

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.

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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 MMBluebird24, 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".

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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!"

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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.

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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

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