go into the basement and see if you can find any sign of Mitchell or The Circus. Group 2: Zach, Jenna, and I will search the floors' rooms for them. Any questions?"

Zach raised his hand like a kid in a classroom.

Richie sighed, "What Zach?"

"So we are keeping The Circus?" he asked happily.

Jenna and I laughed.

Richie rolled his eyes, but I saw a faint smile creeping across his face. "Come on."

We disappeared one by one into the narrow stairwell which creepily led down into the horribly lit third floor. We piled out into a forked hallway, Richie motioning for Grease and I to go left. I gave him a thumbs up and we left to find the stairwell.

Seriously though. In one situation, can the evil villain be located in some place well lit and wrapped up with a bow on top? Of course not. The job is never that easy. And this is my first job!

Grease and I continued walking down the eerie hallways, waiting to find a door that said "Stairs". Just our luck, we had to make two right turns and walk down a hall full of doors to find it. Although, I will admit kicking open the doors was kind of fun, even if I half expected to get shot every time one opened. We descended to the second level, then to the first, and finally, the basement.

I've seen enough movies, even if I didn't pay for them, to know that the basement is always the secret lair. And yes, The Jester is a villain and so it is a lair. Don't argue with me.

It was a maze of molding tunnels, definitely not up to fancy building standards. We went through hallways of storage doors and forks, following the image of the map I had in my head. Now, the map didn't have in big bold letters "SECRET LAIR", but I had a few suspicions on where she could be hiding, especially that one dead end that I saw.

Honestly, the scariest thing about this place wasn't the danger or the peculiarity, but the confinement of the narrow halls. I'm not claustrophobic, it just reminds me too much of Ariel, too much of my failure to lead my friend to safety. I just hope history doesn't repeat itself...

After what felt like forever, we finally reached the dead end I saw on the map. Lone behold, it was actually a dead end!

"What now?" Grease asked.

There wasn't much, the endless line of dirty brown wall, a huge white boiler, and several evenly spaced lights lining the walls.

"There has to be a secret entrance or something around here. Check everything." I said as I dug my hand into the tops of the light bulb holders.

Grease and I ran our hands across the walls, hoping to find a loose stone or secret lever. I tapped all of the bricks and checked the wall fissures while Grease inspected the boiler.

"Maybe there's somewhere we haven't looked." Grease said as she carefully squeezed between the wall and boiler.

"Or maybe I'm wrong." I retorted.

Grease poked her head out from behind the boiler. "Yeah and my jet is ugly!" she snarkily responded. Her head quickly jumped back behind the boiler.

Of course I'm right! I told myself. *The only time you've been wrong is with-*. I stopped myself before I could say it. The only time I was wrong was when the only family I be known died in my arms. I was not going to let that happen again.

"There's another place they could be hiding. Let's check it out." I said, starting to walk away.

"Okay, lemme just check something." Grease said, still circling the boiler. She tapped it gently, making a funny face as the sound reverberated through the hall.

"This is ridiculous." I said angrily, storming towards Grease. I grabbed her arm and pulled her from the boiler which she was now pressing her ear against as she continued to tap on it.

"Hey!" She yelled, pulling her arm away. She ran back to the boiler, crouched down, and began tapping again.

"She's officially lost it" I said quietly.

"Quite the contrary!" She happily responded. Grease has surprisingly good ears for someone who listens to max volume radio and saws most of the day. "I'm just getting started."

She stood, pulling a slender silver tube from her magical fanny pack (don't tell her I called it that or else she'll probably hit me with it). Along with it came two steel helmets which had a small, rectangular plexiglass slit for eyes: blowtorch and helmets.

"What in the-" I began.

Grease shoved one helmet into my chest. "Put this on." She commanded.

I followed instructions, strapping the cold steel helmet to my face.

"What now?" I asked, having to talk louder than normal.

"I finally get to destroy something!" Grease yelled back.

She pushed me behind her and lit the torch, pushing it closer to the pristine white boiler. It began to sizzle and sparks started flying as the torch burned through the metal. It took a while, but Grease finally managed to cut a large enough piece from the boiler for us to enter through, which plopped into front of us with a loud *clang*. Lone behold, hidden in that boiler was a rope ladder which descended into a strange lit cavern. I peeled the mask from my face, dropping it next to the broken boiler. I peered into the hole, contemplating if we should descend or not.

Grease beat me to it before I could even react. She pushed me aside and practically jumped down the hole, grabbing the last rung on the ladder and quietly landing on the bottom. She signaled for me to follow, but I knew better, in fact, I did the same thing a few months earlier. I also got my best friend killed a few months earlier.

I tapped my earpiece trying to contact Group 2. "Hello? Hello?!"

I rolled my eyes. Of course, nothing works the moment I need it to. I can't even get Zach to fix it! I quickly slid down the ladder, catching up with Grease who hid behind a wall.

She turned and smiled smugly at me. "Always with the hidden base."

A smile began to creep onto my face, but I forced it to recede. *No Brianna. This is a serious mission that you cannot fail.* I signaled her forward, checking each door as we came across them. Let me tell you, for a secret underground base, this place was huge! We must've come across at least ten rooms in the first hallway alone, each one different. I kicked open the doors, revealing table after table of science equipment. One room had a huge white table which oddly leaned vertically against the wall, had an operating tray attached to it, and was surrounded in bright colored liquids. The next looked like a scene from *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, with it's huge wardrobe standing alone in the back of the room, except a huge splintering hole revealed a second, hidden room. This one looked old, like dirt coming from the walls old! Oddly, there were chains strapped to one wall and a lone chair lying on its side close by.

Grease looked at me worriedly. I shook my head in response. "Mitchell is close." I whispered, and we continued on.

Door after door, I kicked in, revealing only more laboratories and no Mitchell. We came to our final door, only this one I couldn't kick in. There was a giant iron door with an enormous wheel blocking our path.

"You ready?" I asked Grease.

She looked at me with an expression of stone. "I've always hated boss fights."

I'll take that as a yes. I grabbed a spoke and pulled hard, making little progress. I stepped back breathing heavily.

"Maybe we can both turn it." Grease said confidently, pulling a monkey wrench from her wonder pouch.

Think Brianna, think!

I tapped my head, only I hit the metallic covering of my headband. *Brianna, how can you be so stupid?!*

I focused on one of the spokes, imagining it turning and the door opening. Sure enough, it did. It was slow, so slow that Grease had to help, but it was working. My head began to ache and I felt myself beginning to sweat, but I powered through. I knew Mitchell was on the other side of that door and whoever was with him was in for it, no matter how much of a migraine I had. Within a few minutes, the door popped open with a loud squeal. I dropped to my knees, utterly exhausted. I waved Grease off as she tried to help me up, and pushed our way into the strangest room of them all.

There were tubes everywhere, not the tubes we saw in every other room that were the size of my finger and held small amounts of bright liquid. These were almost twice as big as me and only three held actual contents. In the closest one, was a girl who floated aimlessly, her head down so she couldn't see me. Her long brown hair floated around her in a vat of clear liquid like tentacles. Directly across from her was a boy who was instead, frozen, like *literally* frozen! He floated in the center of the tube, crystals making the glass seem slightly opaque. Although his long brown hair covered his face, I could tell there was a reason he was frozen. Finally, and to both of our dismay, floated Mitchell, frozen and clearly tortured. His shirt and jacket were nearly torn to shreds and his face and arms were covered in dried blood and scars. His eyes were closed, but I knew he was absolutely terrified.

Grease ran to the control panel, trying to disassemble and reverse engineer it, while I tried my best to break the tube. I concentrated on that glass cracking, the entire tube exploding, but nothing happened. Frustrated, I banged on an empty tube next to me. Grease was still attempting to disassemble that control panel when I heard it. It sounded like someone knocking but it was faint. I looked at Grease, still bent over the wires. She was going at it with a screwdriver, but that definitely couldn't make that sound.

It started again, a series of faint, short knocks. This time, I heard it coming from behind me. I turned to find the girl was awake, and trying with all her strength to get my attention. I ran over, running my hands along the glass to try to find a weakness, but the girl didn't care. I scoured the tube for anything that could be a clue, I found two things: a nametag that read "Nicole" and no escape route. She was still banging on the glass, and didn't stop until I looked her in the eyes. She opened her mouth to talk, but through the water and the tube, I couldn't hear a thing. She kept pointing at a silver tiara on her head, then at Mitchell, then at me.

I nodded in response, pointing to my headband.

She shook her head violently, well as violently as you can in a vat of water, and repeated the action. I signaled for her to give me a minute, and walked back to Grease who was still transfixed on the damn control panel.

"Grease?" I asked.

"Hmm?"

"The girl is awake."

"Wonderful" she nonchalantly responded.

"All of our friends are dead." I said, testing to see if she was paying attention.

"Brilliant! I'm almost done." She answered, making my assumption correct.

I walked around Mitchell's cell, trying to make out details through the frost as best as I could. He wasn't situated like the boy, instead of standing, it looked like he was floating in a pool: stomach and face up. Funny enough, he too had one of the silver tiaras and there is no way Mitchell would be caught dead with a tiara. Maybe the tiaras had something to do with the tubes? Maybe that's why the girl was pointing at Mitchell?

I walked back over to the girl's tube, hoping to ask her more questions through our weird game of sign language. She looked at me as I walked over, the fear in her eyes obvious. I pointed at the tiara again, signing a curious look on my face. She understood: I was asking what it does. She put her hand to her mouth and it slowly moved away, coming toward me. She repeated the motion over and over. Then, she began to open and close her mouth, as if she was trying to say something. *That's it! It's a communication device!*

I began searching for another tiara. If it was a communication device, that means there has to be two. You can't talk on the phone without a person on the receiving end. Well, you can, but you'd look incredibly stupid.

There were none! I checked every inch of the walls, around the control panel in front of every tube, even around the backs of the tubes! I was just checking behind the boy's tube when disaster struck, and of course it did. We didn't even hear her coming, but she must've seen Grease from down the hall because Harlequin sprinted into the room and grabbed Grease by the neck. She proceeded to lift her off the ground.

"You're a sneaky bunch aren't you?" she said happily as she began walking to an empty cell next to Mitchell.

"I'm guessing your friends are around here somewhere." she said as she pressed several buttons on the keypad and the glass parted. She grabbed a piece of the silver lining on top of the tube and wrapped it around Grease's head. Grease tried to struggle, but it was futile; Harlequin had done something to make herself stronger.

"Don't worry," she said happily, "your friends will meet my friends very soon."

She dumped Grease into the tube and the glass closed. To my dismay, it began to fill with liquid quickly surrounding and lifting Grease. In seconds, her head went under and she clawed at her throat. I watched as she took one huge breath from the last of the oxygen and began diving to find some way to disrupt the current. I watched in horror as she desperately pounded on the glass and finally ran out of air. Her mouth opened, releasing the bubbles she tried so hard to hold onto.

Then, nothing happened. I know, super anticlimactic, right? But to both of our shock, breathing was no problem. She continued to try to escape, this time not worrying about oxygen. Harlequin merely stood next to her tube and laughed. She placed the silver tiara on her head.

"Now you're part of the collection!" She joyfully exclaimed. She began to happily dance around Grease's tube, following Grease as she continued to attempt an escape. "You'll be my prized possession!"

I carefully inched around the back of Nicole's tube, trying to get a better vantage point and hopefully, find a way to rescue Grease and everyone else. I scooted around the pipes and wires until I reached the other side. Grease's tools were still on the floor: a screwdriver, a wrench, and a pair of scissors, however, her fanny pack was still wrapped around her side. She too noticed this just as I did, and began desperately grabbing inside the pack. To both of our regret, her hand came back empty several times; it appears that Grease's Wonder Bag isn't waterproof.

I peeked out from behind the tube, just in time for Grease to spot me. Her eyes went wide with joy, then returned to their previously angry state. Harlequin was still jumping around and laughing, when I finally slid behind enough tubes to cross Mitchell.

Maybe I can release someone, I just need Harlequin to leave!

I focused on Grease's pair of wire scissors and carefully began levitating them. Then, I threw them as hard as I could out the door. My migraine was beginning to return, but there was nothing I could do now.

Harlequin chased the noise, running into the hallway. I quickly slammed the door shut and locked it, running back to Grease's pod. I slammed on different combinations of keys, hoping to hit the correct set. No such luck.

I heard the gears of the door, beginning to turn as Harlequin began to unlock the door again. I focused on the knobs again, turning the door the other way. My head began to wrack with pain. There was no way I could hold Harlequin like this and free everyone; I just needed the passcode. Luckily, Richie isn't the only that can come up with rescue plans.

I released my lock on the door and ducked behind the tubes again, just before the door could fly open and Harlequin stormed in. She romped around the room, trying

to find what locked the door (me). She angrily marched to Grease, who tried to look tough, but I knew better.

"What are you looking at?!" she yelled. She punched in a series of letters: *C, R, Y, O*. Seriously?! For a bunch of evil geniuses, they suck at making passwords! With enough time, I could've guessed that!

Regardless, Grease's pod began to freeze, cold icicles slowly creeping from the base of the pod. They started to surround Grease, whose eyes were wide with fear, until she was completely encased in ice.

I saw Harlequin sneer and punch in another series of letters: *H, Y, D, R, O*. Grease's pod began to defrost, returning to its previously liquid state. But, just after it liquified, Harlequin quickly typed in a final series of letters: *D, R, A, I, N*.

The liquid was silently sucked from the tube, leaving Grease soaked and sprawled on the tube floor, coughing and gagging. She dragged herself to her feet and stood defiantly before Harlequin.

"Let me go!" she seemed to mouth.

Furthering my prediction, Harlequin responded out loud and probably in her head, "Only after the tests!"

Harlequin punched in her final command: *HYDRO* and watched happily, and the waters returned.

I decided now was the perfect time, with Harlequin thinking it was over. I concentrated on the screwdriver and sent it flying at Harlequin's back. However, I miss calculated, only catching her in her shoulder. She cried out in pain, and carefully removed it as I stepped in the light.

"Ah, the bookworm has come to save her friend? How sweet." She mocked, clutching her shoulder. We circled each other, sizing up what one another could do. "You think you're so heroic, coming to save your friend. Too bad you can't save the other three."

We continued in our Mexican standoff, Harlequin throwing taunts at me while I stared back coldly. "My friends will take care of your's very quickly." she said snidely. I don't know what came over me, but I flew at her, sprinting for her hideously painted face. We traded punches: left and right, she'd dodge, then me. It was slow going at first. I landed a few good hits to her face and abdomen, but that didn't stop her. I started going on the defensive, dodging each of her attacks, until I could come up with a plan. The only problem: that's exactly what she taught us to do and Harlequin recognized it. She caught me with a solid kick to the face as I went to dodge behind a tube.

I slammed into the adjacent tube, my face throbbing. Harlequin stood over me, confidently smiling. "You're lucky I'm not allowed to kill you."

I felt exhausted and my head was killing me, but I looked around for something to get me out of this. My eyes locked onto the last of Grease's tools: her wrench. I turned back to Harlequin who stooped in front of me. Just as I was about to say a really good one liner, she grabbed me by the throat and lifted me into the air. Nevermind the super awesome movie line then. She began walking in the opposite direction of Grease's tools and Mitchell's cell. Good thing I can move things with my mind! I focused on the steel wrench until I saw it beginning to levitate off the ground. I flung it at Harlequin's back, hitting her in the back of the neck. Harlequin stumbled and dropped me to the floor. I took no time, although I don't recommend running with very little breath. I made it to Grease's panel in which I quickly typed *HYDRO*. I watched as the ice began to melt and Grease started to float again. I took no time to type *DRAIN* as well, but I was rudely interrupted. Just before I could hit the N key, Harlequin grabbed the back of my shirt and threw me backwards. My body jolted as I landed hard on my side. Just as I looked up to find where Harlequin was, her fist connected with my face. My head snapped sideways, pain exploding in my face again. I drearily I looked up again, seeing three Harlequins spinning above me. I could faintly hear her maniacal laugh, but everything was out of focus. My head lolled back, out of sight of Harlequin which she quickly fixed by dragging me to an empty pod and propping me against it. "You want to free your friend? Fine!" Harlequin angrily screamed. She gripped my cheeks and forcibly rotated my face to look at Grease. I watched as she stretched out her arm, just as I do, but rather than levitation, Grease's pod exploded throwing goopy green liquid and glass everywhere. Grease tumbled out of the pod, lying on her side, and grotesquely hacking. After a few seconds, she fell limp. Harlequin moved my face back towards her. "Oops," she exclaimed cheerfully, "One down, five left!" With Mitchell trapped in a tube, bloody and frozen, Grease lying dead on the floor, and myself facing near death, I was waiting for that adrenaline to kick in. Harlequin grabbed the bloody screwdriver lying on the floor and happily strode over to me, but before she could plunge it into me, I made a last ditch effort. I focused on Harlequin, imagining her blasting away from me. I put all of my remaining energy into seeing her fly away and never bothering us again. I dumbfoundedly watched as Harlequin slowly was lifted into the air, and with every ounce of energy I had left, watched her be thrown backwards so hard and fast, that she shattered the stasis tube she crashed into. My head rolled back and my eyes slowly closed. I was simply too exhausted to even move.

I woke to Grease's terrified expression and the violent shaking of her strategy to snap me awake. She has questionable methods, but there's no doubt they work.

"You're not dead..." I said weakly.

She laughed, whether from relief or fun, I'm not entirely sure. "You aren't either."

With sudden realization that Mitchell, Nicole, and the boy were still trapped and our friends were doing who-knows-what upstairs, I jolted forward, causing every part of my body to explode into pain.

Grease eased me back against the glass. "I'll handle Mitchell and the other two. You stay here."

Grease stood, first walking to Nicole who excitedly banged on her glass. Even in my state, I saw the elation on her face.

I didn't even have to tell Grease the password; apparently she was watching Harlequin punch in the codes too. I watched as the liquid from Nicole's tube drained and the glass opened. Nicole collapsed from her cell, into Grease's arms. In between hacking coughs, I heard Nicole's joyful crying.

"You know how to open the pods?" Grease asked.

"After months of being here, I sure hope so." She quickly responded.

I watched as she sprinted over to the boy's tube, quickly typing the keys to release him. The water drained and he fell into Nicole's arms, completely unconscious.

"Sam? Sam?!" She called desperately.

I tried to stand, hoping to help, but it was futile. Whatever I did, wiped me out.

Grease working on Mitchell's tube, but Nicole's calling got her attention. I tried again to stand, this time forcing myself to my knees. I still had to lean on the glass, but it was an improvement.

I watched them whisper, barely able to hear anything. "Help Sam... purple serum... heal...". Grease only nodded her head, finally getting up. As soon as she was on her feet, Sam woke with a start. I could hear his heavy breathing and just imagine his panicked face from across the room. Nicole tried to calm him down, but I could see him frantically shaking. I watched as he grabbed Nicole's arm and suddenly disappeared. And I mean *disappeared*: they vanished into thin air, only to reappear outside of the stasis room and down the hall.

"Sam!" Nicole screamed once again, before she vanished again, this time, not reappearing.

Grease acted as if nothing happened, running back to Mitchell's tube.

"We have... to rescue...her!" I said in between rattling breaths.

"No time." Grease responded nonchalantly.

With a shaky start, I managed to get myself upright and hobble to Grease, just as she was opening Mitchell's pod.

"Now that you're up, I'll need your help."

She typed the keywords, and Mitchell unconsciously tumbled from the tube. We caught him and laid him over our shoulders. We started to drag him out of the room.

"We have to find everyone else and get out of here." I said. I knew Grease was thinking the same thing, but I said it anyways.

"I know. I'll get the Squadjet ready, you and Mitchell go find the rest of the team." We stopped just before the hatch. Grease told me to stop for a second before we go back up. She ran into the adjacent room and returned seconds later with a purple solution in a tube. She handed me one and a small needle.

"What's this?" I asked nervously.

"Nicole said it'll heal you and Mitchell."

"I'm fine." Mitchell moaned, carefully stretching his arms below us. "The Jester injected me with that before you guys came. Thank you by the way. If every bone in my body didn't feel like Jell-O, I'd give both of you a hug and then slap you for not coming sooner."

"Yep, he's fine." I confirmed.

"Whatever, just find Richie, Zach, and Jenna and meet me on the first floor!" Grease yelled as she ascended the ladder.

I turned to Mitchell who was taking slow and shaky steps until he got to his feet. "Up for some climbing?"

"Aren't I always?" He responded with a smile.

We climbed the ladder, and wound our way back through the basement. This time, I didn't forget the directions.

Page Break

Chapter 25: So Much for Covert

Richie

You know a mission has gone south once the radios stop working. As soon as we stepped through the roof access door, they must've begun acting up because I tried calling Brianna and Grease on every channel and all I got was static. In fact, all any of us got was static. Zach ripped off his earpiece, mumbling about how he has to fix everything. Jenna and I continued on, while Zach began dismantling the poor thing. I stood at the ready, as Jenna kicked in more doors. The building had an odd orientation: several doors that led to a central conference room which was surrounded by a fork of hallways. On the perimeter was all offices with one wall an entire window. Some offices had windows looking in, while others were completely closed. We decided to split up, Jenna taking every door on the right while I dealt with all of the offices.

Zach trailed behind, still fumbling with his toy. He was so engrossed, he didn't even bother to check the central conference room he strode into; Jenna and I ran behind him, making sure he wasn't ambushed on the way in. He calmly took a seat at the round table, mindless ripping apart the Bluetooth. A few seconds later he threw it down in frustration. "It isn't the Bluetooth!" He yelled angrily.

I laid my knife on the table and leaned over Zach. He angrily passed the torn apart comms unit to me and whipped out his laptop. I looked over the tangled wires, but it was hopeless; if Zach couldn't fix it, there was no chance of me figuring it out. I'm a smart guy, but advanced tech is definitely more of Zach's speed. Jenna still combed the doors, searching for any sign of The Circus or our team.

She strode over and stood next to me, leaning on her staff while staring blankly at us. She looked back and forth at Zach and I while he feverishly typed on his laptop and I continued to tear open Zach's comm unit.

"Can I help you?" I asked once I started to get annoyed from Jenna staring at me.

"What do you think you're going to accomplish?" she asked.

"I'm hoping that I'll be able to hear my friends once they've found Mitchell." I said, paying more attention to the piece of metal than my teammate.

"And you?" She asked pointedly at Zach. When he didn't flinch, she softly whacked him with the butt of her staff.

Zach jerked and squirmed in his seat, still angrily pounding on his keyboard. "Trying to break into the encrypted server. If I can get in, I can reverse whatever is blocking the signal."

"Keep at it. You'll get it." She said, trying to be encouraging. Zach was neither shocked nor affected by Jenna's attempt at being a good teammate; he still angrily punched the keyboard.

Something dropped outside, making a loud clang as it hit the floor. Jenna and I swarmed the nearest door, carefully peeking out while Zach ducked below the desk, still going at the server. I peered outside, only to find everything in the place that I remember. Jenna and I kept watch for a little longer, Zach slowly coming from behind the desk asked, "We good?"

"I think-" I started, until something rustled just around the hall corner. I quickly jumped back into place, carefully watching the hall. Something metallic and out of my sight skittered across the floor. Large shadow moved across the wall and stopped just before my line of sight. I saw the shadow flinch, preparing to move around the corner of the hall. I clicked the black button on Kindness (Yes I named my weapon. Don't judge.), and pitched a throwing knife down the hall. It missed the person by a mile, mostly because the person was a rat. It hopped across the hall, staring at its attacker. The knife was wedged in the wall high above it: perfect for trapping a person, but not a rat. Jenna looked on surprised, then, covered her mouth with her

hand, trying her best to suppress a laugh. A wave of relief rolled over me as the rat skipped away, but that relief quickly turned to anger. I walked across the hall and unwedged Kindness from the wall. Jenna still stood in the doorway, trying her best to look serious, but ultimately failed. I caught her let loose a giggle and gave her an exasperated sign in response. I pushed past her and threw myself into a chair next to Zach.

Jenna came from behind, making noises from behind. The first few made me jump, but I quickly figured out she was just making fun. After I stopped twitching and jumping, Jenna came from behind and grabbed my shoulders. I jumped for my knife, but stopped myself. I slumped back into my chair, tapping my bluetooth.

"Zach, can you give us a minute?" she asked.

He looked at her, aggravated, "Of course. It's not like I'm trying to break into an encrypted server or anything". They continued staring, until Zach grabbed his laptop and stormed outside.

Once he was gone, Jenna quickly said, "You didn't correct my grammar."

She plopped into the chair next to me, staring expectantly. I stared back, confused.

"I'm sorry?" I said, confused at the point she was trying to make.

"You didn't correct my grammar." She repeated. When I didn't respond, she continued. "You always correct my grammar and I always punch you for it. What's wrong?"

"I must've missed it. Sorry."

"You never miss a chance to embarrass me. What's really going on?"

I rolled my eyes. Now really isn't the time and place for this talk. "I kind of have a job to do, so can we have this conversation later?"

"No." she quickly retorted. "Because your 'later' means never. Now quit dodging questions and answer me.""

We continued our little staring contest until I finally caved. "I'm stressed, I guess."

Jenna looked at me, dumbfounded. "I thought you were supposed to be smart."

I leaned back in my chair, annoyed, as Jenna continued. "For a spy, you suck at lying."

"Fine! I realized how much I missed my old life, my family, my friends. When we were dividing up, it reminded me of playing Capture the Flag with my neighbors; when Zach was aggravated punching his computer, it reminded me of Game Nights at my house." I regretfully looked across the table. "I was supposed to be keeping it together, but I can't even do that."

"What are you talking about?!" Jenna said, bursting into laughter. "You rallied the team into finding Mitchell! You got us all here and are sure enough going to get us out! You're by far the smartest person I know and not just because of some hard math problems!"

I raised my eyebrow, waiting for Jenna's punchline. "You're a survivor. That's why you're smart. I saw your orientation video. None of us even thought of smashing the chair or climbing the ventilation. You find a way to solve everything: you'll solve this, you'll solve The Jester, and you'll be back with your family."

"You're surprisingly supportive." I noted. "Are you feeling okay?"

Jenna reclined in her chair, laughing. She got so loud, I had to shush her before she awoke everyone in a ten mile radius. "I can't support a teammate?" She asked jokingly.

"You can, it's just unlike you." That shut her up surprisingly fast. He sat back, pursing her lips, obviously deep in thought. "What happened to you while we were gone?" Jenna thought for a second, then looked up with a strangely happy look. "It's funny what an epiphany can do."

And the question-dodger strikes again! If there's anything my team can do, it's dodging questions better than most politicians.

Jenna suddenly jumped forward. "You never talk about your life before this train wreck. What was it like? To be normal I mean."

I had to really think how to answer that. My life was so boring: tests and quizzes, annoying classmates and less annoying friends, and most mundane of all, a stereotypical bothersome family.

"Nice, I guess. I haven't really thought of it, after all, there's others things occupying my thoughts right now."

"Well, what did you do for fun? Who were your friends? Come on, there has to be something interesting!"

I tried my hardest, wracking my brain for something that was interesting before I was, in hindsight, kidnapped. I shook my head, smiling, at the sudden remembrance of a stupid ordeal with my friend. "Last year, my friend and I stuck in school after we snuck in to change his test grade."

"Seriously?!" Jenna screamed before dying from laughter. "Do tell!"

I tried my best not to smile and turned my head. *That was stupid*, I told myself. That is a story that has an awful ending which I'd prefer to not get into.

Luckily, Zach came running into the room. I owe you one! I silently told him, but, unluckily, he didn't notice because he was too preoccupied with something else.

"I have good news and bad news. Which do you wanna hear first?" He quickly asked.

Before either of us could respond, Zach continued. "Good news: I broke into the server and shut down the signal blocker. Bad news: A-"

Zach didn't get to finish because a blaring alarm interrupted him. It echoed through the building: the lower floors ringing amplified our floors, making it sound like two different alarms were going off in chorus. "THAT!" Zach screamed.

We jumped from our seats and rushed out the office. I stormed down the stairs, Jenna and Zach in hot pursuit. "We need to find Brianna and Grease and get out of here!"

I suddenly remembered Zach deactivated our headsets. "Brianna?! Grease?! Answer me!" The headset only sent static back. *There's nothing wrong with our headsets, there's something wrong with theirs*, I chillingly realized.

We quickly made it to the second floor, an open area with entire wall windows lighting up the floor. I carefully picked my way into the room, Jenna and Zach close behind with her lacrosse stick and his arm length gun out and ready. I heavily gripped my knife, practically turning my knuckles white. "We need to hurry. We may still have the element of surprise."

Of course with my luck, a figure stepped from the shadows. The dismembered voice called out, "I'm afraid you lost that a long time ago".

The Jester stepped into the light, revealing her oddly well done, yet messy mask of black, purple, and red.

"You. What have you done with Brianna and Grease?!" Zach yelled.

The Jester let out her annoyingly infamous laugh. "Myself? Nothing." Zach's face exploded with relief, and despite his best attempt, he failed to hide it. "However, I cannot say the same for my associates."

"Yes," another familiar voice said from behind. Time Queen sneakily came from behind, blocking the stairwell. Except for the decommissioned elevators, we were trapped. "Harlequin is downstairs right now, no doubt dealing with the bookworm and the garage junky."

Time Queen slammed the door shut, slowly pushing us into the center of the room as she strode forward. Now, without all of the talking, I heard a soft tick coming from the stairwell. Then, another followed, harmonizing with the other faint noise. More and more faint ticks began to sound off until the point where it caught the attention of Time Queen. She turned back, curiously checking the door. The Jester watched as Time Queen inspected the door, pressing her ear against the steel wall. Just as she began to back away, the door blew off its hinges, throwing Time Queen to the other side of the room. Brianna, Grease, and Mitchell stormed into the room, ready to fight.

Time Queen scrambled from the floor, practically fuming with anger.

"Incompetent little weasels..." The Jester muttered. "In any case, this is no problem. Now, I can explain my evil plan once before I kill all of you."

"Let me stop you right there." I said. "Why explain your evil plan?" Jenna punched me in the back, hinting to stop, but I continued anyway. "If you have some spectacular plan to take over the world, why tell us? Then we know exactly how to stop you."

Everyone looked at me dumbfounded, even The Jester, who was now contemplating my point. I have a feeling that Jenna was going to beat me up, but before she could act, The Jester piped up. "You have a point. However, you all think of me wrongly." We obviously made our confusing clear because despite our fierce stance, The Jester and Time Queen looked on happily. "I want you to join me."

"And why on Earth would we even consider that?" Mitchell angrily asked.

"I didn't want to hurt you children, not in the beginning. I always planned for you to be special. At first, you were all an idea, a speculation. In fact, it was just random chance that I ran into you, but I knew there was something special about you children."

I don't ever recall running into a creepy clown like this (and I most definitely would).

"Then, I watched you children grow and prosper. In other words, you are different, special and that is talent that shouldn't be wasted in some second rate school for the other type of special children. You children have gifts like no one else! They just need to be opened. There's so much more to you children than you understand. So much potential in just 11 souls!" The Jester reached out her arms longingly, like a mother begging her child. When we didn't respond, she turned to Jenna. "Jenna, please. I've taken care of you since you were 13! I've given you everything you've needed for those 3 years."

Mitchell stepped in front of her, blocking Jenna from The Jester's view. "And what about that attack on Headquarters? Was that out of love?!"

The Jester shamefully looked down. "My dear children, you must understand that wasn't me. I wasn't myself that day. Please, all I ask is for you to join me now and see who I truly am."

We all stood, still ready to fight, but slightly uncomfortable. Zach was the first to come forward.

"I'm not completely sure what you're planning or if you're entirely sane," he began as The Jester excitedly smiled. "But, knowing what you're capable of and what you've done, I will never join you. These '11 souls' that you've tampered with will fight you with every chance we get!"

Immediately, her smile was wiped from her face and the familiar sneer returned.

Next, came Jenna and Brianna, standing next to Zach with their weapons at the ready- an obvious agreement. Then, came Mitchell, awaiting orders with a grenade in one hand and his steel bat over his shoulder. And lastly, me.

"Looks like we've made our choice." I said confidently. The Jester angrily stepped forward, obviously about to make a winded speech about how we will never win and how we disappointed her, blah blah blah. Honestly, nothing I haven't heard from my parents after I got suspended. But before she could continue, I flicked the green

button, making Kindness drip with a dark green poison, and pitched it at her shoulder.

Now, you're probably saying, *Wow Richie, you're so stupid! You could've killed the villain who kidnapped your friend and conducted science experiment on everyone*, however, The Jester is still Headmistress; I don't want to kill her, just maim and arrest. Still, that throwing knife to the shoulder *really* pissed her off.

She screamed in agony and fell to the floor as the knife pierced her shoulder. Time Queen ran to her aid, but just as quickly, The Jester pushed her off. She rose to her feet and furiously yanked the knife from her shoulder.

"I tried to be civil! I tried to resist her, but you leave me no choice!" she indignantly screamed, all while wildly waving Kindness in the air.

Kindness's poison should be, at the very least, paralyzing, but The Jester was angrier than my mom when I brought home that B+ on my Algebra midterm. In case you don't know, the only thing scarier than an angry Bahamian mother is a psychotic clown carelessly waving a knife. Still, The Jester should be flat on the floor by now.

"I swear, you children will regret your betrayal." She angrily yelled, taking a step forward.

I sensed she was about to do something desperate, so I stepped in front of my team, despite being defenseless. "Headmistress, please just come with us. Let us help you."

She whirled around, pitching the knife just as fast as I do, directly at me. Everyone jumped aside, dodging the knife, but I didn't have enough time. I ducked right, just enough to not get skewered. I'll take that as a *no*.

"That's it!" Brianna screamed, and charged forward with Mitchell on her heels.

The Jester charged as well as dodged past Brianna and Mitchell, making them run into Time Queen.

Jenna pushed me behind her. "I got Crazy Number One, get us out of here!"

While Jenna went at it with The Jester and her sledgehammer (which she pulled out of nowhere), I ran to Kindness who was lodged in the doorframe of the stair entrance. Zach and Grease were suddenly next to me.

"Got a plan?" Grease asked nervously while she dug through her fanny pack.

"Working on it!" I grunted as I dislodged Kindness from the wall.

I clicked the button to return Kindness back to her normal state, but in the process, a drop of poison landed on my hand. I pursed my lips, trying to hide the pain. Already, I could feel my hand tingling as my nerves shut down. Luckily or unluckily (leaning more towards unluckily), Harlequin appeared in the doorway, breathing heavily and looking disheveled. Whatever happened downstairs, Grease and Brianna gave Harlequin a beat down because her face paint was washed away in some areas and drained in others.

Grease pushed me away, throwing a screwdriver in her face. "Go help Jenna! We've got this!"

I turned as Zach fired his iGun, blasting a crater in the wall, which Harlequin somehow dodged.

I turned Kindness into Baby Kindnesses - 3 in each hand- and charged at The Jester. It's about time this ended.

Page Break

Chapter 26: The Best Fight Scene in the Book (So Says Grease Monkey)

This chapter is dedicated to my amazing friend and writing consultant, Monique. Not only did she inspire the character in this book, but keeps me writing as well. All of her compliments and positive reinforcements do wonders, just like her advice. I definitely recommend checking out her page (@WritingGirl) as the only thing that matches her incredible personality is her writing. I'm sorry this chapter came so late, but happy belated birthday!

Monique

Finally I get a chapter! Let it be known that Richie is a *huge* book hog. Regardless, I am, by far, a much more entertaining writer than my team.

So there I was, epically battling Harlequin, various tools on javelin (Zach was also there, but he's irrelevant). While he just aimlessly blasted holes in the wall (at least it seemed like that), I was busy constructing a makeshift EMP, hopefully to shock these maniacs to the stratosphere and back. For a short while, Harlequin disappeared; literally disappeared! Zach checked the destroyed stairwell, while I crept around the inside walls to see if she somehow snuck through. All of the sudden, she tackled me through one of Zach's craters. We struggled on the floor in a tangled mass. I ended up on the bottom, doing my best to keep her sharp nails out of my face.

"This is for the stasis room!" She screamed as she raised her claws in an attempt to scratch me. Before she even get close, Zach blasted her off of me, sending her sprawling across the room all the way to Jenna, Richie, and The Jester by the opposite wall's open windows. Zach pulled me up while wildly firing cover shots. On my way up, I saw Time Queen winding up to knock out a defenseless Mitchell. I grabbed a jagged rock and threw it at her, hoping to hit her in the arm. Let me tell you, I was more than happy when I did one better: I hit her square in the chest. She was knocked off balance, giving Mitchell enough time to scramble for his bat and give her a good whack.

"You okay?" Zach mindlessly asked.

I flashed him my famous *are-you-kidding?* look and he rolled his eyes in response; gotta love family. Harlequin came charging again, this time wielding a broken pipe. We dodged, but as Zach came up from his roll, he fired in Harlequin's direction, missed by an inch and exploded the wall behind her. Zach stared at me questionable as I watched in dismay at the fountain of water that resulted. Harlequin grinned with delight as the water slowly surrounded her, seemingly endless as it gushed from the wall. Richie was so mesmerized, if it hadn't been for Jenna, The Jester would've pulverized him with a heavy hit from her sledgehammer (which looks vaguely familiar).

Still, that didn't faze Harlequin who was totally engrossed in the giant undulating bubble that surrounded her. If not for Zach and his quick thinking, I'd be doused and flat on the floor. As Harlequin forced a geyser of water in our direction, Zach jumped in front of me, letting loose with his iGun. The blast held the funnel back, but Harlequin was relentless. Zach was doing incredible, but he clearly wasn't okay. His face was scrunched with focus and and drenched, but not with water, with sweat. He looked at me with pain in his eyes. "Hurry!" he pleaded. "I can't hold this for much longer!"

I lit up with panic. There's no time to build something and with the bubble, I don't have a clear shot at Harlequin. Luckily, we engineers always find a fix.

"Richie!" I yelled. He threw a Baby Kindness over his shoulder, which The Jester sadly deflected. He didn't turn to me, but cocked his head to let me know he was paying attention. "Toss me Kindness!"

Luckily, the kid is smart enough to not ask questions. He threw a Baby Kindness my way, just hard enough so I could catch the hilt without being stabbed, and sprinted back into his fight with The Jester, down one weapon. I slid under Zach and Harlequin's dueling blasts. I caught a glimpse of Zach who was clearly about to collapse. He tried to say something, but the noise of the various battles of the room blocked it out, although I'm willing to bet it's something along the lines of "HURRY UP!". I pulled from my pockets two stray wires; before you question my habits, it is evidently handy to keep wires in one's pocket so don't argue with me.

I wrapped the wires around the blade and flicked Kindness's yellow button, sending lightning arcing up the blade. Before I executed the plan, I prayed to every deity in existence that I don't electrocute my friend.

Apparently they were listening because as I thrust the knife into the stream, Zach saw what I was doing and dodged away from the geyser. Harlequin screamed as arcs of lightning jumped from the stream and throughout her protective bubble. Her shield dissipated and she crumpled to the floor, motionless.

Overcome with relief and joy, I turned to congratulate Zach on not being a total idiot, but to my dismay, he too lay on the floor, looking just as dead as Harlequin. I furiously sprinted at his motionless body, sliding next to his side. "Zach? Zach?!" I hurriedly pressed two fingers against his throat and practically wept with relief when I felt the pulse. I sat there for several minutes, which may not seem like a long time, but with the epic battle raging on behind me, it felt like forever. His iGun had shrunk back into its bracelet form, but was smoking. Zach's sleeves were torn and scorched, his arm red with burns. After several painstaking minutes, I finally heard Zach quietly groan. He didn't open his eyes or speak, but softly clutched my hand. Once I collected myself from overwhelming joy, I carefully slid my arms below Zach's armpits. "Zach, I'm going to move you." I proceeded to half carry- half drag my friend to the corner of the room where he was less likely to get hurt. I rest him against the crook of the wall and ran back to the fight.

It wasn't going well: Brianna was slumped against a window, trying to defend Time Queen's strikes but was obviously exhausted; Mitchell was trying his best to protect her, but had run out of grenades and was now wielding the bottom half of a snapped steel coated slugger; Jenna looked fierce as always, but was struggling against Time Queen's influence; and doing worst of all, Richie, who was pinned to the center floor, struggled to hold the shaft of The Jester's sledgehammer above his head via the crook of Kindness's hilt.

The Jester noticed me standing alone in the center of the room.

"You children are absolutely infuriating, but I must compliment your work! This sledgehammer is wonderful!" she exclaimed. "You do great work, Grease!"

Now I remember why that sledgehammer looks so familiar; I tricked it out for Headmistress in the event the Academy was attacked again! I didn't know Headmistress would use it to try and kill us. Oops.

Richie craned his neck to see me. Despite the struggle, he managed to get out a sarcastic comment, "Really Grease?! Did you trick this one out too?!"

I shrugged nonchalantly in response. What can I say? Mama loves her toys.

Sadly, Richie's sarcasm jogged The Jester's memory that I did indeed trick it out, and it isn't going to help us in the slightest. She shrieked with delight at her sudden enlightenment and flicked a hidden switch on the hammer's shaft. The end facing Richie opened and left him barely enough time to turn away from the wall of flames that charred the ground next to him.

"Grease!" he screamed, panic evident in his voice.

I scooped up the still electrified Baby Kindness and pitched it at The Jester. It turns out I'm incredibly lucky because even though I miss The Jester by a mile, it pierced Time Queen arm, causing her to lose control. Mitchell knocked Time Queen upside

the head, while Jenna, now free from Time Queen's power, sprinted across the room, stuck her lacrosse net over The Jester's face, and pulled her off of Richie. Jenna and The Jester were furiously going at it. I tried to find something to help, but all there was were debris. I pitched rocks at The Jester, but my aim was terrible. More often, I'd get closer to hitting Jenna.

Finally, I decided to give up on the long range and move in. However, my last throw accidentally hit Jenna in the head, stunning her. The Jester shoved her backwards with the front of her sledgehammer, throwing Jenna against the wall where she slid to the floor, unconscious.

I ran to Richie, who was now on his side and struggling to get up. In the meantime, The Jester dragged Jenna's limp body from the wall into the center of the room. She stood over her, relishing the moment. "You children are so naive. We've come across one another before. It is your *fate* to join me!"

"What are you talking about! We don't-" I furiously exclaimed.

The Jester quickly interjected, "A fair once came through each of your home towns. I recall the children happily clapping as my friends and I performed. I saw each and every one of you at these fairs and something told me you children were special. So, I slipped a prototype into your cotton candy, popcorn, or elephant ears, it really didn't matter. And look at you children now; I was correct. Sadly, the prototype was merely that. It didn't take full effect. But now, I have the complete serum!" She reached into her pocket and pulled out a vial of dark green liquid.

Suddenly, Jenna jumped from The Jester grip and knocked the serum from her hand. It rolled away next to an open window.

The Jester raised her hammer over her head and Jenna braced for the impact.

"Enough!" she screamed. Before I could stop him, Richie summoned his left over strength and sprinted at Jenna. He grabbed her hand and threw her aside, leaving him in front of The Jester. She brought down her sledgehammer, missed Richie, but cracked the floor where she stood. I watched as the floor began to sink and before I knew it, I was on my feet. The floor caved in, creating a crater in the second floor. Cement, The Jester, and Richie tumbled into the low light of the lobby. I slid to the edge and stretch my arm. I locked onto Richie's arm and tried to pull him up, but I felt myself slipping too. I looked around, but everyone was out: Zach and Astrid passed out at different ends of the floor, Time Queen and Harlequin weakly struggling to rise, and Jenna lay just outside the radius of the crater on her back, immobile.

I slid further and further into the hole until I finally fell in. For a few seconds, I went airborne, but I grabbed a steel rod that jutted from a loose piece of concrete in the floor. Richie looked up at me with pain in his eyes.

"Let go!" he pleaded. "I'm dragging you down!"

I shook my head no in response. I was terrified that if I said another word, I'd lose my grip and we'd fall. My hands grew numb with agony, so much in fact that I couldn't feel that grooves in the steel digging into my skin.

I felt Richie trying to wiggle from my grasp; I guess hoping I wouldn't fall too. Before he could, my hand slipped from the rod and we plummeted into through the hole.

Page Break

Chapter 27: Mission Plan? Never Heard Of It.

Richie

I'm not sure how long it's been, but I know I passed out. The sound of my body hitting the hard tile floor is still echoing in my head. At first, it didn't seem real. Everything moved in slow motion: the dust particles in the air, Jenna's distant rampant screaming, even the shadows against the walls. I couldn't sit up, much less stand. My body felt so exhausted, as if all of the adrenaline I'd felt previously had never existed. Then, it came flooding back to me: The Jester cracking the floor, the giant crater opening, and myself being sucked in along with Grease in her heroic, although irrational, attempt to save me.

Grease! My eyes opened fully with a start. *She's down here somewhere. But that means.* A chill ran down my spine. *So is The Jester.*

"Richie?" I heard someone weakly call from across the room.

I sat up with a start, only to collapse to the floor in agony. Before I could even see my surroundings, I crumpled, finally feeling the effects of my fall. I tried to answer what was hopefully Grease calling me, but all that came out was "Arghh". My eyes flooded with tears and shadows filled my vision as I tried to move. With all of my spare energy, I bent my torso to see my legs; the result was definitely *not* worth the pain. Sticking from the center of my thigh was a shimmering silver and red steel rod; glimmering and stained with my blood. All of the air in my lungs left in an instant. Alone I sat, in the dark and gasping for anything concrete (not the stone, there's plenty of that). I sat up again, slowly inching so I could look at my injury. Even though my shattered glasses weren't much help, it was obvious it wasn't good. The rod pierced clean through my mid thigh, leaving my leg skewered in a long, bent steel beam. That was all I could assess before my vision swam and, once again, I fell to the floor.

Tears welled in my eyes as I sat in the darkness and let it envelope me. Zach and Brianna were upstairs, knocked unconscious; Grease and I trapped down here with a homicidal clown hunting us while my stupid ass is in a metal shish kebab; and Jenna and Mitchell who were likely still upstairs, either defeated or winning the fight, but

no matter how much I hoped, I knew the latter was impossible. Besides, their battle cries and clashing weapons had both stopped: not a good sign.

How hopeless his all seemed! Six barely trained teenage spies with bad attitudes and scarred records rebelling against three professional teachers who have years more training than us and know everything we can do. Exactly, impossible.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something move in the darkness. I slapped my thighs, expecting to grab Kindness, but only managing to hurt my already in pain leg. I scrambled to find the closest object for defense, a small rock at the edge of the circle of light. I tried to scoot over to it, but I forgot, once again, my leg was practically nailed the ground. I cried out in pain as my entire left side lit up like I was being burned alive. Regardless, I continued to stretch until I'd slipped one finger over the rock. I slowly flicked in the rock in my direction until I managed to get my hand over it and retrieve it.

It felt so good to rest, that is until the pain flared up again. Still, I tried my best to see what was moving in the darkness. I turned as far as I could without turning my leg. Just as I was about to blame my cautiousness on paranoia, I saw something small and quick move through the shadows. I clutched the rock, even though a sharp edge was piercing my hand. I squinted, trying to look through the thick black, hopefully, it was Grease looking back at me.

I heard another mysterious item skitter across the ground opposite of where I was looking, this time sounding *much* closer. Panicked, I quickly turned, expecting to see The Jester's hideous smile inches away I was greeted only by silence and more rubble. However, my quick turn sending burning stabbing up my leg. Too afraid to scream in pain, I clenched my fist, trying my best to suppress the rising outburst inside.

Lucky thing I did because The Jester's terrifying voice echoed through the dark room. "Where are you?"

First rule of not being killed by a homicidal maniac: hide; second: don't get yourself trapped. Lucky me, I've already broken the first two rules. That just leaves the third: run. Wait! I can't do that either! Perfect!

Panic began to set in as she continued her search. Honestly, she must be taunting me because there's only two areas with any light: the few windows that aren't blocked by plywood and the giant crater I currently reside under. Still, if there's any possibility she hasn't found me, I need to escape.

I gripped my thigh with both hands and carefully lifted my leg up the pole. The pain was worse than I expected, so much so that I accidentally bit my tongue, filling my mouth with a copper taste. Also, I reflexively dropped my leg, causing my vision to swim.

This isn't going to work. I thought.

Now, I was moving in robotic, stiff grabs. I threw my left hand onto Grease's (formerly beautiful) shredded long sleeve black jumpsuit and tore open one of the holes. In a minute, the sleeve was gone, lying in my hand. I quickly wrapped it around my leg in a tourniquet and tore of the other sleeve and jammed it into my mouth. My parents always told me that if you are doing something difficult, do it quick so the pain lasts less. That is so not true.

I jerked my leg up, completely forgetting that the rod was bent. Tears welled in my eyes once again, but I couldn't give up. I had a sneaking suspicion The Jester was lurking in the darkness behind me, happily watching me struggle. Just as I was about to slid my leg over the lip of the beam, a glass vial burst over my hands, splashing green liquid all over me. In a panic, I dropped my leg, which lumpy landed with a thud at the base of the rod, once again. I laid back numbly as pain flooded my brain. Grease's suit protected my arms from the poison, leaving the cloth sizzling as it slowly dissolved, but my hands weren't so lucky. Despite my noxiousness and sluggishness, I managed to rub and shake most of the chemicals off before they completely burned my hands, but I could still make out raw skin and bubbling sores through the spots in my eyes.

And on cue as usual, The Jester's creepy, peppy face bobbed above me.

"You were so close!" She taunted. "Don't worry, you get an A for effort!"

She flopped down on top of my bad leg. This time, the rush of pain was so quick and unbearable, I couldn't keep from screaming. She planted herself there, happily watching the tears stream down my face.

"If there's one thing you can do, it's get yourself into trouble!" She exclaimed jokingly.

She then straddled my chest, playfully stacking her fingers as if she was waiting for a response. I tried to come up with some witty clapback, and of course I did, but my voice couldn't cooperate as it was currently busy waking Chinatown with its screams. She slowly pulled a vial from inside her shirt. Waving it above me, she joyfully asked, "Do you know what this is?"

Too busy coping with the pressure on my leg, I refused a response. Still she smiled, looked down at me like I was a naive child, and solemnly shook her head. "Here's a taste."

She uncorked the vial, wafting a putrid smell into my nose. She slowly tipped the vial over my head, barely increasing the tilt until I watched a single drop well at the end of the glass and plummet the few inches between my face and its former home. Instantly, a searing pain spread across my face, making me thrash so violently, I nearly threw The Jester off my chest. In the commotion, several more drops sloshed from the tube, landing across my forehead and dangerously close to my eyes.

"Aw does that hurt? I'm so sorry! Here's a little gift to make you feel better once we get where we are going."

She slipped a small vial of purple liquid up my sleeve and promptly bounced off my leg.

"But, we can't go anywhere with this predicament you've gotten yourself into!"

She gripped my thigh and knee, kindly smiling. I knew exactly what she was doing,

"Please no..." I began, but both she and I knew what was coming. She yanked my leg upwards and sideways in a matter of seconds, dropping my leg like the useless hunk of flesh it now is.

My alternating loud screams and shallow breathing echoed through the dark room as my brain failed to cope with the pain. She left me there for a second, sniffing on the cold tile while she pattered around out of sight. Soon, her footsteps echoed closer as she returned with something in her hand. Once I heard the familiar *zip* of the zip-tie and felt my hands being restrained, I knew I was utterly defeated.

"Hey..." someone whispered from the shadows.

"Quit your whimpering!" The Jester screamed before she returned tending to my hands. The zip-tie ripped one final time before I felt it digging into my wrists. The Jester returned to the darkness again, searching for something else.

"Hey!" someone called again, a little louder.

I watched as Grease's soot-covered face slowly emerged.

"You need to leave..." I groaned, trying to sound forceful.

"Like hell I am. We are getting out of here!"

"No go. Find the others The Jester was talking about. You can rescue us later!"

"Richie,-"

"That's an order!"

The Jester's footsteps began echoing down the hall again, growing increasingly close.

"Go!" I whispered, and tried my best to return to the pained expression I previously wore (honestly, it wasn't too hard. Thank you Left Leg!).

Grease's pain stricken face sunk into the dark just in time for The Jester to miss her.

The Jester skipped into the light and yanked my left leg upwards, causing me to yelp in pain. She proceeded to drag me into the darkness while happily singing the Dora the Explorer theme song. My head and torso knocked against scattered debris as The Jester made her way to another source of light: the stairwell. Just before we turned the corner to enter the stairwell, I looked back just in time to see Grease's shadow disappear through another lit doorway.

She then pulled me up each step, subtly though not so subtly making sure my head knocked every step on the way up. By the time we reached the second floor, I couldn't tell if I was going to pass out from hypovolemia or the massive concussion I

just received. Though my vision was blurry, I could clearly see Harlequin and Time Queen's bright and tattered outfits as they stood over my clearly defeated team. Brianna and Mitchell laid limply beside Jenna and Zach, who, although weary, struggled against their bonds. They froze as The Jester and I entered the room, watching as she dragged my limp body past them.

"Richie?" Jenna asked, clearly trying to keep herself from bursting into tears.

"Richie?!"

I raised my head in response, revealing my battered and burnt face. All of the sudden, my head felt heavier than I ever thought possible and I flopped to the floor.

"Richie!" Zach screamed. "Hang in there! We are going to get this-"

"Now Zach, don't finish that sentence. It's rude to make promises you can't keep."

The Jester said with a little too much enthusiasm for my taste.

I wanted to say something to both calm Zach and Jenna down and irritate The Circus, but I, first of all, couldn't speak: the only sounds I could muster were small scratches and squeaks of my voice; second, for once I couldn't think of anything to say. No witty remark or sarcastic comment was filling my head, giving me the energy needed to say exactly what I thought. What was I supposed to say? Don't worry, these gashes and chemical burns are nothing? My leg would disagree.

I numbly rolled my head, hoping for some miracle that we'd be the heroes of the story. Let me tell you from personal experience, no such ending exists. Just at the moment you need them the most, those "superheroes" you love can't help. That's my one regret, my one goal I never accomplished: to be the "hero" of the story, the knight in shining armor that saves the damsel in distress. Well, we have a damsel, there's plenty of distress, where's the hero?

As wonderful of a question as that is, I'm afraid I didn't have to time to find an answer. Suddenly, I felt The Jester grip my leg a little tighter and began feeling myself move sideways. The Jester dragged me in circles, pivoting until she had spun me long enough to finish singing Ring Around A Rosey. Too woozy to defend myself, I numbly watched as she slowly lost her grip and I went sliding across the slick tile. I felt myself slow to a stop. Filled with relief, I lolled my head back to rest it on tile below, only there was no tile below. I panickingly jumped at the realization of the empty floor, only I didn't jump fast enough as my head knocked the edge of the pit. Just as I reflexively reached back to hold my head, I felt time slow and myself become even more sluggish. Jenna and Zach's screaming slowed until it was almost impossible to understand. But just as quick as it came, the cloud disappeared, and I knew exactly what was coming next. Like clockwork, The Jester appeared overhead, smiley as always. With one knee on my chest and one hand practically strangling my throat, she had me easily pinned.

She continued to questionably stare at me until the awkward silence became unbearable. "No snarky comments?" She asked. " I really thought you'd put up more of a fight!"

I opened my mouth, but all that came out was a simple, painful wheeze.

"No matter. I suppose this is where the villain," she said gesturing to herself, "explains her evil plot and the heroes", another gesture at my incapacitated friends, "lie hopelessly defeated and wait. Only, here's the twist, there is no miraculous rescue! For none of you five!"

Five? I thought. Then it came to me, The Jester *forgot* about Grease! She doesn't know that Grease escaped! Now I just have to follow my number one rule for school: stall as long as you can to avoid taking a test. Luckily, The Jester loves to talk. Not so luckily, The Jester *loves to talk*. Even better, she only spoke about her plot to "correct nature", as she called it.

"Humanity is a disease!" she exclaimed, as she dangled the familiar vial of poison over my head. "I'm merely doing Mother Nature a favor. You see, once my plan is complete, we special few, the chosen eleven of this crusade will save what is dying." Part of me was listening to her monologue, trying to understand what exactly she was ranting about, the other part was focused on that damn vial precariously positioned above my face. I can't tell you how happy I was to see her quickly tuck it back into her pocket.

" But you rebellious children have ruined my plan the save our damned world; you five are the enemy of my crusade. I'm afraid I cannot allow that."

She began poking around in her pocket again. *Please no more poison*. I silently hoped. Finally my wish came true. The Jester pulled a green vial from her pocket, only this one was definitely different, darker.

"This is my adventure. Not world domination, not global extinction; this is no fantasy. No, my adventure is rebirth... perfection!"

"Per... fect... ion?" I croaked, grimacing at every syllable.

"Yes, perfection. Something people strive for, yet claim it to be unattainable.

Aggravatingly, they are correct, for now. Take my associates for example. You've already seen what Time Queen can do, but do you know the repercussions? Except the distasteful name, the poor thing is frozen twice as long as whatever she freezes. You see, my serum does not give power, it unlocks truths. Its digs through the mind and soul, enhancing your power, making your sad fragile self stronger. And I am so close! But still, it isn't perfect. Similarly, you children are not perfect. Broken, in pain, confused, you children are strangely oxymoronic, in a contradictory way, perfect. For my experiment at least."

"Where are the others!" Jenna suddenly blurted from across the room.

The Jester angrily jumped off me, twisting my leg in her hurry. While I gritted my teeth and hugged my leg, The Jester stormed to a furious Jenna. "You'll meet them soon, you aggravatingly incompetent child" She said distastefully. Harlequin and Time Queen loafed around, either complaining about their injuries or playfully snickered as they harassed my friends.

The Jester plopped next to me, purposefully landing on my leg. I choked back a sob, trying to refrain from giving her the satisfaction of seeing me in pain. "You've seen what Harlequin and Time Queen can do, are you ready to explore yourself?" She cackled joyously.

Harlequin and Time Queen carried me back to my friends and plainly dropped me in front of them. By now, Brianna had begun to stir, however, still dreary. Mitchell, on the other hand, was wide awake and fighting. He froze when he saw me, my beaten and burnt face, my bloody suit. I heard him mumbling "No, no, no..." as I watched him fumble with his restraints.

Zach, Jenna, and Mitchell were all calling my name, begging me to look their way, but I stared ahead, into The Jester's gleaming eyes. She clasped my throat, threw my head back and uncorked the vial. A single stream of dark green liquid cascaded into my agape mouth.

"No!" Mitchell screamed as he grabbed a piece of debris with his feet and hurled it at The Jester. She barely dodged it, but the vial did not. The glass shattered, sending shards of glass and drops of serum in every direction. The Jester sailed in protest, desperately picking at the glass pieces.

"Do you know what you've done?!" She demanded as she stormed towards, Mitchell.

This is it. I thought. We win. I choked and coughed on the disgusting serum, trying to get it all out of my system. And I thought I did. Until I felt the shakes. At first I thought I had finally begun to feel the effects of bleeding out, but I didn't feel sickly, in fact, it was just the opposite.

An ecstatic Jester appeared overhead as I involuntarily quivered.

"Yes Richie!" she cheered, "let the serum course through you, let it envelope you, become you. You are like a computer, constantly searching for answers, creating tools at your disposal, a weapon beyond understanding. You can generate exactly what you need in the time you need it!"

I felt myself beginning to not only shake, but bounce. I heard a steady, loud drumming of what I first thought was my body. The Jester must've felt it too because a look of confusion crossed her face, but quickly disappeared. I felt myself beginning to shut down, but I willed myself to stay awake. I turned my head and watched The Jester stride towards a defeated looking Mitchell.

"Thought destroying my vial would stop me?" she asked.

"You aren't turning any more people into your little science experiments!" he yelled defiantly.

"No indeed, at least not via that method." she said as she pulled, not a vial, but a canister from her pocket. "There are many ways of digestion."

She pulled the pin and dropped the canister in the center of the ring of my incapacitated teammates. Thick green smoke began pouring out, and one by one, my team was felled as they inhaled the toxic gas.

"You five will obey me, no matter the rehabilitation you'll endure." she angrily mumbled as she walked back to me, Time Queen and Harlequin close behind. My arms and leg still sporadically jumped, but I oddly felt energized. It was a strange paradox how utterly powerless I was, but how incredibly active I felt.

She grabbed my face with one hand and lifted it close to her's. "Not you or any of your weak friends will stop me."

In all the commotion, I hadn't realized the thumping had grown increasingly louder and closer. Once I saw the Squadjet outside the window, and Grease in the pilot seat, I knew things were going to get crazy. Well, *crazier*.

"I beg to differ." She calmly said over the loudspeaker, as a gatling gun dropped from the base of the jet and opened fire. A halo of bullets shattered the glass and blasted the battered second floor. The already damaged ceiling rattled as the force of the bullet sent cracks across the walls. I watched the cracks grow, connecting in a circle above me. To my horror the ceiling above broke and plummeted towards me and The Jester. She managed to roll away, but I couldn't move much less jump away. The best I could do was weakly raise my arms in a pathetic attempt to block the giant falling cinder block and hope the rest of my team could escape with Grease. But to my surprise, as it was seconds from crushing me, it disappeared. You heard me right, disappeared. In a flash, a loud crash echoed outside followed by a plume of smoke which rose just yards outside the building. Before it could register, a girl I've never seen before looked down at me worriedly. Without saying a word, she picked me up and proceeded to bring me to my team. I tried to see who she was, only I couldn't. Not because I was hopelessly exhausted (maybe a little) but because she didn't have a body. Her disembodied head floated and moved with me. I could feel her hands under me, but saw no sign of them existing.

"You... you're like them?" I quietly asked, terrified that I was slowly losing it.

She carefully lowered me to the ground next to a knocked out Jenna. "We are here to help."

Grease and an unfamiliar boy came running to us. Grease hollowly stared at me for a second, then turned to the boy and girl. "You came back!" She exclaimed.

The girl smiled as the rest of her slim body faded into existence. "Of course! We owe you."

"And our debt is paid." The boy said hurriedly, tugging at the girl's arm.

I wanted to say something, ask who they are, but all that came out was a weak groan. Now, I couldn't fight the effects of The Jester's serum: I could feel my strength waning quickly. My head felt increasingly heavy to the point where I could no longer sit upright. As I lowered my head to the hard, debris covered floor, I noticed the growing cracks along the ceiling. At first, they were only small fractures, but the soon grew to be webbed crevasses. Chunks of ceiling rained from above as the ceiling began to collapse, a large square falling dangerously close to Zach and Mitchell who were completely unconscious.

The boy annoyedly rolled his eyes, "everyone grab hands". He's lucky I'm currently incapacitated because that amount of laziness is only acceptable from me. And maybe Grease...

I used my last ounce of energy to grab Jenna and Zach's hands. Grease pulled Brianna and Mitchell next to each other, forming a circle of knocked out secret agents.

"Can you get us on the Squadjet?" Grease asked nervously.

I looked through the window to see the Squadjet lifting into the air, preparing to take off. "You children had your chance!" The Jester called from the jet's loudspeaker.

"Now, just like it, you are never getting a second!"

The boy squinted his eyes in concentration. All of the sudden, he yelled angrily, "I can't see into the cabin! And even if I could, there's no place clear enough that I could teleport everyone where we'll be safe."

"You have to see where you're going?" Grease asked.

He sarcastically smiled at Grease, "that's the way the world works, Diesel."

Surprisingly, Grease ignored the snarky remark. "How about pictures?" she asked as she unfolded a small rectangle from her pocket.

Shocked, he responded, "I've never tried."

"Well there's a first time for anything and I don't hear any better plans coming from the five knocked unconscious spies laying at our feet, so let's get this show on the road!" (There's the returning sass!)

Pieces of the ceiling continued to fall as the boy and girl contemplated it. After several nervous glances and shrugs, everyone linked hands again.

Eventhough my eyes were growing increasingly droopy, I watched as the roof above us exploded and caved in. I felt cement powder brush across my face and watched the ceiling cascade towards me. But in a flash of light and swirl of wind, the familiar Academy courtyard appeared in front of me. Before I could comprehend what just happened, much less react, I felt my eyes roll into my head and saw the world go black.

Chapter 28: The Birth of the New Spy Squad

Jenna

Wow, talk about a rough night. I definitely have to give major props to Grease for getting us out of there, although I'm not entirely sure how it happened. All I remember is that green gas clouding my vision after The Jester did a number on Richie. But strangely enough, I woke up today in my bed. Even stranger, I woke up to screaming.

See I'm not much of a morning person, so when I first heard the screaming, I didn't exactly hear it. It took a second to register; okay fine, a minute, but this warrior needs her beauty sleep.

By the time I stumbled out of my room, everyone was already outside and staring into Brianna's room. With Richie and Mitchell towering in the door frame, I couldn't see what was wrong, but it obviously wasn't major because weapons weren't flying, at least not yet.

Once I knocked Mitchell out of my way, I caught sight of a terrified Brianna, who cuddled her knees on her bed and looked worriedly around the room. I pushed aside various floating items as I made my way into her room. This should sound weird, but with Brianna and that damn headband that she never takes off, is was just another fix for Grease. I gingerly sat next to her quivering frame while everyone else stood in the doorway and watched like the confused neanderthals they are.

I'm not exactly sure how this "comforting" thing works, but when I tried to rest my hand on Brianna's shoulder, just to get her attention, she quickly recoiled and continued to stare into empty space. I stared down the entourage, trying to signal them to help me, but no one would budge. Looks like I'm own my own.

"Brianna," I implored as kindly as possible, " I need you to tell me what's wrong."

I gave her a remarkable generous (at least for me) two minutes to respond, but nothing came. Similarly, my useless team looked as dead as the girl cowering in fear.

"Brianna, it's me. You're safe. I understand you're scared, but you need to show me what you're scared of"

Still, the room sat dead silent. So, it looks like Diplomatic Jenna isn't working (I hate her); time for a more familiar approach.

"Brianna, I swear if you don't say something in the next two seconds I will go all The Godfather on you"

Slowly, she turned her head and stared me dead in the eyes, only it wasn't normally curious and sparkling brown eyes I looked back at, it was pure confusion.

"I'm not doing this," she whispered, as single tear streamed down her face.

If anyone was coming to their senses, they were surely back to square one.

"Brianna, what do you mean you aren't doing this?"

"I mean, I'm not controlling this!" She said with an expression full gesture at everything.

I worriedly glanced around at the various floating objects, noticing how now they weren't just floating; they were violently bouncing, responding to her anger and confusion.

"Yes you are," I responded forcefully, " You need to relax, calm your mind, and let us help you."

She inhaled sharply and closed her eyes. One by one, the objects fell to the floor. Brianna scanned the room with a rattling breath. "I... I don't understand?"

Now that the emotions had left, I understood Brianna's confusion: on top of her head sat no headband.

And with that, I saw exactly how strange the entire situation was.

Other than things floating that shouldn't be, my friends still stood, flabbergasted (I love that word), in the doorway. Even stranger, Richie was dressed in a tank top and underwear which showed off a tourniquet on his right thigh which was soaked in red: blood. As if that wasn't weird enough, he firmly gripped a glowing purple sword and shield. Since when did he have a sword and shield?! Why don't I have a sword and shield?!

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do next: roast Richie for wearing polka dot underwear, rush him to the infirmary, or ask about the shiny Sparta cosplay?" I blurted frankly, trying to hold back my laughter as this is a serious situation of trouble. That's sarcasm in case you couldn't tell.

Obviously confused, Richie stared down. A look of mortification and confusion crossed his face in a matter of seconds.

Before he could find some witty retort, someone screamed from the back of the crowd. "What in the name of Phillips screwdriver are you doing?!" Grease knocked aside Mitchell and Zach until she stood face to face with Richie (well, face to chest. The height difference made the situation that much better). "Your leg!"

"I'm fine" he claimed, just before collapsing on top of Grease. She carefully eased him down against the door frame before turning to us.

"Grease what happened after the gas last night?" Zach questioned, nervously. Trying to hide her emotions, she laid it on thick with the sugar coating. "I knocked out The Circus, loaded you guys on the Squad jet, and blew the building."

"So, The Circus is gone then?" Mitchell asked.

"Are we not going to talk about this?!" yelled Richie, "Brianna can move things with her mind without her headband, I was holding a freaking glowing sword, and you guys want to question Grease on how she saved our lives?"

A cloud of solemnity and contemplation fell over the room, silencing everyone once again.

"I know what is causing this," Mitchell said shyly, "definitely for Richie and possibly for the rest of us."

We stood idly by as Mitchell struggled to explain the serum to us.

"When The Jester took me, she held me in the bunker you guys found me in, but while you were searching for me, they ran experiments on us. She injected different things into me; one made me feel extremely weak but revived at the same time. I think all of you ingested the same toxin as me"

"So how does that," Brianna asked pointedly, "relate to all this?"

"After The Jester poisoned me, she said 'This is the serum, Mitchell. Marvelous, isn't it? It flows to the frontal lobe and adapts itself to super humanize what makes you human. Dependent on one's personality, it can do incredible things'. I think I get it now"

"Can you stop beating around the bush and answer the damn question or not."

I stated, trying to push this conversation along.

Mitchell sighed heavily, "The serum enhanced our best traits, skills, and abilities."

Wow, was not expecting that! Richie did his ridicule-ish laugh, a small exhale from his nostrils, and pushed himself off of the ground despite Grease's protests. "What are you saying? We have superpowers?" he asked rhetorically, most likely hoping for Mitchell to correct him.

To his dismay, Mitchell shamefully nodded his head in agreement.

"Cool!" Zach said with a growing grin.

"No, not cool!" Brianna quickly corrected.

"I agree, this could be dangerous" Richie cautioned, examining his hands as he slowly turned the over.

"So Brianna can lift things without my tech and Richie can summon third century weapons? What about the rest of us?" Grease asked, annoyed.

"I honestly don't know, I don't even know myself" Mitchell said, hanging his head in disappointment.

"Soooo? When do we get our names and costumes?!" Zach asked, jumping to the front of the crowd.

"I swear if anyone gives me a stupid name or leggings to wear-" I began before Richie rudely interrupted my threat.

"No one is getting identities or costumes! We are not superheroes! I am going to find a cure for this and we are going continue our normal lives as teenage spies" Richie yelled, throwing his hands up in exasperation. But he quickly fell into the doorframe as his leg began to violently shake.

"Which you cannot do if you bleed out, so you can get to the infirmary by walking next to me or by me dragging you unconscious body through the halls. Your choice." Grease stated fiercely. Before he could respond, Grease was already pushing him out

the door. He jumped back into view, yelled "This isn't over!" before disappearing down the hall with Grease who was angrily grumbling about how she hates doctor's offices.

The remaining four of us stood awkwardly in the room, afraid to continue the conversation.

"Well this was fun..." Mitchell finally began, spurring everyone else awake.

"Hardly" Brianna commented. She threw herself back, digging deep into her pillows.

"I'd hate to be impolite..." she started, " who am I kidding? It's still dark out, leave!"

I pushed Mitchell and Zach out, glancing at the clock as I followed. In bright green, the clock read 1:37 AM. 1:37 AM?! That's twelve hours before I'd ever wake up.

"Try to keep the screaming to a minimum!" I yelled, before closing Brianna's door.

Zach and Mitchell were already down the hall, sluggishly stumbling towards their rooms. "I wonder what I can do?" Zach said wistfully, before slamming his door shut.

Honestly, superpowers? The Jester probably injected us with some virus and those are the side effects. Superpowers? Please. Call me when you get back to reality.

I strode into my room, closing the door behind me as I came in. The door swung closed, but I guess I didn't realize how much effort I put into it. A loud crack echoed through the room, making me cover my ears from the sudden noise, especially when I'm half asleep already. Guess I don't know my own strength.

Well, all's right in the world: I got my full 12 hours of sleep, no strange powers started throwing things around my room, and, most importantly, no annoying screams startled me awake. Actually, that last one is a little iffy. See, it isn't wrong, but someone did wake me up.

I was going to get up, honestly, but sometimes it's nice to lay in bed with your eyes closed and not worry about life. That is until Richie begins whispering in your ear, "Jenna? Jennaaa?"

Half asleep, I tried to slug Richie in the stomach: a warning shot for waking me up when I didn't want to. Lucky for him, he has fast reflexes. So instead of teaching him a lesson, I punched the corner of my desk clean off, sending it flying out the door. Richie grabbed at my hands, examining them closely. His eyebrows ferreted in concerned. "Are you okay?!"

"No," I quickly responded. I angrily ripped my hands away and lazily turned over in the bed, pulling my blanket and pillow with me. "How many times do I have to tell you people I am not a morning person?"

He gripped my shoulder, pulling me back to face him. I swear this kid is begging for a good punch to the face.

"Jenna, you shattered solid wood!" he exclaimed, stupidly pointing at the obvious crater in the desk.

It may be two in the afternoon but first of all, it is always too early to be making subtle hints at me, and second, this boy just woke me up and expects my brain to be functioning. Ridiculous.

"Congrats Boy Wonder, you've found out I'm strong!" I sasses, angrily pulling a pillow over my head in a last ditch effort to drown out his incredibly annoying, yet cute, voice. "Would you like to run one of your tests to find exactly how strong I am? A jab to the face should be sufficient." I mumbled beneath the sheets that were piled on top of me.

"Jenna!" he yelled, ripping the sheets off from on top of me.

Too lazy and annoyed to give a response, I blindly pitched a pillow at him. He ducked in time to miss a solid hit to the face. Dammit.

"You. Shattered. Solid. Wood!" he stubbornly yelled, pulling at me like a child on Christmas morning.

I waited for him to finish. I also waited for him to enjoy the last few seconds of having working vocal chords! Deep breaths Jenna, deep breaths.

"Five minutes," I said calmly, doing my best to count to ten and not explode on the one person I actually respect (if you ever tell him, I swear I will kill you). "Give me five minutes and then we can talk."

He opened his mouth in protest. But must've seen the futility in arguing with someone as stubborn and pissed off as me. He heaved a heavy sigh as let me be, throwing my pillow back at me. "Five minutes. We really need to talk"

I could clearly see the concern in his eyes, but that wasn't what made me actually obey the five minute rule; it was the fear behind it. "Richie?"

"You made me promise to give you five minutes! Whatever further insults or angry comments you have can be made in five minutes."

It's nice to have someone nearly as smart, witty, and cool as you on the team, but holy crap, I see why I'm such an isolated badass.

I pulled on my usual lounging gear: a jacket, my favorite Nike joggers, and matching sneakers before grabbing my stick and running out the door. Eventhough Richie never said where to meet, I know the one place he'd most likely be: the cafeteria. The elevator opened onto the floor filled with more restaurants than The Mall of America (Dad got me a sweet Michael Kors purse, but Juvie doesn't allow nice things). My team was seated in the center of the hall, enjoying the strange variety of meals: everything from the appropriate burger and fries to the less appropriate waffle and eggs (Mitchell...). My team excitedly beckoned me over, forcibly seating me before I could even choose a restaurant. Katherine - the head robotic chef who bakes practically everything - knows me well enough to bring me my favorite: a fully

stuffed burrito from Moe's. Don't ask me why she likes me so much, but she brings me food and that's all that matters. Also, Mitchell named her after his favorite Chopped champion, Katherine Chin, so I like to rub it in his face that she likes me more.

Just as I began digging in, Richie (of course) pipped up. "Jenna, we were talking a bout the strange events of this morning. Anything new?"

I was going to respond with, "Yeah that bruise" and punch him in the arm, but before I could swallow, Zach jumped in.

"Quick dodging it! We have superpowers!" Zach screamed giddily, nearly knocking my plate over. "Check it out!"

With outstretched arms, Zach eyes rolled into his head and the lights began to flicker. Above us, a light blew, sending glittering sparks into the epileptic darkness. Tendrils sepped from the fixture, dripping until they surrounded Zach like vines from a tree. And just like that, the lgihts returned and Zach beamed excitedly at our dumbfounded expressions, playfully running his fingers through the dangling coppers wires.

"So you're FPNL's worst nightmare?" Grease joked.

Instead of a snarky remark, Zach simply whispered something to the wires. The quickly coiled back into the light fixture, sending a blindly beam back on top of us.

"I can control electrical components?! Well, at least I think. Speaking of which, does anyone know if we have ceiling light repair robots or do I still have to program those?"

Mitchell quickly changed the subject. "After not being able to fall back asleep, I went to practice some swings. After hitting about 50 dead on homeruns... well, let me just show you."

He called Katherine over, whispered something in her ear, and excitedly waited for her to return. He revealed several dots for the dartboard across the room, nailed to the wall between Starbucks and Chick-fil-A. He sized it up then threw three consecutive shots, all of which missed teribly: ricocheting off tables and signs. That is, until all three landed practically on top of each other in the center of the board.

"I can't miss," he said sheepishly, staring at our awestruck faces.

Richie broke the silence. "Jenna?"

"Whatever loser, no one shit their pants, okay," I said, dusting off my hands. I then proceeded to pick up the table, with everyone seated, with one hand, and set it down. Everyone's mouths were left agape, whether in terror or awe, I can only hope the latter. Luckily, Zach has fairly appropriate reactions every once in awhile.

"AWESOME!" he screamed happily, jumping out of his seat and pounding on teh table in approvement.

Heads quickly turned to Grease as we waited for some incredible mech to bust through the wall at her command; well, I did at least. But she just sat slumped over her Lasagna, depressingly poking it with her fork.

All of the sudden, she realized she was the center of attention. "Right, superpower! Uh...". She anxiously twiddled her thumbs, something I've never seen her do. "I'd love to show you, but I, uh, have stuff to fix, so maybe later? Cool."

Before we could decipher what that was, she jumped from her seat and anxiously strode out of the cafeteria, leaving her lasagna- a very non-Grease-like thing to do.

"So," Richie awkwardly interjected, "super strength, accuracy, telekinesis, technokinesis, and technopathy. What do we do next?"

The room quickly fell silent as we all tried to think of the best answer. Of course, there is no best answer. Six incredibly irresponsible and stupid teenagers just gained superpowers. What the hell are we supposed to do?

Zach abruptly jumped excitedly, causing us all to reflexively jump with him. "Secret identities!"

Brianna stared blankly ahead, but she wasn't alone as we all were very confused.

"We already have those. It comes with being spies," she sassed.

"Not those boring things! We didn't even use them on the biggest mission so far!" He complained, "We're superheroes! We need newer, cooler nicknames!"

"What do you propose ComicCon?" I teased, not expecting such a straight answer.

He turned to me, pointing and waving his hands in excitement. "You have super strength so.... Power Woman?!"

"That's lame." I said, cutting him off before he could come up with a horrible costume to go with that name.

His expression quickly changed, infuriated by my quick rejection. But of course, here comes Richie to the rescue.

"I like it," he agreed, nodding his head in appreciation. "It suits you"

"Really super computer? How about we call you Spartan?"

"That's perfect!" Zach outburst.

"No way! Richie should totally be Headmaster!" Mitchell quickly added.

I struggled to hold in my erupting laughter, gagging on my suppressed bellow.

"You're kidding right?"

"Yeah!" Zach said, jumping on top of the table. "Richie would be Headmaster, Brianna is Mastermind, Mitchell is Bullseye, and Jenna is Power Woman!"

"And what about yourself? You came up with these horrible codenames for everyone but yourself" I confidently pointed out, waiting for Zach to be stumped.

That got him to sit down and shut up for at least a minute while he thought about it.

"Hm... System? No, too plain. Conduit? No, too common..."

"How about Mainframe?" Brianna asked quietly.

"I love it!" Zach screamed, once again jumping from seat.

"That's so lame. I'd quit before any of you call me 'Power Woman'" I mumbled, disgusted by their terrible taste in codenames.

Zach mumbled something under his breath, which sounded a little like, "I thought you already did?"

He lucky I'm trying to think of a better codename or else he'd see just how super I am. Then, it suddenly came to me, "Athena!" I shouted. Everyone stared at me questionably as I celebrated my Eureka moment. "You know, the Greek goddess of battle strategy and strength? It's definitely better than Power Woman and, let's face it, I'm a goddess."

Before Zach could jump into argue, Brianna beat him to it, "Now that that's done and over with," she abruptly began, "I think we should redesign the Academy.

Headquarters is nice, but the open field can used for so many things! Who's up for it?" she enthusiastically asked as she laid huge blueprints over the table.

I laid my hands over the extensive blueprints eyeing all of Brianna's precise marks and calculations. "Why is there a club and a football field? There's only six of us."

Richie quickly jumped in. "It sounds cool, but how are we going to do that? We're six teenagers. Even with superpowers, building a campus is crazy and will take forever".

I have to admit, a full campus sounds cool, but slightly unrealistic. Without someone in charge, how are six teenagers supposed to run the place?

"It sounds like a great idea, Brianna, but I think our main priority should be stopping The Jester." Mitchell added.

"Well, once you find her," she angrily stated, "then you can stop her. Until then, Grease and I and anyone else who cares to join will be making this state of the art facility into a facility."

Brianna quickly rolled up her blueprints and stormed out.

"I guess that's our cue to break?" Mitchell calmly mentioned as he scooted out of the table and walked out. Zach ran behind him, asking about a "summoning".

Naturally, Richie turned and nervously asked, "What's a 'summoning'?"

I laughed as we both stood. I carefully steered him towards the elevator. "The summoning is a ridiculous name Zach invented after he came here. It's basically how everyone gets here" I answered, pushing the down signal for the elevator. It chimed as Richie and I awkwardly stood in waiting.

"I, uh, don't exactly remember how I got here" Richie revealed, watching the numbers draw closer until the elevator chimed a little louder and the doors opened.

"Well, if you remembered how you got here, we'd be in serious trouble.

I'm taking about the last thing you remember before being here"

"You mean my kidnapping?" He asked incredulously.

"Well, the summoni is different for everyone," I stated as I punched the button for P2 and the elevator closed. "For you, yes, the van."

"How do you know about that?" He quickly asked, backing into the corner of the elevator.

I quickly held my hands up in surrender. "Relax, I was there. I drove the van."

"You were? Who was the blonde guy that attacked me? Why did he attack me?!"

"That was Zach in disguise. Headmistress was worried you wouldn't come easily. The rest of us had a reason to go with her, but you, we figured you wouldn't come willingly at first."

"So you guys knew me before I came here?" he asked suspiciously.

"Headmistress debriefed us on who you were; as for you specifically, we just knew your face and your intelligence. Why?"

"Just curious, I guess."

Another break of awkward silence. Seriously, I can hear crickets chirping. How can I go on a mission where he saves my life and still not be able to have a normal conversation with him?!

"I never did get to thank you for saving my life," I anxiously added, trying to keep the conversation alive.

"Of course" he quickly responded.

Before another awkward silence break could ensue, I quickly interjected as this was going to drive me insane. "I know I'm an acquired taste, but do you not like me?" For several seconds, he stared at me, shocked by my sudden outburst. "Why on Earth would I not like you?"

"Well for one, you're awful at holding a decent conversation with me; second, I feel awful about being such a horrible teammate, especially after you saved me."

"Jenna, you're my favorite person on this team!" he quickly replied with that smile that will probably be the only thing that keeps me together as we draw closer to our destination.

"Why's that?" I hesitantly asked, regretting asking the question as soon as I asked it, utterly terrified to hear his answer.

He grabbed my hands and, without hesitation, explained, "You're the only person on this team I know, without a doubt, you can handle yourself. You don't care about everyone else because you know that no matter what they do, you're strong enough to get them back on track. That's why have super strength, not because of some fortune and a daily workout regimen."

"You don't think I'm pretty?" I asked, nearly slapping myself as soon as it slipped through my lips.

"Physically, no," he responded. I could practically feel my heart shatter. "But personally, you'd be Miss Universe" he finished, lovingly clutching my hands. "Now, do you want to tell me where we're going?"

I almost told him exactly where, but I quickly hardened. I needed him to see it to understand. I'm afraid that if he hears it now, he'll never trust me again. "Something I should've shown you a long time ago."

This time, he leaned in, pulling my face towards his. I wish I could've stayed in that second forever, but naturally, the doors had to open. I could've played that off too! I had some sentimental speech about my past ready, but I didn't intend for a unwanted visitor to accompany us. I didn't intend for it to turn out like this, kissing Richie on the way the see my evil ex, but I've never been happier. It feels as if the world has been lifted from my shoulders. But, reality came crashing through my dream like a kaiten.

The elevator lurched to a stop, waking Richie and I from our daze. The doors opened to reveal The Jester carefully lifting a fainted boy in a polo, loafers, and shorts from a stasis tube: Preston. She lifted him over her shoulder and turned to exit, staring right at us, just as surprised as we are. We all stood frozen in a Mexican standoff, waiting to see who'd make the first move. Something banged off to the right, as if someone were pounding a glass, instinctively making Richie turn to see. As fast as lightning, The Jester threw a dart and dashed off. Before I could unhook my stick from my back to deflect it, the dart pierced Richie's chest. He crumpled against the elevator wall, struggling to bring himself to his feet. The Jester bounded to the stairway exit directly across the hall, I pitched my staff like a javelin as she darted through the doors. I heard a satisfying grunt echo through the corridor as my staff flew out of view.

I quickly grabbed Richie arms and wrapped it around my neck, heaving him to his feet. I plucked the dart from his chest and carelessly tossed it away. His head hung limply as I tried to darg him out of the elevator.

"Hangar..." he mumbled, as I carefully set him down in front of Preston's, now open, capsule.

"Stay here. I going to find this overgrown La La Loopsy," I demanded, but his grip on my hand held firm.

He struggled to raise his head, but when he did, I saw the sweat dripping down his forehead, the pain in his sparkling blue eyes. Wait. Richie doesn't have blue eyes. Well, either he got contact lenses or that dart is affecting him because his eyes went from the color of my teakwood desk to the color of the sky in about two minutes.

"Hangar," he said more assertively. Before I could ask for specifics, his eyes illuminated, casting a blinding light into thin air. Once my eyes adjusted, I saw it was a projection and across it raced video from all camera angles of The Jester and an

unconscious boy, Preston, breaking through the security door to the jet hangar.

"Get..." Richie demanded before falling limply against Preston's tube.

Get. Finally, something simple and understandable. No science mumbo jumbo and overly exaggerated names, simple commands are more my speed. I left him leaning against the pod as I dashed through the open door into the stairwell. My staff had pierced the wall, point deep. I angrily ripped it from the cement, sending dust flying. I barely noticed the shred of cloth stuck to the point of my stick, before I ascended the stairs. I tore it off, sticking it into my pocket before climbing the flights, taking three to four steps at a time. Not much later and barely out of breath, I ascended the 40 flights to reach the underground hangar (Grease's workshop), ready to throw my stick a bit more precisely at The Jester. As I busted through the broken doors, I watched Grease uselessly pelt a starting jet with various tools. The Jester sat behind the cracked windshield, frantically punching buttons until the jet began to hover. I thought about about jumping onto the windshield and knocking it open with my strength (how cool would that be?!), but the jet was already hovering by the time I made a plan. It lifted above Grease until she was just below the engine. It only took a second before I understood what The Jester was trying to do. I sprinted at them, my target insight. I tackled Grease to the floor just as the engine revved and the engines combusted into life, throwing licks of scorching flames just feet away from where we lay. Just as quickly, the jet was clear of the bunker and out of sight. I rolled off of Grease, laying on the ground nearly hyperventilating as I tried to process what just happened.

Zach and Mitchell suddenly appeared above me in a firestorm of questions and paranoid remarks of my possible death. I was swarmed by their flurry of questions: everything from "Where is she?" to "Can we track the jet?". It wasn't until Zach asked where Richie was that I woke from my stupor. I silently sped towards the door, but like magic, Richie stood in my way.

"I don't know and yes." He answered, the terrifying glare returned in his eyes.

He held up his hands to reveal a torn piece of parchment and the dart. I tore the parchment from his grasp, unfolding it as my hands shook feverishly. In calligraphic script wrote, "The game has only begun. You children are no fun. I off to find a true team. Follow my lead and you'll sure see, this parchment is crucial if you want to catch me." Here was no signature, only a crude drawing of a colorful, demented smile: The Jester.

"Is that supposed to make sense?" Zach asked over my shoulder.

Grease quickly retorted, "Does anything from her ever make sense?"

"So what do we do next?" I asked, thoroughly confused.

"We find 'the others'," Richie plainly answered in his adorable I'm-gonna-kill-someone look.

"I know them," Mitchell piped up, cause us all to turn our heads and even lift an eyebrow. "Well, two at least." He quickly added.

I turned to Richie, looking for some type of answer, but he was busy giving Mitchell a weird questioning stare. "Let's find ourselves a homicidal clown," he said, with a growing smile.

Everyone joined into his infectious smile, even me; but let's face it, some stories just don't have a happy ending.

Page Break

Chapter 29 (Epilogue): Far From Over

The Jester

It's funny how one day you may think you know someone, then the next, they become a completely different person. As I stood in the darkness, staring at the unconscious boy before me, I couldn't help but contemplate this. After nearly two years of being in stasis, would my dearest disciple be the same?

Those wretched children have stolen everything from me - my family, my resources, my trust - and left me with barely anything useful. Even my henchmen are gone, but as useless as they could be, they were true. But alas, they sit in pods beneath a building that I built myself; a building that was stolen from me, a building I intend to recover. That Spy Squad will pay for their treason, my vendetta will be sought, and my goal accomplished. And it all begins with the lifeless boy tied to the chair before me.

As I said before, I'm not sure if he'll be the same, but should he be, those children stand no chance. As soon as I make more serum, I will be unstoppable, my herald will stand victorious, and the world will finally see perfection.

They call me mad. Mad scientist, mad clown, mad... visionary. Indeed, I am *mad*. So was Einstein; so was Tesla; so was Frankenstein; so am I. So I may, in fact, be this 'mad scientist', but insanity is a matter of perspective; the willingness to use every available resource to accomplish the impossible.

Sadly, I'm nearly done with my maniacal monologue, but Preston's eruptive coughing spurred me from the moment, killing my mood - rude as always. The boy's mop of hair flew wildly as he anxiously absorbed what little surroundings he could. A lone bulb hung over his head, like an interrogation from those 60s movies I used to love; need be, I may just succumb to those same tactics, although I do hope it doesn't come to that. He rustled against his bonds, violently struggling in the plastic chair until he tipped over, landing face-down on the cold floor with a heavy thud and a loud grunt. Without being seen, I carefully snuck behind him and picked up his seat, before sinking back into the darkness.

"Who are you?" he asked in that gravelly voice, so familiar.

It felt strange to hear that voice again, although not disturbing; more like an abrasive strange, like finding an old friend you haven't thought about in years.

"What do you want?" he continued, pleading for his unknown captor to reveal herself.

I tried to think of a reply. But how do I reply to him? More importantly, how do I break the news? Even more importantly, how do I break the news so he doesn't kill me? This like this, words, are normally never this hard to arrange; but given the circumstances, I don't think there's anyway to easily deliver this.

"Where am I?!" he begged imploringly, rattling the chair in a desperate attempt to escape.

I couldn't take it anymore. I crept from the shadows, standing behind him as he stared ahead. "Somewhere safe."

His head whipped around in a panic, trying to catch sight of me. I walked around his trembling body until we stood face to face.

"You..." he disgustedly noted, recoiling at the sight of me. Not the best reaction, but definitely not the worst. "How long did you leave me? I remember my imprisonment like yesterday; maybe it was? Well, at least for me!"

"Preston..." I began, but in his fury, he quickly cut me off.

"You betrayed me! I watched you stare me down as I was frozen in time! Jenna, Mitchell, and Zach not have recognized you, but I did! I knew The Jester, I knew Headmistress, and I saw right through your hideous disguise. And you watched your right hand man be covered in frost forever." He spat despicably.

"I was trying to protect you!" I interjected, trying to get my explanation in. I stopped, carefully thinking of what to come next.

"By making me miss how many days of my life?!" He quickly replied.

Shocked by the sudden outburst as well as my growing aggravation with this child (who is much more gripeful than I previously remember), I threw all preparation out the window. "Son-" I started, before stopping myself, but it was already too late. He stared back at me, startled, while I tried to recover; now crafting my words extremely carefully as Preston had an expression of glass. "This isn't how I wanted you to find out," I said shamefully, bending to his level of eyesight. I watched as his expression changed from horror and anger to disbelief. "Preston, George Lucas may sue me for copyright infringement of this, but, I am your mother."

It felt like an eternity as he speechlessly stared into my unchanged eyes. Finally, he managed to speak, uttering, "This isn't possible" under his breath.

"I promise I will explain," I began, "but we have several... issues... to tend to."

I flicked on the light switch, showing him the simple basement we now call Headquarters. Still reeling from the shock, he mindlessly glanced at the few

computers and weapons I managed to steal from The Academy or that I luckily kept in storage. While he assimilated himself, I undid his bonds, leaving him free to roam and explore his new home; our new home.

He stood, rubbing his wrists. "What next?"

I grinned. *Next* is my favorite part. "Next, we find your brother."

His jaw dropped as he wobbled from the earth shattering news I kept delivering. "I... where is my brother?"

"Someplace neither of us and go," I said, sneering as I thought of his name. A mother will love her child unconditionally, even if he has stabbed her in the back. This is Mitchell's last opportunity to come to his senses before I destroy everything he knows and loves and make the world *Perfect*. "First, we get Mitchell. Then, we get revenge."

Page Break

Acknowledgements

So the time has come that I have to write this and I am both overjoyed and sad. It was an amazing adventure of annoyance and joy, but I have no regrets for it. People tell me a lot, "It can't be that hard to write a book", but let me tell you and all who read his probably already know, it is! It arduous and messy and horribly chaotic, but I want to thank all of my amazing friends who, not only gave me the idea for Spy Squad, but helped me write it! So, to Monique, Jenna, and Kat who I knew I could depend on to get me through writer's block and created some of the best scenes of the story, I can't even begin to thank you. Also to all those who eagerly waited for my aggravatingly spontaneous posts, I know; sadly that's the way my brain works. And lastly, but certainly not least, to Gia for inspiring me to write the book in the first place and sitting through the mess I become when I eagerly plan upcoming chapters. Thank you everyone for keeping me on track and staying with me as I do what I love.

I promise Spy Squad 2 will be out soon. ❤️👉❤️👉❤️👉