

ANIM^{PAW}RPHERS





In my opinion, there's no better way to start a Monday morning than with Alt-Rock. Rehearsing with my band that day before school, I was the happiest I was going to be all day. In fact I was almost looking forward to algebra. *Algebra*. That's how happy I was that morning. I began singing the chorus, pouring all my focus into sending my low voice wailing into the Microphone. (It was off, of course, but that didn't really matter.) A small crowd was gathered near the door, watching Silver Creek High School's most gifted (And only) band play. It's not like the name "Stint With Fiction" Was whispered in the halls or anything, but watching us was better than cleaning whiteboards or something. The bell rang for class to start, and the band members set down their instruments and filed off the stage steps. I jumped off the edge and joined my friend Emma, who was waiting quietly by the doorway. "Whassup?" I grinned. Emma shrugged. My smile widened. Good ol' shy Emma.

"Awww, what? Do you not wanna talk to me?"

Em gave me a small smile. "You can be a bit much at times." She joked. I swatted her arm playfully.

"Hey now, if your'e gonna criticize, tell me something I don't already know, Emmy." I rapidly changed subjects in that attractive way of mine "hey, that song you wrote was really good. When're you planning to stop making me take credit for 'em?"

Emma's face went pink. "I already told you, I don't want any recognition for this."

"Oh, come on. You've got talent, Em! Don't tell me you don't, I've heard you play piano."

"You're the one who wants fame, not me."

I shrugged "true."

I didn't want to argue with her right on the first day of school, so I let the matter rest for now. And besides that, I probably wouldn't have said anything right then anyway, because Oliver Pascal had come walking down the hall. I stopped and watched him pass, a little short on breath. I felt my cheeks heat up. I'd been crushing on him since freshmen year, but so far I hadn't really talked to him. Mostly because I was afraid I'd say something stupid and end up looking like an idiot.

Emma followed my gaze and gave me a knowing look. "Tell you what." She said. "I'll start taking credit for my songs when you ask him out on a date."

I gave the journal in my arms a little squeeze. "I might do it, you know." I said.

No answer.

"What? I might! You never know."

The late bell rang and I bit my lip. "Gosh dangit! See you in English!"

I dashed off to class, where everyone was already taking a seat. The teacher, A small bespectacled man with a face like an anxious marmoset, gave me a sharp look. "I see our friend

Riley has decided to put down her guitar and join the rest of us." he squeaked. He sounded a bit like a marmoset, too.

I grinned. "Yessir! Now the wide world of numbers is complete!"

"Sit."

I strode languidly over to a desk in the middle row. Someone behind me poked the back of my head with a pencil. I looked behind me at a sneering bot in a Rainbow Dash T-shirt.

Ugh.

"Nice song, loser." He hissed. "Maybe if you worked at it you could land a job playing in a subway."

I glowered at him. "Nice*pony shirt*. Who dressed you, your mom?"

The day went on pretty normally from there. Pretending to listen in Algebra, trying and failing to listen in History, actually listening in English and Music, and so on. The last class of the day was Biology. I wasn't really paying attention until the end, when Mr. Neil started talking about the field trip. I looked up from my journal.

Last year it had been an Aquarium, This year, Mr. Neil informed us, we'd get a behind the scenes tour of the Zoo. "And, a hands-on tour of a local science lab."

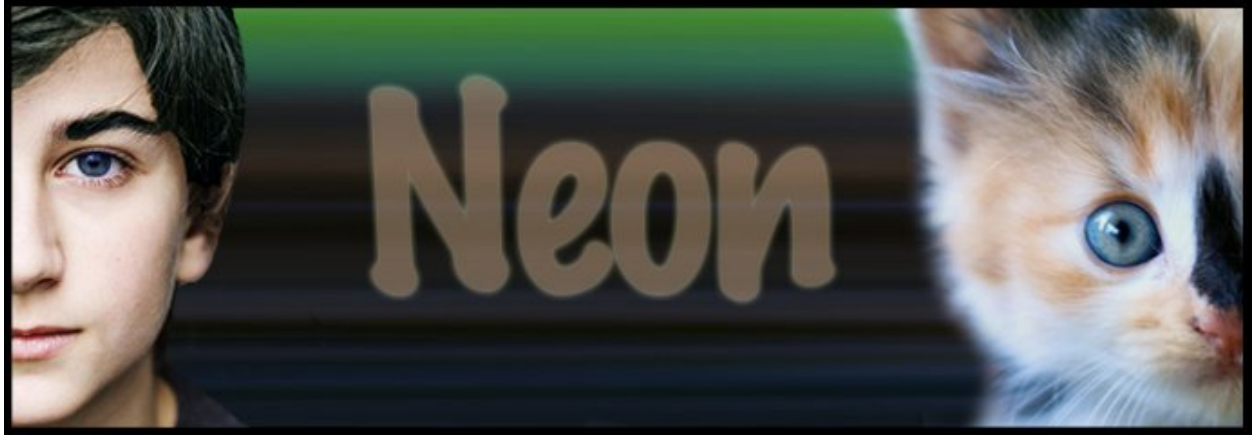
A few kids started whispering excitedly, but I was more focuses on the Zoo. Science labs were for scientists, not me.

....

Leaning on the wall outside waiting for our rides, Ryker, another friend of mine, and I were joking about the tour. "Hey, it could be cool." He smiled "What if we got superpowers from a lab accident or something?"

I nodded with exaggerated excitement. "Oh, that sounds like a good Idea! Alright, here's what we do: I'll get "accidentally" trapped in the experimental radiation chamber, and you smash the controls with a monkey wrench!"

We laughed at the joke and made up what kind of powers we could get from that. In no time a sleek black sedan had pulled up in front of the school. I shrugged my backpack onto my shoulder and trotted over to the car, waving at Ryker before clambering in.



“Uwaah! I’m gonna be late!”

Neon scrambled out the door, racing down the street, crimson scarf blazing behind him. His feet pounded the tarmac as he desperately gripped a piece of toast between his lips. “Wait! Wait!” His cries were muffled by the warm veil of crispy bread and jelly.

The school bus lurched forward, rumbling down the street. Neon raced after it, his backpack bouncing against his torso. His lungs burned with the effort. “Slow...down!” he cried.

The golden carriage ground to a halt at the end of the street. Neon could almost see the bus driver meticulously the road checking before the turn.

Desperately, he ripped a bite from his toast, praying to the toast gods for strength. Neon put on a burst of speed, his feet hammering the pavement. He could see the bus slowly starting again, turning left.

Neon stomped the ground, leaping forward, palms outstretched. His fingertips seized the bumper just as the bus lurched around the turn.

Groaning with effort, he hoisted himself up, clinging to the back of the bus. Using his free hand, he brushed his messy black hair out of his eyes. He sighed, taking another bite of toast. “Whew...what a way to start a day.”

He hung there for a while, as the school bus sputtered its way towards Silver Creek High. Watching the world roll away behind him, he gave out a small chuckle. Then another. Then a giggle.

Neon burst out into laughter, swinging precariously over the rushing road. His mad glee rippled across the air, drawing plenty of alarmed looks from the other drivers.

His giddy smile only grew as the bus hurtled around a turn, throwing him sideways. “Yes, yes, yes!” he cackled. “Upon this morning, I have conquered this school bus! And soon, all will tremble before my-”

The bus slammed to a halt at the school, crushing Neon and his toast against the window. Dazed, he fell backwards off of the bumper, crashing down on his back. The toast dropped from the window, plopping onto Neon’s face, smearing his nose with jelly.

Neon groaned slightly as the bus doors opened, letting the students off. Blindly, he punched a fist in the air, grinning beneath the mask of bread. “Made it.”

He walked in the door just as Riley and Emma were finishing up their song. They weren’t quite amazing, but they made up for it with sheer dedication. Riley was mesmerizing, singing each note with ease. The crowd watched with impartial interest.

Gradually, the song drew to a close, and the audience dispersed. The band members snapped their instruments back into their cases and scampered off, hurriedly saying goodbye to Riley and Emma, who started talking at the doorway. Emma said something with a small smile, and Riley blushed slightly.

Neon smirked. It didn't take a genius to figure out that they were talking about. He could easily see that Riley was head-over-heels for Oliver Pascal.

"It's simple," he muttered, walking forward with his head down. "The bonds between souls...invisible, and delicate, like a spider's web." He exhaled, lips reforming into a smile. "And those who can see these threads are the deities who pull them. And in this world of puppets, I am a god!" He struck a dominant pose, clenching his hand triumphantly. Placing his fists on his hips, he chuckled heartily, grinning.

"Um...Neon?"

The two girls were staring at him strangely. Neon's laughter died down slowly as a cold wind blew through the school foyer.

Instinctively, he knew what to do. Quickly, he positioned himself in the wind so that it blew into his scarf, sending the scarlet tails flaring out. He pointed an imperious finger in the girls' direction. "So, we meet again, Riley West."

Just then, the late bell rang. Riley jumped. "Gosh dangit! See you in English!" Turning on her heel, she dashed down the hallway.

"What the- Hey! Get back here!" Neon yelled, starting after her.

A timid voice interrupted him. "Um...shouldn't you be getting to class too?" Emma asked tentatively.

Neon gritted his teeth, sighing. “Fine. I suppose this battle is your victory. But stay on guard,” he warned, staring intensely at Emma. “Our paths will cross again.”

Not waiting to see her reaction, he dashed down the hall, his scarf streaming out behind him. “Today, I conquer this hallway! And my classes! And tomorrow, the world!”



My alarm goes off at the same time everyday. 5:45 AM sharp. Enough time to make it to school to have an hour of peace, and music. So when my alarm started blasting Tear In My Heart by Twenty One Pilots I wasn't that concerned. That was, until I saw the clock.

6:15 AM

"Dammit!" I yell. (Okay, actually I whispered but that's beside the point) I quickly get up, and rush to get ready. Basics first. Which includes brushing teeth, deodorant, tinge of this old lavender perfume my mom got me, messy bun, eyeliner, concealer, and glasses. (No time to look super cute today) After I get ready I quickly slip on a gray sweater, black leggings, and sandals.

There.

I run down the stairs to see my mom cooking something that smells amazing, my my dad watching the news on the tv from the table, and then there is my brother and Michael sitting at the counter stuffing their faces with my moms famous bacon. He rolls his eyes when he sees me. (I'm usually gone by the time he gets here)

Jerk

"Honey, where are you going? You need to eat breakfast." My mom says.

"Don't worry mom I'll just grab something on the way." I reassure her.

"You'll be fine if you're 30 minutes to your-"

"Mom." I interrupt her as I motion to Michael with my eyes. No one really knows about the whole music thing. Well, except Riley and Gwen of course.

"Oh." She says. "I mean. Yeah, just make sure you're home by dinner."

"Thanks mom." I run over and give her a kiss on the cheek. Then, I quickly grab some toast from a plate and make a run for it. "Love you!" I shout.

"Bye kid." I hear my dad yell from the kitchen. I also hear "Later loser." From my brother. (That's what we do, make fun of each other, but we actually get along quite well.)

I actually run to school. Crazy right? And to think I actually managed to do it without tripping more than three times.

Go me.

I make it to the music room about 30 minutes later than I usually do. It's not that big of a deal, but...it's special to me. I spend the first 20 minutes working on a new song for Riley. I even sing a little bit. Nothing too loud though. But those 20 minutes end the same way they always do. Me pounding on the keys and sighing loudly.

I'm pushing myself to hard.

But I don't care.

"Hmm. How about a little Paul Cardall to finish me off today?" I ask myself.

Sweet Escape

It's not a difficult piece, but it's still one of my favorites.

Just as I'm about to hit the ending I hear a crashing sound coming from the hallway.

"Hello?" I stand and make my way to the doorway.

A fallen music stand?

Was someone listening?

It doesn't matter now though. Probably just being paranoid. Whoever it was has run off now.

I check the clock. If I go now I can catch the end of SWF's rehearsal this morning. I grab my book bag, and my new copy of The 5th Wave off the piano and head out.

After SWF finished up Riley and I walk to first period. I watch as she makes googly eyes at Oliver Pascal.

Oh my gosh why doesn't she just ask him to hang out already?

Then again, kind of a hypocrite in this situation.

My first few classes were fine, but I mean it is school. There's only so much you can expect from it.

Lunch time is the highlight of my day. It's not because I get to see Ryker. It's mainly because I don't really have to do anything. Just nibble on some pretzels, read, and make awkward eye contact with Riley and Ryker the whole time. Riley and Ryker both try to get me to talk, but I guess I don't really have much to say.

Do I? Ugh never mind.

I decide to leave lunch early today. The smell of fish sticks is making me a little queasy.

Go lunch ladies. Poor things have such a rough time.

I walk the halls for a few minutes before nearly tripping over someone sitting on the floor.

Dan.

"Oh! Hey Emma!" He quickly stands up scratches the back of his head. A nervous habit I noticed.

"Sorry Dan. I wasn't watching where I was going." I slightly laugh.

"What?" He asks.

"A little weird seeing you before last period." I joke.

"Yeah." He let's out a small laugh. "Uh. Hey, Emma...would you...you know like to maybe..uh-"

"Tutor tonight?" I ask.

"Yeah. That's what I was trying to say." He blushes. I feel like that's not what he was gonna ask, but I push that thought away.

"I'm sorry I can't. I wish I could, but mom wants me home early. Tomorrow?" I ask.

"That's the field trip." He says.

"Oh yeah I forgot... We can always figure it out later."

"Yeah totally. Uh...Emma?"

"Yeah?" I ask.

"Actually, never mind it's stupid. I gotta go." He rushes off without another word.

"Bye..." I say. It's weird how easy it is to talk to him. Even though we both barely get out any words in regular conversations. Unless you get him talking about animals or books and then his face lights up, and then he can't stop talking. It's kind of amazing.

The bell rings I head to the rest of my classes for the day. It's a pretty normal day if you ask me. I walk home by myself after the bell rings.

My mom isn't home when I walk in. (Neither is Ashton. Probably at practice) I find a note on the counter.

Went out for groceries. Be back soon. If you want you can invite Gwen over for dinner.

-Love mom.

I smile and head upstairs where I quickly text Gwen.

Me: Mothership offers food. Do you accept?

Gwen: Duh. Need a good reason to not pay attention to my English homework. Plus your moms cooking rocks!

Me: Sound good 😊

I go downstairs to my backyard where Gwen soon joins me. We sit on my old swingset sharing a bag of Starbursts that my mom buys in bulk.

"Not too bad of a day?" Gwen asks.

"Not too atrocious." I reply. We both laugh enjoying the sounds of Spotify spilling from my phone, and the fruity taste of Starbursts.

Not too bad at all.



Michael was a heavy sleeper. When his alarm would go off for school, he would snore over, it turning to his side. His mother tried once, and failed, pouring cold water on him. The end result was a soaking bed and a cold Michael. If he finally woke up, by some chance, then he would yawn and try to argue a point that it was too early for the sun to be up or the clock is wrong or better yet, it is daylight saving times. His brother, who is a year younger, looks up and tries to reenact how Michael is feeling which causes tension and fights.

Today was a different day. Mostly instead of sleeping in late, Michael was the first one up. He was sitting at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee between his hands as he stared intently at an open book. The sun was barely up as the sky was turning different colors of pink and blue and orange, with the wonderful sounds of birds chirping. His mother woke up for work-at-home every morning, sitting down at the oak desk in the lounge while filling out papers for a part-time job to support the family.

"Michael! What are you doing up this early?" his mother had asked, turning the corner and glaring at the clock. He shrugged, turning the page quietly.

"Today seemed the kind of day for waking up early."

His mother sighed, walking towards the coffee pot. Her pink robe rubbing on her legs, as her messy blonde hair poofed out. His mother could have been a model but before college- and before Michael was born- she met his dad and had a part-time job. She tried to make money for food and whatnot only coming short a few bucks at the end of the week. Soon Michael was born, and that thought of being a model was thrown out the window.

His mother leaned back on the counter, sipping peacefully. Michael closed the book, standing up from his seat.

"Today is a special day."

"Oh really?" His mom asked sarcastically. He glared at his mother from the corner of his eye while preceding to put his coffee mug in the sink.

"Yes, really. If hopefully you signed the permission slip."

His mother choked on her coffee. "P-permission slip?"

"Yeaaaa. The one I gave you last week?"

His mother put down the coffee mug on the counter. She then fumbled around the papers by the oven, grumbling under her breath about bills and papers. Michael raised an eyebrow as he walked past to his bedroom. When he returned, his mother has her head in her hands sitting at the desk.

"You okay, mom?"

"I kinda forgot to sign that permission slip."

Judgement grew in his stomach. He had hoped his mother would have cared enough to sign his permission slip to go on the field trip.

"Can't you find it and sign it?"

His mother mumbled. Michael sat down in a chair. "What?"

"I threw it away, thinking it was a bill that I payed."

Michael sat back in his chair, resting his hands in his lap as his mother sighed.

"I didn't mean to, Michael."

"I gave it to you last week," said Michael sternly.

"Yes-"

"Last week you could've signed it."

"I know-" his mother began as Michael interrupted.

"You know how long I wanted to go on this trip? For days. When I first started school, they talked about the trip to Quantum Mechanics and Cancer Research to Biological Studies. I wanted to study the natural habit of animals as a job. This trip, compared to the rest of the trips, is more educationally and I wanted to go. But no. You forgot to sign a simple piece of paper and no, that's not it. You threw it away," Michael let out a chuckle. "And to think I thought you were prepared."

His mother blinked. It had a been awhile since Michael spoke to her like that- mostly, after his father had died. He was more reserved and staying in his room, away from family members. Even his grades went downhill, before he could change them. It was a hard death and his mother still feels the pain of trying to raise three kids, each with something special and needing something everyday.

"Couldn't you get a new paper and I could come down to your school and just sign it?"

His mother asked. Michael let out another chuckle.

"You don't get it! I have to turn it right when I get to school," he replied, looking at the clock.

Michael sighed, getting up and walking to his bedroom once more.

"I have to get ready for school and maybe get to go on the trip." His mother sighed, sipping what was left of her coffee and getting ready for her planned workday ahead. Minute later, Michael left the house without saying goodbye to his mom.

He walks to school, watching the cars passing and sometimes wishes to have one. After his father died, his mother used all the money in his savings account for a car on bills and hospital visits. Most of his friends would suggest rides with him, debating if it was a good idea or if the car was safe. He would reject and walk to school, with the fall wind blowing around him.

When he got to school, he saw some people he knew. His little group wasn't fully made yet as he settled in the library with his laptop. Around him, most people were getting her whining about how it was a Monday and not wanting to be here. People like that annoyed Michael as he sighed, grabbing headphones and zoning into his own world.

Soon- an hour and half later- the school bell rang, signaling for the classes start. They blurred, making the next class seem shorter than the last. It was until Mr. Neil's class. It was a fun class, with most people he wished he could ignore or agrue or just listen. The clock seemed to move slower and slower, wasting the time of studying animal's parts and movements. Michael propped open his laptop and started to listen to music, as Mr. Neil started to ask if anyone had turned in their slips or needed one. No one raised their hands.

"Okay class, today we are going to learn about organisms. Yes, yes I know. 'But Mr. Neil, we learned that in first class.' Well now, flash back.. what is today? Thursday! Throwback

Thursday..." throughout the class they talked about organisms, animals, and beyond. At the end of the class, Mr. Neil asked again if anyone needed a permission slip. He looked over the class and saw Michael with his earbuds in.

"Michael! Michael!" he called out but it was no use. He gestured to a kid next to him to remove his earbuds. Michael blinked and mouthed 'what'. The kid gestured to Mr. Neil as Michael nodded.

"Sorry about that, Mr. Neil."

"Do you need a permission slip for the field trip?"

Michael nodded, walking up to the desk and receiving looks. He shrugged them off, walking back to his desk while jamming out to his music. The bell rang dismissing everyone from any class, leading a swarm of bees to their nest.

Michael saw Charlotte looking down at her books, paying no attention to the door ahead. He jogged ahead and opened the doors for her. Charlotte smiled, walking through shaking her head as Michael smiled to himself.

When he got home, his mother was sleeping. Michael settled his stuff on the bed, and before, put the note on kitchen table. He slept for most of the day, hoping for the trip tomorrow.



I always walk to Silver Creek High, preferring the crisp morning air and the sweet sound of twittering birds over a claustrophobic vehicle spitting stuffy heat into my face. In rain or snow, I'll simply bundle up. I like wet hair, anyway.

On that particular morning, the weather was nice, and the sun seemed to be greeting me to the new school semester. I avoided the main entrance that was clogged with cars and buses and climbed the grassy slope towards the track. I could see a few of my cross country friends already clustered at the top of the stairs, waiting for the coach to arrive. I joined them.

"Hey, Charlotte!" Layla said, smiling.

I was very grateful for Layla's friendship. We were in a few classes together last year, when she taught me how to draw a few things with her epic art skills, and over the summer we had grown closer during cross country and track practices.

"Hey!" I said. "Where's Coach?"

Layla shrugged. "She'll be here soon, I guess."

"Do you think we'll have to run today?"

"Gosh, I hope not. It's the first day since break."

I didn't want to run either. My hair was all pretty and I was wearing more makeup than usual for the first day of the semester. Makeup and sweat? Not the greatest combo.

Coach Dossley is a sympathetic person, thankfully, and after going over the season's plans, gave us a free period to do as we wish. So the cross country team got to stay pretty, and Layla and I had enough time for a drawing lesson. We ended up goofing off by the end of the period, finding ourselves drawing random scribbles on each other's papers instead and trying to make sensible drawings out of them with a few embellishments. I called it Picasso Art.

English was the second period of the day, where I sat in a corner by myself and listened to the teacher's introductory lecture. He was pretty funny, actually. Next was European History, where we learned that we had a three page essay due the next day. Fun. So much fun. The teacher also had an intimidating black beard.

On my way to Spanish, I passed by Oliver. "Charlotte! How's it going?"

"Well, I have a three page essay due tomorrow, but otherwise I'm good. You?"

"Eww," he said. "I'm good too, I guess. Most of my teachers are good, but my math teacher's pregnant. I've already seen some signs of mood swings. She's thrown a pencil at Neon already."

I laughed. "Really? What's her name?"

"Something like Tangerine..." he checked his schedule. "Ah, Tangeman. Mrs. Tangeman."

"Great," I groan, recognizing the name on my own schedule. "I have her too. Math is terrible enough without a terrible teacher."

He grinned, and slapped me on the back. "We'll be fine. Just get on her good side and avoid flying pencils."

"Yeah," I said, laughing. "See you later!"

Spanish and Math passed in an uneventful blur. I was eager to get to Biology and hear more about the field trip. When I stepped into Mr. Neil's classroom, I was pleased to see several familiar faces: Michael, Daniel, Layla, Gwen, among a few others.

"Charlotte," Mr. Neil said, tapping the table in front of him, "you sit here." I nodded quietly and slipped into the seat. Sitting next to me was a *very* tall guy. Like, *very* tall. Why'd the teacher have to put a dwarf like me next to a giant?

Mr. Neil switched on the projector and opened up a Google Slides presentation. It was titled, Day One: Partner Activity. I swallowed.

"First," Mr. Neil said, "introduce yourselves."

I turned my head towards my giant partner. "Charlotte," I squeaked.

"What?" he said.

"Charlotte."

"Oh, Charlotte. Uh, nice to meet you. I'm Jinx."

I nodded. "Cool name."

"Thanks."

"Number two," Mr. Neil read from the powerpoint, "Describe the color of your partners' eyes. You are not allowed to use the words 'blue,' 'brown,' 'green,' 'gray,' or 'black.' Be creative."

Against my will, I lifted my head and locked eyes with my partner. He returned the gaze with piercing blue eyes. Wait - no, not blue...

"Coffee," Jinx said to me. "With, er... an amber flare in the center, around the pupil."

I blinked. "Yours are like the sky, on a stormy day."

Mr. Neil lead us through a few more activities, and by the time he started talking about the field trip, I had decided that Jinx was a pretty nice guy. I was a bit mad at myself for being so afraid of him just because he was so big. Talk about judging a book by its cover. (Jeez, Charlotte.)

The bell rang and I rose to leave, juggling my pencil bag, math textbook, Spanish workbook, and two binders in my arms. I must not have been paying much attention, for if Mike hadn't been there to open the door for me, I might've just crashed right into it. My face flushed red when I saw him smiling at me.

Gosh darn it, Michael Anthony, I remember thinking. I hate it when my face turns colors.



I jolted awake as my alarm went off. I turned it off, yawned and looked tiredly around my room. My copy of 'Red Rising' was still next to me open on my pillow exactly how i had left it the night before. I sighed. It was the first day at school. Back to the old grind. I got dressed in my usual clothes;dark blue t shirt, black hoodie, blue jeans and sneakers.

I checked myself in the mirror as I went down, decided I looked decent and went down the stairs and into the kitchen. My parents were in the kitchen, preparing to go to work. My sister had left early for school, as usual.

They wished me good morning as they quickly ate their breakfasts. I sat down at the table, and my mum pushed a plate with a slice of toast and a fried egg in front of me.

I ate mechanically as my Dad said "Good bye." and rushed off.

My mom did the same a few minutes later, but added a "Get to school on time. Love you." I sighed.

My parents were always working. They had been ever since I was born. My siblings had gotten more attention, as my parents had been less busy then, but not me. Unlike some kids who,

growing up in environments like this, become very attention-seeking, I had come to expect no attention. I hated that feature of myself.

However, I pushed that to the back of my mind and instead looked at the portrait of a peacock that hung on the wall. That was one of the few things that my Great-grandparents had brought with them from India when they immigrated.

I was fourth generation born American, and neither me nor my parents had ever been to India, but we still remembered our roots. I quickly shook myself out of my thoughts as i saw that school bus had come, and ran out the door and boarded it.

The bus was crowded, with everyone chatting with their friends. All but me. I sat in the back as I usually did, and plonked my bag on the seat next to me, where no one would ever sit, me being mostly without friends.

It had been like that ever since Jim and Derek, my best friends had left town, their parents getting transferred within weeks of each other. Now the only people whom I could call friends were Gwen, and possibly Emma.

I looked boredly out the window as the city flew by. My day brightened up when I heard a shout as I saw Neon running after the bus. I grinned in amusement as he managed to jump onto the back and grab onto it.

Then he proceeded to cackle madly, and declared “Yes, yes, yes! Upon this morning, I have conquered this school bus! And soon, all will tremble before my-” At that point the bus stopped at Silver Creek High and he fell down onto the ground, the piece of toast he was holding falling directly on his face.

At that point I burst out laughing, as did several others. I was still giggling as I left the bus.

I walked past Neon as he said "Made it!" and punched his fist in the air.

"Good job, Neon!" I called out as I past him, "You conquered the school bus! Maybe next time you can conquer the toast as well!" and chuckled as I made my way to the school.

I walked through the door and wandered the halls for a while, as I usually did to pass time while waiting for school to start. Then I heard a voice. I tilted my head as I listened to it. I was surprised as I realized that it was Emma's!

She was singing and playing the piano. While Emma didn't know it, Gwen had told me about her involvement with the band, and I thought she was a really good songwriter. But I had never heard her sing or play before.

I walked towards the sound until I stood just outside the music room, afraid to go in as I knew that it would embarrass Emma. I leaned against a music stand as I listened. She really had a amazing voice and was great on the keyboard.

Then I gasped as the music stand toppled and fell with a crash! I quickly ran out of there, fearful of what Emma might think of me if she found me there, as of yet she didn't know that I knew she wrote SWF's songs.

I made it to the hall just in time to watch the last few minutes of Riley and the band's practice. I saw Emma come in through the other doorway, and my heart sped up. She looked really cute. I debated with myself whether to ask her out, as I did every day. As always, fear and nervousness won the day, and I sped out of there as soon as the song ended.

As I went to class, I debated in my mind when, if ever, I would ask Emma on a date. In fact, I was so engrossed in my thoughts that I didn't notice Terence Matthews. I don't know how I missed that, as he was tall and big, and was standing right in front of me. By the time I noticed him, I had bumped into him. He turned to me with a look of rage, and grabbed the front of my shirt. He slammed me against the wall.

"You'll pay for that, shithead." He hissed as he raised his fist. "Let him go!" ordered a voice from behind him. He turned and I saw that it was Layla. *Saved by a girl. Again. Man, I am going to feel the effect of this later.* I thought as Terence released me and said "Sure thing, babe." and smoothed back his hair. He had a crush on Layla, and everyone knew it.

I thanked Layla and ran off as he started to ask her for a date, which I knew she would refuse. My first few classes were fine. Latin first, then Math, and then finally English before lunch.

I was walking through the halls on my way to the lunchroom when I saw Gwen walking ahead. A page fluttered from her notebook and landed on the floor, right in Mike's path. I quickly snatched it up, looked at it and ran to catch up with Gwen.

I caught up to Gwen in the lunchroom and said "Gwen, look what fell out of your notebook. Right in front of Mike! Don't worry I grabbed it before he could see it."

She snatched it out of my hands and blushed before saying "Oh my gosh, thanks Dan! That would have been embarrassing."

I grinned and replied "Why embarrassing? I think you set a new record! I've never seen Mrs. Gwen Anthony written so many times before."

She smiled and said "Shut up! By the way, do you want to sit with me, Emma and Riley for lunch?"

"No thanks," I replied,

"I'm gonna go talk to Layla and Charlotte. Given where we're going for our field trip tomorrow, and given our fields, it's bound to make for a lively discussion."

Gwen rolled her eyes and replied "Fine, but I don't know how you can stand Layla."

I shrugged and said "Everyone has their likes and dislikes. See you soon." and I went off. As I got my lunch, I wished that Gwen would give up chasing after Michael. While I had long ago gave up any hope of getting her to go out with me, I just didn't want her to get hurt when she finally realized that Mike just wasn't interested. but she wouldn't listen to me when I mentioned it.

However, I pushed those thoughts to the back of my head as I ate my lunch while talking about the field trip with Layla and Charlotte. The three of us were very excited. Behind-the-scenes access to the Zoo and a hands-on tour at a local Science Lab? This was our chance to see how zoologists and biologists actually worked! We were still talking about it when I saw Emma leave the lunchroom early.

My heart quickened, and my mind whirled. She was now in the perfect place for me to ask her out. She was alone, so neither her nor I would feel too nervous, and there was no one to hear if I refused. I muttered something about having to go and leaped out of my chair and ran after her.

A few minutes later I couldn't find her, and just gave up. I felt incredibly conflicted. On the one hand, I really liked her and it would be amazing if I could be her boyfriend, but on the

other hand, if she said no, then it would embarrass both of us, and possibly ruin my relationship with her.

Torn, I leaned against the wall and slumped to the floor. A few moments later, I felt someone's foot connect with my leg.

I turned and saw Emma, who looked like she had just nearly tripped over me, and got up hastily before saying "Oh! Hey Emma!" At that moment, I decided to finally ask her out. I scratched the back of my head, which was one of my nervous habits.

"Sorry Dan. I wasn't watching where I was going." she said, and laughed slightly.

"What?" I asked, looking at her curiously

"A little weird seeing you before last period." she said jokingly.

"Yeah." I let out a small laugh. Then I took a deep breath before starting nervously "Uh. Hey, Emma...would you...you know like to maybe...uh-"

"Tutor tonight?" she asked.

"Yeah. That's what I was trying to say." I felt my cheeks warm up, and I knew I was blushing. I really wanted to ask her out, but fear always seemed to get the better of me.

"I'm sorry I can't. I wish I could, but mom wants me home early. Tomorrow?" She asked .

"That's the field trip." I replied.

"Oh yeah I forgot... We can always figure it out later."

I nodded before replying "Yeah totally." and then, starting to have second thoughts, I said "Uh...Emma?"

"Yeah?" she asked, looking at me curiously.

I looked and knew that I would never want to ruin my friendship with her. I really liked her, and didn't want to ruin our friendship for anything. *And she'll probably say no.* I thought to myself. So I blurted out "Actually, never mind it's stupid. I gotta go." And I rushed off without another word.

As I walked away I gave myself a thorough mental beating. *You are a complete coward, Dan.* I told myself. *It was the right place, and the right time, and what did you do? You chickened out.* I continued like this until I reached world history, which was the first class after lunch.

I walked in and sat down in my usual place at the back of the class, next to Neon. While I and neon didn't talk much, I enjoyed seeing the little comic strips he drew during class.

Mr.Nelson called for our attention to him. He made an imposing figure, as he was tall, and while his hair and beard were greying, he looked tough. He was strict, but always taught us in interesting ways.

He then began speaking. "Hello, class. Today, on the first day of school, I don't want to bore you with uninteresting topics, so today we will discuss the Third World War. Daniel, can you tell us something about it?" I sighed.

Teachers always called on me to answer questions because I was smart. But I hated being the 'teacher's pet' all the time. That led to me being constantly bullied.

However, I answered "Yes, Mr.Nelson. The Third World War was fought between USA and China, as a direct result of USA's conquer of Da Nang, a city of Vietnam, a province of China."

"Very good, Daniel. Now, what other significant countries were involved in the war? Jack, perhaps you'd be able to answer this?"

Jack was a 'teacher's pet' like me. Teachers usually alternated between the two of us when asking questions.

Jack answered "The European Union and India were on the side of USA, and Russia and Japan were on the side of China." Mr. Nelson nodded, pleased.

He then turned to me and asked "Now we are sidetracking a bit. Europe is made up of many countries. Yet they fight as single military power according to their agreement. What did this agreement entail?"

I replied "The agreement stated that all the countries of Europe, while being autonomous states, would not attack each other, and pool their military strength and make such decisions concerning armies together. This was done so that the countries of Europe would not be taken advantage of by foreign powers."

"Good." the teacher replied and then asked "What was the result of the war?"

Once more, I dutifully replied "The war ended with a peace treaty agreed to by both sides."

Mr. Nelson nodded and said "Very good, Daniel. However, it was not a total peace. Japan now heads the axis that was once led by China, which lost some power during the war while Japan rose, but those territories are still hostile to USA. Travel between the two sides is not permitted. Tensions between them are rising, although we say we are at peace. Sooner or later, they will rise to a breaking point, and that will be a terrible time for people all over the world." Everyone in class seemed to at least feel a little scared at this ominous message, except for Neon.

He was busy adding to the stash of paper airplanes that he kept in his bag. I had once asked him why he needed so many airplanes, and he had replied very seriously 'to conquer the skies'.

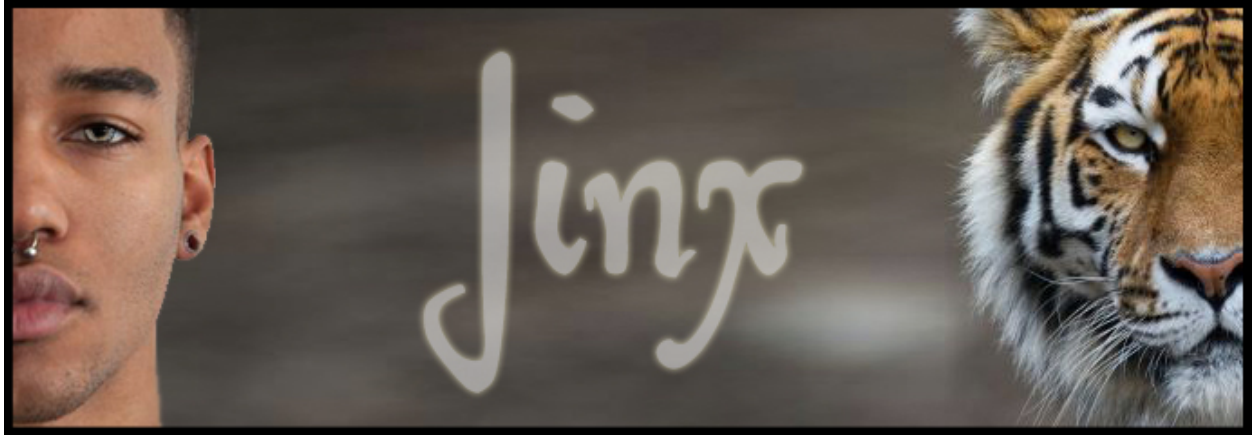
At that moment, the bell rang and the period ended. We all left, but Mr.Nelson's words rattled around in my head for long after.

The next period was Creative writing and my thoughts turned from possible war with Japan to Emma, and how I had blown my chance of asking her out.

The next period was Biology, and I was sitting next to Emma. I wish I could've asked her out then and there, but with so many people about, we would both have gotten embarrassed.

I didn't really listen throughout Mr.Neil's class, but he never mentioned anything, as teachers tended to be more lenient towards me due to my high grades. Towards the end, he spoke about the field trip, and I felt excited again at the prospect of it.

But on the bus home, my thoughts became focused on Emma. I realized that I was fixating on one of my mistakes, which was a sign that I was becoming depressed again, but I didn't try to stop it. For once I let it flow over me, and at home, I sank into a deep depression in which I remained for most of the day before the field trip.



Mornings were never Jinx's strong suit. When his fifth alarm- that is, his emergency, "*If you do not get up now you are probably dead*" alarm- began screaming, he finally lurched to a sitting position and blinked blearily. He pawed at the blankets beside him for his phone and squinted at the bright screen for the time. 7:35 AM.

"Sh--" he hissed, ripping off his blankets and swinging his long legs over the edge of the couch he had claimed as his bed. He cringed as his feet hit the cold tile, and goosebumps rose on his naked chest. Snatching a pair of jeans and a likely-clean shirt crumpled on the floor, he dashed into the restroom, reemerging moments later, dressed and chest heaving. Not the best outfit for first day impressions, but Jinx had never been very good at that anyway.

He ran his hands through his curly hair as he rushed into the kitchen and snatched up a granola bar for breakfast, then his car keys and backpack; it was empty, save one sad, ripped binder.

Dad was still out, thank God. Jinx couldn't stand disappointing his father, and being late to the first day of school wasn't exactly impressive. He hoped the new night watchman job would

work out in the end, but it was a bit lonely eating meal after meal alone every day. School would help with lunch, at least.

His father had taken the city bus so that Jinx could have the truck, likely guessing that Jinx would miss the school bus no matter what. Jinx ran out of their small apartment, locked the door, and dashed to the truck. He flung his backpack in the back seat and slid into the driver's seat, breathing hard, praying that maybe, just maybe, he could actually make it to school on time. The ratty pick-up that had taken Jinx to kindergarten grumbled unhappily when he twisted the key, and the engine light flashed.

Jinx closed his eyes in horror. Just his luck that the crap machine would die *today*, of all times. He lashed out angrily with his palm, striking the wheel, and inciting a furious blare of the horn.

"AH!" he cried, cringing with embarrassment. He had most likely woken up the entire apartment complex. He tried the key again, begging the stupid car to work under his breath, despite knowing the futility.

Finally he twisted his fingers through his hair in hopelessness, recognizing that it was past the school start time by now. He gritted his teeth and flung open the truck door, stomping around the car and giving the wheel a furious kick.

Cursing furiously, Jinx grabbed his backpack and began to trek the two miles to school.

A demerit on his report card, already. What a surprise. Two more late arrivals, and he'd be liable for a detention.

He had been in sort of a daze all day, drearily receiving syllabuses on the course work to come. His one binder was now stuffed with forms and papers, which he had promptly doodled all over. Normally, he would have been looking forward to escaping this hell-hole that they called school at the end of the day, but now he faced telling his father of the misadventures of the morning.

He knew that his father loved him no matter what, but he hated disappointing him. What would he say? At least he had managed to convince the nasty office lady not to call or email his father about it. Jinx would much rather tell Dad himself.

He was so lost in his thoughts during biology class, slumped uncomfortably at his desk, that he didn't realize that the girl beside him was speaking to him for a beat too long.

He blinked and shifted his body in her direction, shaking himself from his bleak thoughts.

"What?" he blurted.

The girl seemed to recede into herself shyly, her small form completely dwarfed by his.

"Charlotte," she repeated, brushed a strand of strawberry blonde hair out of her eyes.

"Oh, Charlotte," Jinx mumbled dumbly. "Uh, nice to meet you. I'm Jinx."

He mentally berated himself for being unobservant, slow, et cetera, et cetera. He tried his best to focus and have a decent conversation with her.

By the time Mr. Neil had led them through a few partner get-to-know-you exercises, Jinx determined that he was perfectly fine with having Charlotte as his neighbor. He liked her. She

was pretty, and she seemed smart. Maybe she'd make biology a bit more bearable. He needed all the stimulation he could get, after all.

"Make sure you have your permission forms to me by today or tomorrow," Mr. Neil instructed, regarding the field trip the next day. The teacher's dark eyes glinted and he adjusted his geeky tie. "This is an opportunity you don't want to miss."

Jinx made a mental note to catch his father that evening. He had completely forgotten about the field trip, and suddenly he was anxious. A full day with kids he didn't know, in a place that he wasn't familiar with, with a teacher he wasn't sure he liked? Sounded like a recipe for social disaster. But no matter. He'd survive.

A thought occurred to him. He raised his hand.

"Yes..." Mr. Neil glanced at his roster, unsure of Jinx's name. "Mr. Gray?"

"Will there be a bus to take us there?"

Mr. Neil smiled. "Of course. Just get to school on time and we'll meet at the front doors."

"Right," Jinx responded slowly. He tried to fight the dread in his stomach about the following morning. Wouldn't it be dreadful if he slept through the cut-off time?

As he left the classroom, his tall form sliding among the surging masses, he decided perhaps a sixth emergency alarm was required for the morning. A grim smile twisted his lips. He didn't want to miss this.



The alarm next to my head goes off with loud, obnoxious beeps. I groan. Consider throwing it against the wall, but decide against it.

I open one eye and look at the clock. It reads: 6:30AM. I reconsider the 'throwing the alarm against the wall and going back to sleep' concept. Instead I roll out of bed and shuffle over to my closet. The sky is pretty clear and bright today for it being January, but it still appears to be cold and foggy. I throw on a grey hoodie with our towns college sports team logo across the front: '*Go Huskies!*'. Blue jeans, a loose knitted hat and fur-lined brown boots complete the outfit. Brush my teeth, throw a comb through my straight blonde hair and put some very light eyeshadow and liner around my eyes. Good enough.

I make my way down stairs. As usual, I catch my dad just as he's going out the door. He gives me a quick wave and tells me to have a good day at school. Mom is pouring herself a cup of coffee and my little brother Danny is eating cereal in front of the television. Spiderman cartoons, of course. He yells and punches fists into the air as if he's helping Spiderman fight his adversaries, announcing his moves much like a sportscaster would the replay of a football game.

“Mom! When I’m older, will you take me to where Peter Parker went so I can be bit by a spider and have spidey powers, too?”

“You really think you can get abilities by going to a lab and having your DNA altered by a spider bite? Dare to dream, little bro,” I say as I pour myself a cup of coffee. He ignores me and goes back to fighting imaginary foes. I sit down at the kitchen table and pour myself a bowl of cereal. Frosted Flakes. Milk. Earbuds go in my ears. I flip open a notebook and a pen goes into my hand. I’m off in my own little world for a few minutes eating, listening, and drawing before Mom walks up and starts waving her arms around in front of me. She’s learned if she’s subtle that I won’t even know she’s there. I pull out a bud and raise my eyebrows at her in question.

“I need to talk to you about something,” she says.

I turn off my music and pull the other bud out of my ear. “Shoot.”

“Okay,” Mom sits down across from me. “What would you think of your cousin coming to stay with us for awhile?”

“That might be fun... I’ve been curious to get to know my cousins better.”

“Maybe show them around town... Keep an eye on him at school?”

“I could probably manage that—” I stop. *Him?* “Wait, which cousin are you talking about?”

Mom hesitates. “Cole. Cole would be coming to stay with us for a semester.”

I shake my head. “Oh, no. You can’t be serious. Mom, he’s been to *juvie*. He doesn’t understand privacy or respect or, or... not being selfish. He’s going to steal from us and I just know, I *know* he’s going to go through my stuff.”

“Yes, he’s gotten into some trouble lately and that’s why we need to let him stay with us for a while. His mom thinks a change of lifestyle will be good for him. He comes from a broken family and I think it would be really good for him to see what a non-broken one looks like,” Mom explains.

“I don’t feel comfortable sharing our house with that kid. And you’re planning to enroll him in my high school? He could easily make my life a living hell at school.”

“Well, I’ve already arranged for him to stay with us. I would have talked to you beforehand but when your Aunt Sarah called me she was panicked and didn’t know what to do and I couldn’t leave her hanging. I also thought you’d be okay with it.”

I sigh. “I guess I don’t have much say in it then. When is he coming?”

A car horn outside the house answers my question before Mom gets a chance.

I flop my hand down on the table, the spoon clattering against the wood. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

~ ~ ~

I haven’t been around Cole a whole lot, but I’ve known since I saw him at a wedding a few years back that he really gets under my skin. Mom told me she would be driving Cole down to Silver Creek High today to enroll him in school and offered me a ride. I opted for my bike, as usual. It’s how I prefer to get there and Mom driving Cole is only more of an incentive.

Cole had come into the house, a duffle bag slung over one shoulder, a backpack over the other. I tried to act polite, he acted moody and sarcastic as usual. He looked a lot like I

remembered him, although he's taller now and his hair is longer, which looks ridiculous in my opinion. Fortunately, I was able slip out with the excuse of having to get to school early for track. So I grabbed my backpack, pulled my bike out of the garage, slipped on my fingerless brown gloves and went on my way.

~ ~ ~

When I get to school, I chain up my bike and head through the front doors, toward the girls locker room. I find myself ranting in my head as I walk down the empty halls, only working myself up more about the situation. So when I turn a corner just in time to see Terence Matthews shove Daniel Torson-a friendly acquaintance of mine-up against a wall, I have even less tolerance for the event than I usually would. "Let him go!" I growl. Terrence turns to look at me and a moment later, lets go of Dan's shirt.

"Sure thing, babe," he says as he smooths back his overly-greased hair with the palm of his hand. I have to suppress the urge to roll my eyes. He's pretty open about the fact he has a crush on me and has asked me on a date many times. My response? Not if he was the last guy on Earth.

Dan hurries away in the opposite direction as Terence struts over to me. He leans up against one of the lockers and gives me a nod. "I let your friend go. How about you do me a favor. You. Me. Friday night?"

I have to suppress a shutter. "How about this... You stop picking on kids and I won't kick the crap out of you."

"So, that's a no, then?"

~ ~ ~

I get out onto the track field a few minutes before 8:00AM. Charlotte comes out onto the field a minute or two after I do and I realize I'm happy to see her. Maybe she'll help take my mind off of my home invasion.

Luckily, Coach Dossley decides to go easy on us and not make us run today. So I spend the hour drawing with Charlotte. She always puts me in a good mood. It was a really nice way to start off the day.

The bell rings and we go our separate ways. Charlotte to English, me to Math. I grab a desk in the middle of the room. I look at my schedule, curious who my Math teacher is. "Mrs. Tangeman... Hmm..." I haven't had her before. Maybe she'll be better than the grumpy teacher we had last year.

More kids begin to file into the room and I look up just as Oliver slips into the room. Excitement flutters in my chest. *Yep, it'll be better than last year.* He slides into a desk one row forward and two seats to the right from me. He sets his backpack on the ground, unzips it. Pulls a Math book, two notebooks and a few pencils out. Zips it back up, hits the math book with his elbow and sends it to the ground. He quickly bends over and grabs it, then turns back and knocks the pencils off. They fall with a clatter to the floor and begin rolling away. He clumsily dives half out of his seat and grabs them before they roll away and even more clumsily tries to pull himself back into the seat. I can't help but smile at him. He kind of looks around to see if anyone noticed,

then sinks a little deeper into his seat. Then I realize I'm staring and turn away before anyone notices.

Neon struts into the room. He heads for one of the desks in the front row, as usual. He can't take over the world from the back of a class room. He has to be front and center. He turns on his heel at the last second and goes up to the chalk board. He writes "Mr. Kingsley's Class" on the board, and settles down in the teachers chair, crossing one leg over the other on the oak desk.

Wow. First day of school. The kids got guts.

The teacher walks in and closes the door behind her. And I know from the second I see her face that she's not going to be a fun teacher. She clearly doesn't want to be here and she doesn't look like the overly forgiving type. When she sees Neon, her mouth draws into a hard line. "*Out of my chair.*"

"This is *my* class room. Please have a seat and we'll get started. World Domination 101."

"You have five seconds to get out of my chair before I send you to detention," she says.

"Fine..." He pulls his feet off the table and slips into his front row seat.

The teacher clears her throat and steps behind her desk. "Hello, class. My name is Mrs. Tangeman. Please flip your books to page 32. We're going to be focusing on Algebra today."

"Algebra? Seriously? I learned that when I was ten," Neon says. "I thought we could work on some Calculous?"

"You may have learned everything you need to know about Algebra already, but other kids in the class probably haven't. So, we are working on this today."

"It's because you don't know Calculous, isn't it? See, I told you I should be teaching the class."

Mrs. Tangeman ignores him and flips open a binder. "First, I'm going to take attendance. Just to see who all is here."

"Are we *really* here? I mean, are any of us *really* here? Aren't we all just made up of atoms? What make you and me different from that swivel chair?" Neon says.

"Mr. Kingsley..."

"What *is* life? What is the definition of 'here'? What about the spaces between spaces?"

"Mr. *Kingsley*."

"And what is reality? Are we really here or are we in a Matrix of sorts? And if we *are* in a Matrix, what's the point of learning Algebra when there's a whole world out there at our fingertips just *waiting* to be conquered?"

"Mr. Kingsley!"

"What's to keep us from walking out that door or even walking through that wall, going out in the world, kicking ass and taking names? Then we really *wouldn't* be here would we?"

Suddenly, Mrs. Tangeman throws a pencil at him. It bounces off his shoulder and lands on his desk. Neon's mouth snaps shut and his eyes widen. Mrs. Tangeman looks like she's about to have steam come out her ears.

"MISTER Kingsley. Leave my classroom, RIGHT now."

He shrugs and casually puts his backpack back on. "Be good, class. I'll see you minions later." He struts out of the room with a slow, royal wave of his hand. I can't help but roll my eyes at him. *Who does that kid think he is?* Charlotte slips into the room at the last second and finds a seat in the back of the room. A class with Charlotte *and* Oliver? Maybe the class won't be so bad.

~ ~ ~

I have a nice lunch with Dan and Charlotte, talking about science stuff and thoughts on the field trip. Mr. Neil hasn't given us the dirty details yet, but it should prove to be an interesting experience.

After lunch I head for my locker to grab a few things for my next class. Some kid in a hoodie walks past and bumps into my shoulder hard enough for me to stumble to the side. "Hey, watch it!"

The guy turns around and to my execration, it's Cole. "Have we met before?" he says, obviously sarcastic.

I sigh and turn to him. "Did you hit me on purpose?"

"What if I did?"

"Whatever... Any idea how many classes we're in together?"

"How could I possibly know without seeing your schedule?" he says.

I sigh again and snatch the his schedule out of his hand. "It looks like we have three or four..." I pause. "Wait, you're in Mr. Neil's science class? You've *got* to be kidding me."

He shrugs. "Some girl dropped out. There was an open spot. Why not?"

"Of all the classes you could have joined, you joined that one. Since when do you care about science?"

"Since today when they said 'hey, there's an open spot. Wanna take it?'"

"Fantastic." I roll my eyes and push past him. *Yep. He's going to make life a living hell.*



I was awakened by a loud thunderstorm. Of course, it wasn't an actual thunderstorm, but my Sounds of Nature alarm clock. I don't know how people can stand those annoying beeping ones, it just puts me in a bad mood waking up to one of those. I actually find waking up to a thunderstorm sets a better mood for my day.

I rolled over and hit the switch that made the thunderstorm cease its thundering and grabbed my glasses from my nightstand. I sat up and put them on. I was blind no more! Of course, I wasn't *really* blind, just didn't have that 20/20 vision.

Today was going to be a great day! Why you ask? Well for one, I just got my license last week so I'm allowed to drive myself to school now (in grandma's old and beat up Saab but hey, transportation is transportation), and two, I get to see the hotness that is Mike.

Mrs. Gwen Anthony. Has a nice ring to it doesn't it? In fact it has a perfect ring to it.

Nothing could possibly ruin this day for me! It was going to be chilly out, but it was still bright and sunny and cheerful.

I got out of bed and proceeded the painful process that is coordinating an outfit. You see, I'm not the most fashionable girl ever, I like the simple things in life; those being jeans, a t-shirt, and a hoodie and tennis shoes. And yet, the process was still painful.

I dug through my closet until I found a long sleeved shirt, it was simple, just a solid color of magenta and threw on a pair of jeans. I had planned to leave the house earlier than usual to try to catch Emma before class. We were wayyy overdue for some girl talk. And by way overdue, I mean we hadn't talked in two days. That's a really long time for me to not go on and on and on about Mike Anthony to Emma.

I went to the kitchen and made myself a bagel. My grandma had offered to make me bacon, but I'm a vegetarian, I don't eat meat, so I declined.

"How can you not like bacon? Bacon is delicious!" teased Joey who was sitting across from me.

"Do you want me to tell you how they treated that pig in the slaughterhouse or do you wish to remain oblivious and ignorant so you can hold your bacon down?" I retorted.

"Oblivious and ignorant please, I don't want to have pity or sympathy for my food. I wish to eat guilt-free."

"Have it your way."

"Well I am going to try to get to school early, I'm going to try to catch Emma before class. Peace out girl scouts!" I said as I grabbed the keys to grandma's car and walked out the door.

I was about to start the car when I saw Neon bolt out his front door. He had missed the bus. I was about to get out and offer him a ride to school so he wouldn't have to walk when I saw him jump onto the back of the school bus.

I chuckled. Typical Neon. I sighed. I do worry for that boy. One of his stunts is going to get him into trouble or hurt or something. World domination is not healthy. He's as harmless as a kitten! I mean, a kitten could scratch you, maybe bite, but a kitten isn't going to do much damage. They're fluffy and cute. What Neon needs is a good therapist. Or to stop watching so many superhero movies.

I started the car, pulled out of the driveway and headed to school. I was a few cars behind the school bus, but I was close enough to see that when the bus stopped, Neon slammed right into the back of it. Gosh that must of hurt.

I parked the car in the parking lot and headed into the school. I made my way to the music room where Emma generally hangs out. Then I caught sight of Dan. I stopped dead in my tracks. I hid behind a stack of fold-up tables in the hallways, I was curious to see how he would react to her music and singing. He knocked over a music stand. I saw Emma call out after him, and I would have gone up to talk to her then, but a teacher had walked up to me.

"What are you doing behind those folded tables young lady! Get out of there before I write you a detention slip!"

I put my head down and walked wordlessly away. Just then the bell rang and I scurried off to my first class.

I found math class boring and found myself doodling yet another page in my notebook with hearts around "Mrs. Gwen Anthony". The bell rang and I was off to lunch. I picked up my

notebook and binder and quickly exited the classroom. And then I caught sit of *him*. My cheeks burned a bright red and I made a beeline for the cafeteria.

I reached the lunch room and was about to head over to my usual table with Emma when Dan stopped me.

"Gwen, look what fell out of your notebook. Right in front of Mike! Don't worry I grabbed it before he could see it."

I blushed and snatched it out of his hands. "Oh my gosh, thanks Dan! That would have been embarrassing."

"Why embarrassing? I think you set a new record! I've never seen Mrs. Gwen Anthony written so many times before."

I smiled. "Shut up!" and then I added, "By the way, do you want to sit with me, Emma and Riley for lunch?"

"No thanks, I'm gonna go talk to Layla and Charlotte. Given where we're going for our field trip tomorrow, and given our fields, it's bound to make for a lively discussion."

I rolled my eyes at him. I couldn't stand Layla. "Fine, but I don't know how you can stand Layla."

He shrugged "Everyone has their likes and dislikes. See you soon," and he took off.

I had lunch with Emma, where I obsessed over Mike for the entire time. Emma could barely get a word in. But when she finally did I choked on my sandwich.

"Do you think Dan likes me?" She asked.

"Wait what?"

"Everytime he tries to talk to me he blushes" she poked at her grapes.

"No, I don't think so, he blushes when he talks to me too, I think he's just painfully shy or something."

"Maybe you're right."

And we left it at that.

My last class of the day was Biology with Mr. Neil, my only class wit Emma and Dan. We were going on a field trip tomorrow. We were going to some research lab and get behind-the-scene access. Something about it didn't sit right with me, I had no idea why. I mean it was just a field trip, nothing could go wrong aside from somehow becoming genetic experiments and we gain superpowers and would superpowers be so bad? They would be pretty cool.

We had some ice breakers to get to know everyone. But I'm painfully shy, when I spoke it was barely about a whisper and my partner- I think he said is name was Olive or Oliver or something, was kind enough to not make me repeat myself. He tried to alleviate the awkwardness with some humor. He was pretty funny.

I passed in my permission slip for the trip.

When class ended I went straight home. I wanted to catch dad before he went to his second job, he had worked a double shift at the hospital- he was a janitor- so I didn't get a chance to see him this morning.

I sped home only to be disappointed. Dad had left for work already. Poor thing was working like a dog to support us, I guess that's how he keeps his mind off things as well. Since mom died he became almost like a workaholic. I don't think he wanted to think about mom not being around anymore. I mean, I don't either. Thank goodness for Emma, she helped me through it all. She's a good friend.

I went to my room and did my homework. I was almost done with the English homework when I got a text from Emma.

Emma: Mothership offers food. Do you accept?

Me: Duh. Need a good reason to not pay attention to my English homework. Plus your moms cooking rocks!

Emma: Sound good 😊

I left a note from Grandma and my Dad telling them I went to Emma's for dinner and I set off on the 10 minute walk to her house. I found Emma in her backyard on her old swing set with a bag of Starbursts. I sat down on the swing beside her and joined her.

Not too bad of a day?" I asked making some smalltalk.

"Not too atrocious."

We laughed and I grabbed Emma's phone to play my favorite playlist. I love Emma's taste in music, it's amazing.

Her mom came home shortly after and made the best potato pancakes ever. Emma tried to convince me to stay for a sleepover, but I had to go home.

I got home, made sure my grandma was ok and brother was in bed and put some leftover potato pancakes for dad in the fridge. Then I went to bed. *Today was a pretty good day.* I thought to myself before drifting off to sleep.



"This is going to be so lame."

The cab driver pulls up to the front of a suburban, two story house. Family CRV parked in the driveway. Kids bike left in the front lawn. Nice front porch. I roll my eyes and slump my head against the seat. The cheesiness of the cookie-cutter family vibe this place gives off make me want to throw up. Thank goodness Mom sent me here *after* Christmas or they'd probably give me a matching sweater and make me be in their Christmas card photo. Ugh... This is the *last* place I want to be.

The driver waves to me and I pull my headphones off. "Okay, kid. We're here. That'll be \$80. Did you're mom give you money or are the people your staying with paying?"

"I don't need my mom to pay my cab fare. I'm seventeen. I have money of my own." I give him a wad of four twenties and push the door open. He pops the trunk and I pull my duffle and backpack out, slinging them over my shoulder. I walk up to the front door as the cab drives away and I rap on the door with my fist.

After a moment, the door opens and Aunt Jen is on the other side. "Cole! It's so nice to see you again! Come on in."

I readjust the strap of my backpack and come inside. I look around the inside, taking it in. Living room to the left where a boy watches cartoons. A couple other doors in the back of the living room. Bathroom and den maybe? Stairs to the second floor directly in front of me. Kitchen and kitchen table to the right where a teenage girl-who looks vaguely familiar-sits eating breakfast. When she sees me, she stands up from the table.

"Hey... Cole, right?" she says.

"Last time I checked," I reply.

Aunt Jen closes the door and I put my bags down on the ground. "It's so nice to see you again," she says, giving me a big hug. I don't return it.

She pulls away. "We're clearing out a room for you upstairs next to Layla's room. It should be ready for you by the end of the day. Make yourself at home and if you need anything at all, don't hesitate to ask. We're thrilled to have you."

"I think the last time we saw each other was at that wedding, right?" Layla says, clearly trying to make conversation.

"Right... Didn't someone spill wine all over your dress?"

Her face turns slightly pink. "Something like that. Didn't you get caught stealing from the church donation box?"

"*Layla...*" Aunt Jen snaps.

She shrugs. "What?" Aunt Jen gives her a hard stare until she sighs. "I'm glad we were able to help you out. Maybe we'll get some time to hang out and get to know each other better." The words are so forced they almost seem painful for her to get out.

"Yeah, I bet you'd like that..."

She blows a forced breath out her nose and Aunt Jen cuts in. "Hey, you know... A new semester at Layla's school starts today. We should probably head down there so we can get you enrolled. How does that sound?"

"Fantastic."

"Great! Well, there's a bathroom back there if you'd like to freshen up after your long trip. Then we can jump in the CRV and head down there. Layla, since I'm going down there anyway, why not ride with us?" she says.

"I... actually need to get going. I should get there early for track. You know, don't want to be late on my first day back. I'll just ride my bike like I always do." She grabs her backpack and heads for the front door. She takes a glance at me, probably feeling like she should say something else, but she just purses her lips and leaves. At least the feelings mutual.

+ + +

By the time they get me my schedule and let me out of the wardens office, the day is half over. I throw the notebooks and binders Aunt Jen got me into my new locker and head for the cafeteria. Apparently lunch is going on and I was told to head there to "get acquainted" with my fellow classmates. I could hardly care less. I casually walk past the buffet of food and slip a muffin into my pocket without anyone noticing. I grab an empty table towards the back of the room, slip my earbuds in and keep to myself. New school, new kids, yet it's no different than my old school. Every school is the same, no matter where your mom ships you off to or how many schools you drop in and out of.

The day is relatively uneventful as it always is. Last period, I head into the science class Layla got all worked up about me being in. About half of the seats are already filled and other kids continue to casually file in behind me. The teacher turns to me and looks pleasantly surprised. "Hello! I don't remember you being in this class. Are you new?"

"Yeah, I enrolled this morning. Apparently there was an opening in this class?"

"Yes, we had someone drop out just before the semester started. Welcome! I'm Mr. Neil," he says, then scratches his short, black beard. "We have a field trip scheduled for tomorrow, which I'm sure you haven't heard much about but don't worry, I'll be explaining it in great detail today. Here, take a permission slip. If you'd like to join us, just bring that in tomorrow morning, signed, and we'll get you a spot on the bus."

I take the slip. "Thanks."

"Let's see..." Mr. Neil looks around the classroom. "Why don't you take a seat next to Emma? She's in the grey sweater."

I nod and make my way over to her. I slip into the seat and plop my backpack down next to me. The girl looks over at me, uncomfortable, then goes back to reading her book. I watch the kids who come into class. Some of them give me curious looks but most don't notice my presence. Mr. Neil assigns them all seats. Layla comes in, notices me but doesn't say anything, then goes to her assigned seat.

"Welcome back, everyone! It's wonderful to see you again. Or, at least most of you. We have a new student with us today. Why don't you introduce yourself?"

I hesitate, then stand up and stuff my hands in my pockets. "Hey, I'm Cole. I just moved here from Boston. I'm Layla's cousin. And... there was an open spot in this class. So...I took it..."

"Thank you Cole. You can sit down now." Mr. Neil adjusts his glasses. "Let's start off the class with a few ice breakers. We're all friends here, right? Well, we will be by the end of the year with these icebreakers. Let's start off simple. Turn to your partner and introduce yourself."

I turn to the girl next to me. "Cole."

"My name's Emma," she says shyly.

I nod in recognition. Murmurs of other students continue for a few moments before the room becomes silent again.

"Great! Now, tell your partner three things about yourself," Mr. Neil says.

I sigh. These icebreakers are so lame. Why should I have to tell anyone anything about myself?

I face Emma. "Let's see... I like playing baseball. I'd like to take a cross-country trip with my friends... And I play the electric guitar."

Her face lights up at this. "You play the guitar?"

"Yeah... You?"

"Piano! Mostly I mean... I dabble in other things..." She gives me an embarrassed smile.

"So, that's one."

"One? One what?"

"One thing about yourself."

"Oh! Right... I really like to read and... I love Twenty One Pilots."

"Are they aware that you love them all or do you keep it a secret?"

"What?" She looks at me, deeply confused. Then her eyes widen. "Oh! The band! I love the band. I'm not in love with twenty one pilots, that would just be... wrong. I mean, not *wrong*... people can love whoever they want to love but..."

"Hey!" I throw my hands up. "I'm not here to judge."

She sighs. "I like the *band* Twenty One Pilots. I'll just leave it at that."

I can't help but smirk at her. Does she usually ramble this much?

+ + +

"Okay! Before I lose track of the time, I want to be sure and talk about tomorrow's field trip! The laboratory we will be visiting is very top secret. It's called the Miles Eximius Laboratory, named after its creator, and they don't normally allow field trips to do tours because the stuff they're working on in there is revolutionary and they generally don't want kids running around and messing with their projects. But! I just so happen to be close friends with one of the head scientists who work there and they agreed to let *you* guys see what they're up to. Pretty cool, huh? We'll call the lab M.E.L. for short." He shuffles through some papers in his stack. "We'll all meet up at the front of the school at eight o'clock sharp tomorrow morning. Make sure to have your signed permission slips with you. They'd prefer if you didn't bring cameras in there as there is some... sensitive stuff they're working on, but I encourage you to bring a notebook and a pen, because there is going to be a lot of interesting stuff to write down. This is definitely not a field trip you want to miss."

He answers a few questions, then the bell rings.

"Ah, see. I knew we were getting close. Have a good rest of your day and I'll see you all in the morning! Get a good nights sleep. *You're going to need it.*"



Oliver sat on his bed, early morning darkness flooding the world outside and darkening his room. As he stared at his alarm clock, the minutes ticked by in neon green. 5:45 AM. His mind was racing through all sorts of scenarios, as quickly as it could, which wasn't as quick at this hour as it had been a few hours before. Snailing, Oliver decided, was what his mind was doing. His mind was *snailing* through all sorts of scenarios for the coming day.

Normally he'd stay up reading or pondering things or even attempting to write a poem, but he was too nervous today. It was the first day of school, and that always got him so anxious that he wouldn't even bother sleeping. Yes, it drained him. Yes, he had to deal with the first day of school with a sleepless night on his record. Yes, he'd quite like to sleep, but it just wasn't possible with his mind racing – or snailing now – considering all the ways his day could go horribly, or awkwardly, or embarrassingly.

Oliver wasn't quite sure why he cared so much. Honestly, the moment the sun began to rise, he'd forget all about being so nervous and be his normal self. Granted, his normal self was far from extroverted, but he wasn't cripplingly shy.

Nonetheless, he remained up. Not much point in trying to sleep now...

Oliver jolted up and looked around wildly. Checking his now blaring clock, he found that it was 7:31. He'd dozed off again.

“Dammit!” he exclaimed, leaping from bed and stumbling about the room. Grabbing a random shirt from the closet and a pair of jeans from the floor, he quickly got dressed. He snatched up a pair of socks – mismatched because he didn't have time to dig around for a matching pair – and his sneakers, then hurried out of his room, bounded down the stairs, and darted into the kitchen. There wasn't time for anything much of breakfast, but he was able to grab a banana before his watch began beeping, letting him know that he'd wasted five minutes struggling to pull his shoe on.

“Daaammit!” he breathed, fumbling with the watch and wasting even more time trying to find the 'SHUT UP' button. His search proved futile for the moment, as it was just sucking up more valuable time. Giving up on the watch, he ran out the front door, banana clenched in his teeth.

He shouted a muffled farewell to his grandfather and sister and tossed a prayer to the wind that neither of the dogs had gotten out along with him.

Oliver liked running, usually. Running was good. But when there's a banana in your mouth, a beeping watch on your wrist, and a backpack thumping against your spine, running isn't all that fun. Two blocks down, he realized that he'd forgotten his binder on his desk.

“Good god, seriously?” he exasperated. There wasn't *time*. He kept on his way, cursing time for playing all of its cards against him, today of all days.

* * *

He'd made it to school in one piece, so long as a dozen lungfuls of air doesn't count as a piece of you. Everything was pretty much a blur for a while, thanks to that. He faintly recalled seeing a kid with what looked like jelly on his face, then Emma and her friend somewhere, and just before that there was something that sounded like music.

Oliver shrugged and wandered about, trying to locate a class that he belonged to. After some time, Oliver found himself en route to Spanish. He hoped. Oliver didn't really like directions. He'd also never liked Spanish all that much. The grammar rules always confused him and he couldn't get the hang of them. Luckily things were much clearer now, at least.

As he looked around for Spanish class, he spotted Charlotte.

"Charlotte! How's it going?" he called with a grin. She said something about an essay, to which Oliver nodded, still smiling. He was wrong; things weren't much clearer. He must've lost a ton of brain cells or something from that run. Nonetheless, he kept smiling as he tried to decipher Charlotte's words.

"You?" she asked. Not sure of what she said, Oliver tried to think of a response. He couldn't find one that made sense and just settled with--

"Eww." The rest of his words just spilled out, but he wasn't sure what he was saying. All he could do was hope he sounded coherent and wait for the conversation to pass. Eventually tangerines were brought up for some reason and his head finally decided to get in the game. He looked down at his schedule. *Mrs. Tangeman*? he thought.

"Ah, Tangeman. Mrs. Tangeman."

"Great," Charlotte groaned. "I have her too. Math is terrible enough without a terrible teacher." Oliver grinned again, finally a sincere grin. Giving Charlotte a friendly slap on the back, he replied.

"We'll be fine. Just get on her good side and avoid flying pencils."

"Yeah," Charlotte laughed. "See you later!"

With that, she walked off, heading for... Spanish, Oliver realized.

Dammit, I was going the wrong way. He kicked himself mentally and spun around, following after Charlotte.

* * *

After Spanish and math and who knows what else, Oliver ended up in Mr. Neil's biology class. He was glad that asking how someone got somewhere wasn't a usual occurrence, as he wasn't quite sure how he'd gotten there himself. Finding an empty seat and slumping into it, he set his backpack on the ground beside it. The pack fell over with a soft rustling sound. Oliver set it back up again. It toppled. Oliver glared and readjusted it. The bag insisted on falling again.

"Fine, stay there," he muttered, then looked around quickly, hoping no one had overheard.

Suddenly, Mr. Neil spoke up and began talking about a field trip. Oliver tried to pay attention, but that almost-all-nighter had really been a bad idea, and the teacher's words barely made sense to him.

He caught something about a research lab and permission slips. Then his head hit the desk and he started snoring.



Ryker was trying his best to make it through the first day back. School was the last place he wanted to be. The subjects weren't half bad, and he wasn't half bad at them either. It was the other students that got to him. Here he was trying to get to class without being recognized and half the school stopped to say hi. (He'd hoped they would've all forgotten him over break. No such luck.) So he returned their greeting excitedly. The second he turned from them, his lips returned to their tightly locked position.

Lunch was less than eventful. He sat with the same crew, but didn't pay much attention. His French book was much more interesting. Even after taking two years of the language in school and studying with his tutor for the same amount of time, there were things he didn't understand; grammar being among them.

When the bell rang finally, Ryker gathered his books and headed off to Biology. This year Mr. Neil would be discussing the internal workings of organisms and plants, exploring the complex being that the Earth was. But Ryker was most looking forward to the field trip the next day. Mr. Neil's field trips were the best. No competition.

"Hey, Ry," Mr. Neil called when Ryker walked into the room. "You know, we're going to be dissecting in a few weeks. Figured you might be interested."

For the first time that day, Ryker broke out in a genuine smile. "Sweet. Can't wait." He headed over to the desks to find his name. The moment he did, he slid into the seat and pulled out his textbook. The first thing he did was take to scanning through the chapters. There was a lot to look forward to.

Just when he was starting Chapter 10, Mr. Neil called for class to start. Grudgingly, Ryker slid the book under his chair. There would be plenty of time after school to look ahead. As long as Gwen stayed out of trouble. With mix gendered twins it was usually the boy egging on the girl. It was the opposite in Ryker's house. Gwen was the troublemaker.

"Right, field trip tomorrow." Mr. Neil clapped his hands together. "Everyone get a permission slip? If you need one see me. We're in for a real treat this year. We'll be heading to a laboratory that specializes in many aspects of biology including..."

A snore pierced through Mr. Neil's voice. Ryker snapped his head up and looked around. To his left, Oliver was collapsed in his chair, his head laying on the desk. Ryker rolled his eyes as his friends let out another snore.

He debated leaving him like that, just to get a good laugh, but he decided against it. It would be too much. So he reached out and poked Oliver's arm.

"Ow! Hey, I'm up, okay? Awake." Oliver's words were slurred together from the rude awakening.

"Dude. Sleeping on the first day back? Not cool."

"Yeah, whatever," Oliver responded, leaning his head back on the wooden table. "Didn't sleep much last night. Now are you gonna pay attention or what? I need someone to rely on to take good notes." Ryker rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to Mr. Niel.

Class was over before he knew it. Everyone dashed out of the room and were in the hallway before Ryker even had the time to scoop up his books. Just as he was about to leave, he heard another snore and turned to see Oliver fast asleep. Again.

"Think we should wake him?" Mr. Neil asked. Ryker jumped as he realized the teacher had come to stand beside him. "Seems a shame really. He's so peaceful."

A mischievous grin found its way onto his lips. "Let him be. He'll wake up eventually." Mr. Neil gave a short chuckle before sending Ryker on his way.

* * *

Just as Ryker was heading out of the school, Riley caught up with him. "Good first day?"

Ryker shrugged. "You could say that. Wasn't much to be excited about." *Absolutely nothing, actually.* The only thing worth remembering about the day was Mr. Neil's class. He was by far Ryker's favorite teacher. And not just because of his out of the ordinary field trips.

Field trip. He reached behind him to dig around in his backpack. When he felt the loose piece of paper he let out a sigh of relief. For a moment he thought he had left it in his locker. If it wasn't signed by the morning he wouldn't be able to go.

He tried to imagine getting left behind. His other classmates would be excitedly clambering onto a bus while Mr. Neil shook his finger in Ryker's face. "I told you no more

second chances. Report to the guidance counselor's office when it comes time for my class."

Then his classmates would stare out the window at him, most likely thinking about all the ways he was a flake.

"How about that field trip though?" The smile on Riley's face couldn't possibly get any bigger. Then it did. "Should be fun."

"Uh, yeah," Ryker replied. "Hey, it could be cool. What if we got superpowers from a lab accident or something? Like Spiderman."

Riley giggled and throwed in her plan to get superpowers. Before long they were in hysterics. It really wasn't that funny, but something about it struck him as such. He couldn't let it go.

It only took a few minutes for Riley's ride to appear. Ryker on the other hand, dropped his backpack to the ground and plopped onto the white bench to look out for his mom. She had to take care of all those kids and all the normal things moms did. His dad was home when he could, but he mostly had to work.

As Ryker waited, his mind wandered back to the field trip the next day. He couldn't wait to see what crazy things scientists dreamed up in their labs.



The alarm clock blares in my ear and my morning routine starts all over again. I slap my hand over the snooze button and I burry my face in my pillow with a groan. In an amount of time I *swear* is way shorter than the five minutes it's supposed to snooze for, it comes to life again and beeps relentlessly in my ear. I groan and am tempted once again to throw it against the wall, but I restrain myself, roll over, and turn the alarm off. My room goes silent.

I sigh agitatedly and flop the covers over, exposing myself to the chilly air of my room. Then when my level of consciousness rises above 10%, I remember the field trip... and my new house guest. I get dressed quickly, grab some coffee in a travel mug, throw my bag over my shoulder and grab my permission slip. I'm coasting out of the driveway on my bike before Cole even wakes up. *Success.*

When I ride into the school parking lot, I see the bus instantly. It's smaller than a normal school bus. There's more like sixteen seats and a back bench instead of 44 seats and a back bench. I chain up my bike and head towards Mr. Neil, who stands in front of the buses doors. "Layla! Nice to see you. Do you have your permission slip?"

I dig around my bag and pull it out, slightly dented. "Here it is."

He takes it from me and slips it into a binder. "Take a seat."

I nod and head for the bus. I stop and look over my shoulder. "There wasn't anything else I was supposed to bring, right?"

Mr. Neil ponders my words for a moment. "Just a very open mind."

I climb into the bus. Neon sits towards the back, drawing some kind of chart on the window with a dry erase marker that I'm pretty sure involves calculus, time codes and something in latin.

Closer to me, on the other side of the bus is Gwen. She sees me, narrows her eyes slightly, and goes back to the book she had been looking at before. I readjust the strap on my shoulder and walk past her. *What's her problem?*

I slide into the seat on the opposite side from Neon. "Of course! I forgot to factor in the gravitational pull!" he says to himself. I shake my head and slip my earbuds in.

Other kids slowly file in. Dan grabs a seat at the back after gives me a friendly nod. Michael sits in the very front. Emma and Riley comes out of the school together and grab a seat together right behind Gwen so the three of them can chat. I stop paying attention after that start drawing in my sketchbook. A few more people file in before I feel someone sit down in the seat next to me. I look up to see that it's Ryker. "Hey, Ryker, right?"

"Yeah... I'm sorry. I don't remember what your name is," he says.

Somehow that stings a little, but I push it aside. Why *should* he remember me? it's not like I've even spoken to him much. I just happen to be good at remembering names. "Layla."

We chat for a couple minutes before Ryker leans over and looks at my drawings. "Hey, those are pretty good! Where did you learn to draw like that?" he asks.

I'm about to answer when I notice Charlotte hurries onto the bus and right behind her, Cole comes on. He walks up to us and gives us a nod. He looks at me. "Layla." Looks at Ryker. "Scrawny Kid."

"What are you doing here? There's no way my mom signed your permission slip."

"And yet she did," he says.

"Is she crazy? Letting you into a top secret lab with *your* record?"

"Relax. I told her I'd behave."

Mr. Neil steps onto the bus and the doors close behind us. "Okay! That's everyone. Please take your seats." He slips into a seat at the front and Cole sits down across from us, next to Neon. The breaks squeal and we start rolling backward.

~ ~ ~ ~

After driving for an hour, we file out of the small bus and out onto the dusty ground outside. We're practically in the middle of nowhere. "Okay! I've assigned you all partners," Mr. Neil says. "So, when I call your names, find your partner. I'll be going alphabetically by last name." He clears his throat and looks down at his clipboard. "Anthony with Woods. Cole with West. Gray with Kingsley. Mauze with Penn. Sanders and Tanner with Torson."

As I go to find Mike, I decide I'm fine with my pairing. Of course, I would have preferred Charlotte or Dan or maybe Ryker, but I definitely prefer Mike as a partner over the majority of the class.

I shove my hands in the pockets of my jacket as I walk up to him. "Hey. Looks like we're partners."

"Seems so."

We file through the front doors of a building made mostly of silver metal and big windows. Very modern and professional looking. I was expecting some boring brick building... but this place must get quite a bit of funding.

"Welcome to M.E.L.," a man in a lab coat says. "I'm the head scientist here and you can call me Liam. Before we get you started on the tour, I'd like to lay down a few ground rules. One, stay with your group. Don't wander off. We have a lot of things going on here and some are more dangerous than others. *Your safety is very important to us.* Two, don't touch anything without asking. Again, some things might not be safe to touch without gloves on, or at all. For your safety, ask us before you touch. Three, we are putting a lot of trust in you by letting you be here today. We'd like you to return the trust and know that anything we ask you to do is for your own safety or is completely safe. And the first thing I'm going to ask you to do is place your phones and ipods and any other electronics into this box." He holds out a small cardboard box. "The electronics could mess with some of our equipment. You will get them back at the end of the tour. Any questions?"

I look around and exchange glances with the others. No one says anything as we all reach into our pockets and reluctantly drop our phones in the box.

"Okay, one last thing I'd like to add to that," Mr. Neil says, "is that you should pull out your notebooks and take lots of notes. There will be a test on this at school tomorrow."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

We're brought through multiple different rooms and laboratories. They give us lab coats and goggles as well as 'visitor' name tags. Dozens of scientists are at work. Some are in lab coats while others are in hazmat suits. The hazmat guys we only get to see through the windows, because it's not 'safe' for us to be in there. In one room, they're working on a natural way to make plants grow faster. There's a whole greenhouse full of every kind of plant you could imagine... as well as some they've made up. The cancer research is fascinating. They're working on stem cell research and alternative methods to cure it that isn't as harsh on the body as current methods. They're even working on trying to find a cure for a handful of different illnesses. In the electronics lab, they tell us that hover boards and robots may not be too far off as they show us the early prototypes they're working on. And the thing that blows me away the most is their animal DNA research. Rabbit ferrets = Fabbits. Long bodies. Long ears. Lizard turtles = Lurtles. Lizards with small shells on their backs. And there are even some crazier mixes that I can't even wrap my head around. They tell us they have over two thousand different animal DNA samples in their lab that they can use for a multitude of different experiments. DNA ranging from mice to birds to lions.

They let us break for lunch, then they take us into the last section. The head scientist, Liam, leads us to a door he uses a keycard to get into. "This is the state of the art, most top secret part of our lab. Everything in here is under wraps from the public and almost everything will be for at least another couple years. Everything you see in here is highly confidential."

His seriousness is a little startling to me, but I suppose they want to make sure we understand the seriousness of their work... so I guess it makes sense.

In here they show us interactive hologram prototypes, the blueprints for nanobots that can run through your bloodstream and work to constantly keep you healthy and fight off viruses quicker. And finally, he brings us into a room with a chair that resembles a dentist's chair, only it has something that comes down over the head and wires with nodes on the end hang down from various spots on the chair.

"This is one of the things we are closest to releasing. This is a working prototype of the M.I.C. - Medical Information Chair. Basically, the patient will sit in the chair and the chair will do a full physical scan of your body. There are three different levels the chair can be set on. Level one will do a basic checkup of your body. Blood pressure. Heart beat. Temperature... the works. In five years, basic medical checkups won't exist. The patient can simply go to a facility that has a M.I.C. and give *themselves* a checkup. Ten minutes in the chair and they'll know exactly what they need to know." He adjusts his glasses. "Levels two and three go deeper, taking blood samples, doing brain scans, X-rays and 25 other tests. Essentially, after a patient goes through level three, the doctors shouldn't have *any* doubt of what is going on with their patient and can more effectively treat them, thus allowing people to be healthier, happier, and less stressed about their health. Any questions?"

"How long until you think this will be open to the public?" Riley asks.

He ponders her question. "We hope to get the first one out in no more than six months. Now, like I said. This is a *working* prototype. We're just waiting for it to be accepted by the American Medical Foundation as an official medical testing system and we're good to go. It's

perfectly safe to use. Which is why, all of you will get to try it out today! Just level 1. No need to do anything more than that... just so you can see how the chair works. Ten minutes each. All you have to do is sit there and we'll give you your results at the end of the field trip. Come with me."

He leads us back out of the small room and opens his arm up to the hallway lined with doors. "We have fourteen of these chairs, all in their own rooms. Luckily, there's only twelve of you, so you don't have to sit around and wait for everyone to get their turn. So, go ahead and set your stuff down out here, then grab a room and someone will be in to get you started!"

I set my bag down on the sofa in the middle of the hall and wander into one of the rooms, finding myself feeling uneasy. I know it's nothing but a check up basically, but somehow it feels weird getting in a chair in a top secret laboratory. At the same time, it feels kind of cool to be one of the first people to use a machine that could essentially change the medical field forever.

A moment later, a woman in a lab coat comes into my room and closes the door behind her. She looks at her clipboard. "Layla?"

"That's me."

She smiles, walks over to me and sticks out her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you! You can call me Alissa. You're lucky to be here today. Neil practically had to beg our head scientist to let you guys in. Anyway, lets get you started. Lay back and try to relax."

I lean back and Alissa lowers something down over my head, coming half way down to my nose. It's like a grey cage, so I can still see through the square holes. I tilt my head at her. "I thought we were only doing level one?"

She smiles. "We are. It won't actually do the brain scan. It just has to come down for the chair to work properly. You're perfectly safe," she assures me as she presses a couple nodes to

my arms and puts a finger clamp on my finger. Then she goes over to a computer and starts typing into it. The chair beeps a couple times and a light on a track starts going back and forth over my body like a printer.

"Okay, you're good to go. It's pretty common for people to fall asleep while in the chair, so don't worry about if you doze off. I'll wake you up when it's complete."

And just as she says that, a wave of tiredness washes over me. Not just sleepiness... I feel like I was drugged. I'm about to ask her if she did something, but I'm out before the words can make it past my lips.

When I wake back up, I feel like I'm coming out of a coma. My vision is blurry at first, but when it starts to clear, the woman comes back into view. "Layla..." she says, but it sounds like it's echoing from another room. "Layla..." she says again. Her voice is closer this time. Then everything snaps back into focus. "Layla, it's over. You can get up now."

I rub my face and sit up. The room sways and I grab onto the side of the chair to stabilize myself. "I... don't normally sleep that deeply."

"It's perfectly normal. It's a side effect of the waves the chair gives off. The dizziness you're experiencing is also perfectly normal. It should subside in just a minute." She walks over to the computer and prints out a paper. "Well, it looks like your vitals are outstanding. Good blood pressure. Strong heartbeat. 98.6 temperature. Nothing you need to worry about."

The room levels back out. "Thank you." I stand up and she hands me the paper. Other than feeling like I took nighttime cold medicine, I feel completely fine. I open the door and walk back out into the hall to grab my stuff. Everyone else is grabbing their stuff too.

"Okay, that's the end of the field trip! Pretty cool, huh?" Liam says. "It was a pleasure to have you kids here. I hope you enjoyed your tour."

"Time to head back to the bus. Grab all of your belongings and follow me!" Mr. Neil says. We all file after him, who leads us through a side door and down a hall where the outer wall is made entirely of glass. We go through another door at the end with leads us back into the main lobby. Mr. Neil lets us take all of our phones and electronics back, then we make our way back into the bus which will take us back to school. I can't help but feel confused. *What just happened?* I'm not sure if I just can't wrap my head around all the new technologies I saw today... or if something else went down today. *Something just doesn't feel right.*



I woke to the sound of my older sister making slurping sounds in my ear. I pulled the pillow over my face.

"Janey, go. Away. I'm tired."

"Maybe you wouldn't be if you didn't stay up all night writing. Seriously. Mom should confiscate your flashlight."

I grumbled incoherently and tried to disentangle myself from my blanket, which had somehow become wrapped around my leg. The struggle with my bedding ended with me falling out of the bed and the blanket emerging victorious.

The fall seemed to jog my memory, though, because that was when I remembered the field trip.

"Ahh! What time is it?!" I hissed in a loud whisper. I flailed around until I had gotten the tretchorous blanket off of me, and jumped up, flinging clothing from my drawer in search of a suitable T-shirt.

"Seven."

Oh, good. I still had an hour to get ready. I found the shirt I was looking for, pulled out a worn pair of boot cut jeans.

I paused and looked at Janey.

"Um.. D'you mind?"

Janey smirked. "Mind what?"

"Get outta my room."

Janey shrugged and exited stage right.

In no time I had dressed, breakfasted, and brushed with a half an hour to spare.

I flopped down on the couch, and drew my journal from my backpack. It was a simple composition book that had used to be yellow, once upon a time, but it was by far one of my most prized possessions. A fantasy adventure I had been working on for nearly two years. It was the second journal I had used to weave the tale, and it was just as beat up as it's predecessor. The cover was faded and falling apart, and like the spine, had been fixed to the pages with several layers of duct tape. The pages were yellowed and well worn from all the times I had thumbed through the book. I opened the journal to my current page, pausing to read through my favorite parts, and put pencil to paper.

I had no idea how long I had been immersed in my creation, but I was jerked out of the creative trance by a scratching, rustling sound from the direction of the rabbit hutch, indicating that my other prized possession had just woken up.

I closed the journal gently, and made my way over to the hutch.

"Hey baby girl!" I crooned. At the sound of my voice, Elanor, my rabbit whom I was convinced was more fluff than she was rodent, looked around, ears pricked and nose twitching. I opened the top of the hutch and picked her up, holding her close as I returned to the couch. I crooned to her as I bushed her, then went into the fridge and brought her an apple slice.

It was at that moment Janey entered for her second act.

"Riley, quit snuggling your girlfriend and come on. You're gonna make me late."

"Don't tell me *you're* driving."

"Yup. Mom's feeling under the weather again, so you're stuck with me." I bit my lip. My mom had been dealing with bouts of nausea and fatigue since I was twelve. the doctors didn't know what was wrong, but it was getting worse. These days Mom spent more time in bed than she did anywhere else.

"Oh and I bet I have to deal with your dopey boyfriend too."

Janey made a face at me.

I inserted rabbit into hutch, and we were off.

.....

The bus wasn't hard to miss, seeing as it was right next to the large group of high schoolers. I climbed out of the car, and made my way over to the rest of the class. The whole drive I had to deal with the idiot Cameron drooling over my stupid sister.

needless to say I was in a bad mood.

Emma spotted my coming down the sidewalk, and waved me over timidly.

I couldn't help it. I grinned. No matter how much Cameron annoyed me, or how grumpy and worried I was, Em always brought me out of my doldrums. She didn't even need to do anything besides just...be there.

I was so happy to have a friend like that.

I picked up my pace and jogged over to join Em.

"Hey Emmy!"

Emma didn't waste time on chatting this time around.

"Riley, are you alright? You looked kind of mad..."

Emma didn't usually inquire about feelings, but she must've been feeling braver today. I shrugged.

"I'm fine, just had to deal with the Duche-bag on the ride here."

"Cameron again?"

"yeah."

I thought she might ask me about why my sister was driving me, but she didn't. Secretly I was relieved. I didn't feel like telling anyone about my Mom's declining health or how much it worried me.

I passed Mr. Neil, handing him my permission slip and sitting down with Emma. In no time I was laughing again, my troubles pushed to the back of my mind.

for the time being.

.....

Mr Neil stood in front of the class, and started assigning partners.

Gwen got Oliver. Lucky stiff.

Emma was with Dan. I looked to the back of the bus, and after meeting his eye wiggled my eyebrows at him. I had a sneaking suspicion that he had a crush on her.

Ry was paired with Charlotte, and I was left with...Cole.

Not exactly sure how to feel about that.

He was a good deal taller than me, (It wasn't a huge deal, most people were.) And he didn't look much like the friendly type, but I tried making conversation anyway.

"Hey there! You're the new kid. Cole, right?"

"Yep."

"I'm Riley. Born to write, live to rock."

Cole smiled a little at that but didn't say anything.

It was wired. Whenever I was forced to hang out with someone, I had a harder time connecting with them. I'd try again once I found out a little more about him.

Maybe I could ask Layla.

A man in a labcoat starts talking, going over rules and such, but I don't pay attention. My thoughts wander, and finally settle on my mom. She was always home, taking care of the babies who weren't old enough to go to school, and she had homeschooled me in middle school when I wasn't accepted into the Arts Magnet School I had auditioned for. I loved both my parents a lot, but my dad had his job, and mom was just around more. I loved her so much.

I didn't try imagining what it would be like without her. I wouldn't have been able to do it, and besides, It wasn't going to happen. Never.

"Riley?" Mr Neil's voice broke through my reverie. "Do you have any electronics on you?"

I shook my head, tightening my grip on my journal.

.....

I had no trouble paying attention to the tour. It was interesting. Especially the medical research. I paid the most attention to that after I heard the word *Syncope*

I recognized the name of the defect from my cardiologist.

The animal hybrid's kinda creeped me out, but when I saw a Lizard/Turtle combo, I couldn't resist.

I sidled up to Emma, and pointed to the creature. "Look, Em, shell!" I whispered.

"You two should start a club!"

Emma gave me a look, but I could see the humor glinting in her eyes.

"Stop that!"

.....

It was during lunch break that I decided to approach Layla about her cousin. I set my backpack down and laid my journal inside it.

"Hey, Layla?"

Layla looked around at me.

"I was wondering if you could tell me anything about Cole."

Layla gave me a wired look. "He hasn't been living with me long, I don't really know much about him. I'll warn you though he hasn't got the cleanest record. He's..." Layla trailed off, staring at something over my shoulder.

"He's digging through your backpack."

I whirled around just in time to see him pull out a journal.

My journal.

The mother tigress in me awoke at the scene and I marched over and snatched it from his hands, whacking him over the head with it for good measure.

"Ow! Hey!" He objected.

I leaned down until we were nearly nose to nose.

"Never. Ever. Touch. My. Journal."

.....

"This is one of the things we are closest to releasing. This is a working prototype of the M.I.C. - Medical Information Chair."

The head scientist explained how it worked. The chair would give you a checkup, as well as other more in-depth tests that would help diagnose a patient, and the best way to treat them.

"Any questions?"

My hand shot up.

"How long until you think this will be open to the public?"

I felt eyes on me and glanced over my shoulder. Emma and Ryker were both looking at me sympathetically. They probably thought I was asking the question because of my condition, and in part I was, but...

More important than my own issues was my Mom.

This chair...it could save her life.

Not that there was anything *seriously* wrong with her.

"We hope to get the first one out in no more than six months." The head scientist said after some thought.

.....

I never expected we would actually get to try out the equipment. When the scientist said we'd get to take the chair for a spin, I had been pretty stoked.

But now that I was strapped into it, I was having second thoughts.

I felt like some kind of lab rat.

The chair began beeping, and a few moments later, I felt like I had drank a whole bottle of Nyquil.

I was out in ten seconds flat.

When my doctor woke me up again, I still felt drunk.

When my vision was clear enough that everything didn't look like a huge blob of color, I noticed how concerned the doctor looked.

"Lemme guess. Everything fine except..."

The scientist hesitated before finishing my statement. "...Your heart. It seems you have--"

"Heart defect that causes the subject to lose consciousness after long periods of exertion. I know."

I pushed myself off the chair, pausing to trip unceremoniously over the sofa, and re-joined the rest of the group.

I filed onto the bus along with the rest of the class.

I hadn't noticed Cole had been missing until I saw him again on the bus. What had he been doing?

I still felt slightly dizzy, and I rested my forehead on the cool glass of the window. I didn't feel like sleeping, I just sat there thinking.

In a story, this sort of thing is what always starts the trouble. Sure the trouble is pretty awesome, but it's still kind of inconvenient for the hero.

'Shut up, brain, you're being ridiculous.'

I chastised myself. There was no way that chair was going to cause a problem.

I wouldn't

It *couldn't*



That morning I managed to wake up an hour earlier. Field trips stress me out, and sleep isn't an option. By the time I got downstairs my mom was already on her third cup of coffee, and halfway into her next chapter. Super mom by day, glorious writer by night. She published a book before I was born. It was amazing and she sold a lot of copies, but at this point it's been her one hit wonder. She's been trying to redeem herself ever since. You would be surprised how many times Riley comes over just to talk to my mom. It's kind of funny sometimes.

"Mom, you do realize that there is a thing called a bed right? It's upstairs. It's just a flight of stairs away." She turns towards me, and takes off her reading glasses.

"Honey. You, and I both know you don't need to take care of me. Isn't that my job?" She chuckles.

"I just want to make sure you'll be awake to do that."

"Hey, hey, hey don't do that. I actually went to bed early last night."

"Sure..."

"Fine. I promise I'll take a nap today."

"Promise?"

“Yes I promise...You’re up early for someone who was up till 2 in the morning. Well, earlier than usual. Why were you up so late anyways?”

“Last night was fine mom. I just...had trouble sleeping. My room was hot.” I slightly laugh, but she’s sees right through it. I can tell, because she gives me that “you and I both know you can't hide anything from me” look.

“I was just freaking out about school and stuff. I’m not looking forward to this field trip mom. I guess I’m excited to be with Riley and Gwen all day, but science isn't my thing. Besides most likely I'm going to be lost the whole time, and they’re probably going to ask me some basic question that I don't know the answer to. Then, I’ll look like a fool in front of everyone.”

“I swear you and your father are complete opposites, but exactly the same. He was just like you in high school. Except he loved science. Maybe you two should talk when he gets home from the hospital tonight. His shift isn't that late, so he shouldn't be tired...” She laughs. “You ended up being a creator like me. Honey, sometimes its okay to be a fool at times. Science is not your passion. You don't have to be good at it. I just wish you would go for your real passion instead of playing that keyboard up in your room all day. Show the world want you want to create.”

“I can’t mom...I just can’t” I say.

“Well take your time then. I intend to see that day so don't make me wait to long.”

“Okay...Well, I gotta go.” She stands up and hugs me.

“Try to have a good day.” She says.

I left my mom to her coffee and writing, and headed out. I got to the school pretty early, but instead of heading the music room I sat outside by the bus with a book in hand. I read until

people started lining up. Riley showed up with her sister. I could tell she was annoyed, but I did my best to cheer her up.

“Okay everyone. Permission slips out, and after you hand it in enter the bus.” I heard Mr. Neil yell by the opening of the bus. I handed him the slip and made my way towards the back of the bus with Riley. Luckily we snagged seats behind Gwen.

"Okay! I've assigned you all partners," Mr. Neil says. "So, when I call your names, find your partner. I'll be going alphabetically by last name." He clears his throat and looks down at his clipboard. "Anthony with Woods. Cole with West. Gray with Kingsley. Mauze with Penn. Pascal with Sanders. And Tanner with Torson."

Thank god I got Dan. Hopefully this means I won't be completely lost. Plus he makes me laugh so I probably won't fall asleep. Score!

I look for him on the bus, but I already notice the eye contact between him and Riley. He's blushing. Does he like her? I wonder. Then again Gwen told me he always blushes so it's probably nothing. Why do I even care? His gaze switches to mine, and I smile. He smiles back and the bus roars to life. The entirety of the trip was talking about Riley's band, and a project Gwen had been working on. I mostly listened. Both of them are kind of amazing. Riley also asked about Cole, and I told her he seemed nice. I mean we only talked once, but he seemed cool I guess. She seemed a little worried. I tried to assure her, but there only so much you can say to calm Riley's nerves. I do my best.

When we arrive at the labs a nice guy gave us all the information, and we get with our partners. Dan does a pretty good job at keeping the trip interesting. I honestly think it was more fun watching him light up when they talked about the animal morphing stuff. It was priceless. To

be honest I only started paying attention when they brought up the chairs. I have admit the idea the chairs is cool, but when they ask us to test them out I feel a little apprehensive.

“Aren’t these prototypes?” I whisper to Dan.

“Im sure they’re completely safe. They wouldn't put children in it if it wasn't completely tested.”

“That's true I guess.”

I enter the room at the same time as everyone else. A shiver goes down my spine as the door slams shut.

“Hello. My name is Dr. Edwards, and I’ll be your helper today.” I turned to see a young woman in a bleached lab coat. She told me about the chair, and the side effects. I don't think it will be that bad so I follow her directions as best I can. When the fatigue hits I become uneasy.

Something isn't right here.

Before I can say anything though, everything goes black.

When I wake up I feel a little nauseous, but I manage to sit up just fine.

“You did great! Good job. If you need a minute that's okay. Your class will be waiting outside.” For a second I almost thought I could see through her smile. Dang she has a good poker face. I take a minute like she instructed, and then I make my way to the door. The moment I touch the doorknob I feel weak all of a sudden. I fall to my knees and the nurse rushes to me.

“Are you alright?” She asks.

“Yeah. I’m sorry. I just...kind of blacked out I guess.” I say.

“That's normal in some patients. I'm sorry if I would have known I wouldn't have done it. I see you’re on a few strong anti anxiety medications. That could also be the source.”

“Yeah. Uh... I gotta go.” I slowly stand and make my way back towards the group. My parents, my doctor, and I were the only ones who knew about the medication. It's not exactly something I like telling people.. Especially strangers. I haven't even told Gwen, and we tell eachother everything. Well, I guess not everything now that I think about it. I hate hiding it from her, but I hide it from everyone. Even myself sometimes.

“Are you okay?” Dan asks when I make it back to the line.

“Yeah...I’m pretty sure. That was weird right?” I say.

“Right.” He says.



The field trip had been perfectly enjoyable until the scientist guy led us to the M.I.C. exhibit. The Medical Information Chair exhibit.

The idea of sitting in a highly-sophisticated medical robot chair with wires and buttons that scans your body and looks like it belongs in a dentist's office doesn't sit well in my mind, but if it helps doctors pinpoint diseases and such, that's great! As for me, I'd rather go with traditional human doctor checkups, which are terrifying enough.

"We're just waiting for it to be accepted by the American Medical Foundation as an official medical testing system and we're good to go," the man in the lab coat, Dr. Liam, was saying. "It's perfectly safe to use. Which is why, all of you will get to try it out today!"

Wait, what?!

"Woah, neat!" Ryker said, glancing over at me. His smile faded. "What's wrong, Charlotte?"

"They can't make us sit in those things!"

"What do you mean? Dr. Liam said they're harmless."

"They're *prototypes*!"

Ryker shrugged. "I'm sure they're fine." When he saw that I wasn't comforted, he added, "Trust me, it'll be neat. These things are going to be our future. All of us'll be able to tell our children that we were among the very first people to test the M.I.C."

I didn't say anything but hugged my notebook closer to my chest and shivered in spite of myself. Eventually, my classmates were ushered into separate rooms. Not me. I rooted my feet on the pristine tile floor and watched as the doors closed behind my friends. Layla, Daniel, Michael, Jinx, and all the rest.

"Charlotte." Mr. Neil laid a hand on my shoulder and I jumped. I hadn't seen him there. "What's the matter? Wouldn't you like to go inside?"

I smiled nervously. "Not really. I'd rather stay out here and wait."

"But this is a once in a lifetime opportunity! I can't let you go home without having experienced the wonders of our future's technology."

Dr. Liam approached me too and bent down to appease my height. "Trust me, there's absolutely nothing to be afraid of. Remember, we're just going to do the first phase. It'll be a breeze."

"And," Mr. Neil inputted, "you'll get to see some fascinating results about yourself after it's all done. Maybe you'll learn something new."

"I think my health is fine," I said as politely as I could. "Thank you, but I think I'll just wait here -"

"Normally," Dr. Liam said, "I wouldn't push anyone to do something they didn't want to do. But this is really important. Here, I'll take you in myself, and show you that it's not all that bad."

I unwillingly relinquished my bag and notebook and followed Dr. Liam into one of the brightly-lit rooms. I glanced back at Mr. Neil before the door closed, and he smiled at me reassuringly.

C'mon Charlotte, I told myself. There are much scarier things than this in the world. Ryker's right. This is our future.

Dr. Liam rubbed his hands together. "Just take a seat, and I'll walk you through everything."

I sucked in my apprehension and eased myself onto the M.I.C., pretending that it was a giant, stuffed teddy bear (a tactic I've used with other similarly scary things in my past). Unfortunately, it was harder to keep an image of Mr. Snuggles in my mind when a cage-like helmet was lowered over my eyes, but gradually I found myself calming down and feeling awfully tired...

"It's a completely natural side effect for patients to fall asleep during the procedure, so -"

And with that, the checkerboard pattern of light that seeped through the helmet faded to black, and I slipped into an unwillingly deep sleep.

~

"Rise and shine, Charlotte!" Dr. Liam said. "You're all done!"

I lifted myself off the chair, my limbs shaking. My left arm was sore, but otherwise I felt alright. It was all over.

“Everything about you is perfect. Your pulse is a bit faster than it should be, but under the circumstances that’s completely normal. You did a wonderful job, Charlotte.”

I mumbled a “Thanks” when he handed me the paper and got out of that room as quickly as I could. Michael exited his door at the same time as me, and he came to my side immediately.

“How’d it go?”

I shuddered. “That was weird. I fell asleep, as if they had drugged me.”

“Me too. You would have thought that they’d have mentioned it earlier. The falling-asleep thing.”

I nodded. “I’m just glad it’s over.” I brushed a strand of hair from my face. I think my hand was shaking and Michael noticed it. He picked up my bag and notebook and handed them to me, and quietly we waited for the last of the examinations to be over.

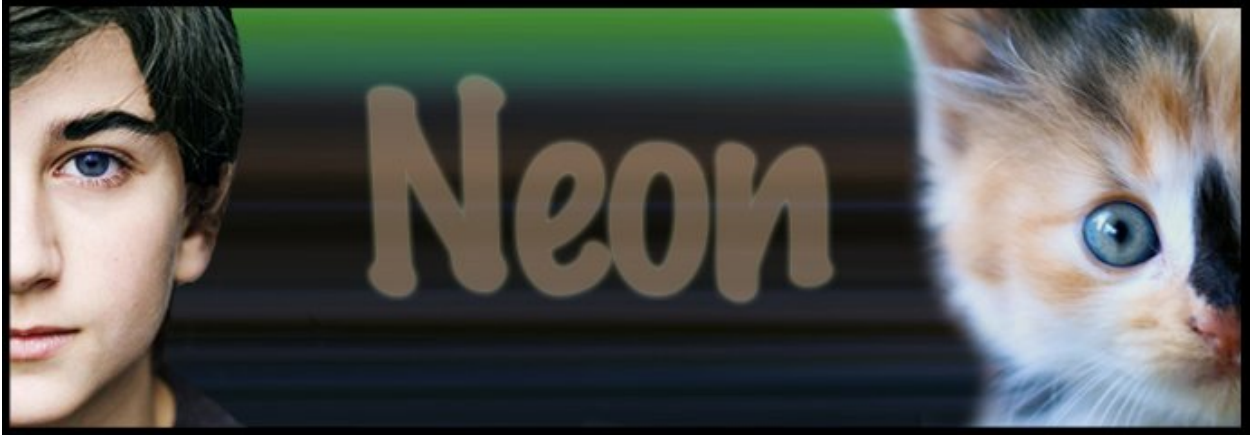
With that, the field trip came to a close. We followed Mr. Neil outside and climbed onto the bus. I sat with Layla towards the back of the bus so we could talk, and I wasn’t surprised to learn that she found the whole thing suspicious, too. Her cousin Cole was sitting behind us, next to Neon. Regardless of what Layla had told me about him, he seemed alright. I mean, he *was* pretty cute.

But then we found out he had been stealing.

“What are *those*?” Layla said, craning her head around to see what Neon and her cousin were messing around with.

Cole shrugged, fingering brick-sized black boxes in his palm. “We saw a bunch of ‘em lying around. Hundreds. They won’t miss them. After all...” He nodded towards Neon. “This guy needs them to conquer the world.”

He's cute, I decided as Layla practically exploded, but very stupid.



Neon's feet whisked him across the terrain, the wind cavorting through his hair. A smile broke upon his face as the sunlight danced in his eyes, the radiant beams filling him to the brim with energy. He leaped forward, soaring towards the back of the school bus. He tossed his head back as he landed, laughing-

"Neon," Mr. Neil coughed from where he stood, on the concrete sidewalk beside the bus.. The bus wasn't moving, and neither was the boy latched onto the back of it.

"Well, you're certainly energetic today; that's a start," Mr Neil said as Neon jumped down lithely. His eyes glinted with subtle amusement. "But please, refrain from conquering the bus until *after* the trip."

Neon landed on the balls of his feet, springing from the asphalt onto the sidewalk. "Sure thing, teach," he relented airily, tossing the tails of his scarf over his shoulder. Swaggering past his teacher, he clambered into the bus.

Dropping his bag in the back, he uncapped a dry-erase marker, unsheathing the inky felt blade. Without hesitation, he began drawing on the window, slashing his marker across the pane.

In the reflection, he could vaguely see the bus driver get up to stop his art. Mr. Neil halted the man, placing a hand on his shoulder and shaking his head somberly.

Neon's mind raced with ideas as the marker flew across the back window. "Potatoes!" he exclaimed at one point, drawing odd stares from his classmates. Neon paid them no heed, muttering intensely as he recalculated.

He smacked his forehead, chuckling. "Of course! I forgot to factor in the gravitational pull!" Erasing a chunk of calculations with the edge of his hand, he scribbled new symbols furiously.

"Hey, Neon," a boy quipped as he placed his bag near Neon's. "What's that?"

Neon whirled around, tapping his forehead. "Well, you know how potato clocks work, right?"

"Ye...yeah." The boy, Dan, seemed a bit confused. "Electricity, I think."

Neon grinned. "Well, what if we applied that to an EMP? Or a power surge? With enough potatoes, I could take over China!"

Dan raised an eyebrow nervously. "Figuratively speaking, right?"

"Not at all," Neon chirped.

"Ah." The boy seemed a little uncomfortable; it was natural for people in the presence of greatness. "Well, what does that say?" he asked, pointing to some words Neon had scrawled off to the side.

Neon loosened his scarf, grinning. "Carpe Terrarum. Seize the *world*."

At this, Dan went wide-eyed, slowly backing away to talk to someone else. Neon chuckled, returning to his work.

“Hey,” a voice prodded once more from behind him. Neon sighed in exasperation, turning around again to see a beanie-bearing boy staring down at him, a disgusted look in his eyes.

“Oh. Hello...sorry, wait a second.” Neon rummaged around in his bag, pulling out and referring to a list of students. “Hello, As-”

“Cole,” the boy interjected coldly.

Neon looked up, blinking. Then he shrugged. “I suppose we can’t all be named perfectly, now can we?” Scooting his bag over, he made room for the abrasive boy, who sat down heavily.

“What’s that?” Cole asked, gesturing to the windows.

“Oh, that? Just a morning warm-up.” Neon clasped his hands behind his head, grinning. “The gist of it? Potatoes beat machines.”

“So it shuts down electronics?”

“That’s one way of putting it, yes.”

A malevolent spark lit up behind Cole’s eyes. “We could use this to shut down cell-phones, right?”

“Indeed,” Neon affirmed.

“And radio towers, and bank systems?”

“Well...yes...”

“And internet cat videos? And the Young Writers Society?” Cole’s outward expression didn’t change, but an evil light seemed to emanate from him all the same.

Neon did his best to smile and nod, but he shuddered inside. *This guy...might be even more dangerous than me*, he concluded grimly.

Neon was at the head of the class for the entire tour, drinking in each detail as the guide explained it. By the end, he was pretty sure he had learned at least five new ways to take over Europe, two of which involved rabbits.

"This is the state of the art, most top secret part of our lab," the guide rattled off sternly. "Everything in here is under wraps from the public and almost everything will be for at least another couple years. Everything you see in here is highly confidential." He seemed to glare at them as he said this.

Neon rolled his eyes. "Highly confidential" was like a ribbon on the present for him. And he was raring to tear it open.

Tapping Cole's shoulder, he jerked his head towards a door at the end of the hall. "Come on," he whispered. "Let's pay a visit to the gift shop."

Cole shrugged. "Alright."

The two boys slipped away from the group as they moved on, heading down the hall. Cole knelt at the door, fingers whispering deftly over the lock. In about ten seconds, he had popped it open, and the steel door swung outward. Gesturing inside, he bowed sarcastically.

Neon nodded, genuinely impressed. "I wonder what we'll find in a place like this?" he murmured as they slipped through.

Stepping forward, the boys set foot into a hallway that seemed to stretch without end on either side. Azure lights flooded the room with an eerie aura, making Neon's skin crawl. He made a mental note of it to add to the decor of his lair.

"So, which door should we try first?" Cole mused, pacing in front of the dark iron thresholds. "Eeney, meeney, miney, this one," he said, cracking open a door to their left.

Neon had no time to protest before the door swung outward soundlessly. Cole tiptoed inside, a mischievous grin lighting up his face.

Not bothering to shut the door this time, Neon walked into a room with a single lamp embedded in the ceiling, the lone defender against the shadows along the walls. It shone intensely upon pitch-black packages that lined the walls in stacks, stretching down the room. "Happy birthday to me," he murmured.

"What're these?" Cole wondered, picking up a parcel and turning it in the lamplight. It was roughly the size of a brick, with a reflective sheen around the outside.

Neon plucked the package from his fingers, smirking. "Only one way to find out." Turning it over, he set his fingers into the odd material. It gave easily, pulling apart like plastic. He almost dropped the package as a slight hiss came out. "It's airtight?"

Reaching into the package, his fingers clenched around a smooth, dry piece of cloth. "Hm?" Neon tore the rest of the parcel away, holding the cloth in front of him.

Cole's eyes widened as the cloth expanded in Neon's hand, warping out into a black suit. Neon waved the suit like a flag, the ebony cloth undulating as it grew.

"A wetsuit that reacts to air, huh?" Neon weighed the suit in his fingers, turning it over. "Kind of drab if you ask me. At least add a cape or something."

“What were they going to do with these?” Cole asked, grabbing two more parcels from the stacks.

“I don’t know...ocean expedition?” Neon guessed, holding the suit up to the light.

“And why would they need so many of them?” Cole gestured to the mountains of identical suits, standing like grim sentries against the wall.

Neon rubbed his thumbs into the fabric. “Kind of smooth,” he murmured. Familiar...

The dark jigsaw of Neon’s mind clicked together in that moment, sending a chill racing down his spine. “I don’t think these are wetsuits,” he said slowly, relinquishing the suit to the floor.

“Cole. We’re leaving.” Neon’s voice came out more forceful than he had intended. Trying to keep from shaking, he headed for the door. He hesitated at the threshold, eyes falling upon a single suit-package by the doorstep.

Before he realized what he had done, he had scooped the package from the floor, tucking it into his bag. Running back into the room, he stashed the other suit he had taken in it as well, as well as the scraps from the casing. No traces, he thought. They can’t know we’ve been here.

“Cole. Come on, we’re going,” he said, with more urgency.

Cole, who had been staring at the packages with a greedy look in his eye, looked up. “What? Oh, yeah.”

Neon nodded tersely, a white-knuckled grip on his bag. Without waiting for Cole, he strode out into the eerie blue hallway, heading back to the safety of his classmates.

That material...I've read about it somewhere. An experimental report... The thoughts collided in his mind, tumbling over one another as his footfalls tapped on the metal floor. *It's not a wetsuit. Not a wetsuit at all.*

But then again, perhaps he was getting worked up over nothing. Perhaps the scientists were trying to make portable clothes for the needy. *Unlikely*, he immediately countered. *That material costs thousands of dollars to produce.* He could feel his brain pulsing, the world spinning around him.

"Stop it," he muttered, gritting his teeth. "You're supposed to be the man who conquers the world." He was invincible; he was limitless, without fault. He felt the terror fade as confidence swelled his chest, making him walk a little faster.

It was impossible to say anything for sure at this point, after all. He'd need to do more research before he could conclude any-

Smack.

He cried out as he crashed into something hard and soft at the same time. Falling to the ground, he scrambled backwards. A shadow loomed over him, leaning forward to-

"Something wrong, Neon?" Mr. Neil peered down at him, a slightly concerned look perturbing his features. One hand dusted off his coat where Neon had run into him.

Neon shook his head. "No! No, nothing." Looking around, he could see his classmates crowded around their teacher, gazing down at him oddly.

Mr. Neil offered his hand. "Well, come on. Pay attention, we're about to try the chairs."

"Electric chairs!?" Neon squeaked.

Laughter rippled through his classmates. “No, not electric chairs. Well, they do run on electricity, but...” Mr. Neil shook his head. “Nevermind. Come on, we’re starting.”

Neon grabbed his wrist, letting himself be hoisted to his feet. At the back of the class, he could see Cole stealthily rejoining the group.

The other students began dropping their bags into the corner, heading into the rooms. Neon hesitated, almost seeing his stolen goods through the cloth of his bag. *They can’t know*, he thought. *They can’t know I was there.*

Cole walked up and clapped his shoulder. “What’s that look for?” His eyes were gleaming with the excitement of danger.

Neon broke away, walking through one of the doors. “Nothing.”

He pushed through into a room with one chair, and a panel beside it, operated by a barrel-chested man in a black suit. “Hello,” he greeted in a voice like the rumbling earth, “I’m Taro. I’ll be conducting your test.” He grasped Neon’s hand, shaking it and grinning genuinely. “And you are?”

Neon felt the giant’s charisma spread to him, and a small smile grew on his face. “I’m Neon.” Maybe he was overthinking this. He couldn’t judge things so soon, after all. Such behavior was unbecoming of an overlord.

“Right this way, Neon.” Taro gestured to the chair, returning to the panel. Neon eased himself back into the M.I.C. as the grey cage came down overhead.

Taro’s voice echoed from outside the chrome shell. “Now, you’ll be getting a bit sleepy while the chair takes a reading. Don’t be alarmed, my friend. It’s perfectly normal.”

Neon smiled lazily as the world began to shift, fading to black.

I've been drugged, haven't I?



It was a rainy afternoon when they got onto the bus to their doom. Michael was content, his hands in his jacket pockets. The rest of the students in his class, seemed on the verge of falling asleep or exploding like an overcharged atom. Mr. Neil seemed... more excited for the trip more than anyone, grinning and having a skip in his step.

"Everyone onto the bus. Single line," he said, ushering. Michael was the first on the bus, overlooking the empty and dull seats. He picked the first spot on the bus, behind the monitor's rest area, and sat down. He gazed out the window as everyone else that was coming in, each grinning and talking to their friends. Soon everyone was on the bus as Mr. Neil stated, "Remember guys- keep an open mind when we go and a clearer mind when we leave."

When the bus got to the site, it was completely open and dusty. Some kids in the back thought we were lost and was about to ask if so, when Mr. Neil perked up.

"So, when I call your names, find your partner. I'll be going alphabetically by last name." He looked down at the clipboard, raising a pen in the air. "Anthony with Woods. Cole with West. Gray with Kingsley. Mauze with Penn. Pascal with Sanders. And Tanner with Torson." Michael sighed.

He liked that partner choice, as he didn't like to talk much to anyone. Layla would just follow after him and be like anyone else in the group. They got off the bus, each with their partners as Layla came up to Michael.

"Hey. Looks like we're partners."

Michael looked ahead. "Seems so." There was a huge, silver building in the middle of the nowhere gleaming in the sunlight. The class walked towards and stopped in front of the huge sliding doors. Mr. Neil looked as if he was going to erupt with excitement as they entered the M. E. L.

A skinny man in his late twenties, with brown hair and glasses, came up to the group. He went over the certain rules about safety and not to touch anything unless asked. There was a cardboard box on the counter with the word "Electronics" written in Sharpie. Everyone put their phones and mp3 players in before they headed off, as it could possibly ruin their technology.

"Any questions?" Mr. Liam asked. No one said anything, just awkward glances at each other. "Good! Now follow me this way, please."

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The class was showed around M.E.L, going into different laboratories and had even gave the children their own personal lab coat and goggles. Mr. Liam showed them the works of the facility, stating how they found the perfect result of curing cancer and little robots that go into the bloodstream, to monitor the patient's problems, if any.

Men and women worked left and right, poking and prodding at unimaginative things. Some wore the causal lab coats while others wore yellow hazmat suits. They were behind a plastic domain with a plastic curtain, hiding whatever inside from the outside.

Soon after a short lunch, the group is shown around the last area of M.E.L- M.I.C. He explains that the chairs are prototypes and is in hope of being accepted by the American Medical Foundation. He also states that each process is split into three processes and only takes ten minutes.

Each student was filed into a certain room, a chair covered with a plastic covering. It reminded Michael of a dentist chair; scary yet so cozy. He settled in, rubbing his palms on his jeans nervously.

Soon a girl with braided brown hair came into the lab.

"Michael Anthony?" She asked, looking down quickly at a clipboard.

"Yea?"

She smiled. "Hi. I'm Diana. I am glad you can make it here. For one, your teacher was begging the head scientist if he could bring kids into a place like this. Now I want you to lay back and relax."

He did so, adjusting to the seat. The plastic squeaked as Diana was busy getting Michael set up. Adding a cage-like thing around his head and a finger clamp on his middle finger. He blinked.

"This seems more complex than what I thought," he laughed.

Diana nodded, adding some tubes to his arms. "This is only level one. You don't need to worry about anything." After she was done with that, Diana walked over to a table in the nearby

corner handing a hand down on the screen. It beeped as she typed and pressed some buttons.

When she was done, she came over to Michael, who was blinking rather lazily.

"You are set now, Michael. It is completely normal for people to sleep. When you awake, level one will be over." Soon darkness covered Michael's eyes like a blanket.

Sometime later, the sleepiness wears off as Michael can see the dizzy face of Diana. She is waving her hands in front of his face, repeating his name like a mother would.

"Michael.. Michael.. Michael.."

His focus slips in as she states, "Michael, it is over." He blinks a couple of times before rubbing his eyes and yawns.

"That was a perfect sleep. Almost how I sleep everyday."

Diana chuckled, going over to the computer and prints a paper. "You're a funny kid. Here you go. Your results look normal. Thank you for coming!" He grabs the paper and leaves, still feeling a little dizzy. Charlotte comes out at the same time, grabbing her head.

"How'd it go?"

"That was weird. I fell asleep, as if they had drugged me."

Michael nodded. "Me too. You would have thought that they'd have mentioned it earlier. The falling-asleep thing."

Charlotte pushes back a piece of hair from her face. "I'm just glad it is over." He notices she is shaking and decided it was best for her to not do anything, and grabbed her notebook and bag. Only silence was speaking between the two.

When they got on the bus, everything seem normal. Except for the questions Michael had. He had wondered if anyone else was asleep- he probably guessed so. Soon, the bus rolled and they drove back to school.



By the time I get down stairs, Layla is already gone. Not a big surprise.

"Hey, I can give you a ride," Aunt Jen tells me with a cup of coffee in hand.

"I *am* seventeen. I can drive myself."

She gives me an unfortunate look. "Actually, you can't. I need the car to get to work.

Sorry."

I sigh. "It's fine. I'll just take my skateboard."

I grab my backpack off the ground and the permission slip to the field trip starts to fall out, reminding me of it. I ponder it for a moment, deciding if I want to go on it or not. I decide it might be cool, and if nothing else, it will drive Layla nuts that I'm there. I turn back to Aunt Jen.

"Hey, can you sign this?"

She takes it from me and looks it over. "Ah, the field trip Layla's going on. I'm not sure how I feel about them letting you in somewhere like that." She says this with a smirk and a tone like she's half-kidding, but I'm pretty sure there's more truth behind her words than she's letting on.

"I won't do anything stupid. Promise."

She hesitates for a moment, then grabs a pen and signs it. "Have a good day."

I give her a smirk and shove the slip back into my bag. I stomp my foot down on the end of the skateboard so it flips into my hand and I head out the door. I put some rock music on my iPod and make it to school only a minute or two before they're supposed to leave for the field trip.

A short girl with blonde hair hurries onto the bus just as I get there and when I head onto the bus, I realize I'm the last one here. Dozens of eyes stare at me. Most probably still don't have any idea who I am. I shoulder my bag and walk towards the back. After announcing my presence to Layla, I slip into a seat next to some younger kid drawing equations on the window. I'm surprised to see someone so young here until I see what he's been working on and I realize he's here because he's basically a genius. Not that anyone would believe me if I told them, but I actually understand some of his equations. The mischievous gears in my head start turning as he talks to me. *This kid's kinda cool.*

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"Cole with West," Mr. Neil says as he assigns us partners. I look around, having no idea who "West" is. I start to fumble around in my bag for the list of kids names in my class when someone comes up behind me.

"Hey there! You're the new kid. Cole, right?"

I turn around to see a girl staring at me. "Yep." I look at her, taking in her curly hair and bright blue eyes.

"I'm Riley. Born to write, live to rock."

I smile in amusement. Rocker chick. *My kind of partner*. She's kind of cute, too.

We walk inside the laboratory where the head scientist begins listing off boring rules I could care less about. Then he tells us to put all of our electronics in a box and I throw my phone in. "Your iPod too, Cole," Mr. Neil says. I roll my eyes and throw that in too. Anyone who knows me knows it's not wise to take away my music against my will. Then he moves on to ask Riley if she as any, since she seems to be off in her own little world. I nonchalantly pull the sleeve of my jacket further down over my wrist watch. It's not electronic like phones are, but I try to hide it just in case they would have wanted it anyway. I'm not leaving my watch in some crappy cardboard box. It's too special for that.

Over the course of the field trip, I find myself growing more curious about Riley. At first I thought maybe she was too peppy for my tastes, but she seems genuinely interested in the experiments around the lab, she's hanging out with Emma, the quiet girl I'd met in class yesterday, and she has a death grip on her journal the entire time. *I wonder what's in her journal that's so special*. I raise my eyebrows. *Challenge accepted*.

We settle for a quick lunch in a big room with a few tables, though there aren't enough for everyone. Layla and her partner along with a few others sit on the floor while the rest, including Riley and myself, grab a spot at the tables. I pull a can of Pepsi out of my bag and click back the metal latch. It opens with a satisfying hiss.

Then Riley gets up from her seat next to me and walks over to those sitting on the floor. I look around to make sure no one is paying attention to me, then I slip soundlessly out of my seat and make my way over to Riley's bag. I kneel down, unzip it as quietly as I can, then rummage

through it for a few seconds before finding the journal. Just as I'm about to open the cover, it's yanked from my hands and I'm hit over the head with it. "Ow! Hey!"

Riley leans over over me and stares me hard in the eye. "Never. Ever. Touch. My. Journal."

Normally I would make some snarky comment. Some little girl with braces can't tell me what to do. But this time, I think she really means it. I feel a chill go down my spine. So, to prevent being hit with it again, I slink away and sit back at the table. What is *in* that journal?

+ + + + +

After lunch, we're led into a super secret part of the lab. My mind starts to wander again when he goes into 'important' rules and stuff I don't care about. Just then, I feel someone tap my shoulder. I look over and don't see anyone, until I look down. The little genius kid with the scarf stares up at me. Then he jerks his head toward a undisclosed door. "Come on," he whispers. "Let's pay a visit to the gift shop."

Now we're talking. I shrug, acting as if I don't care much and respond with a matching tone. "Alright."

We slip away from the group while they're distracted. I try the door handle, but it's locked, so I pull out my lock picking set, look at the time on my watch, then get to work. I have it open in ten seconds flat. *New record.* I push the door open and gesture inside with a sarcastic bow.

It opens up into a long hallway, lined with endless unmarked metal doors and lit with cold florescent light. Neon doesn't pick a door within a few seconds, so I pick one for him. *Step one of being a thief: if you're doing something you're not supposed to, be quick about it. Don't hesitate.*

I slip inside the room, a mischievous grin spreading on my face. There's nothing like the adrenaline rush of doing something you're not supposed to. The room isn't overly bright, being lit by one sole light in the middle of the room, but it's enough to reflect off of the shiny black bricks that line the walls in stacks. *What the heck?* "What're these?" I ask, picking one up and turning it over in my hands.

Neon picks one up and starts ripping it open. "Only one way to find out." The package hisses and starts to expand in his hands. "It's airtight?"

As the black material grows and expands by the second, it turns into a large suit. I grab a couple more off of the shelf "What were they going to do with these?" Neon says something in return, but I'm not really listening as I look down the walls lined with hundreds of these things. "And why would they need so many of them?" An uneasy feeling rises inside me. *Something isn't quite right here.* I study the packages in my hands.

"Cole. We're leaving," Neon says so forcefully it startles me. *What's his problem?* I start to put the packages back on the stack I'd taken them from as Neon stuffs the suit he'd inflated into his bag. "Cole. Come on, we're going." Then he disappears out the door. *Where's he going? Damn it! If I lose him, they're going to blame me. Wonderful!* I start towards the door in an attempt to catch up with him. I throw my bag over my shoulder and it hits one of the stacks, causing several of them to topple onto the floor. I curse under my breath and scramble to get

them. I realize I won't have time to stack them all up again, so in panic, I shove them all in my bag and hurry after Neon.

I slip out the door leading into the hall and let it close behind me just as I see Mr. Neil hoist Neon up off the floor. The class is so distracted by him that I'm able to slip into the back without anyone noticing I was ever gone.

They lead us into a wide hallway lined with several doors. I'm not entirely sure what's going on when I'm directed into one of the rooms. A weird looking chair with wires and things sits against the wall. "What the heck is this?"

Someone comes in behind me, startling me. "Ashton. You can call me Derek. Have a seat," the voice says.

I turn around to see a tall, broad shouldered man in a lab coat presenting his hand to the chair. "It's Cole," I correct him. "What is this? I ah... was distracted during the explanation."

"A state of the art chair that will revolutionize medical care. There are three different levels of the intensity of the tests we run. We'll only be doing level one on you, which is your basic check up. It's perfectly safe, nothing to worry about. Just lay back and relax."

I shrug. "Alright." Seems pretty straight forward. I lower myself into the chair and he brings a cage half-way down over my face. "It's not going to hurt, but you might fall asleep. The scan shouldn't take anymore than ten minutes." I nod and instinctively take a look at my watch.

2:20PM.

Derek presses some buttons on a computer and an L.E.D. light starts scanning over my body. One second I feel fine, pumped up from our heist, and the next I'm out cold.

I wake with a jolt, my eyes shooting open and my body bolting upright in the chair. "It's okay. Calm down..." The man tries to sooth.

I cough a few times. "What the hell was that?"

"Like I said, it's normal to fall asleep. Your test came out fine, except you seemed to have some adrenaline in your system, which might account for your abrupt awakening," he says as he prints out my paper. I glance at my watch. *3:05PM*. I tilt my head. *Didn't he say it was supposed to take ten minutes?* I shove my sleeve back over it as he turns around and hands me the paper.

I take it from him and stand up. The second my feet hit the floor, I feel like the room shifts at a 30 degree angle and I stumble forward into the counter. "You okay, Ashton?"

I grip the counter top so tight that my knuckles turn white, feeling as if I let go, I'm going to slide and slam into the wall. Then as if someone has flipped a switch, everything instantly levels out and I feel perfectly fine. I stand up straight. "My name is *Cole*," I say with a side glance at the man, then I shove my way out the doors, agitated. Everyone else is grabbing their things when I get out there. My mind wanders back to my watch as we head out of the hall. *Did I read my watch wrong, or did the scan take 35 minutes longer than they said it would?* My suspicions grow deeper the more I think about it, so I quicken my pace and I catch up to Layla.

"Hey, do you know what time it is?"

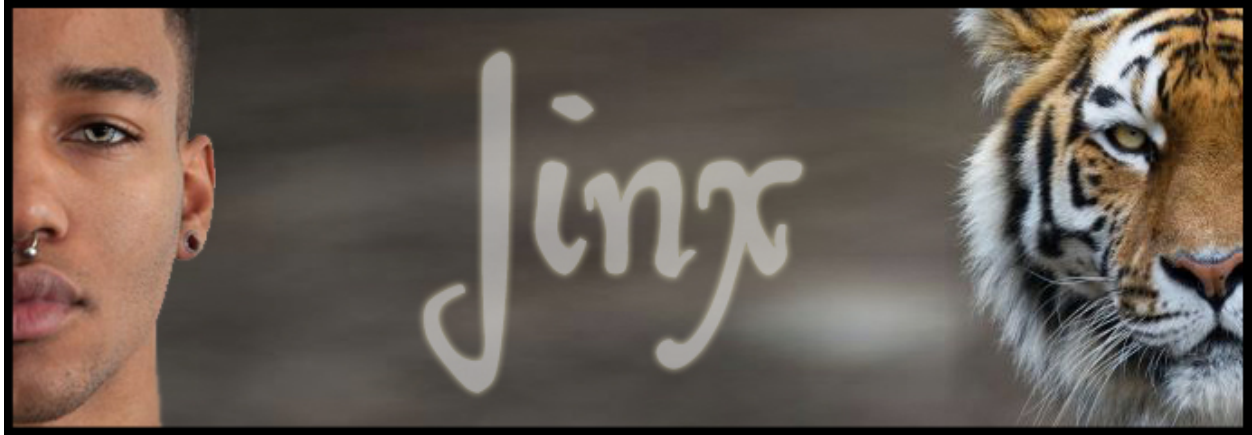
"No, they took our phones. Remember?"

"And you didn't see any clocks anywhere in the laboratory?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "Not that I recall. What's this about?"

"Nothing. Thanks." I fall back into line, my head reeling.

What if they didn't take our electronics because it would mess with the equipment. What if they took them so we couldn't tell what time it was... I swallow. Or that the test took a whole 45 minutes.



Jinx cursed under his breath as he shivered at his bus stop, near home. He hadn't ridden on the ratty government vehicle since his first year of high school, as he'd gotten his own license as fast as possible. But now that the truck had gone and died completely, here he was again, without any other option but this, or the same long walk as the day before. It was a bit humiliating.

He had been so anxious that he would sleep in too long again and miss the field trip that he had woken up far too early. As in, fifteen minutes. An all time record. A good thing, perhaps, but a tired Jinx was a grumpy Jinx.

Well, grumpier than normal.

The bus rumbled up to the curb and braked with a long, pained hiss, the doors swinging open slowly. Jinx shifted his backpack on his shoulder and climbed the steps, frowning. Mornings suck.

As the bus continued its rounds through the nearby neighborhoods, Jinx curled his knees to his chest and pulled out his crumpled permission slip. The night before, after he had confessed his late arrival to Dad, he had presented the paper.

“A field trip?” his father questioned, raising an eyebrow over sagging eyelids. His watchman outfit was crumpled, the dirty dishes from a lazy meal spread out before him. “Pretty early in the semester for that.”

“Yeah,” Jinx said, scuffing his foot on the tile of the kitchen floor. He still felt guilty about being late to school, and, less logically, about the truck dying. They didn’t have the money to take it to the shop quite yet. Pay day wasn’t for a few days. “It’s a rare opportunity, they said.”

“Sure, sure,” Dad said, pulling out his reading glasses and perching them on his flat nose. He scanned the slip, dark lips puckered. He finally looked up, concerned. “You’ll miss quite a few classes. Will your grades handle it?”

Jinx wrung his hands and shifted his gaze away. “I’ll figure it out.”

His father stared at him for a few moments more, then lowered the pen and signed with one swift movement.

“I trust you,” he said softly, holding out the paper for Jinx. The boy hesitated, then took it.

“Thank you.”

After another long, lonely bus drive of listening to music and staring out the window, Jinx watched as the M.E.L. building approached. He heard the other students shuffling excitedly and murmuring to themselves, but he hunched his shoulders and leaned his forehead against the cool glass of the window. Maybe doing this was a mistake. What did he know about science? A full

day with these other teenagers seemed suddenly unbearable, but soon Mr. Neil was calling for them to exit the bus, and he slowly dragged himself to his feet.

Outside, the teacher gathered the group and consulted his clipboard.

"Okay! I've assigned you all partners," Mr. Neil said. "So, when I call your names, find your partner. I'll be going alphabetically by last name. Anthony with Woods. Cole with West. Gray with Kingsley. Mauze with Penn. Pascal with Sanders. And Tanner with Torson."

Jinx glanced around, realizing that he had no idea who had the last name Kingsley. His gaze was finally met by a short, dark haired boy with a slightly wild look in his eyes. Was that him?

The boy stepped forward and briskly shook Jinx's hand.

"Neon," he quipped, spinning around on his heel to march towards the building before them. "Conqueror of worlds."

Jinx blinked, then matched the boy's stride, easily keeping up the pace with his long legs.

"Uh, Jinx," he stammered in response, watching his partner cautiously. Teenagers were odd creatures, he knew.

"Jinx, like a hex? Like a curse?" Neon snapped an interested glance at him, his eyes glimmering. "Interesting. Do you happen to know the quantity of potatoes required to cause cataclysmic events?"

Jinx couldn't help but snort out a laugh. What? He glanced over, his chest still convulsing, but Neon just looked at him with bright blue eyes, his mouth set in a grim line. He was serious?

“I’m afraid I don’t,” Jinx said, his mouth twitching as he tried to hide his smile. What kind of question was that? Potatoes? Cataclysmic events?

“Shame,” Neon replied curtly. He furrowed his eyebrows impatiently, then swept through the lab doors, leaving Jinx behind.

The tall boy shook his head incredulously, still smiling faintly to himself as he followed the group into the building. The architecture is interesting, and soon a man in a lab coat approached them, and began explaining the rules with the group. He instructed them to place their electronics in a box, and Jinx grudgingly handed over his phone. They received their name tags, and the tour began.

Jinx was soon enthralled with the lab’s work, latching onto their tour guide, Liam’s, every word. To think, he thought excitedly as he peered into the animal testing lab, Science can do all these amazing things! They could revolutionize society, stop disease, change humanity! He made a mental note to sketch some of animal hybrids he had seen, when he got back home. The fabbits were absolutely fascinating.

Maybe becoming a scientist, like Dad wanted, wouldn’t be so bad after all.

Jinx was so enraptured with the animal lab that he held back for a while longer than he probably should have, staring at the tumbling fabbits in their cages and the bustling lab workers about them. When he glanced up, he realized with a start that the group had already begun to move on, and he was about to be left behind.

Jinx jogged to catch up to the group down the long, brightly lit hallway, concerned that he had lost them. He paused, and could hear Liam’s voice drifting around the corner, explaining the

next part of their tour. Something about confidentiality and medical testing. He pushed forward, following the sounds of the group's chatter.

The backs of his classmates came into Jinx's line of sight as he turned the corner, and he felt a relieved smile stretch over his face. Phew. He hadn't lost them after all.

But as he went to step forward and rejoin them, two boys detached from the group and slipped away, back towards him. One of the boy's dark hair and blue eyes caught Jinx's attention. It was his partner! What was his name... Neon! He wasn't sure who the other kid was. He vaguely remembered him joining the class the day before.

The two had suspicious expressions and glanced over their shoulders as they casually walked away from the group. Jinx hesitated. What were they doing?

As he watched from the corner, unseen and undetected, he saw them pick a seemingly random door of the hall. The new boy crouched down by the handle and did something with his hands. He was picking the lock, Jinx realized with a start. Neon watched him approvingly, occasionally glancing around for intruders.

Jinx's eyes widened. What were they thinking? Should he intervene?

He glanced down the hall again, realizing that the group was growing farther and farther away. But if he left where he was now, the two boys would spot him. He blinked and furrowed his brow. He didn't want to tattle on them. That seemed cowardly, and he didn't want to make enemies already. But what they were doing was wrong, to snoop around like this. His muscles were tense with indecision.

The handle gave, and the new boy swept aside with sarcastic flourish. Neon nodded happily and they went in together. Jinx could see another hallway stretching behind the door, and he bit his lip in concern.

He tried to evaluate the situation properly. Logically, it was dangerous for the two boys to be wandering around without supervision. It was completely against the rules. They could cause accidents, they could get radiation poisoning, they could get into all sorts of trouble.

But if he told, they'd certainly hate him.

He clenched his fists and let out an exasperated sigh. The boys had now disappeared from sight through the door. If they didn't reappear soon, he'd tell Mr. Neil afterwards, in private, so it could be anonymous. No one would know. And besides, the teacher would realize they were missing if they were gone long enough.

He'd been standing there for a while.

Having made his decision, Jinx glanced around with his good eye and hurried towards the group. Mr. Neil spotted him as he approached, and raised an eyebrow. Liam was almost done explaining the final part of their tour, some sort of medical chair. Jinx wandered over to stand beside Mr. Neil and whispered an apology.

"I was looking at the fabbits," he explained nervously. The teacher nodded and smiled, understanding.

"They are quite fascinating, but try to stay with the group in the future. Glad you could join us again."

Jinx breathed a sigh of relief. He glanced behind him to see if the boys had returned, just in time to see Neon run right smack into Mr. Neil.

“Something wrong, Neon?” Mr. Neil asked, brushing off his coat. Neon’s eyes widened and he shook his head vehemently, denying it. Jinx stared at him, at the backpack he clutched in his hands. Neon reacted very nervously to Mr. Neil’s comments, a great contrast to his confidence from earlier. What had he found? Jinx narrowed his eyes, but turned away finally, resolving to tell Mr. Neil about the whole ordeal later.

Soon the class had set their bags in a corner and separated to their rooms. Jinx hovered awkwardly by the M.I.C., unsure of whether he was supposed to sit or wait. Soon the door to his room opened and he was greeted by a broad-shouldered, dark-skinned man as tall as he was, a rare occurrence. The man extended a giant hand and greeted him.

“I’m Aaron. Jinx Gray, correct?”

Jinx shook his hand and nodded. “Yup.”

Aaron smiled and gestured to the seat. “Why don’t you take a seat, and we’ll start the medical tests?”

Jinx glanced at the chair and stuffed his hands in his pockets. Memories of doctor visits and IVs from his eye surgery when he was young flooded his mind.

“Uh, is it possible to decline?”

Aaron glanced up from tapping on the panel beside the chair. He raised an eyebrow, his smile fading slightly.

“Excuse me?”

Jinx shifted his weight and blinked.

“I mean, can you just show me how it works? I don’t feel all that comfortable with medical testing. It’s just like a normal checkup, right?”

Aaron took a step towards him and spread his hands appealingly.

“Well, sure. But don’t you want to experience this new technology? It’s such a unique experience, and the public won’t see it for a quite some time.”

Jinx turned towards the chair, debating. He hated doctors, but what would be the harm, really? He took a step forward and sat on the edge of the chair, but he still didn’t feel quite comfortable.

Aaron put a giant hand on his shoulder encouragingly. “Go on. You’ll thank me later.”

Jinx glanced at him, suddenly uncomfortable. He didn’t like this. The machine was a prototype. He felt himself getting cold feet, and suddenly wanted to stand up.

“I just had a checkup. I’m healthy. I know I’m blind in one eye, already,” Jinx said, forcing a dry laugh. He made to stand up again, smiling at Aaron. “Can’t you just show me the ropes without testing?”

“No, not really.” Aaron said, his smile gone. Jinx stared at him, confusion clouding his eyes. The man’s grip tightened on his arm, and he pushed him back into the chair, more forcefully now.

“Please,” Aaron said, his voice tense. He gave Jinx a bright smile. “I promise, it’s completely painless. Don’t worry.”

That wasn’t a proper answer, and Jinx felt his heart begin to pump faster. He didn’t stand up, but he didn’t relax, either.

“Okay,” he mumbled grudgingly. Aaron nodded in approval and released his shoulder.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Jinx. We really appreciate it.”

Jinx didn't reply, but allowed Aaron to place nodes on his arms, a finger clamp on his finger. The chair started to scan him, and a cage-like thing lowered from the ceiling. Jinx's heart rate sped up as he felt more and more uncomfortable and claustrophobic.

"I really don't want to do this," he murmured, but Aaron didn't reply. A wave of exhaustion swept over Jinx, and his eyelids fluttered. He hadn't signed up for this...

But before he could protest once more, everything went black.



I slowly stirred awake as a small breeze brushed my face. My eyelids fluttered open and I stared out the open window at the trees next to the house and listened to the chirping of the birds. I sat up and realized that I had fallen asleep at the compute. The last thing I could remember was that I had been writing out the first chapter of a new story, as I had had a sudden brainwave for a new plot, about a boy with the spirit of an ancient Archmage sharing his head.

Well, no problem. As long as I woke up on time, it doesn't matter. I clicked my mouse and peered at the computer screen to see what the time was. Then I screamed as I saw that the time was 7:41 pm! I jumped up, got dressed in my usual clothes, and went through my morning routine in what I was sure was record time and ran downstairs. I definitely did not want to miss the bus, as if I did, I would miss the field trip! And I had been looking forward to it for months!

I managed to reach the kitchen quickly. Since I was late, my parents and sister had left already. There was a piece of toast and jam on the table, which I knew was for me. I picked it up and gobbled it down before rushing out the door, pausing only to grab my backpack on the way. I ran out to the bus just as it was about to leave. I sat down in my usual seat at the back with a sigh of relief. *Made it.*

I got to school on time and immediately went to the parking lot. I handed in my permission slip to Mr. Neil and got on the bus. I gave Layla a friendly nod, and was walking to the back when I noticed Neon drawing something on the window with a dry erase marker. It looked complicated.

My curiosity piqued, I put my bag down next to his, and said "Hey, Neon, What's that?"

Neon whirled around, tapping his forehead. "Well, you know how potato clocks work, right?"

"Ye...yeah." I replied, a little confused. "Electricity, I think."

Neon grinned. "Well, what if we applied that to an EMP? Or a power surge? With enough potatoes, I could take over China!"

I raised an eyebrow, wondering what he was thinking. "Figuratively speaking, right?"

"Not at all," Neon chirped.

"Ah." I replied, uncomfortable now. "Well, what does that say?" I asked, pointing to some words Neon had scrawled off to the side.

Neon loosened his scarf, grinning. "Carpe Terrarum. Seize the world."

At this, my eyes widened. *This boy is weird...or crazy.* I thought as I slowly backed away. I heard Neon chuckle as I turned to Gwen.

"Hey, Gwen!" I said, pushing my weird conversation with Neon to the back of my mind.

"What are you reading?"

She smiled at me before replying, "Hey, Dan! I've finally taken your advice and started reading *Red Rising*."

I grinned, pleased. "How do you like it?"

"It's awesome! I wish I'd taken your suggestion earlier."

"Great!" I replied, "I'm glad you like it! Have fun reading! The first time is always the best."

She chuckled before replying, "Thanks, Dan!" and went back to the book. I then went to the back of the bus and took my seat.

By the time we reached the lab, I was super excited. I couldn't wait to see the scientific advances that were being made in the lab! Before we got off the bus, Mr. Neil cleared his throat and spoke up.

"Okay! I've assigned you all partners," he said. "So, when I call your names, find your partner. I'll be going alphabetically by last name."

He clears his throat and looks down at his clipboard. "Anthony with Woods. Cole with West. Gray with Kingsley. Mauze with Penn. Pascal with Sanders. And Tanner with Torson."

At that, my heart did a somersault. I really liked Emma and we could speak to each other really well but...recently my crush on her had made talking to her a little awkward. I was going to have to make an effort to hide my crush from her, as I really didn't want to ruin my relationship with her.

I caught Riley's eye as she was looking at the back and she waggled her eyebrows at me, a knowing expression on her face. I blushed. *Does she know about my crush?*

I turn away from her, embarrassed and look towards Emma. She catches my eyes and smiles. I smile back and find that I'm blushing again, and quickly look down. We then file out of the bus.

As I got down to the ground, I felt someone grab my shoulder and turned to see Neon, giving me a hard expression.

"Don't think I didn't notice that." he said.

"What?" I replied, confused.

He looked me in the eyes, unblinkingly, and said "You blushed when she looked at you! You have a crush on her too!"

"No," I replied, trying to correct him, "You misunder-"

He cut me off, saying "Stay away from her! You have been warned!" and then turned and walked away.

"Well, that was weird." I muttered to myself.

"What was weird?" said a voice.

I turned, startled, to see Gwen. "Umm...nothing." I replied, deciding to keep what Neon said to me to myself.

"Okay..." she replied, looking at me concernedly, "If you're sure." I nodded, and jogged to catch up with Emma.

I was at the front of my classmates the entire time, drinking in all the amazing information about the lab. I make sure to help explain things to Emma, and tell her stuff that I hoped she'd find interesting.

I didn't even have time to think bout my crush on her. When we came to the animal hybrids, I started to hyperventilate, so Emma thoughtfully gave me a paper bag to breath in to help me calm down. Once I did, I immediately started to excitedly ask the scientist nearby questions.

"Are lurtles more aquatic, as in turtles, or do they live more on land, like lizards?"

"Actually, they're amphibious." she replied with a smile. I nodded.

"Cool. What are they're egg laying habits?"

"In a hole they dig in the sand before being covered up, like turtles."

"Interesting." I replied, noting it down in my notebook.

Then Charlotte asked "What about their mating habits?" Me, Charlotte and Layla continued asking questions in this way.

The scientist seemed to start to get flustered by us, and that was when Mr.Neil must have taken notice.

He came up and said, "Ah, I see you've met my star students. I'm sorry if they are asking a few too many questions, but they are very interested in biology." The scientist replied that it was okay, and then Mr. Neil turned to us.

"Come along, students," he said. "I think you'll find the next thing they are showing us rather...interesting." And guided us away from there.

He was right. As they showed us the MIC and explained it, I was amazed. I couldn't believe that I was seeing the latest advances i medical technology! Our future! And better still, I would be one of the first people to test it. I would have a place in history!

However, Emma didn't loom as thrilled as I did. "Aren't these prototypes?" she whispered to me.

Trying to reassure her, I replied, "I'm sure they're completely safe. They wouldn't put children in it if it wasn't completely tested."

"That's true I guess." she said, but she still looked a little uncertain.

we were each led to a different room. A Caucasian woman with blonde hair was in mine. She smiled at me coldly and said, "You must be Daniel. I am Dr.Smith, and I will be your helper today."

She gestured towards the chair and I sat in it. She then told me about the side effects, but I didn't think it would be too bad so I followed her directions. Then the fatigue hit and I fell asleep.

At some point, I felt that I had regained consciousness. I had always been a light sleeper and I feel that that must have been the cause. My eyelids remained closed. I tried to open them, but they felt far too heavy for that. The temptation to fall asleep again tugged at me but, for the moment at least, I resisted it. I heard people talking.

"Yes, everything is going smoothly." I heard Dr.Smith say.

"Good." replied a man's voice. "And it had better remain so. These children are our future, and will help us rule. You will suffer for any failure."

"I understand perfectly." replied Dr.Smith. And that was the last I heard before my energy wore out, and I succumbed once more to sleep.

When the doctor woke me up, my brain stirred to life, and immediately started whirring with thoughts. That conversation had sounded ominous. Had it been a dream? Or had it been real?

Dr. Smith smiled at me and said "Your test results are normal. You are perfectly healthy." I nodded, not really listening, and thanked Dr.Smith before walking out of the room. As I did so, I saw Emma coming out of her room. She looked pale and a little shaken.

Concerned, I asked "Are you okay?"

She replied, “Yeah...I’m pretty sure. That was weird right?”

“Right.” I agreed.

As we filed onto the bus, my thoughts drifted towards what I had heard again and again.

It must have been a dream. It couldn't have been real.

Or could it?



The night after the field trip everything was off. I couldn't focus on anything, and my mind was racing. It wasn't until my mom came into my room that I noticed she had been calling me downstairs for ten minutes.

“Emma dinner has been ready for ten minutes now...Are you okay hun? You look pale.” She slowly walked towards me.

“Yeah mom. Just a little tired. I had a long day.” She stood in front of me, and placed a hand on my forehead.

“Emma you’re burning up. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah. Really I’m okay. What's for dinner?” I swing my legs over the side of my bed to stand up, but the moment I stand up my mind swirls. I fall over landing on my side. I look up and reach for my wastebasket in front of me. It feels like I throw up mostly everything in my stomach, because afterward I feel weak and shaky.

“Emma! That's it. Back to bed for you, and I will call the doctor tomorrow.” She wraps one arm around my waist, and pulls my arm over her shoulder with the other.”Lucas! Can you come here?” I hear my dad’s footsteps run up the stairs as my mom places me back into my bed.

“What is it Elise?” He walks into the room, and when he sees me his eyes go sad. “Oh no Emma. My poor baby girl is sick.”

“Dad...” I say weakly. “I’m almost 16.”

“I know. I know.” He laughs. “But you’ll always be my baby girl.”

“Lucas do you think you’ll be able to take off tomorrow?” My mom asks. “I have this super important meeting I have to be at.”

“Of course my love. Now lets let our girl get some rest. I’ll make sure to clean your bucket, and bring it back in case you need it Emma.”

“Thanks dad. Love you both.”

“We love you too.” I fall asleep almost instantly after they leave.

The next morning.

Around 10 I was woken up by twenty texts from Riley. All asking where I was, and if I was dead. God love her. I texted her back with a quick explanation.

Emma: Good and alive. Got sick last night. Hopefully will be back tomorrow.

Riley: Whoo! Feel better. It’s weird like 3 other people from the trip yesterday aren’t here either.

Emma: That is weird.

Riley: Anyways Miss Jackson is stalking down the desk aisle so I have to go. Text you later. <3

Emma: Later 😊

After that my dad tried to bring me soup, but I wasn't hungry. After 5 minutes of arguing he left, and I turned on a documentary to distract myself from my stomach. It kind of helped that I fell asleep right after I turned it on though.

6 Hours Later

The next time I woke up it was about 4 o'clock. I woke up to the sound of knocking at the door.

"Hey Em." My dad called. "Gwen's here, and she refuses to leave until she sees you. She's got a care package."

Gwen is the best.

"Come in" I say. My dad opens the door and Gwen walks in.

"Hey sicko." She smiles, and sets a bag on my desk.

"Aren't you worried about getting sick?" I ask.

"It's all good. I got my flu shot."

"That's the thing Gwen. I don't think it's the flu. Yeah it feels like that, but yesterday after the tests I passed out."

"You what? Have you told your parents?"

“No. I didn't think it was that big of a deal. I didn't want to cause a panic if it was nothing.”

“A few other people weren't in class today, and some said they weren't feeling well. You don't think-”

“That's not possible.” I interrupt. “They are health evaluators. They are safe. Right?”

“I sure hope so.” She says looking down. “Anyways. I've got a few things for you. Aloe socks, clean scented candles, tea, and a long set of chick flicks.”

“I love how you know sick me.” I smile as she hands me the tea.

“What are best friends for?” We both laugh. “By the way, Dan asked about you today.”

“He did.” I look up a little too hopeful. I quickly retreat my focus back to my tea before she can notice.

“Yeah. He wanted to ask about your study session this afternoon. I told him you were sick, and he gave me these.” She pulls out some notes, and hands them to me.

“Oh thanks.” I take them, and slightly smile.

“Plus he wanted to know if you were alright of course.” She says.

“Oh that was sweet.”

“Yeah he is a nice guy. A lot better than most guys at our school.” She says. I slightly blush.

God what are you doing Emma? Since when have you cared? Of course he wouldn't like you like that. He is simply your friend. You're not exactly miss attractive.

“Stop that.” Gwen says.

“What?” I ask.

“You have your doubtful thinking face on. Whatever your hating yourself over. Stop.”

“Sorry.” I apologize.

“Now let's get this movie marathon started.” She puts the first DVD in the player.

“Fair warning. I’ll most likely fall asleep.” I laugh.

“Puh-leeze you are you. You can't stand to miss a good story.” We both laugh, and settle in.

“No. No I can't.” I quietly say to myself.



I wake up once again to the beeping of my alarm... barely. When I open my eyes, I feel like I was risen from the dead. And when I stand up, I feel like I was hit by a Mack truck. The clock reads 7:00AM which means I literally slept through my alarm for a half an hour. I shake my head and stumble into my closet. After getting dressed, I head downstairs. My dad has already left, Danny and Cole are sitting on the couch, eating cereal and watching cartoons while my mom pours herself a cup of coffee. "You're up late," Mom says. She holds up a mug. "Want some coffee?"

I rub my eyes with the sleeves of my hoodie. "In an IV."

Mom nods and sets the mug down, pulling out a larger one from the cupboard. "How late were you up last night?"

"Eight Thirty..." I say with a shake of my head. When have I *ever* gone to bed that early?
"Please tell me it's still 2056."

~ ~ ~

By the time I sit down in my first class, I'm about 90% human again thanks to about a gallon of coffee. I'm surprised I'm not vibrating out of my chair. "Nice fashion statement, Woods," someone says as they walk past me to their desk. I look down at my shirt to find it inside out. *Wonderful...*

By second period, the buzz has worn off, my shirt has been turned right-side-out again and I feel completely normal. I slide into my seat in Ms. Jackson's History class, next to Riley. Part of the way through class, I notice Emma's desk is empty, so I lean over to Riley and ask, "Where's Emma?"

"Got sick..." she whispers back. "Along with like, three other people from our field trip."

"Really? There must be something going around."

Riley shrugs. "I don't know... No one else in school seems to be missing."

I shake my head. "I'm sure it's nothing. Maybe they caught something on the bus yesterday."

"Yeah, that's probably it."

~ ~ ~

I'm sitting on my bed studying when someone knocks on my door. "Come in." It opens and Cole slips through, closing it quietly behind him. "What do you want?"

He looks over at me and acts slightly surprised to see me. "Oh, hey Cuz." I roll my eyes. *Nice act.* He shoulders his backpack and heads for my window.

"What do you think you're doing?" I say, standing up and walking closer to him.

"I'm going out to meet some friends."

"Friends? You've been here a day. How could you possibly have friends yet?"

He shrugs. "I guess I'm just popular. People like me." *Oh, really?* He slides the window open and the cold air sends a shiver through my body. I wrap my robe tighter around my already cold body.

"We have a front door you know," I say, agitated.

"Aunt Jen is down there. Did you know we have a curfew? So lame."

"I don't have a curfew. She must have set one special for you," I tease.

"Are you serious?"

I grin. "No, I have one too. I just never have anywhere to be, so it doesn't really affect me."

He purses his lips. "Hilarious." He swings one leg outside. "Hey, you wouldn't mind covering for me, would you?"

"Why on earth would I cover for you?"

"Because the alternative is telling on me and getting me in trouble when I just got here and you really don't want to be *that* person do you? We're supposed to be getting along," he says with an exaggerated nod. "And I'm sure I'll find someway to get you back if you decide to be a snitch."

"Black mail?" I say as another shiver courses through me, more severe this time.

"Maybe..."

"You owe me one. *Big* time."

"Thanks," he says with a cocky smirk as he swings his other leg to the outside. "Oh, and remember to leave your window unlocked so I can get back in. Later." Then he disappears from view.

I blow a forced breath out of my nose and slide the window closed again. Then a thought hits me and I click the lock closed. "Oops... Did I forget to leave it unlocked? My bad."

~ ~ ~

My night goes downhill from there. What I thought had just been a chill in the January air causing me to be colder than usual turns into five blankets piled on top of me, curled up in a ball under the covers, shivering uncontrollably. I fade in and out of consciousness until I look at the clock, which reads *2:00AM*. A growing sense of nausea sends me stumbling out of bed towards the trashcan, but when I make it there, it never peaks and slowly begins to subside. So eventually I grab the trashcan and slowly make my way back to my bed, but before I make it there, I'm hit with a horrible shiver and a wave of faintness, which sends me to the floor, the room spinning and my forehead covered in cold sweat. *I think I'm dying...* I'm hit with another wave of nausea and crawl my way into the bathroom, but it subsides again.

Then in an instant, everything snaps back into focus. I'm no longer dizzy, I'm not nauseous in the slightest and for the first time in hours, I stop shivering. I take a deep breath and pull myself shakily up to the counter to splash my face with water. *I'm over the worst of it*, I decide. But when I look up at my reflection, at my paper white face... orange fox-like eyes stare

back at me. I let out a gasp and stumble away from the counter. But the horror that courses through my body is short lived, because before I can even process what I'm seeing, I black out.



Jinx had passed through the past week in a complete daze. Ever since he had woken up from that terrible medical chair, he had felt like his brain had slowed down, like it was fried, a slog of oatmeal in his head. His classes were foggy dreams, his mind constantly drifting off to nowhere in particular. He flunked an English test after staring at it for the entire period, forgetting to place a single mark on the paper. He was thankful that the truck was broken, now, because he didn't trust himself not to drift off while driving.

Maybe I have a concussion, he thought to himself as he sat at the kitchen table, clutching a mug of tea like a lifeline. His father had left for work, leaving Jinx with the hot drink and instructions to go to bed early. His father thought that Jinx was just coming down with a cold. Jinx didn't want to worry him, but if this continued, he feared he'd have to go to the hospital. Had that medical chair messed with his brain? He hadn't known that they were going to knock him out when he had gone into it; if he had, he wouldn't have participated.

He thought back to when he had woken up, how he had regained consciousness like a dead man. For a moment, seated in the cold chair, he had feared that he had gone completely blind, because his good eye was clouded with dark spots. Little by little, it cleared, but not the

fogginess in his brain. Aaron has waved him away, cheerfully stating that the symptoms would fade soon. Jinx had felt so terrible that he had forgotten to tell Mr. Neil about what he had seen Neon do, or ask if anyone else was experiencing the symptoms.

Nearly a week had passed by now. Something was wrong.

Jinx hunched over in his chair and gritted his teeth as a wave of nausea punched him in the gut. This was fairly new, but he had felt sick to his stomach most of the day. It was getting worse, and now he feared that maybe he was dreadfully ill. With his father at work, he was going to be alone until the morning.

He closed his eyes, dreading a very unpleasant night to come.

The nausea came again, and Jinx pushed his chair back with shaky legs. He needed to get to the bathroom before he made a mess. But as he lurched to his feet, his good eye flooded with darkness once more, and the room jerked violently. His knees went weak, and Jinx flung out an arm in panic, trying to find the chair to balance himself. But it was too late. His strength gone, he collapsed heavily on his side, his head cushioned by his arms. He cried out in pain as his hip jarred with the tile floor.

The stabbing pain shifted from his stomach to his spine.

Oh God. I've broken something.

He lay on the ground, curled into himself in pain. His eyesight flickered in and out, the world spinning violently around him. His shoulders felt as if they were being wrenched from their sockets. Everything hurt.

He threw up.

I need to call 911. I'm dying, Jinx thought desperately to himself. His phone was still lying on the kitchen table. He tried to push himself to all fours, a guttural moan erupting from his lips as his joints screamed in pain. He collapsed once more, his vision gone completely.

As the pain grew more and more intense, as the world spun faster and faster, and as he felt himself starting to slip from consciousness, Jinx began to pray.

In his last moments of awareness, he felt something erupt from his back.

And then he was gone.



Here's to you, Mrs. Robinson...

I rolled over in bed and groaned, but all that came out of my mouth was a hoarse wheeze.
I swallowed.

Jesus loves you more than you will know, woah woah woah...

My goodness, did my head hurt. I propped myself up on my elbows and cupped my forehead in my hands.

God bless you please, Mrs. Robinson...

I was awfully warm. Great, a fever. I tossed my bed sheets off and reached towards my dresser to see if there was any water.

Heaven holds a place for those who pray -

"Dammit, Simon and Garfunkel!" I croaked. "Shut up!"

So much for setting your alarm at the other end of the room. It's a great technique to get yourself up in the morning, but right then getting out of bed was the last thing I wanted to do. In desperation, I buried my head in my pillow to muffle the music. I must've fallen back asleep, because a few minutes later my mom was nudging me awake.

"Charlotte, honey! It's late! What's wrong?"

"Mom..." I moaned. "Can you turn the alarm off?" *Mrs. Robinson* must have been on at least its third run.

She crossed the room and picked up my phone. "I don't know the password."

"You don't need the password. Just slide the thingy over."

A moment later, a sweet silence blessed the room. I sighed.

My mom placed her palm on my forehead. "Poor baby, you're burning up!"

Whenever I get a fever, my mom says that means no school for the next two days. This time, I would have to miss an English essay, a big history test, an important chemistry lecture, and... My mind reeled and throbbed at the same time, and I sank deeper into my pillow.

I spent the next hour in my bed trying to watch YouTube videos on my laptop. There *are* benefits to getting sick (doing whatever you want), and I was trying to take advantage of them, but this was a different kind of sick. I just felt so weak, so achy, so warm, so cold, and so miserable. In desperation, I shoved my laptop to the side and closed my eyes.

When I woke up again, it was three o'clock in the afternoon. I was still weak, but slowly I realized that I felt considerably better. *Thank God*. Both my parents were off at work, but my mom had left me a note on the counter in the kitchen saying there was chicken noodle soup in the microwave. I got myself a bowl and sat at the table to eat it. That's when things started getting a bit odd.

I ate the soggy carrots. Fine. The celery. Fine, too. The noodles were delicious, and my stomach was happy. Until I swallowed a chunk of chicken. After that I was lucky to have made it to the trashcan.

Chicken noodle soup - especially the "chicken" part - didn't seem very appetizing anymore.

I decided to be a conscientious invalid and take out the trash in the kitchen. I was feeling fine, after all. I just really didn't want to eat any more chicken. I made my way through the garage and to the side of the house, the trash bag slung over my back like Santa's sack of toys (you have to make chores fun), and was about to lift the lid off of the bin when I was startled by a piercing noise from next door. I yelped, dropped the trash bag, and scurried back into the garage, shutting the door behind me.

Within a few moments my brain caught up with my instincts and promptly informed me that that "piercing noise" I had heard was Jade. The friendly Australian Shepherd next door. Barking.

Now, I'd be the first one to admit that I'm a skittish person. I shy away from scary things like clowns, dark rooms, the ocean, and footballs. But dogs? No way. That's Gwen's job. Something weird was going on with me, although at the time I didn't think much of it. So what? I didn't feel like eating chicken and Jade's bark scared me a little.

After all, I was sick. When you're sick, you aren't yourself.



I sit down at the kitchen table. "Hey, thanks for leaving the window unlocked last night."

"Cole, I'm not in the mood," Layla says from across the table.

"You locked me out of the house. It was 25 degrees outside. I had to pick the lock on the back door. I thought your dog was going to attack me."

Layla looks down at the German Shepherd, who sits patiently by the table, hoping for a scrap of bacon. "Good boy."

"Is this funny to you?" I ask. "You locked your window again on purpose, didn't you?"

Layla sighs and sets down her mug of tea. "Is that really so surprising? You threatened to blackmail me if I didn't let you sneak out, *through my window* after curfew to go god knows where. You said yourself we're supposed to be getting along. You're not off to an overly good start."

I look around for Aunt Jen, then lower my voice. "Okay, maybe I shouldn't have snuck out last night. But you don't lock someone out of the when it's 25 freaking degrees outside."

"Cole, can we *please* talk about this later. I told you I'm not in the mood," she says, resting her head on her hand.

"What, are you sick or something?"

"Something like that," she grumbles.

"What are your symptoms? 'Cus I really don't want to catch something from you."

"I feel like I was hit by a truck, okay? Get out of my face." She shoves the chair away from the table and slowly climbs the stairs. *And I thought she was normally grumpy. Sick Layla brings it to a whole new level.*

+ + +

"Well that's just *fantastic*!" Riley says, slapping her phone down on the lunch table.

I slide into the seat across from her, setting my tray down on the table. "What's fantastic?"

Riley seems a little startled by my presence, unsure of what she thinks of me sitting at her table... or what she thinks of me in general. "Oh... Hey."

"Hey. What's fantastic?"

She sighs. "The guitar player in my band, Stint With Fiction, broke his hand playing Skee Ball."

"How do you break your hand playing Skee Ball?"

She shakes her head and rolls her eyes. "Don't get me started... *Anyway*... We're supposed have a gig next week, but we can't exactly play without a guitar player."

I shrug. "I play the guitar... I could fill in for awhile."

"I don't know..." Riley's gaze wanders over to a few books sitting next to her backpack, one of which is her journal.

"Look, I'm sorry for taking your Journal. Curiosity got the best of me, I guess. Kind of a habit to stick my nose into stuff."

"That's not a good enough excuse."

"What's in the journal anyway?" I ask. She glares at me and I put my hands up. "Okay, okay... I won't ask again..."

"I'm not sure how I feel about the idea of you being in my band after what you did," she admits.

"Well, I'm not saying we have to be friends. You don't even have to trust me. You need a guitar player and I have a guitar. It's as simple as that."

She sighs. "Alright... Come by the music room after school and I'll listen to you play. Under *one* condition... You promise to never go through my stuff or take my journal again. And I'm not agreeing to anything yet, okay?"

I smirk a little. "Got it."

"And whatever you do, don't play Stairway to Heaven."

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I sit on a stool in the music room with my red Fender electric guitar, playing 'You Give Love A Bad Name' by Bon Jovi. Seemed like a fitting electric guitar song. My fingers move up and down the fret board, the notes echoing out through the amp sitting next to me. When I strike the

last chord, I know I aced it. But when I look up, Riley just stands there with a skeptical look on her face and her arms crossed over her chest. "So... What do you think?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Not bad..." I can't help but let out a laugh. I know I was good. She's just doesn't want to admit it. "Alright... Under the unfortunate circumstances, I'll let you play in the band. But if I so much as see you near my backpack, you're out. Got it?" I give her a nod, and stand up, placing my guitar back in it's case. "Where'd you get such a nice guitar, anyway?"

"I stole it." Riley widens her eyes. I laugh. "Kidding. You may find this hard to believe, but I've had a job or two before. I saved up for it."

She gives me a skeptical look, but all she says is, "We usually practice before school. Meet me here tomorrow at 7AM. Don't be late."

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When I come in the front door, Aunt Jen is standing at the kitchen counter. "Hey, Cole. Did you have a good day?"

"Yeah, it was pretty good. Thanks." I shrug my backpack off and lay it by the front door.

"Come here for a second." She holds up a spoon with batter on it. "Have you ever had Banana Bread before?"

"Dunno... Doubt it," I say with a shrug.

"Obviously this is just the batter, but it'll give you an idea."

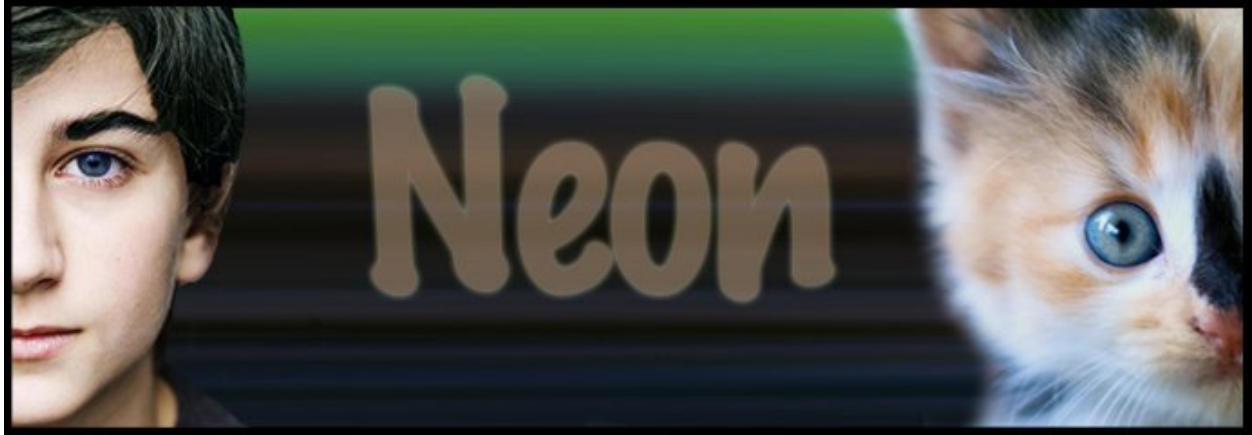
I take the spoon and give it a lick and I'm taken aback by the flavor. "This is literally the greatest thing I've ever eaten."

Aunt Jen dips her finger in the batter and tastes it. "Hmm... I think it could use another banana. Mind mashing one up for me while I run to the bathroom?"

"Yeah sure," I say, but I barely acknowledge her words. I'm overwhelmed by the smell, the taste. I grab a banana out of the bowl, and I completely forget what I was doing. Something comes over me... something primal. I rip the peel of the banana off with my teeth and sink my teeth into the fruit underneath.

It's only when Aunt Jen comes back a minute later and I've devoured half the banana that I'm snapped out of it and back into reality. "Cole... What are you doing?"

I look at her, then at what's left of the banana. I wipe banana mush from my mouth with the sleeve of my shirt. "Umm... Sorry. I was starving. I gotta go." I leave the banana on the counter and run up the stairs. *What the heck was that? Did I just rip a banana apart with my teeth? What's wrong with me?*



Neon dashed down the halls like a bullet, stopping for no one. He weaved nimbly between the larger students, his red scarf flicking like a fiery serpent. In his hand, he clutched a book that he had forgotten in his locker.

The students began to pack out of the hallway, walking into class as Neon skimmed by. Once, he'd been offered a spot in the track team, and had responded by saying that exercise was for minions.

The hallway was empty now, the door at the end slowly creaking its hinge. Neon leaped sideways through the doorway, rolling as he hit the floor inside his classroom. The bell rang as he sprang lithely to his feet.

"Ah," his English teacher harrumphed good-naturedly, shutting the door. "I'll get you one of these days, Kingsley." Mr. Poe's eyes glinted with amusement behind his spectacles.

Neon smiled, pointing at him imperiously. "I sincerely doubt it." Tossing the twin tails of his scarf over his shoulder, he began to walk back to his desk.

"Now then, who wants to read today's script?"

Neon walked backwards back up to the board. "Me," he declared immediately.

“Excellent, we have a male lead! Any females?”

Nobody raised their hands. A few nervous glances were cast around, seeing if any other person had volunteered, if one would be chosen randomly. Neon smirked. This was how it always was. Half were uninterested, the other half were cowards. He was the lone-

“I’ll do it.” A brown-haired girl looked up from her desk. Scribbling the end of a sentence in her journal, she got up and strutted towards the front.

Neon gazed at her as she neared, uninterested. “Well, now. Don’t be surprised if you’re outshined by my stunning-”

The girl looked him in the eyes. It was Riley, with that cocky smile and piercing blue gaze that matched his own.

He forgot himself for a moment, stammering. “U-uh...yeah. Prepare to be defeated!” he said, a bit too loudly.

Mr. Poe chuckled. “I don’t think there’ll be much defeating going on today, Neon.” He tapped the book he held in his hand indicatively.

Neon looked down at the book he had been carrying. He’d never stopped to read it, but now the title was unmistakable. *Romeo and Juliet*.

Mr. Poe sat down, leaning his spindly elbows on his desk. “Since we’ll be starting such a famous play this week, I thought you might regale us with one of your performances.” He raised his fragile hands to hide a smirk.

Riley cocked her head. “Fine by me,” she said, walking to opposite Neon.

Curses, Neon seethed. *I was careless. No matter.* He regarded his expectant audience, and his spry teacher. *I’ll turn this around with the greatest Mercutio ever known!*

“Ah.” Mr. Poe leafed through the pages. “Well, let’s start with a famous scene to get the mood just right. Turn to Act Two, Scene Two, everyone. Neon, you’re Romeo; Riley, you’re Juliet.” A great rustling of papers was the audience’s courtesy clap.

Crap... Neon's heart sank, along with his advantage.

“Now then,” his teacher said, eyes glinting with a trickster’s malice, “whenever you’re ready.”

Neon held his script and tried not to tremble. “Ahem,” he cleared his throat. He caught Riley’s eye as he drew breath. She seemed intrigued, almost...eager, for him to speak.

He grinned. He knew exactly what to do with her.

“She speaks,” he said, throwing himself into his role. In a flash, his demeanor changed, his movements becoming sharper and prouder. He gazed at Riley as he spoke, pouring passion into his words. “O, speak again, bright angel, for thou art as glorious to this night, being over my head, as is a winged messenger of heaven.” He continued, making his voice irresistibly soft, yet clouded with a dreamy desire. This was a battlefield, and there was only one way to claim victory.

To make Riley West fall in love with him.

“O Romeo, O Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?” Riley asked earnestly. Her eyes began to shine with the excitement of performance. Neon could use that. “Deny thy father and refuse thy name. Or, if thou wilt not, be but my sworn love, and I’ll no longer be a Capulet.”

Neon had to give her credit; she was an impressive performer. But nowhere near the level of a conqueror. “I take thee at thy word,” he said, drawing closer. “Call me but love, and I’ll be new baptized. Henceforth, I shall never be Romeo.”

Riley seemed to waver a bit, a hint of pink in her expression. Neon smiled. He had the upper hand.

They continued through the scene, two opponents wearing the masks of lovers, the tips of their tongues sharpened for battle. Neon had to admit that his heart skipped a few beats as Riley clasped at her chest, delivering her lines with a delicate sincerity. The audience seemed drawn in as well by their performance.

Riley seemed to grow softer, more affectionate, as she was subconsciously pulled into the role of Juliet. Neon grinned. It was time to end this charade.

“I have night’s cloak to hide me from their eyes. And, but thou love me, let them find me here.” His voice grew deeper, conviction flooding forth as he moved closer. No more than two feet away, he gazed into her eyes with all the love he could muster. “My life were better ended by their hate, than death prorogued, wanting of thy love.”

On the last words, he reached under her chin, tilting it up to hold her beautiful blue gaze. Neon gave Riley a wry smile, letting his dark hair and bright eyes culminate into something irresistible. He saw her cheeks flush, and a wave of triumph cascaded over him. He had conque-

“Thou knowest the mask of night is on my face. Else would a maiden blush bepaint my cheek, for that which thou hast heard me speak tonight.”

Da-dump.

Heat shot up Neon’s neck as Riley continued. *What’s going on?* he thought, placing a hand over his chest to find his heart pattering quickly. *Is this fear?*

“O gentle Romeo,” Riley said, moving closer, “if thou dost love me, pronounce it faithfully. Or,” she added, drawing back sternly, “if thou thinkest I am too quickly won, I’ll

frown and be perverse and say thee nay.” She pouted as she said this, crossing her arms over her chest.

Adorable- No! Shut up! Neon buried his crimson cheeks in his scarf. He’d been careless again. Something had changed since yesterday; his thoughts were far too slow, and his heart outpaced his mind.

“I should have been more strange, I must confess.” Riley had the classroom’s full attention now, captured in every dainty movement of her body. Neon’s face heated up further, hot needles of embarrassment prickling down his back. His cocky posture faded into something shy and timorous.

“But that thou overheard’st ere I was ware, my true-love passion,” said Riley, leaning forward, looking into Neon’s eyes. Her delicate fingers rested on his shoulder, burning at the touch.

Neon’s heart thumped erratically, his confidence quickly melting away. One hand clutched at his scarf as he tried to regain himself. He was a conqueror! He and Riley were duelists of words, intricately crossing their tongues- wait, no!

“Therefore, pardon me,” Riley said, her voice barely more than a whisper. The softness of it curled into Neon’s ears, setting his mind aflame. Their faces were mere inches away. Riley’s eyes were glazed over with the love of Juliet. Neon began to feel dizzy as his blood came to a boil.

“And not impute this yielding to light love, which the dark night hath so discovered,” Riley finished, smiling like the sun. And seemingly just for show, she giggled and added, “My Romeo.”

Neon was ablaze with fiery red. He stumbled backwards, his act dropping completely. “R-riley...” he stuttered, his heart bursting from his chest.

Riley gazed dreamily back at him, her enticing words hanging in the air. Neon tried to rally his thoughts, to no avail. *I...haven't lost yet!* he declared.

Just then, his brain overheated, and he collapsed backwards into the sultry darkness.

Neon jolted awake, sitting upright. The white linen beds of the nurse's office bade him good morning.

“Did you sleep well?” Neon turned his head to see Mr. Poe sitting in a chair next to his bed. The man gripped a copy of *Romeo and Juliet* in his hands, wringing his wrists.

“Like a king,” the boy replied, stretching his shoulders. The drowsiness shook from his body, and he grinned. “It appears that I’ve taken a successful nap in your class, sir. I’ve outwitted you yet again!”

“So it would seem.” Mr. Poe chuckled, looking a little embarrassed.

Neon yawned loudly. “How long was I out?”

Mr. Poe tilted his spectacles down to glance at his watch. “About two hours. It’s lunch break right now.”

“Hah! I even skipped third and fourth period! This petty school has no hold on me!”

Neon clenched his hand, reveling in the power.

The thin, fragile man pushed his glasses up, glancing away. “Well, it’s good to see that you’re intact.” He broke off, looking unsure whether to continue. “The nurse couldn’t find much wrong with you - she even said you might have fainted out of exhaustion.” He stared down miserably. “It was deplorable of me to put you under so much stress. If I’d-”

“Don’t worry about it,” Neon said, clasping his hands behind his head. “It’s not your fault. I’ve been off my conquering lately; that’s why I haven’t beaten you yet.”

Relief broke upon the old man’s face. “Then rest well, and I’ll see you in class.” Getting up, he walked out of the infirmary, shutting the door behind him.

Neon sighed out softly, leaning back. Perhaps, on a day like this, it was best to get some rest.

His stomach gave a low growl in protest. Neon rolled his eyes and jumped out of bed, heading for the cafeteria. Rest was for the weak, anyway.



I jogged swiftly through the halls on my way to the gym, quietly humming the tune of the song we had been rehearsing. I had been practicing it so much I wasn't allowed to sing it in the house anymore.

I was mostly mindful of my family and tried not to annoy them too much when practicing a song, but this gig was more important than most. It was an audition for a annual Battle of the Bands sponsored by a local radio channel.

The last band that won had received a lot of public recognition after that, and this year I was determined to come out victorious, and come one leap closer to world fame.

I started singing softly as I trotted through the halls, imagining the bright lights of the stage, the thrill of performance...

I was jerked from my daydream when I bumped into something solid. "Umph." I grunted, backing up and brushing stray hairs away from my face.

"Sor-Oh." I said when I saw who I had just ran into.

I grinned "Hey, Neon."

I don't remember the heater being on in here...

"Always a pleasure to run into you," I batted my eyelashes playfully. "My Romeo."

Neon drew himself up and gave me an imperious look, which was somewhat compromised by the fact that he was blushing furiously. I bit back a laugh.

"Gloat while you can, Riley West!" He declared, puffing out his chest and pointing dramatically at me.

He seemed to be a fan of pointing.

"The next time we meet, I will claim victory! You have my word!"

I looked up at him from under my eyelashes, smirking good naturedly.

"I shall count the seconds." I joke softly before tossing the hair out of my eyes and striding into the gym, leaving Neon alone in the hall. I let the door close behind me, then burst out laughing. I had no idea why, but Neon's reaction to my teasing was hilarious to me. And, admittedly, a little adorable too.

"What's up with you?" Cole asked. I shook my head, refusing to answer. Still grinning, I bounded up the steps onto the stage.

The other band members joined me, and began playing the well-known intro that we had been rehearsing for the past three days.

I inhaled deeply and soon the words flowed smoothly from my lips. A low, confident, crooning melody.

But something seemed to be off. A few times I noticed my concentration slip, or my legs quiver.

Jitters. I dismissed. A common problem performers must face. It never lasted long.

And that was when the dizziness started. one moment I felt completely fine, the next I felt as if I were floating. I stopped singing, resisting the urge to look down to make sure my feet were still on the floor. Again, another bout of light headedness swept over me. The world began to swim and I blinked rapidly.

"Riley? You okay?" A band member inquired nervously. They had stopped playing now and his voice echoed around the empty room.

"Y-yeah...I think..." I breathed weakly.

My legs buckled under me and I toppled off the stage. The last thing I saw was the floor rushing up to meet me before everything was lost in an explosion of darkness.



It was the night after the field trip when Michael was feeling odd. Like the flu odd, with the different arrayment of stomach aches and sudden headaches, along with his siblings fighting. He decided to take a nap soon as he came home, resulting in a two day sleep and when he was finally awake, was greeted with the stress of his parents. His household seemed on the brink of depression and stress. His mother would head down to take a nap while he was in charge of looking over the two wild ones, who completely ignored his pleas to calm down and enjoy the brunt pizza he had made.

Later on in the night, when his mother was awake, Michael was ordered to complete dinner while she rest on the chair in the lounge. He argued points about the stove being dirty from the pizza but was cut off by the waving hand of his mother.

"Just make some left-overs."

"There aren't any leftovers!" he stated, putting his arms over his head. His sister gave him a funny look before poking at the brunt pizza. His brother was staring fondly at the TV with a X-box control in his hand, while sounds of guns and cars hung in the room. Michael sighed residing to the kitchen, standing before walking towards the fridge. He could hear the soft gun shooting

on the TV and his mother talking to his sister. A sudden ping mumbled in his head, echoing off his brain and into his skull, while he shook off the pain. It continued to bounce around in his head like an idea before fading into his skull.

He groaned, walking out of the kitchen down the hallway, and into his bedroom. No one seemed to notice, as he turned from side to side holding his stomach. The TV out in the lounge, seemed to be louder than before and all the lights in the house seemed brighter. Michael turned on his side, clenching his stomach as his head pounded like a drum.

Later on he had fallen asleep, woken up by someone shaking him. It was his mother who had brought in some soup, putting it on the bedtable. She turned on the light and poked his side, which earned a sleepy chuckle before shaking him.

"Hmm?" Michael sheepishly said, rubbing his eyes with the palms of his hands.

"You seem a little off, Michael. What's up?" She grabbed the soup and handed it to Michael. He took it, prodding the surface until it had formed ripples.

"Just some headaches now and then. Nothing too big."

"You stumbled out of the kitchen into your bedroom, Michael." She put a hand on his forehead and sighed. She sat up from the bed, and walked to the door. Michael was happily slurping at his spoon, raising the silver spoon up to his lips and drinking thoughtfully. His mother once again sighed, walking out the room and down the hallway. Later on, Michael was finished with his soup and decided on doing his homework which was studying the brain patterns of certain animals and compare them to that of humans. It was simple until he fell asleep, slobbering on his arm.

His mother went to check on him, taking his soup bowl and covering him with a blanket. She felt his head again as it was hot enough to cook eggs.

"I'll have to call the doctor tomorrow," she mumbled, walking out into the hallway before stopping in the doorway. "Sleep tight, Michael." And shut off the light.

The next morning, Michael awoke with a massive migraine and popping ears. He groaned, planting two feet on the ground. His laptop was opened to the page of homework he had and decided to close it, as he wouldn't be doing it for a little while. He wanted to research something that taken the life of his father and grandfather. It was touchy as well as annoying, since it ran in the family along meaning Michael could have it or not.

He quietly searched as he heard the cartoons were turned on meaning both his siblings were up for the morning. Words danced on the screen along with pictures of people and websites explaining the symptoms Michael had.

The migraine returned along with a continuous buzzing in his ears. He groaned, closing his laptop lid and going back to sleep. He had only hoped he didn't have a brain tumor, or worse. Everything changed after that stupid trip to M.E.L labs, and even before in Mr. Neil's class, he hadn't felt the same.

He fell asleep a few minutes later when his mother had called him for breakfast.



I chuckled helplessly along with several others as Neon blushed more and more. He tried to hide it in his scarf, but it was still easily visible. While no one knew for sure about Neon's crush on Riley apart from me, after today, most would have probably guessed it. I immediately stopped laughing when Neon fell to the ground unconscious. I jumped up and ran to the front of the class.

I looked anxiously at Mr. Poe and said, "We should get him to the Nurse's office!" Mr. Poe nodded, looking shocked, and told a couple of other boys to help me get Neon the Nurse's office.

Leaving Neon in the capable hands of Nurse Johnson, I went back to class, but Mr. Poe wasn't in a state to continue teaching, so he gave us a free period. So, I just did some homework, wishing fervently that Emma was there. She and I sometimes had good conversations at times like this.

The rest of the periods passed in a blur until Biology where I was once again struck by the lack of students. I remembered the dream I had had. *Did the MEL do something to us? And was my dream real? All these people coming down with illness is very suspicious...* But I pushed those thoughts to the back of my mind. *It couldn't have been real. It was too weird to have been real.* but I knew that I was just trying to convince myself.

Still, I repressed those thoughts and did my best to focus on class. After Mr. Neil had taken attendance, he said, "Since there are only six of you today, I will only do a reading of the chapter and not any explanation as such." and proceeded to just that. His lack of concern about the absentees was unsettling. He acted like none of it surprised, or even like he had expected it.

Six absentees, some absent for a while no, and he acts like it's normal. Something weird is going on, and I have got to figure out what it is. After class I went up to Gwen and gave her notes to give Emma from other classes we shared, so she didn't miss anything. I also requested her to give me updates on how she's doing.

"Okay, okay!" Gwen replied in mock annoyance. "Unless she's taken a turn for the worse since yesterday, she's fine! But don't worry, I'll send you an email like I do everyday."

"Thanks." I replied with a grin.

Gwen grinned back and said, "No problem. Oh, and she thinks you're sweet for caring so much, and she said to say thank you."

"N-no problem." I replied stutteringly, feeling myself start to blush. *She thinks I'm sweet. Maybe I do have a chance after all...* And I was lost in daydreams about becoming Emma's boyfriend for the entire bus ride home.

A couple of hours later, I had convinced myself to act rationally and not jump to conclusions about her feelings for me. But I still waited anxiously by my laptop, waiting for the momentous email that always came around that time. I nearly screamed with joy when Gwen's email about Emma's condition finally arrived, and I opened it with bated breath.

The email's subject was "The Poor sick Girl..." and in it was photograph of Emma sitting up on her bed, her legs under the covers, a huge bowl of popcorn on her lap. She was smiling and waving at the camera. I grinned, amused.

Well, at least she's doing alright. But thoughts about Emma falling sick stirred deeper thoughts. Someone from my Biology class was falling sick every day or two. It was too much of a coincidence. *Could the MEL have had something to do with this?* And that brought up more thoughts about my dream, which seemed more and more like it could be real. My mind was messed up with those thoughts for the rest of the day while I tried to figure out what exactly was happening, right until it was time for bed.

Suddenly, I woke up in cold sweat. I had had a strange dream which I couldn't recall. I looked at the clock on my bedside table and was astounded by what I saw. everything was close up My eyes could see everything in excellent detail!

Woah, have I developed superpowers? I got up and stumbled to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Then I screamed. Or well, I tried to, but all that came out was a small, shocked squawk. In the mirror, I saw that my head had disappeared, and in its place was a dark brown eagle's head! I stumbled backward and tripped over a shoe that I had stupidly left on the floor, and I fell back, my head rushing to meet the bathroom floor. My last thought before I lost consciousness was *Am i losing my mind?*



3 days away from school, and I'm going insane. Thankfully Dan's notes are somewhat keeping me on track, but at this point I need to get back as soon as possible. Today has been so much better. I am able to get out of bed, my fever has gone down, and I haven't gotten sick for over 24 hours. Gwen is a miracle worker, but I still fear that she is going to get sick too.

Gwen and I are in the middle of a board game when my mom gets the call about Riley. It all happens so fast. The rushing out of the house, the long car ride, the heavy breathing. You know that feeling of falling? When your stomach goes to your lungs. That's what this feels like. I've known about Riley's condition for awhile now, but it's never been a stop sign for her. It doesn't change who she is, or how she acts. In fact her condition has always made her a stronger person. Riley always takes care of me, so when I get news like this it almost doesn't feel real.

When we arrive at the hospital I don't wait for mom and Gwen to catch up. I head straight for the waiting room, and I don't look back. Along the way I almost run into a familiar face.

Cole?

Why is he here?

No time for questions now. I rush up to the desk, and take a moment to catch my breath.

“Hello. I’m here to see Riley West.”

“Are you family?” The young nurse asks as she types in the name on the computer.

“Well no, but-”

“Then you can't see her. I'm sorry. Only kin is allowed.” The nurse interrupts.

“No you can't do that!” I snap.

“Young lady. I suggest you go sit down. The only thing you can do for your friend right now is wait.” She snaps back.

“Emma?” I turn to see Riley’s mom come out of the double doors leading to the back.

“Mrs. West!” I run to her. “How Riley? Is she okay? What happened?”

“Emma. Emma calm down. She’s okay. I promise. The doctors honestly don't know what happened. They assumed it was her heart, but when they took some tests her vitals were okay. Improved even. They are honestly baffled as to why she passed out. She’s awake and okay. Just a little shaky. They decided to keep her for the rest of the afternoon for testing.” Mrs. West turned to the nurse right as my mom and Gwen walked through the waiting room doors. “If you want you can visit her real quick, but not for too long.”

“Okay.” I smile and follow Mrs. West through the double doors towards Riley’s hospital room. A nurse is taking her blood pressure when we reach the doorway. When Riley sees me her face instantly lights up.

“Emmy! Your up and alive!” She jokes.

“I could say the same for you. You scared the pee out of me.”

“My bad. I should have given you a heads up about the whole passing out thing.” She laughs. “Although I wish these people would release me. I can't stay this still this long. I feel fiiinnnee.” She calls after the nurse who leaves the room. I laugh.

“So what's new?” She asks. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better.” I say. “But you wanna know something strange. You know the new kid. Cole right? Yeah, he is out in the waiting room right now.”

“You're joking.” She laughs. “That's a good one Em.”

“Dude I'm serious.” I reassure.

“Wait really? That's weird.”

“Just a bit.” I say.

“Oh yeah I forgot to tell you. He is kind of the new guitar player. Drew kind of broke his hand.” She shrugs.

“Wow. I'm gone three days and I miss everything.”

“Yeah. You kind of do. By the way I may have also made Neon pass out in English class.” I can't help but burst out in laughter.

“Are you kidding me?!” She starts laughing as well.

“Nope.” For the next twenty minutes Riley and I catch up on school, her crazy new boy situations, and even this huge gig the band had coming up. I didn't realize how much I missed her until today.

After our twenty minutes were up, the nurse kindly escorted me from the room. I told my mom about Riley, and we left the hospital. On our way home we dropped off Gwen, and grabbed some food from Al's Pizza. The first food I have kept down in 3 days.

Praise!

The first thing I do when I get home is head for the shower. I spend a good 15 minutes in there letting the hot water wash across my achy body. When I get out something strange happens. Feathers cover both of my arms. I stare at them in the mirror and try to brush them off but they don't budge.

The heck?!

I grip one of them between my fingers, and pull. It comes out in one swift motion, and I yelp in pain.

“You okay honey?” My mom calls from outside the bathroom door.

“Yeah mom....everything is fine...” I stare at my arms baffled.

Oh. My. God.

Everything is not fine.



I walk into the gym at 7AM sharp, just like Riley told me to. I'm rarely on time to anything, but for this, I figure I should try a little harder. Ironically, though, as I make my way up the stairs and onto the stage, I don't see Riley anywhere. *Seriously? You tell me to get to school an hour early when you're not even here yourself? Figures...*

The other band members greet me and shake my hand, then go back to preparing for practice. Hooking up amps, tuning instruments, checking microphones... I pull my electric guitar out of its case and sit down on one of the larger amps. I figure I might as well make sure it's in tune while I'm waiting. It's not like I've got anything better to do.

I've got five strings tuned when the door to the gym swings open and Riley comes in. *It's about time...* When the door clicks shut, she bursts out laughing.

I give her a look. "What's up with you?"

When she contains her outburst, she runs up the stage steps and just shakes her head at me, although she still has a huge smile on her face. I roll my eyes. *Silly girls...* Standing up, I pull the strap of my guitar over my shoulder and dig around in my pocket for a guitar pick.

One of the other band members comes over and sets a music stand in front of me. A paper with guitar chords scribbled on it sits in the tray. I give the guy a questioning look. "The chords for the song," he says. "Just until you have it memorized."

"I think I've got it... but thanks." *It's not like Riley gave me the chords for it yesterday or anything.*

The guy gives me a nod and walks back to his drum set. Riley looks back at us. "You ready?"

We all reply in agreement, casting glances around at each other. She gives us a nod and turns back to face the front. "One. Two. Three. Four..."

The song starts with just a quiet plucking of a single note from the bass player. Riley starts singing and I'm surprised at how good she sounds. So much so, that I almost miss my cue to join in. I catch it though, then the drums come in and before I know it we've got a full-blown song going on. A smile spreads over my face. *This is kinda cool...*

Then the music gets really loud. Like, window shaking loud. Barely able to stand it, I look over at the other band members, but they act as if nothing has changed. Then it quiets down to a reasonable level again. I shake my head, clearing it of the confusion and concentrate on the song again. *I don't know what they were worried about... This song is so easy...*

The sound explodes again, even louder than before, and I stop playing. It's deafening... crippling. *How are they not bothered by this?* A high-pitched ring echoes through my ears and I place my hands over my ears, hoping to make it stop. The music gets quieter, and then something else joins into the mixture of sounds. My heartbeat. It becomes so loud that it drowns out the music and it's all I hear. Overwhelmed by it all, I start to sink to the floor. Then I hear a *snap!*

and the heartbeat in my ears is gone. The ringing dissipates and the volume is back to normal again.

Looking around at the others, I realize none of them noticed me, which I'm thankful for. Had someone asked me what was wrong, I wouldn't be able to tell them. Because I have no idea. I complete the rest of the song with ease... no more issues or weird sounds, and I decide to write it off as lack of sleep. *Who voluntarily gets up at six-thirty in the morning?*

Riley looks back at us. "That was good, guys! Lets try out that intro we've been working on this week. I think it's just what the song needs." She turns back around and points to the bass player. "Hit it!"

They start playing once again, then the drums join in and Riley begins to sing. I find myself watching her again, which is the only reason I catch onto her change in expression. One second she's singing confidently at the mike like she did the first song, and the next her smile wavers and she presses her eyebrows down like something's bothering her. She shakes her head and tries to regain her previous show of confidence, but then her legs sway a little and she grips onto the microphone stand, cutting off the verse she was singing. One by one, the other kids in the band catch on and stop playing their instruments, the song abruptly being cut short. "Riley? You okay?" the base player asks.

"Y-yeah...I think..." Before she can finish her sentence, her legs buckle from under her and she falls off the stage. My jaw drops as I frantically pull my guitar off my shoulder, half setting it, half throwing it to the side. I fly down the stairs and am the first one to get to her.

"Riley... Riley..." I sit down next to her and pull her head into my lap, off of the cold, hard floor. Lightly tapping her cheek with the back of my hand, I continue to try and wake her.

"Riley... Riley!" Her head just falls to the side, out cold.

I shake my head. This isn't getting us anywhere. Looking up at the other band members, they just look on, frozen with wide eyes, unsure of what to do. As I start to stand up, I call back to them and say "Someone call 911." At once, they all scramble around like idiots looking for their phones.

I pull Riley up into my arms and hurry as quickly as I can out of the gym and towards the nurses office. *What the heck happened?*

+ + +

Looking at my watch, I see I've been sitting in the waiting room of the hospital for about fifteen minutes, with no signs of any doctors coming out with info. I *am* worried... definitely more than I expected to be... but I also can't help but be curious as to why she took a nose dive off the stage when the minute before she was fine.

Getting impatient, I head for the desk to try and get some info. But then an ambulance drives past the entrance with it's sirens blaring and it feels like my ear is literally pressed against the speaker. I stumble to the side, catching myself with my hand on the wall. I widen my eyes, feeling like my head is going to explode. When the ambulance passes, the sirens get quieter, but everything else around me is still *way* louder than it should be. Footsteps. Nurses typing on keyboards behind the counter. Conversations being had in a nearby room. I can hear it all with

crystal clarity. Then someone slams a car door and I'm snapped back out of it and everything is back to normal. *What is going on with me? I must be losing my mind...*

A woman hurries through the front door and heads for the counter. "I'm here to see a Riley West," she says.

"Are you family?" the nurse asks.

"I'm her mother."

The nurse nods and gets up from her seat. "Right this way." They disappear through the double doors of the E.R. and I head for the desk once again.

"Hey, do you have any information on Riley West?" I ask.

"Are you family?"

"Yes... I am. I'm her twin brother, Cole."

The nurse gives me a skeptical look. "Her file doesn't say she has a twin brother."

"Yeah, that's the thing..." I lean my elbow on the counter. "I'm sort of her *long lost* twin brother."

"Long lost twin brother?"

"Yeah... It's a long story. Our mom put me up for adoption. Riley was just so much of a *handful* she couldn't handle us both. And then there was a money issue and something with a firecracker and next thing you know she's shipping me off to Boston. It's all very sad.

Heartbreaking, really. I'm scarred for life. But we were reunited last year and it's like we were never apart. Glued at the hip, you could say. And you know, I just got her back and I'm *worried* about her."

"Uh huh..."

I give her an exaggerated sigh and look off in the distance. "I don't know what I would do if something happened to Riley. My dear, darling sister."

The nurse shakes her head. "I don't know how think I would believe a word you said... but your effort is amusing." She looks at me for a moment, then sighs. "All I'm going to say is that they're still running tests. Will you go away now?"

I give her an annoyed look and shuffle back into the waiting room and sit back down in one of the chairs. *Well, that wasn't worth the effort.*

+ + +

Another fifteen minutes of waiting, and Emma bursts through the doors of the waiting room, making a B-Line for the nurses desk. She stops for a moment when she sees me, and stares at me for a second, confused. I stare back, surprised to see her myself. Then she just shakes her head and rushes away, towards the desk. Of course now, when I *want* to hear better, I can't. I struggle to listen in, but it's no good until the nurse shakes her head and says something and Emma slaps her hand down on the counter and yells, "No, you can't do that!"

The nurse stands up and raises her voice. "Young lady. I suggest you go sit down. The only thing you can do for your friend right now is wait."

Then Mrs. West comes back through the double doors and Emma explodes with questions for her. Mrs. West puts her hands on Emma's shoulders to calm her. "Emma. Emma calm down. She's okay. I promise," she begins to explain. I lean closer to them. "The doctors honestly don't know what happened. They assumed it was her heart, but when they took some

tests, her vitals were okay. Improved even. She's awake and okay." Then they disappear through the double doors. *Her heart? Why would they think it was her heart?*

I shake my head and stand up. It sounds like she'll be alright and that was all I needed to hear, so I head for the doors. Just before I make it there, Neon barrels into the waiting room, scarf trailing behind him. "Where is she! Where is she!" He frantically looks around the waiting room, where he has successfully gotten the surprised attention of everyone inside. He looks up at me and narrows his eyes. "You... What are *you* doing here?"

"Calm down, squirt. Riley's fine. And you might as well save yourself some time and leave now. They're not letting anyone back there."

"Stay away from Riley! She's mine!" He pushes the flap of his scarf over his shoulder. "And don't call me squirt!"

I chuckle a little at his exasperation. "Okay, whatever you say, little man." I ruffle his hair with my hand on my way out the doors. "Later, squirt."



"Wuaaaaaaugh!" I moaned to Ryker, leaning my head back over the edge of the stage and letting my tongue loll out for added affect. "It was *soooo booooring!*"

Ryker smiled a little. "You were only there for an afternoon."

I gave him a meaningful look. "*Exactly.*"

"Oh you poor thing." Ryker grins sarcastically. Then he suddenly became serious. "So, what was it that made you pass out? Do you think it was..."

Ry tapped the spot over his heart.

I shrugged. "I thought so, but the doctor said my heart was fine. I'm as confused as you are, Ry." I said, throwing out an exaggerated shrug.

The bell rang and I turned myself upright and bounced down the stairs of the stage.

"Well, another day in Algebra. Hooray! See you later, Ry!"

I burst out into the hall and guess who was right outside the door?

Oliver Pascal.

And I practically slammed straight into his back.

He turned around, clearly surprised. He looked right at me, fixing me with those beautiful green eyes.

Oh, great going! what do I do now? I mean, should I say something? Gosh, what should I say to him? Just Hi? Or something else?...

I felt about a million degrees hotter than I did before, and then he spoke. His voice was as captivating as his eyes.

"Oh...Hi there."

I froze, opened my mouth in an effort to say something, closed it, and bolted down the hall in other direction.

My cheeks were still burning, and as I pelted down the hall, I scolded myself with every footfall.

Idiot! Idiot! Idiot!

I passed Cole on my way down the hall. He looked mad about something.

"Riley-" He started to say, but I pushed past him and kept running, shouting over my shoulder at him,

"NotNowGottaGoBye!"

I thrust into the Marmoset Man's classroom, among the first to arrive.

Mr. Monkey seemed surprised I was actually on time.

I had never been so happy to be in math class in my life.

.....

Cole sat at my table at lunch that day.

Wonderful. Oliver in the morning, Cole in the afternoon.

"Hey." I mutter, not looking up from my journal. I finished my sentence and closed the book just as he started to peer over my shoulder.

Cole shrugs.

"So, that guy in the hall."

I flushed a violent shade of red. No way was I talking about Oliver with this guy!

"You were at the hospital the other day." I said in an attempt to change the subject.

"Emma said she saw you in the waiting room."

"Yeah, I was there. But anyway, What-His-Chavez in the hall, the lanky kid."

"What were you doing there?" I asked pointedly.

"You realize he probably doesn't even know your name, right?"

I sighed. For whatever reason, Cole wasn't going to let this go.

"Why do you even care?" Was all I said before leaving to find Emma.

.....

I was taking books out of my locker for last period when someone bumped into me. It was just hard enough to make me drop my books and let me know it was on purpose.

Now, before I go on, I'd like to point out that I don't go around plugging *everyone* in the eye. But that day, I really, *really* wasn't in the mood to be picked on.

I collected my books, power-marched over to the guy who had pushed me, grabbed his shoulder, turned him around, punched him right in the face.

No questions.

No words exchanged.

The dude looked completely baffled. standing there with his mouth hanging half open.

My work done, I dropped the Mic, and stalked off to Biology.



Ryker sighed as he walked to his first class after talking to Riley. He was glad that she was back, and more than relieved that she was okay, but he couldn't seem to shake the feeling that something was off. What were the odds that after that field trip, more than half of the class had gone home sick, or were acting strange?

"They can't make us sit in those things! They're prototypes!"

Charlotte's concern from the day of the field trip came back to him, and Ryker stiffened. What if she had been right? What if something had been wrong with the medical chairs?

What if...what if they had caused them to fall ill?

He shook his head as he slid into his chair of his first class.

That's ridiculous. The scientists would never put kids into an unsafe situation.

He pulled out his math textbook and began scanning the lesson ahead, but his heart wasn't in it. He tried again to convince himself.

They would have tested the MICs a million times before we tried them. It has to just be a bug of some sort going around. The flu or something.

But why had it not spread to the rest of the school? Why was it only the field trip group who was falling like flies?

Ryker's breathing felt too shallow. He wasn't usually one to get paranoid about illness, but it seemed as if he was one of the last students in his class to be affected. Would he end up in the hospital too?

His math teacher started talking, and Ryker tried to focus, to distract himself. He tried to write down his notes, but his hand was shaking. He felt light-headed, dizzy.

He took a deep breath.

You're just freaking yourself out. Calm down.

But his breathing really did feel irregular. And his balance didn't feel quite stable anymore.

Maybe I should go get checked by the nurse, to prove that my fears are all in my head.

Yeah, that was a good idea. She'd take his temperature, check his heart and whatnot, and he'd go away feeling assured that nothing was wrong.

He pondered this for a moment more before raising his hand. His chest twinged.

"Yes, Ryker?"

"Uh," he stammered, his brain slow. How could he suddenly forget what he was going to say? "I...I don't feel very good."

The class murmured and those closest eyed him cautiously.

His teacher raised an eyebrow. "Do you need to go to the nurse?"

"Uh...yeah?"

Was it just him, or was his heartbeat terribly slow in his ears?

"I'll write you a pass. Do you need someone to walk with you?"

Ryker swayed in his seat. His head felt like it was stuffed with cotton.

"No," he heard himself saying. "I'll be okay."

His teacher nodded uncertainly and held up the slip of paper. "Okay. Go on then. Feel better soon."

Ryker reached for his backpack and stood slowly, feeling as if his every movement was in slow motion. His head was wrapped in fog. His heart beats were too far apart, too much silence between them.

Bum...ba...bum. Bum...ba...bum.

Maybe he actually needed the nurse, after all.

As his knees straightened, his dizziness peaked. He staggered forward, then caught himself. The fog cleared for a moment, and he swung his backpack up and around, sliding his other arm through.

His teacher watched him in concern, but let him take the pass and go out the doors. Ryker gripped the cold door knob tightly and focused on closing the door softly. This simple task required so much effort, and his eyes scrunched up in worry. Something was wrong.

The click of the door met his ears, Ryker looked around him in concern.

Where...am I? He shook his head, his chest tightening in pain. *School. Nurse. Right.*

He had forgotten two simple things already. He needed to hurry and get to the nurse.

Gripping his backpack straps tightly, Ryker started to venture down the hall, his breathing ragged. His heartbeats slowed even more.

Bum...ba.....buumm...

He should have had someone walk him.

Then his breath caught in his chest, and the hall swung about him in one violent swoop.

He felt himself falling, his skull cracking on the tile floor...

Darkness.



Walking down the halls of Silver Creek High, I try to put all the pieces together of everything that happened last week. Starting with my weird flu...thing. I felt like crap for about a day and after that I was fine. But three people from Mr. Neil's class missing most of the week? Neon fainting and Riley being taken to the hospital? Could these all be coincidences? I mean... I guess Riley ended up being fine and Cole and I have been fine with the exception of my one-day fluke. I'm probably just being paranoid.

I have a few extra minutes before my next class starts, so I decide to step in the bathroom quick. Coming out of the stall, I head for the sinks. Wash. Rinse. Grab paper towels. When I look back at the mirror, deep orange eyes have replaced my normal blue ones. Startled, I let out a squeak and take a step back, crashing into one of the stalls behind me. But I don't black out this time. They don't disappear when I blink. I stare at them and they stare at me. They're my eyes, after all. I'd thought it had just been a hallucination when I was sick. I mean, I *did* have a pretty high fever. They'd been gone when I had woken up. But I'm not sick anymore.

I just stand frozen, staring at my reflection. Then I suck in a deep breath, realizing I haven't breathed for about half a minute. "What's happening to me?" I take a couple slow steps

closer to the mirror and bring a shaky hand up to my face. *They're my eyes...* The orange fills my entire eye, the whites no longer there, and the normal roundness of my pupil has reshaped itself into slit, much like a cats. No, not like a cats... "It's like a fox..."

The bell rings and it startles me so much that I gasp. *Oh, no no no... I can't go into class with my eyes looking like this.* Whatever *this* is. I pull my backpack up into the sink and quickly fumble through it until I come out with a pair of sunglasses. I put them on and you'd never know it to look at me. So I decide it's the best I can do for now and, trying to keep it together, I hurry to class. Slipping into my seat in Mr. Collin's history class at the last second, I make it just in time and I think I'm off the hook.

Mr. Collin starts taking attendance and stops when he sees me. He gives me a look and walks back to my desk. My heart begins to beat faster. "Layla. The sunglasses please."

"I... have a migraine. I'm really sensitive to light today. Mind if I leave 'em on just this once?"

Mr. Collin shakes his head. "I know yesterday was Sunday and you probably had a party to go to... and I don't really care what you do with your weekend, as long as you don't come into my class hungover."

"What? I'm not hung-"

"Layla. The glasses. Now," he orders.

My heart starts to pound. Reluctantly, I reach up to grab onto the rims. *Oh gosh. He's going to see. They're all going to see...*

With shaky hands, I pull off the shades and look at him, expecting him to look back at me shocked or surprised... But his annoyed expression doesn't change and he takes the sunglasses out of my hand. "Thank you. Now was that so hard?" he says, walking back to the front.

Confused, I look around at the other kids. They don't act unusual either. Just the occasional student chuckling or whispering to a friend, about me I'm sure. A realization hits me and a scramble for the pocket mirror I have in my bag. Flipping it open, I see my eyes are back to normal, just as blue and white and round as they've always been.

I slump back in my seat with a sigh. *Thank god...*

"Okay, kids. This week I'll be pairing you up with a partner for a report on 'Detectives In History', due on my desk by Friday. Pick one specific detective and collaborate to write an extensive, ten thousand word essay." He lists off a few kids who are to be partners, then he says, "Gray with Woods..." I look over at Jinx's desk, which is empty. Like it was all last week. Annoyed, I raise my hand. "Yes, Ms. Woods."

"Jinx Gray isn't here. He hasn't been here for a whole week."

"Well... I guess this is the perfect start to your assignment, then! Putting yourself in the shoes of a detective and tracking down your partner." He gives me a nod, then continues on with his list. I give him a glare. *He can't be serious...*

~ ~ ~

The bell rings out through the school, telling us that it has ended for another day. I take my time putting my books back in my bag and heading for my locker and by the time I head out, the halls

are almost completely empty. Which is why I notice three jocks turn the corner and head down another hall like they've got somewhere they need to be. Generally not a good thing this time of day... It grabs my attention and I follow after them. Turning the corner, I see they've joined two other guys who are beating the crap out of someone. The odds of me being able to take on five guys without being beat up myself are slim... but I can't bring myself to turn away. So I sprint for them, grab one guy's shoulder and punch my fist into his face. He stumbles away and I kick the next guy, first in the back, then in the neck. He falls against the wall and I run for the third guy, tackling him to the ground. I punch him a couple times before someone grabs me from behind and pulls me off of him. I fight the guy who grabs me, but he's so much bigger than me that it's not much use and he slams me into the wall.

Turning to face them, I see they're all coming for me now. *I think I've made them mad.* And none of my attempts kept any of them down for long. *At least the attention is off of the other kid.* I put up my fists, attempting to be ready for them. The guy closest to me widens his eyes and a look of fear crosses his face. One by one, the others in his group take on similar expressions, some even looking horrified. "Hey, guys. Let's get out of here!" A couple of them take off down the hall.

"Freak!" One of the others says as the rest follow the first. I tilt my head and press my eyebrows down for a moment. *What's up with them?* Then my eyes shoot wide and I turn to look at my reflection in the shiny metal of the lockers. *Fox eyes.* I see them again, and this time I see them fade back to my normal blue. I shake my head. *What is going on?* Then I remember there had been another kid and I whirl around to see her sitting against the glass windows that make up the wall, legs sprawled out in front of her, trying to catch her breath.

I tilt my head. "Riley?"

She coughs a couple times. "Hey. You should have seen the other guy. Mind giving me a hand?"

I hurry over to her and help her up off the ground. "Why were they beating the crap out of you?"

Riley winces. "It may have had something to do with me punching one of them in the face earlier."

I pull her arm over my shoulder and help her to walk. "Why did you punch him?"

"Don't get me started... But he started it."

I push open the bathroom door and help Riley to slide up onto the counter. I wet some paper towels and get a good look at her face. Bloody nose, possibly broken. A black eye. Bruises along the left side of her face. I shake my head at her. "Man, they got you good, didn't they?" I start carefully cleaning some of the blood from her nose. She winces again and pulls away. "Hold still," I order her. She gives me an annoyed look and relaxes again.

"Think anyone will notice?" she asks, although she says it with irony, like she knows the answer must be obvious.

I give her a chuckle as I wet another piece of paper. "Nah... that's what concealer is for."

"Thank you..." She tilts her head. "Why are you doing this?"

"It's nothing... I just don't tolerate bullying. That's all. I actually didn't even know it was you until after they were gone. What I don't get is why you punched the guy? I mean, I don't know you very well... but that just doesn't seem like you."

"Bad day." She sucks in a breath when I clean a more sensitive spot. "Cole got on my nerves..."

"Tell me about it..." I say with a shake of my head.

She sighs. "Made an idiot of myself in front of this boy I like..."

"Mmm... Mind if I ask who?"

Riley hesitates and gives me a slightly embarrassed look. "You may not know him... Oliver Pascal?"

My heart jumps and I cough to try and cover up my surprise as I grab more paper towels. *Oliver is my crush...* "Oh, Oliver... I think I've seen him around," I say as casually as I can. "Seems like a nice guy."

"Yeah... He's cute isn't he?"

"Not bad..." I fold the paper towels and soak them with water, then turn to her. "Here, you might want to put these on your eye. I think I've done all I can in a girls high-school bathroom, though."

She takes them from me and slides back off the counter. "Thank you... again."

"Don't even mention it. It's nothing. Just try and avoid punching jocks in the face for awhile. Seriously... that's a really stupid thing to do."

Riley chuckles as she presses the paper towel against her eye. "Will do."

We head out of the school expecting an empty parking lot only to find it filled with the flashing lights of an ambulance and at least a hundred by-standers as a kid with dark skin is hauled into the back on a stretcher. Riley and I exchange concerned glances, then hurry closer to find out what's going on. I'm able to catch a glimpse of the kids face just before the stretcher is

slid all the way into the ambulance and my breath catches. "That's Ryker..." Turning to the kid on the other side of me, I nudge them and say, "hey, what happened?"

"Dunno for sure. He said he wasn't feeling well and next thing you know he's found unconscious on the floor in the hallway. I heard his heart was barely beating. He was probably out there for at least a half an hour before anyone found him."

Riley shakes her head and pulls out her phone. "I gotta go... Thanks again, Layla," she says as she hurries away.

People getting sick... fainting... hospitalizations... *fox* eyes... this has to be connected... doesn't it? And Jinx... he's been gone ever since the field trip. I haven't even heard anything about him.

I start to become paranoid... worried even. *Of all the stories building up from our science class, what's his?*

~ ~ ~

I look down at the piece of paper in my hands, then up at the number written on the side of the apartment building. It's a match. Supposedly, this is where Jinx lives. I need to talk to him about our history assignment and I'd really like to put my paranoia at rest. I'm sure he's fine. Just came down with the flu like Emma and Charlotte did.

I shoulder my backpack and head into the old building. Up one flight of stairs, I walk down the hall with creaky floors and stained walls until I make it to door 208. I go to knock, but the door is already open and swings when I try. *That's odd...* I peer inside and don't see anyone.

Consider leaving, but something just doesn't feel right. So I look down both directions of the hall, then slip quietly into the apartment.

It's small and old, but not the worst place to live. Although, the place is trashed. The floor is littered with furniture stuffing and glass and items strewn about. *Were they broken in to?* "Jinx?" I say aloud, but the only sound I hear is the hammering of my own heart. I carefully make my way through the apartment, trying not to step on things that aren't already broken. I wander into the small bedroom and call out for him again, but no answer. Just as I peek my head into the closet, a rumbling sound rises up behind me. I don't know what it is, but it makes my blood run cold. With a start, I realize it's growling. But not from a dog. It's deeper, more intense. I slowly turn around to find myself staring into the eyes of a 475 pound Siberian tiger.

I stand frozen. Heart pounding, hands shaking. I don't even know how to wrap my head around the fact that there's a *tiger* in Jinx's apartment. It roars at me and I try desperately to keep myself from losing it. Then suddenly, it jumps for me and I duck at the last second. It misses me by inches and crashes into the clothes in the closet behind me.

Adrenaline floods my system as I run as fast as I can for the hallway. *Why the hell is there a tiger in the apartment? Guard dog? Unwelcome guest that ate Jinx?* I bet animal control has never gotten a call about a tiger infestation.

Skidding out into the hallway, I grab the handle and try to slam the door closed, but the tiger is there and grabs onto the door, it's giant claws digging into the old wood. I fight with it until I realize my strength is nothing compared to the tiger and let it go. I sprint down the hall, the tiger barreling after me. I don't bother running down the stairs, I just jump and hope I land at the bottom, which I do, slamming into the wall and barely keeping my footing. I use the last

scrap of energy I have to make a bee-line for the metal-framed glass door that leads to the outside. I throw the door open just as the tiger has made it down the stairs and this time, I click the door closed a split second before the tiger gets there. Gasping for air, I laugh at my success, slightly hysterical at this point. My whole body trembles and I run a hand through my hair as I watch the tiger clawing angrily at the glass, drawing claw marks in the clear surface. It looks like it's going to try to break through the glass when suddenly it swings its head back and forth and staggers backwards instead, suddenly looking weak. The tiger's angry huffs and roars mutate into something strange... something that almost sounds human.

Then before my eyes, the tiger begins to shrink... Become skinnier and more muscular. One of the paws claws at the floor and it begins to lengthen, the fingers separating. The fur begins to thin and I'm frozen... horrified at the scene in front of me. Before I know it, the tiger has transformed into a man with darker skin and short-cropped black hair. I suck in a breath when I realize it *is* Jinx. Laying on the ground on his stomach and pawing at the floor weakly with his hand. "Help me..." he says. "Help... me..."

Shaking myself out of my shock, I dart back inside. Throwing open the door and hurrying over to him, I pull off my coat and drape it over him. "Jinx... What is going on?"

He lets out a shuttered breath, then sucks in a weak one. "You have to help me..." he manages to say before erupting in a coughing fit. I just stare at him, totally at a loss. Did what I think just happen *actually* happen? What the heck are you supposed to do for a guy who just turned into a tiger?

All I know is he needs help, and I am in no way equipped to help in any way. So I pull my cellphone out of my pocket and do the only thing I can think of to do: Call 911.



“Suspended for the rest of the week! Riley!” I yell into my phone Tuesday morning.

“Look, I’m sorry. It’s not my fault Miss Jackson saw me do it. I don’t even think the guys would have said anything. It was just wrong place at wrong time.”

“Riley, you should have told the principal that those boys basically beat the crap out of you yesterday!” My hands begin to shake, and I rub my cuticles raw.

“Emma I am fine. I promise. Nothing’s broken. Just a few bruises, and they’ll be gone by next week anyways. And Emma...stop shaking.”

“How do you even know that?”

“Because it’s basically being screamed through the phone right now. You may be shy, but you get really feisty when people piss you off. Don’t do anything you’ll regret.”

“No promises.”

“Besides I got all this free time to work on our set list, homework, and I can visit Ryker more.” My stomach clenches at the sound of his name. I had gotten over my crush on Ryker a few months ago, but he was still my friend.

“These past few days have been insane. Everyone seems to be going off the wire. How is he?” I ask.

“His Dad called me last night. He’s unresponsive, and they don’t think he’ll wake up anytime soon.” Her voice shakes.

“He’ll be okay.” I reassure.

“Yeah. I hope so. Hey Emmy I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later okay?”

“Okay. Bye.” Before I can even get out the end of my goodbye she quickly hangs up on her end. I look up in time to see Rick Johnson walking down the hallway. A.k.a the leader of the douche-bags who beat up one of my best friends. My hands start to shake again. I rush towards him, but a large figure stands in my way.

Michael.

“Get out of my way.” I snap.

“Wow. That’s the thanks I get from trying to stop your ass from getting kicked. I appreciate it.”

“Look why do you even care?” I ask. “You’re just my brother’s friend. That’s it. Now get out of my way.”

“I think this is the most you have ever said to me. Aren’t you usually the quiet mouse?” My eyes go slightly wide.

Mice...

I shake my head out of the trance, and return my attention back to Michael.

Okay. That was weird.

“Besides.” He continues. “You won't make any difference. He'll still be a jerk not matter what you say or do. Trust me.” I shake my head. I know he is right, but I definitely won't admit it. I rush off down the hallway away from Michael. Away from Rick. “You're welcome!” I hear Michael yell after me, but I ignore him.

I find myself walking so quickly towards the music room that it feels like I'm flying by people. I walk straight into a blonde girl with frizzy curls. Sierra Murphy. Cheerleader. Crap. I manage knock all the books from her arms.

“I'm so sorry. I wasn't watching where I was going.” I scramble to pick up her books for her.

“Yeah that's obvious. How about next time you open your eyes a little wider weirdo.” She rips her books from my arms, and struts off down the hallway.

I can't believe she seriously didn't remember me from last year. Thank god.

“That was rough.” I turn to see Daniel walking up to me. “Welcome back by the way. I'm really glad you're okay.” I slightly smile.

“Thanks. Its uh..Its good to be back. Also thanks for the notes. They really helped me.”

“No problem.” He coughs. “I'd do it for anybody.”

“Oh.” I say.

“Well I mean I would do it for all of my good friends. Not that you're one of my good friends. Okay that's not what I meant, but I mean we are study partners. But that's not all we are! And-” I look down.

“Uh yeah thanks Daniel I get it. I gotta go.” I turn away from him, and I start heading to my next class when I think I actually hear him facepalm. I stop and turn back. A red mark on his forehead proves me right, but he tries to play it off.

“Hey Daniel?” I ask.

“Yeah?” He asks hopeful.

“This may seem like a weird question, but I'm pretty sure you're the only one I would trust to answer this.”

“What is it?”

“Have humans ever been reported growing feathers from their bodies?”

“I mean maybe by accident, but it's never been due to actual growth. Most of the time cases have only showed up as one to two feathers. And it's been confirmed that it was due to bacteria's from the area. Most commonly South America. Why?”

“No reason. I just saw a music video, and it made me think about it. Thanks...”

“Yeah no problem.”

“I'll see you later I guess?”

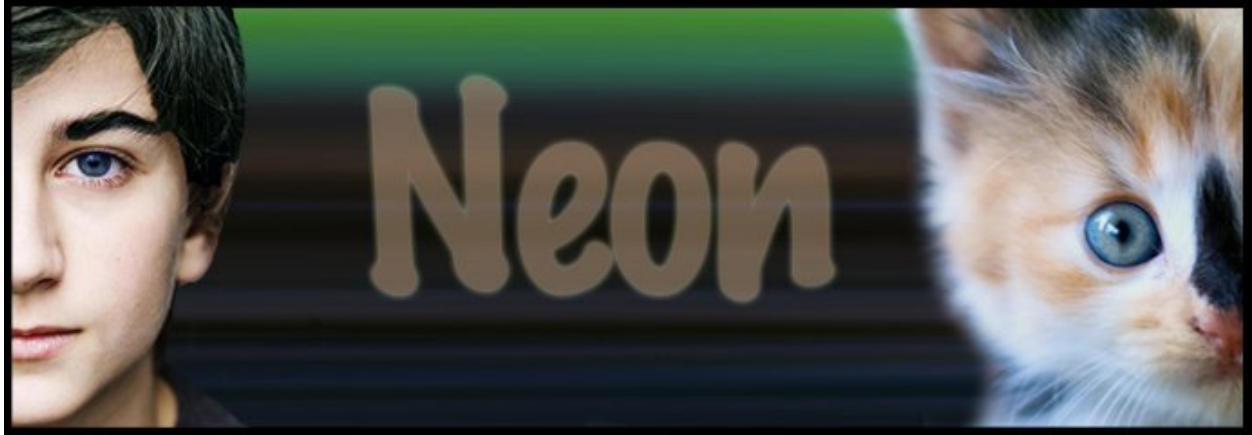
“Definitely.”

“Alright bye.” I slight wave, and I continue my way down the hall.

“Bye.” He says. I continue until I reach the girls bathroom. The minute I lock myself in one of the stalls I quickly pull up my sleeve.

More feathers. Crap.

What the heck is going on with me?



Neon was running. But this time, he rocketed down the hallway, panic burning at his heels. His eyes were wide, his head shaking in disbelief.

Bursting into English class, he walked promptly over and slammed his palms onto Emma's desk, making the classroom tremble.

Emma jumped back a bit, frightened. "N-neon-"

"Is it true?" Neon asked. He didn't look up, and his hair hid his eyes. His fingers clawed at the metal desk. "Did she...?"

Emma's voice softened, recognizing his tone. "Neon..."

Neon's teeth clenched. His hands balled into fists. "Answer me, you weak minion," he spat, leaning forward. "Has Riley West been suspended for violence?" His gaze shot up, burning blue eyes piercing the girl in front of him. "Has she?"

Cold fear was all he got in reply. Neon realized that he was gripping Emma's shoulders, and quickly released her. He opened his mouth momentarily, searching for something reassuring to say; his teeth eventually ground together as he fell silent. His eyes dropped to the carpeted floor once again.

“Yes.” The single word echoed inside the classroom, which seemed to be holding its breath for the spectacle taking place before it.

Neon’s head dipped, slowly and slightly. “I see.”

The bell rang, and Mr. Poe got up to shut the door. Walking to the board, he held up *Romeo and Juliet* again, waving it around. “Now, I hope everyone read the section like they were supposed to,” he said. “We’ll be starting today on page...page...” He trailed off, staring at Neon, still clawing at Emma’s desk. As did the rest of the class.

The thin man coughed into his fist. “Neon, perhaps you’d like to read a bit today? I think the part of Mercutio would suit you...” He trailed off again as Neon rose from the metal desk, swaying slightly.

The boy shook his head stiffly. “No, I’ve done it quite enough. I think I’ll let someone else-” He shuddered suddenly, fingers clawing wildly at his sides. His muscles strained; his eyes bulged. “I’ll let-” Another spasm, this time distorting his stance into something twisted and inhuman. “I think...” A wicked smile alighted on his face, and the beginnings of a chuckle made his chest tremble.

Gradually, the light died from his eyes, and his demented posture realigned itself, arms hanging uselessly at his sides. “I’m fine,” he said simply.

Keeping his head down, he lumbered to the back of the class, ignoring the stares. He sat down heavily, and the sounds of Mr. Poe pausing before asking for volunteers faded into static noise.

Neon's mind was ablaze, a black stormcloud brewing above his head. And it began to take shape, forming into one, terrifying word, one that would wreak vengeance upon the peons who'd attacked his rival.

Potato.

Neon pulled the scarf a little lower around his neck as he walked towards the lunch table. Taking a small bite of the potato in his hand, he strolled over to where Rick Johnson and his troupe of assorted cronies were jostling each other over their food.

He stood there, chewing softly as the faceless brutes in front of him laughed wildly at the two-word phrases that they kept shouting as if a third repetition would make it funny.

One of the boys leaned back, talking with his mouth full. "Can we help you?" he asked, staring up at Neon.

Neon's shoulders bounced with a small chuckle. "Help me? Goodness, no. I have standards for my minions, after all."

A lazy smile appeared on the boy's lips. "What? You think you're a big shot or something?"

Neon took another bite of the potato. "No, I simply said you were incompetent. Pay attention," he said, nonchalantly gazing over the table.

The rest of the crew stopped shoving each other and stared at him. "This guy don't know what he's saying!" one shouted obnoxiously.

“Ooh! That’s some real cheese right there!” The assembled cronies laughed loudly, and they were only being partially ironic.

“Enough,” Neon’s tired eyes swept over them. He’d stayed up late last night inventing. “Rick Johnson, I’d like to say something.”

The brawny boy at the head of the table grinned, cocking his head. “Say what you want! This is America, dude!” The rest of the table shouted their own self-lauding agreements.

The corners of Neon’s mouth twisted upwards. “Ah, that’s excellent. For a second, I thought you might take offense.” He drew a tense breath into his lungs, and spoke his mind.

Within seconds, the bullies were on their feet.

“Dude! What the hell!”

“Who do you think you are, judging us like that?”

“That’s some real cheese right there!”

Neon leaned forward, grinning at their anger. “Do I have your attention now, worms?”

“You’ve got more than that, kid,” Rick Johnson growled as he stood up. “You’ve got a fight.”

“Is that your answer for everything? Well, no matter.” Neon shook his head and shrugged helplessly. He gazed confidently at his now-irate foe, keeping an upbeat tone. “So, after school, then?”

Rick smiled crookedly. “Why not right here?” He gestured to the tables around them, where the students sat, eating. “I don’t need too much space to kick your-”

“Language!” Neon warned. Tapping his forehead guiltily, he continued, “Apologies. Also, fine by me. Though I never took you for a masochist, I must say.”

“Shut up.” Rick walked around Neon, until the two boys were facing each other, three meters apart. The lunch crowd slowly looked up to see what commotion these odd two were creating.

The bully cracked his knuckles and grinned. “You’ve got a big mouth for someone so puny.”

“Your originality is scathing.” Neon sighed, placing a hand on his hip. “You know what? Even with your strength, you’re still quite worthless.”

Seeing that the other boy had no retort, he continued. “What a sickly soul you must have, to beat up on Riley in your little packs. I’d like to make it known to you,” he spoke coldly, looking Rick dead in the eye, “that nobody is allowed to defeat her, except me.”

Rick snarled and raised his fists, cracking his knuckles and giving himself arthritis.

“And now, I’m going to show you just how worthless your strength is.” Neon extended his arm, opening his hand. “You see this? I’m going to defeat you with this potato.” The brown, freckled lump lay in his palm, a few bites already taken out of it.

Rick laughed. “You’re lying.”

Neon smiled. “No. I never lie.”

“It’s a potato,” Rick insisted. “You’re a lunatic.”

“No, a lunatic would have shot you and teabagged your corpse.” Neon grinned fakely. “I’m a bit more sophisticated; total humiliation works for me. Anything to show you how worthless you are to my story.”

“I’ll crush you!” Rick roared, charging towards him. Neon’s eyes flashed as the boy neared. He raised the potato to his teeth, but this time, he pulled at the vegetable instead of biting.

With a wet sucking sound, the top half of the potato came away into Neon’s teeth. Beneath it was a metal casing, the same metal that comprised the rest of the vegetable. Neon hadn’t been lying; Rick had just assumed that the device was *only* a potato.

Raising his hand, Neon smashed the iron potato against the ground. A cloud of thick smoke shot up, blinding Rick as he charged.

Neon ducked into the smoke, lashing out savagely with his fists. His punches slammed into Rick’s stomach, causing the boy to stumble back. Leaping upwards, Neon uppercutted him, and he crashed onto his back on the cafeteria floor.

Polishing off the rest of his smoke bomb’s edible portion, Neon walked over. A quick, light stomp to the stomach crushed the breath from Rick’s lungs.

“You bastard!” Already, the other boys were leaping to their feet. Friendship was a foolish force, indeed.

Terence Matthews took the helm, dashing forward. “Get him!”

“Wait!” Neon’s voice surprised the bullies, and they stopped dead in their tracks. Slowly, comically, he held up a red lunchbox from behind his back. “Do you know what this is?”

Fear flashed across Terence’s face. “W-what? What is that?”

Neon smirked, clanging his knuckles on the front. “It’s metal.”

The scarf-clad conqueror dashed forward, swinging the lunchbox in a wide arc. Terence's eyes rolled back in his head as it bashed against the side of his skull. Eyes wide with glee, Neon whipped the metal box around again to strike the other bullies as they advanced.

Within seconds, the force had been dismantled. Most were picking themselves up and running, but a scant few remained, staring Neon down. He admired their resolve, if not their logic.

Neon spread his arms wide, grinning. "Come on! Five against one, correct? These are the same odds you gave to my opponent!" He tossed and caught the lunchbox in his hands menacingly. "So shut up and let me defeat her!"

A large weight slammed into the small of his back, driving him to the floor. Rick Johnson roared as he tackled Neon from behind. Neon braced himself as the heavier boy piled on top of him.

A fist slammed into his cheekbone, and another connected with his jaw. "You can hurt me," Rick roared, "but I won't let you hurt my friends!" His furious salvo pummeled Neon's body beneath him, striking painfully into his bones.

The boy fancied himself a hero. Neon grinned softly as the fists smashed downwards. Looking back, he was the villain, wasn't he? The dirty trickster who'd attacked the noble hero and his friends.

"Well, that's fine." The words slipped from Neon's lips, resonating into the air. "I don't mind what I'm labeled. I know what I am."

Rick stopped punching and sat back, confusion flitting across his face. "What-"

“I’m the king of the world!” Neon cried, sucker-punching Rick across the mouth. He sprang to his feet as the other boy collapsed backwards onto the floor.

Neon leaped onto his chest, watching Rick shake his head groggily. “Who cares about right or wrong? There is only *victory*,” he seethed, “and I’ve beaten you.” He grinned as the other boy squirmed beneath him.

Then a thought struck Neon: Why not punch him again?

A brutal left, a savage right, a wicked slap, all of it came raining down on Rick Johnson’s defenseless body. The pained grunts of the victim only widened Neon’s smile, his strikes gradually becoming more frenzied and unstable.

Eventually, Rick fell slack, head knocking against the floor. Neon pressed two fingers to his neck, feeling a steady pulse. “Passed out? ...Cheater.”

Getting up off of the bully, Neon turned to address the entire lunchroom, splaying his arms wide. “Victory is mine!” he cried, clenching his fist with triumphant vigor. Placing his hands on his hips, he chortled comically, trembling with odd laughter.

His mirth slowly died down as he looked at his audience again. Most were frozen in their seats, some were inching towards the exits, while others just cowered beneath their tables. A single, cold emotion ran through each and every one of them.

Fear.

Neon smiled nervously, casting a worried glance around the room. “Um...” Attempting to lighten the mood, he stretched his cheeks and pulled a face.

Sierra Murphy screamed, raising her manicured fingernails to her cheeks. The lunchroom fell to chaos as students scrambled out of their seats, dashing down the hallway and leaving their food warm at their tables. Were these...the spoils of war?

The last stragglers fled the scene, whimpering pathetically, and Neon was left standing in an empty theater. An odd sensation came over him, and he touched a hand to his chest. It wasn't so much a new emotion as a new lack of emotion. He felt nothing from his victory, nor his prize.

He felt hollow.

Then the muscled arms of the security guard seized him from behind, dragging his limp body away.

Neon hunched in the hard wooden chair, not looking up. Dean Jacoby loomed over him, her fingers rapping agitatedly on her desk.

"Well, well, well, Mr. Kingsley," the dean said, wrapping her hands around a cream folder. "I'd never guessed that you'd be so prone to violence."

Neon said nothing, staring at the floor.

Jacoby sighed, leaning forward. "Anything you'd like to say for yourself?"

A slight turn of Neon's head was the only answer.

The woman's lips came together in a hard line. Prising the folder open, she leafed through the pages of the report. "Under normal circumstances, we'd suspend you for the rest of

the semester. Fighting and bringing a weapon to school? I thought a kid like you would see this coming.”

Silence.

Dean Jacoby pulled out another paper, examining it. “However, you’d had multiple past infractions, including insubordination, violations of safety procedure, and several claims of world domination...” She scratched the side of her head. “Anyway, we cannot allow such abhorrent behavior from our students. Neon Kingsley,” she condemned, “we have no choice but to expel you from Silver Creek High.”

The words echoed in Neon’s ears as he shuffled his hands and nodded understandingly.

“Now, state law dictates that you can return after two years.” Jacoby glanced down at him. “You probably didn’t need that education, anyway.”

The education, no. The people...

“I believe that will be all, Mr. Kingsley.” Dean Jacoby raptly straightened the papers, placing them back into the folder. “Should I arrange for your family to come pick you up?”

“Family?” Neon scoffed, rising from his chair. He walked to the door, gently pulling it open. Glaring over his shoulder, he stared coldly at the dean. “What family?”

With that, he whisked out of the building like the wind, shutting the door behind him.

Neon shoved his hands into his pockets as the biting chill of January frosted his blood. Tapping his shoes on the pavement, he began to walk, not really caring where he was going.

Images of the panic-stricken students running from him flashed through his mind. He gritted his teeth, burying his expression in his scarf. *That wasn’t a victory*, his mind throbbed.

That was an utter loss. They didn't love me. I didn't conquer them. His foot lashed out savagely, kicking a discarded soda can down the road.

I'm not human, he thought. *They didn't see a man. They saw a monster. I'm not human.* But that was a good thing, wasn't it? He was a genius who would conquer the world...conquer the people...make them fear him.

Neon wished, for the first time in his life, that he were somebody else.



I lay in bed shivering as I thought over the events of the past two weeks. After the field trip, weird things had been happening. People had fallen sick and even those who hadn't yet seemed like they were hiding something. I had been dreading it, but had finally fallen ill like the others.

As far as I knew, of Mr.Neil's class, only Gwen, Neon and Cole still hadn't had any symptoms. And to make it worse, my head had transformed into that of an eagle. After re-checking my encyclopedias, it was the head of a martial eagle.

Now, I loved Martial Eagles, who were the all rounders in terms of strength in the Eagle world, being able to fly high and for quite some time while still being able to rend flesh and crush bone with their powerful talons.

But when my head turns into an Eagle's head, two possibilities come to mind;1)I'm going crazy 2)It's actually happening and Eagle DNA is in my body. 1) is by far the more plausible, though it is an unpleasant thought. However, I had shown no other signs of mental illness, which would be unusual in such a case. Thus I was left with the latter theory. It was seeming more and more plausible as I thought about it.

Everyone falling sick, the strange dream (or was it?) that I had had in the MIC... When Emma had asked about feathers, I had nearly flipped out and told her everything. But then she had said that it was a music video which had sparked the thought, and so I restrained myself. But thinking back, she had acted rather oddly. She had asked the question nervously and replied hurriedly before running off, signs that she wasn't telling me the whole truth.

Poor Emma I thought as I remembered what had happened recently, pushing the deeper, weirder thoughts to the back of my head for the moment. I had been jealous of Ryker in the past due to Emma's crush on him, but I had still felt sorry for him when I had heard of what happened to him.

Emma was good friends with him, so i knew she'd be sorrowful. Not to mention Riley, one of her closest friends had gotten suspended for a week. Yes, things hadn't gone Emma's way recently. Then there was the business with Neon. I had watched him take down those bullies, and was shocked by the persona he had displayed.

He had, for a few minutes, been no longer the amusing trickster and joker that made class withstandable, but something different. Something vicious. He had been expelled for it, having beaten up several of that gang, and put two in hospital. I had never expected Neon to act like that. But then, my head had transformed once, so who was I to talk. The thoughts tired me out. I had caught fever the day before, the day Neon had been expelled, and had missed school today. It was the middle of the afternoon, but fever had drained my energy, so I pushed all my complicated thoughts to one side for the moment and fell asleep.

When I woke up, I knew that something was wrong. Through the window, I could see that the sun was low on the horizon, so it was the evening. But that wasn't the weird part. Once

again, I could see everything in excellent detail. I started to rise, fearing that my head had changed again, but discovered to my horror that I couldn't get up.

I tried to lift my arms but they were larger than I remembered and wider. And my legs seemed much shorter. *Have I shrunk?* I thought as I attempted to get out of my clothes. My feet scrabbled at my shirt, and to my surprise, tore through it! Then I saw that I no longer had feet, but large eagle's talons! I tried to give a shout of surprise, but instead I squawked loudly. Then I knew that my head had also transformed.

I need to get help. I decided as I tried to think of a plan. The only way to get help would be to get out of my room and find my parents. *But they'll just think you're a freak. With an eagle's head and talons. How will they know who you are?* said my brain, but I pushed thought down for the moment.

I needed to get free, so using my powerful talons, I tore the shirt to shreds and got free. Then I looked down at myself and my heart sunk as my suspicions were confirmed. It was not only restricted to my feet and head, but my entire body had changed! I had completely transformed into a Martial Eagle! I thought it over frightenedly. *This isn't a dream...this is real.* and I knew it with certainty.

I quickly tried to think of something positive about the situation, like my parents had told me to try during depression periods. *Well, Martial Eagles aren't too bad. At least it's not a House fly or something weak like that. Not to mention that seeing as I now have talons that can crush bone and tear flesh, Terence won't have the guts to come after me.* I felt amused at that thought, but it was quickly replaced by confusion, fear and anger.

I knew the MIC had caused this. And the dream I had had was probably true. As I was thinking it over, I started to feel hungry. And within a few moments that thought superceded all others.

I need food. I have to hunt. I NEED FOOD NOW. Some instinct within me took hold of my brain, and I hopped onto the window sill before spreading my wings and taking off.

I was an eagle! King of the skies! I flew well, expertly steering through the skies with a wingspan of over seven feet, and riding the thermals with ease. Daniel Torson no longer existed. There was only me, the martial eagle. And I was hungry. I flew down near a tree to catch a squirrel, but it scampered away before I could catch it.

A human girl with a strangely familiar face looked on in amazement. *Charlotte.* said a voice from inside me, but I payed it no heed. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that I, the Eagle was still hungry. And I needed to find more prey. I glided high once more and this time flew away from the city, towards the woods nearby.

As the woods approached rapidly, I noticed a shape flying near its outermost edge. As I drew nearer, my keen eyesight detected that it was a barn owl. *Prey.* said my Eagle mind and I flew closer, but making sure that I remained silent so as to not alert it of my approach. When I was right above it, I swooped down, my large curved talons outstretched to catch my prey. But the bird reacted just in time dipping down just as I reached it, so my talons could not fully catch it.

But they had made contact, as was proven by the deep bloody gashes that appeared on it's back. As I saw the blood that I had spilled, my human side took over once again, and I became

Daniel Torson once more. *What...what have I done?* I looked out at the owl, who was thankfully still able to fly, but did so shakingly and with visible pain as it flew into the trees.

But just before it did, I heard a voice in my head say *ow, oh no...* in Emma's voice! I felt confused at that, but pushed that thought away in the face of what I had done. I had tuned into a martial eagle and hurt a poor innocent bird who hadn't done anything wrong. I hated myself.

How am I doing this? I don't even know how to fly! As I thought that, I started to panic, and drop, but my eagle's instincts kicked in and helped me to stay aloft. I decided to just return home. My eagle mind remembered the way back and so I let it have restricted control and flew home. Upon getting into my room, I hopped onto the floor.

I can't take this... I thought and closed my eyes and tried to will everything back to normal. As I did, I felt my body warp and change, my legs elongated, my face shortened, and body expanded. When I opened my eye, I was happily a human again! But my joy was tempered by the fact that I was stark naked!

I quickly put on some clothes and, as soon as I had, my mother called up from the stairs, "Daniel! Come down for dinner!" The thought of dinner made me salivate. I felt so hungry...but I knew what I had to do first. I quickly hid the ruins of my shirt and wiped up some blood that my talons had left on the floor before flushing the napkin I had used to do so down the toilet.

Then I went down for dinner, and to my family's amazement, ate a whole roast chicken! My sister complained that I was eating like a pig, but my mother said that I was probably going through a growth spurt so I could eat as much as I wanted. I also startled my family by refusing to eat any carrot, which was my favourite vegetable.

I didn't know why I didn't want to eat it, but the mere thought of it felt wrong.

But meat...meat felt like the right food for me, like it was the food I needed to have, and should always have. I was scared, as I felt like a part of the eagle was still in me, even after I had turned back to human. I also recalled the power I had felt as an eagle, like I had complete control of everything in my life, and was a king, and I found myself longing for it. And that scared me, because I knew that I had never felt power hungry before.

But as I lay in bed after dinner, fatigue took hold of me, and the fear and confusion and every thought settled down as I succumbed to exhaustion and fell asleep.



Two gold eyes shine from behind jagged blades of grass, floating orbs in the dusky purple light.

A deer grazes peacefully in the clearing, ears twisting every so often to scout out danger.

The owner of the gold eyes, a large Siberian tiger, flicks its striped tail, standing downwind so that the deer can't smell it. Its stomach growls; it's been days since the tiger last fed. The muscles in its haunches tense, preparing to leap on its meal.

But its tail lashes too much, and the grass swishes softly at the movement.

The deer's ears prick up, and it raises its head in alarm, nose twitching. Wide set eyes scan the grass around it. The tiger crouches lower, flattening its ears against its skull, and the deer looks in the opposite direction, misguided by the wind.

The tiger seizes the opportunity, and throws itself from its hiding place, springing upwards on powerful legs, claws extended. The deer stumbles to the side in panicked surprise, and the tiger lands short. It churns its legs to gain its footing, but to its surprise, it goes nowhere. The deer bounds away lightly, and the tiger thrashes on the ground in confusion.

The beast begins to sink into the ground, its lips pulled back in terror. It's as if the earth has transformed into thick liquid, sucking at the tigers paws, holding it fast. Soon the animal's

chest is covered, and it struggled to keep its head up. Black mud crawls over its fur and between its paw pads, and as the tiger fights, the more it is trapped.

The mud reaches the tigers nose now, and the tiger lurches in the ground, thrashing its limbs, fighting for another breath. The mud leaks into the tigers ears as the darkness becomes complete. The tiger fights, the air leaving its lungs. Suffocating.

Dying.

"Help," the tiger gasps, eyes flying open. Gray-blue ones, not gold.

"Help me."

Sirens wailed in Jinx's ears, cutting through the fog in his brain. His brow crumpled in confusion as he tried to open his eyes, and cringed at the harsh light coming from above him. His back pressed against a cold, hard surface, and he could feel stiff straps crisscrossing over his chest.

His head killed.

"Oh! He's awake," a deep voice exclaimed in surprise.

Who was that? Jinx tried to open his eyes once more, and winced at the light again. A low moan rumbled in his throat as his temples throbbed in pain.

"Turn off the light, Marcus. It's hurting him," another voice came, soft and feminine.

There was a gentle click, and the brightness faded. Jinx finally opened his eyes and wearily looked at the two people hovering over him. A man and a woman, both young and wearing bright green vests with silver stripes. The woman had her blonde hair pinned back and

was wearing no makeup. The man was tall with curly red hair. Jinx's eyes latched onto the badges on their chests. It looked very familiar, but it was hard to think with the siren wailing in his ears.

"We're your paramedics, Mr. Gray," the woman said loud enough to be heard over the din. "I'm Stacy, and this is Marcus. We're taking you to the hospital."

Jinx stared at them. Paramedics? Hospital?

"Wh-What happened?" he stuttered, his voice cracked and dry.

"Your friend found you hallucinating and feverish when you were home alone. You talked to her. Do you remember?" Marcus asked, concern shining in his green eyes.

Jinx's eyes slipped closed as he tried to remember, but all that came back was his dream. It had felt so real, like he had actually been the tiger stalking its prey. But then at the end, when he had been sucked into the ground... could that have been part of his hallucinations? His illness working its way into reality?

"I...I don't know," he said finally, like a sigh. Exhaustion settled on his chest like a wet blanket.

"We're almost to the hospital," Stacy said comfortingly. "We'll figure out what happened there."

"It's a good sign that you're already awake and functional," Marcus added.

Despite their encouraging words, the ambulance siren continued to scream through their words, making the situation seem dire, like his very life was in danger. Jinx didn't reply, his head aching too much to open his eyes again. He wasn't over this yet.

"Jinx. My god. Are you okay?"

Dad swept into the hospital room, still in his watchman clothes. Jinx shifted his head so he could see his father with his good eye. His father's question rang in the air. Of course he wasn't okay, but his father didn't give him the chance to answer.

"I tried to leave as soon as I could, but no one would answer my calls. I finally got Anthony to cover for me," Mr. Gray rambled as he strode forward, biting his lip. "They told me that you're better now, that nothing's wrong. I think that's idiotic, honestly. My son passes out, has hallucinations and a fever of 105 degrees, and then they say you're perfectly okay? Bullshit."

His father stopped at the edge of the hospital bed and wrung his hat in large hands. He stared at Jinx desperately, as if his son would disappear any moment.

"I should have stayed home," he groaned, berating himself. Jinx opened his mouth to comfort him, but then his father's eyes narrowed. "And a girl found you? Since when are you talking to girls?"

Jinx sighed loudly, cutting him off. "Hi Dad."

Mr. Gray's eyes suddenly filled with tears, and he flung his arms around Jinx's neck.

"I'm glad you're okay," he whispered, face buried in Jinx's neck. A tear stung Jinx's skin.

The teen patted his father awkwardly on the back, unsure of what to do.

"Uh, me too."

His father sat up and swiped at his face, looking embarrassed. Jinx knew that he was all that Mr. Gray had left, that it would devastate him if anything ever happened to his son.

A thought occurred to Jinx. He didn't hang out with girls. Who had found him?

"Dad? What girl?" he asked, his voice still rough, but getting better.

Mr. Gray wrinkled his brow. "Someone named... Layla, maybe? Why? Do you not remember? They said she saw you and talked to you, then called 911."

"I...no," Jinx said hesitantly. Had he really been so ill that he couldn't remember? Why had she been at their apartment? "She's from my school. I don't know her very well, though."

Dad raised an eyebrow and licked his lips. "Well, she was at our apartment. Which is trashed, by the way. The paramedics have no idea how you caused that much damage."

Jinx blinked. "What?"

Mr. Gray shrugged. "You broke quite a few things and a lot of furniture was knocked over, they said. Not anything too expensive." He hesitated, then looked at Jinx out of the corner of his eye. "You weren't... doing drugs or anything, right?"

"What? No!" Jinx protested, mind reeling. "I am so confused." How could Dad possibly think he was on drugs? He had almost *died*, or something! He had been delusional. That must have been what happened. He had hallucinated and destroyed the house.

Dad raised his hands with a dry smile. "I know you wouldn't. Plus," he punched Jinx lightly in the shoulder, "I'd find out soon with all the testing they're doing, anyway."

Jinx scowled. "You don't have very good bedside manner, Dad."

Mr. Gray chuckled softly. Jinx tried not to notice the tiredness in his father's eyes, the wrinkles in his cheeks.

"But I love you," Dad said, and kissed Jinx's forehead. The teen rolled his head away in embarrassment, but deep down, he felt a warmth spread through him. His dad rocked.

But what had happened to him? Why was he so sick? Even his father's reassurance couldn't shake the feeling that something was terribly wrong with Jinx and his body.

And why, why did he still feel the panic of the tiger from his dream? He could still feel the thrashing of powerful legs against unrelenting doom, the tightness in his chest as he suffocated in the dirt.

Jinx shivered, and pulled the covers closer to his chin.



I sit in the waiting room of the hospital for about an hour, and I'm not even entirely sure why. I barely know the kid, but I know what I saw and to say the least... I'm freaking out. My heel taps on the ground, keeping rhythm with the quick beating of my heart. With shaking hands, I reach for my cellphone for the fifth time to call Charlotte or Dan or maybe even Cole. But I cancel it just before I hit dial like I've done each time before. What am I supposed to say? 'Hey, Jinx turned into a tiger and tried to eat me?' They'd probably tell me it's a good thing I'm at the hospital, so I can get a CAT scan. But if anyone needs a 'cat' scan, it's Jinx.

By the time I see Jinx's dad come through the double doors, tired and wearing a security guards uniform, I've chewed my lip raw from anxiety. I hadn't even realized I'd been doing it until now. Finally, I decide I can't just sit here all night. I need to talk to Jinx.

When I see Jinx's dad pass by, I head into the E.R. and stop at the nurses desk. "I'm here to talk to Jinx Gray."

"Are you family?" the nurse asks.

"No, I'm the person who found him. I called 911."

"Oh... Well, I'm afraid you're too late. Non-family visiting hours will be over in five minutes."

"I just need a minute," I assure her.

She sighs, then types on her computer. "Alright. He's in room 213."

I give her a nod and head that way. 211... 212... 213. I turn the handle and poke my head in. Jinx is awake and sitting up against the headboard with pillows behind his back. He turns his head to look at me, surprised. "Layla?" I quickly slip in and close the door behind me, then yank the blinds above the window down over the glass. I turn around to face him, pressing my back up against the door and find myself feeling uneasy at being so close to him. *He tried to attack me earlier, what if he tries again?*

He just stares at me, curious and confused. "What are you doing here?"

I take in a deep breath and let out a shuttered one. "I'm gonna be straight with you. I'm kind of freaking out, here. Do you... remember anything from earlier?"

"I keep trying to... but nothing. They told me I was hallucinating."

"Yeah, because that's what I told them."

"What were you doing at my apartment--wait. That's what you *told* them? As in what you said was different from the truth?"

"We were assigned to be study partners," I say. "I came to your apartment to give you some notes... And they wouldn't have believed me if I'd told them the truth."

"What happened?" he asks, growing more concerned.

Man this is going to sound weird if he doesn't know what happened. "So, you don't remember anything? Nothing at all?"

He shakes his head at me. "Just a weird dream. Will you stop stalling? Whatever it is, I need to know."

I walk closer and carefully sit down in a chair at the end of his bed. "There's no way I can say this that won't sound crazy, so I'm just going to say it." I take in another deep breath. "You turned into a tiger. And back."

"A tig-- Layla, don't mess with me. That's not possible."

"Jinx, I am telling you. I went into your apartment and, as a tiger, you tried to attack me. I *saw* you turn from a tiger into... well... you." He watches me carefully, not saying a word. I run a shaky hand through my hair. "I don't know how, or why... But I know what I saw. You don't remember asking me for help?"

"I *told* you. I don't remember *anything*." He sighs and wipes his face with his hand. "This doesn't make any sense. It's not possible for a person to turn into a tiger. It just isn't."

"I would have said the exact same thing this morning," I say. He just stares at me. "So... you don't believe me?"

"I don't know what to believe. This is... weird."

"Really weird," I agree.

"Look, I don't know what to make of this. But can you just... keep this whole thing to yourself for now?"

The door opens and I jump. I put my hand over my thudding heart as the nurse pokes her head in. "Visiting hours are over."

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "Thanks." I head for the door, but turn back to look at him before I go.

He looks at me with worry clouding his eye. "Please," he says.

I hesitate, then give him a nod. And as I make my way back out to the parking lot, I realize I don't feel much better. Jinx doesn't remember anything, and I'm not even sure he believes me. I mean, how could he? It's not like if it was him telling me that I'd been a tiger that I would have been overcome with relief and gone, "Oh... Yep. That must be it." No, I would have been just as skeptical, if not more. And now on top of it all, I have to keep it a secret. I'm not sure who I would have told anyway, but the fact that I *can't* tell anyone now makes this whole thing feel even more suffocating than it did before.

~ ~ ~

"Layla, have you been practicing after school?" Coach Dossley asks me, clicking the stopwatch in her hand.

"No, why?" I ask, out of breath, stepping off the track.

"You broke your record by a whole ten seconds," she says with a hint of disbelief.

"Ten seconds? Really?"

"Yeah. *Nice* job. Whatever you're doing, keeping doing it." She gives me a smile, then turns to face the rest of the team. "Alright, that's it for today. Enjoy your classes, everyone."

How is that possible? I didn't sleep at all last night, I think as I head to my first class of the day. My mind had been on everything that happened yesterday, and if it wasn't that, it was from a growing pain in my ears. I'd hoped it would go away, but it only seems to get worse. *Man, I better not have an ear infection. Those suck.*

~ ~ ~

Mrs. Tangemen lets us out of Math ten minutes early. Stopping by my locker on my way to Second Period History, the pain in my ears intensifies to the point where I feel light headed. I stumble into the lockers. *Why does it hurt on the outside, too?* Then I hear a *crack!* and I feel something give way on the side of my head. Then the pain is gone. Instinctively, I raise a hand up to touch my ear, and my eyes widen when I feel something furry.

Frantically, I turn the knob on my lock and yank open the locker to look in the mirror on the inside of the door. Fox ears. Giant tan ones poking up through my blonde hair. I rub my finger along the edge of one of them, my mouth hanging open. *What the hell is happening to me?*

The bell rings, announcing the end of first period. I panic. I turn around to see a kid on the other side of the hall grabbing books out of his locker. He wears a baseball cap. Without even thinking, I go over and grab the hat off the kid's head, then hurry away, hiding the ears in the hat. He yells at me in protest, but I ignore it.

I turn the corner and run right into someone. "Sorry!" she exclaims. Then her eyes widen. "What's wrong with your eyes?"

I look at my reflection in the window of the door to my left. Orange. Bright. Fox-like.

Still panicking, I shove my way past her and start shuffling through my backpack for my sunglasses. I yank them out and conceal my eyes behind their tinted lenses. *I've got this under control. Everything's fine...*

A wave of nausea hits me and I shove my way into the bathroom, then into the largest stall. I empty out my stomach until nothing's left. Icy sweat prickles at my forehead as I reach up to flush, but black, thick nails replacing my normal ones stops me. But I'm barely able to acknowledge it before I feel something in my body shift. A second shift forces me onto my hands and knees. I sink lower and lower to the ground, though my elbows aren't bending.

I look down at my hands, which are now covered in tan fur before they're hidden behind my sleeves that seem to grow longer with each passing second. *What's happening?*

The room starts to spin, then my vision blacks out. It comes back a few seconds later, at the same time that my concept of reality starts to slip. One second I know I'm in the girls bathroom at Silver Creek High, and the next I have no idea where I am.

Fear and panic course through my tiny body. Something restricts my body, threatening to trap me. I thrash and wiggle until I free myself of the cloth that surrounded my body. *What is this place?*

The door opens, and my large ears prick up at the sound. *Quick! Escape!* My legs dart fast through the opening of the door just before it closes. Dozens of strange, tall creatures watch me. Some jump back, some scream... Others pull out their cell phones or throw things at me. I skitter down the halls, desperately trying to find safety. *How did I get here? What is this place? Who am I?*

Then something in my mind shifts. *This is Silver Creek High. My name is Layla. What's going on?*

"There's a fox in the school!" someone yells.

There's a fox in the school? I look down at my paws as I run down the halls, the five-foot-tall lockers suddenly towering over me and my classmates looking down at me from high above. *Am I a--*

My brain shifts again. *Weird sights. Weird sounds. Danger. Must escape. Must find cover!*

~ ~ ~

My eyes open groggily. My whole body aches and I'm shivering. *Where am I?* I look around, and it takes me a minute to figure out my strange location. *I'm under the bleachers in the gymnasium.*

I look down at myself, then immediately back up. *Oh, god. I'm naked. At school.* I peer through an opening between steps. No one's in here. *Why am I in here?*

Fragments come back to me, like pieces of a dream I had a week ago. My hands fly up to feel my ears. Normal. I look down at my shaking hands. No fur, no black nails. How much actually happened? How much was just in my head? What *did* happen? *Did I just-* Ugh, this is all too weird.

I stand up and walk to the edge of the bleachers. My eyes fall on a gym bag sitting along the edge of the bleachers. I pull it back behind and unzip it. The only clothes inside is a cheerleading outfit. I wouldn't wear this if someone paid me... but under the circumstances, I don't have much choice. So I pull on the mini-skirt and the half top and hope I'm not caught dead wearing it.



The warm summer sun shone down on the practice field. Different kids doing different sports. The class of Mr. Jefferson, were playing soccer on the west side while Miss LaDora's class was playing badminton on the north side. It was a cheerful day. The white outfits the children wore seemed to show the hard work they were doing. Laying under a tree and watching the activities unfold, was Michael. Since last week, he hadn't been feeling himself nonetheless wanting to do anything (this was abnormal of him, as he was "supposed" to be the class jock). He rested his hands behind his head, staring hazily at the classes. His class and the teacher, Mr. Neil were trying to figure out the complex game of "volleyball".

"To score in volleyball, you must win by two points." Mr. Neil was holding a volleyball, hugged closely to his side. He seemed causal today, wearing the same white t-shirt as everyone else but with faded blue jeans. The whole class was around his, crossing arms and awkwardly shifting.

"There is a mandatory rotation in volleyball. Why is there a mandatory rotation in volleyball?"

"Maybe to keep the players together?" a girl with a blonde ponytail suggested. Charlotte Penn. Michael shifted in his seat under the tree, feeling a stick poking in his lower back. "If everyone was just jumbled together, Mr. Neil, injuries and problems could arise."

Mr. Neil smiled and flipped through the book some more. "All of this seems to be common sense. So, let's play! Mr. Torson, can you go get Mr. Anthony?" The boy (Daniel Torson) nodded and ran towards the tree.

"Michael, Mr. Neil nee-"

"I'm not going to play that stupid sport," Michael interrupted. "Besides I have to practice for football. Volleyball is just a sport for weak-links, like yourself." And got up from the tree, walking towards a close off field to practice. A couple of Michael's friends were waiting there, throwing the football back and forth. After awhile, Mr. Neil's class seemed to drift off into different sports leaving the teacher alone under a tree. Most the classmates decided upon running around the track as practice then racing for four miles. The only running Michael did was for a football. He watched the rest of the class line up behind the start line, before he caught sight of Charlotte. She seemed born to run, long legs and the perfect body built for it. Behind the glasses she wore, focused eyes stared hard at the challenge. It gave "chills" to Michael.

Soon they were off and something inside Michael's chest was telling him to go after them. *I don't like running.*

"Charlotte's running."

That is besides the point.

"You know you like her. Go after her."

Shut up.

His conscience shrugged before lounging back on his little memories. *"You're going to do it, aren't ya?"* Michael groaned, standing up. They were around the second bend when Michael's legs seemed to run by themselves. As the class passed the third bend, he could be able to be behind Charlotte and race along side her. Of course, it would be straining for his legs and chest. He was on the track now, running slowly as the class caught up to him. They were all breathing fast and Michael could smell the sweat (fear possibly?) on their clothes. Something was stirring inside of him. Something bad was coming.

Two people ahead of him was Charlotte, who seemed focused on what she was doing. Michael wanted a chase, something to get his blood pumping and his heart beating fast. He tried everything in his power to move faster, weaving between the classmates and sometimes pushing others aside. Charlotte could sense his actions and tried to run a "little" faster, but Michael was faster. His head was fuzzy, like a heavy blanket over a flood lamp. His body seemed to feel heavier and heavier, his breathing turned irregular. The world was dimming too soon, as Charlotte and Michael ran indoors.

When they got indoors, he could feel the transformation happening; his hands turned into yellow padded paws, his clothes seemed to rip as his upper body seemed to grow bigger and bigger, and heavy set of yellow brown hair grew in place of his once ginger hair. Michael still felt cloudy, running and running after a.. gazelle? Where was Charlotte? Was Charlotte the gazelle? Some animal instinct kicked in as Michael let out a heavy roar.

What in god's name is happening? The gazelle and the lion ran around the gym locker room, breaking the wood benches and smashing into the metal lockers. As the transformation was complete, Michael felt lighter and more faster. His mind was replaced with a strange

connection of different wires, fused together to make him roar or run. They seemed to be coming to a corner, and Michael knew it was his chance to catch the meal.

The gazelle seemed panicked, realizing the corner. It turned around and backed into the corner-- it knew it was the end and there was no way out.

Charlotte, is that you?

OHIAMGOINGTODIE! Wait... how do you know my name? How are we talking?

I don't know.

You-you aren't going to eat me?

Yes- no- I don't know. Different thought processes are weird when you are a lion

Try being a gazelle!

The lion cornered the gazelle. He was sneering, staring hungrily at the helpless prey. At sudden, different voices of humans came into the locker room. Michael blinked. He stared at Charlotte, who in the gazelle form looked kinda cute. Big, brown doe eyes were staring helplessly at Michael while her thin, brown legs were quivering in fear.

As the classmates filtered into the locker room, they hadn't expected a lion and gazelle to be there. Some of the girls and boys screamed, gripping onto each other and running out of there. While some were in pure terror, staring at the lion the main beast of killing animals on sight. A sudden ping rang in Michael's mind, a cry for help or something. There were police sirens outside, wailing and screaming for trouble. He groaned, pacing back and forth in the locker isles.

We are going to get caught, and that is the last thing I want to happen.



“Oh god my head.” I say sitting up. I look around, and realize that I’m sitting in the middle of a wooded area. And...I’m naked. A gasp escapes my mouth, and even though I know no one is around I self consciously throw my arms around my bare body.

How the heck did I get here!? Ugh. This is not how I expected my Tuesday to go.

I remember falling, but I also remember flying. Something was chasing me, and I was so scared. It must have been a dream, but that doesn’t explain how I got here. There’s no way that was real. Was it?

The shaking of my body makes me uneasy, but it isn’t until the stinging starts that I notice something is wrong. I turn around to see two bloody gashes running down my back. Visions of the eagle attacking me rush through my head.

Not a dream! Definitely not a dream!

I need to get some help, but I dont even know where I am. The last thing I remember I was walking home from school, and I took a shortcut. I just need to find the path again. It takes me a good 7 minutes to find the path, and just like I suspected my bag was leaning against a tree nearby. I dig through it, but like always I only got sort of lucky. Nothing I can cover myself with

but a hoody, and my house is still a few good blocks from here. Blocks full of houses...and people.

I cringe as blood soaks through the hoody. I search for my phone, but no luck. I must have dropped it somewhere near here when the...thing happened. Okay plan B. Who has the nearest house to here? I look around, and there's only one house I recognize.

Daniel Torson's

You've got to be kidding me.

Heat rushes through my cheeks. I had only been there a few times for study sessions. No. No way. I am not stooping that low...But if I don't go, more people will see me half naked. Oh please, just let me get through the rest of this horrid day. I take in a deep breath, and trek my way towards his house. I reach the edge of his backyard, which conveniently has very well placed bushes. I look around, for pebbles I can throw.

How romantic Emma. Great job...

I sigh, and throw one at his window. This is not how I imagined a moment like this would ever happen. I wonder if people in movies have it this rough. Probably not. It takes a lot longer than I expected for him to come to his window. He opens it and peers out. My face becomes warm again.

"Emma? What are you doing here?" He is extremely confused.

"Oh you know just paroozing around the neighborhood. Thought I would stop by." I sigh, and realize I cannot play this off. "Truthfully. Something happened, and I need a pair of sweatpants."

"Pants? Are you okay?" His eyes go wide.

“No. Yes. I’m fine. Well er- Please. Just now. I’m sorry. I just really need your help.” I slightly laugh, once again trying to play it off. And failing miserably. His face goes red.

“Um okay. One minute.” He rushes off, and returns shortly out the back door with a pair of gray sweatpants in his hand. “Look...I-I swear I won't look, but I need you to tell me where you are.” I raise my hand in the air, and wave it around for him to notice. Next thing I know the sweatpants come flying over the bush.

“Thank you so much!” I put them on as fast as humanly possible, and I timidly step around the bush. My cheeks are on fire, and I can tell by looking at him he must feel the same. Then again his blush might be his fever. “So...hey.” I say awkwardly.

“Uh...” He coughs. “Hey.”

“So...thanks...for that, and I guess I'll see you later. And if you don't mind can we never mention this ever again?” I start to rush off, but he catches me off guard.

“Emma?”

“Yes?” I turn to him.

“What happened to your back? Your sweatshirt...it's bleeding through.” Suddenly it's like a realization hits him. He knows something. “Should I get you to the hospital?”

“No. No. My mom already has enough bills on her hands. I’ll be fine. I just need to get home.” I start off again.

“Emma. Can we...can we talk later?” I look at him, and I see the urgency in his eyes.

“Something's wrong...with all of us” I nod in understanding. Something is defiantly up. Everyone has been acting strange, and all around bad things keep happening. And clearly I'm not the only one who noticed.

“I know. We can talk later Dan.” I run off leaving Dan behind. Fear and confusion floods my mind.

Something's wrong.



It was cold for wearing a leotard, I had forgotten to bring a change of clothes in my bag. Again.

My parents basically went nuclear when I got suspended. Think a bear mixed with a piranha, poke that with a sharp stick, and multiply that agitation by ten thousand.

If it weren't for my dance class, they probably wouldn't have let me leave the house. Fortunately, the studio was only a few blocks away from my house, which gave me an excuse to walk and not have to deal with my Mom shooting me looks in the rear view mirror.

It killed me that I'd disappointed her.

I didn't notice the box until I tripped over it. The cardboard wall crumpled as I stumbled into it.

As I awkwardly attempted to hop around it, my shoe caught on the edge and sent both me and the box spilling over the curb and into a gutter.

An indignant mew escaped the inside of the vessel.

I climbed out of the gutter and back onto the sidewalk, dragging the box along with me.

I peered inside at the tiny animal inside. A calico kitten, curled up on a nest of crimson fabric.

The feline looked up at me, blinking its large blue eyes. I reached in the box and tickled the cat behind the ears. The kitten accepted the gesture with a little purr, rubbing its cheek against my hand.

In my bag, I heard my phone ring. I unzipped the bag and drew the device out, hitting the green "answer" button.

"Hello?"

My mom's voice rang through on the other end. "Riley, where are you? It shouldn't take you this long to walk home from the studio."

Oops.

Without thinking, I scooped the kitten up and stuffed it into my bag, quickly zipping it.

"Oh...sorry, guess I just got a little sidetracked. I'm nearly home."

"Okay. Just checking. Bye, love." The line went dead on the other end, and I hung up, going to put the phone back in my bag until I remembered the cat.

Oh, gosh. *the cat*. What was I supposed to do with it? Some people might be allergic to cats, but my mother was allergic to even the *idea* of having one.

But...I can't just leave it here. No, I'll have to do the right thing.

And by "The right thing", of course I mean smuggle it into my house.



Run, run, run, run, run!

Delicate little hooves skittering over cracked concrete floor. Cracked concrete floor. Cracked concrete floor. Wall! Soft, tawny hide bumping against a row of lockers. Brushing the cool, cool metal, disturbing the swinging, clanging locks, like wind-chimes in a savanna windstorm. Everything red, red! Bright splashes of red against the gray.

Delicate little hooves skittering to a stop. Wall, wall, wall, lion. Wall, wall, wall, lion. Clanging locks like wind-chimes disturbed by the flick of the lion's tail. Teeth! Terrifying, flashing white teeth in yellow fluorescent light and terrifying, flashing silver claws slicing at the ground like tiny deadly daggers. Fear, fear, fear! Death!

Then: peace. A buttery smooth voice echoes in my mind. Charlotte, is that you?

I pinned my ears to the back of my skull, my legs quivering, and, somehow, I replied to the voice with thought. The voice, the lion's voice, answered that it did indeed want to eat me and yet at the same time it didn't (which made me feel just great). He muttered something about lion brains being different. Well, I'd think gazelle brains are just as different. Try being me!

The lion was distracted for a minute when there was a sudden, sharp sound at the other end of the room. Terrified, I squeezed myself further into the corner and propped a tiny hoof on a small ledge at the base of the wall, then another hoof, balancing like a man on stilts. The lion flicked its tail, warily looking behind him. All I could see was his thick caramel mane and the rippling muscles in his legs.

Then, all at once, ten thousand terrible sounds crashed upon my ears, and I slipped from the ledge. Frantically I scrambled to my feet and hugged the corner again, and the lion whirled around and growled at the students. I panicked as their screams and yells wrapped around and around my thundering eardrums, but I glued myself to the wall and stayed as still as I could. As the lion flicked his tail the end of it swept over my nose like a paintbrush.

In a few minutes everything had died down. I didn't know what was happening; between the wishy-washy lion and the threat of the students I was only consumed with fear. When the lion finally turned back to me we were both startled again, this time by the ear-splitting sound of sirens not too far off. The doors to the locker room had closed, and nobody except us were inside. To me it seems as if they had all run off, locking the doors behind them and dialing 911 and animal control.

As I began to ponder our situation, I started to calm down. I started to think straight. *That's the police, with the sirens,* I said to the lion. *Coming for us.*

He nodded his big shaggy head, then looked me squarely in the eye. My legs started to quiver again, and I ducked my head and pinned my ears back. But then his smooth voice spoke to me, and I relaxed. *We have transform into humans again,* he said. His dark eyes swept up towards the ceiling, and I followed his gaze. *We'll escape - through the windows.*

As if on queue we both started to change. It all happened very quickly - my big ears, tail, and fur melted away, my muscles tingled, my eyesight sharpened, my smelling and hearing dwindled, and my face flattened into its usual form. I moaned and thrashed and twitched on the cold concrete floor, but as soon as it started the transformation was over. With a huge sigh of relief, I knew I was human again.

Sitting up, I realized in a panic that I didn't have any clothes on. My PE clothes must have been long gone when I first transformed into the thin form of the gazelle. But of course! I was in a locker room! Some rows down, my locker was waiting, with all my clothes and even a pair of extra shoes inside.

I waited silently in the corner, hugging my knees to my chest. The lion was gone. I think he had crawled to a different row of lockers when he started to change; I don't really remember. I thought of calling out to him, but then I remembered that I didn't know who he was. My brain whirled obligingly, happy to be in its human form again. Then with a jolt I realized who it was - Michael.

Just at that moment, I heard his voice echoing from across the room, "Charlotte? Are you okay?"

"Michael!" I squeaked, then cleared my voice. "Yes. I'm okay."

"Good, good. Um, I found my locker and clothes and stuff. I'll get your things too. Where's your locker?"

I told him the number and he crossed to girl's end of the locker room building, and when he'd announced that he'd reached it I recited the combination to him. After a moment he grabbed

my things and entered the row of lockers next to where I was to toss them over. My hands shaking, I gratefully put them on.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m ready.”

Mike wandered to my row of lockers to meet me, his hands in his pockets and his brow creased with worry. He cast his greenish blue eyes up towards the windows again. “We should try to escape now. Coming out of the doors would be... suspicious, to say the least.”

I nodded and looked up towards the narrow windows too. They were *way* up there. How were we going to make it? I shivered with fear and looked back at Michael - strong, courageous Michael - and before I could stop myself I rushed to him and buried my head in his chest. “I’m so scared,” I whispered.

He seemed surprised, but after a moment his arms encircled me and he murmured back, “I am too, Charlotte. I don’t know what’s happening.”

He was the lion. The king, the fortress, the strength. “Why are *you* scared?” I asked him. “You’re the lion.” Immediately I chided myself for sounding so childish.

I felt him shrug. “You’re not the only one who’s scared of things, you know. I’ll play the lion’s part for you, but that doesn’t mean I won’t be trembling like a little gazelle on the inside.”

I looked up at him and he was smiling. I opened my mouth to say something, perhaps a thank you of sorts, but we were cut off by the sound of someone unlocking the door at the other end of the room.

My heart somersaulted tremendously again, and for a fraction of a second I wondered whether Michael’s lion heart had jumped, too.

“To the window!” he cried, and with surprising strength he lifted me and thrust me onto the top of one of the rows of lockers. I turned back to help him but he was already climbing up with ease and ushering me forward impatiently. I turned to the window and frantically fingered the latch, finally thrusting it open and letting a blast of fresh early afternoon air hit my face. I stuck my feet through the opening and grabbed Mike’s hand as I lowered myself down and jumped into a narrow alley between the locker rooms and the gym. He was at my side a second later.

Michael sighed. “Let’s get out of here, shall we?”

We slipped through the alley, away from the curious crowd and squads of policemen and animal control officers at the other end of the locker rooms. Michael squeezed my hand reassuringly. As terrified as I was, I couldn’t help but smile.

~ * ~

I woke up early the next morning, having been exhausted the night before and retiring to bed right after dinner, to the chorus of my worried parent’s voices. My mind was still frazzled. I wasn’t really in the mood for pondering anything, because whenever I thought about what had happened my legs would tremble and I would collapse in desperate fear.

What’s happened to me? What’s happened to Michael? I was sitting up in bed at 5:45 in the morning, rocking myself to and fro and cradling my aching head. It was all like some terrible nightmare. Soon I was so consumed with anxiety that I felt like I was going to be sick, so I

stumbled to the bathroom and flipped on the switch. I leaned over the sink, waiting, but thankfully my stomach settled.

After washing my face I wandered into the backyard and sucked in the crisp morning air. Before long my eyes were alerted to the skies, and I heard the sharp cry of what sounded to me like an eagle. I didn't have my glasses on but I could still make out the distinct shape of a very, very large bird, soaring low. My mouth gaped open. *What's an eagle doing here?* Before long, it was gone from sight.

I unwillingly allowed my brain to wonder about the eagle, the lion, and the gazelle. The locker room. The sicknesses. The absences. The field trip.

Standing there on the porch in my bare feet, I shivered.



"I heard there was a fox running loose in your High School, today? Did you see it?" Aunt Jen says, passing a bowl of fruit salad around the dinner table.

"No, I wasn't around when it happened," I say. "But apparently someone identified it as a Cape Fox, who supposedly only live in Africa. So they're thinking someone had it as a pet and it escaped."

Layla looks down at her plate, picking at her food and being unusually quiet. Aunt Jen notices this too and asks, "Layla, were you there?"

Layla looks up like she's surprised someone's talking to her. "Uh... nope. Didn't see a thing." She gives a quick little smile and goes back to her plate.

Okay... Aunt Jen passes me the bowl of fruit and I spoon some onto my plate, then pass it to Mr. Woods. I take a bite and suddenly my sense of taste and smell are completely overwhelmed by the sweet, juicy taste of the fruit mixture. I completely forget about the other food on my plate, or even the other people in the room and I start shoveling the stuff into my mouth.

Aunt Jen looks over at me. "Cole, why are you-" Mr. Woods starts to pass the bowl to Layla just as I run out on my plate and I snatch it out of his hand before she can grab it. I spoon more and more onto my plate until Aunt Jen pulls the bowl out of my hand. "Save some for the rest of us, will you? Geeze..."

This is enough of an abruptness to shake me out of my obsession. I look up from my food and around at the others sitting at the table. "Sorry... I don't know what came over me. It's just really good, I guess." Everyone gives me a look of confusion, except for Layla, who stares at me with wide, worried eyes.

"Cole, can I talk to you in the other room?" she says suddenly, then pushes away from the table. I raise an eyebrow at her, then stand up from the table. I'm hit with a sudden wave of dizziness and I have to steady myself on the table for a moment until it subsides. Then I follow her up the stairs and into her bedroom.

Layla paces back and forth. "I promised Jinx I wouldn't say anything, but... I've gotta say something. Cole, when I went to Jinx's apartment and called 911, it wasn't because he was hallucinating."

"Okay..."

"Somehow, he had turned into a tiger, tried to attack me, then turned back."

"Hah! Sure... That's a good one." *Layla? Funny? Since when?*

"Cole, listen to me!" She grabs my shoulders and looks seriously into my eyes. I shift my eyes to the side, then back to her, suddenly uncomfortable. "The fox at school yesterday. I didn't see it because I *was* it. I turned into a fox."

"What are you on? Because you're talking crazy."

"I'm not *on* anything! Haven't you noticed all the weird stuff going on lately? The absentees from our science class and *only* our science class which only started after the field trip? Ryker randomly falling into a comma for no reason? Riley going to the hospital? Jinx and myself turning into animals? I'm telling you, something weird is going on."

"Stuff happens, Layla." Cold sweat starts to prickle at my forehead and for some reason, I feel a bit uneasy on my feet. "I think you're being paranoid," I say, shrugging her hands off of my shoulders. Everything that's been going on lately *does* seem to be a little outside of normal, but what she's talking about is so far out of the loop of reality that it doesn't seem possible.

"Then how do you explain your sudden obsession with fruit? What if that's a sign you're going to change, too?"

"Into what? A fruit monster?"

"Cole. I am *this* close to losing it. I feel like I'm going to lose my mind so could you think about someone other than yourself for once and just *listen* to me?"

Think about someone other than yourself for once.

"I only think about myself? That's what you think?" I ask.

"Cole, I didn't mean it like-"

"No, I get it. Just because I've been to Juvie it *must* mean I'm selfish, right?"

Layla sighs. "This doesn't have anything to do with Juvie. It has to do with you acting like an arrogant jerk most of the time. So I'm just asking that you put your usual attitude aside and listen."

"If you hate me so much, why don't you talk to Aunt Jen? Or your animal buddy Jinx? Or even that lanky kid who you so obviously have a crush on."

Layla scoffs at me, then shakes her head. "See! You're doing it again! You're being a jerk when you don't need to be. If you would just lighten up a bit, you might not be so annoying to be around."

I take a few steps back from her, stung by her words. "I don't need this! You're talking to me about being a jerk? Have you taken a look in the mirror lately?"

"Cole..."

"No! I didn't want to come here in the first place! I had friends back in Boston. I had a life back in Boston and then my mom 'decided' to ship me off because it would be best for me. But did she even ask what I wanted? No. And you know what she was really thinking when she told me she was doing it for me? She was thinking she finally wouldn't have to deal with me anymore."

"I understand what you're going through-" she starts, but I cut her off.

"No. No you don't. You couldn't *possibly* know what I'm going through." Another wave of dizziness hits me and I have to steady myself on her desk. After a moment, it passes and I look back up at her. "You don't know what it's like to have your dad leave when you're twelve and have your mom ship you half way across the country just so she doesn't have to deal with you anymore. The only people who ever gave a crap about me were my friends, and they're back in Boston, too. So don't talk to me about knowing what I'm going through, or how much of a jerk I am. I've had plenty of people tell me both."

"Cole, I'm sorry. I didn't mean-"

"Forget it." I wipe my sleeve against my sweaty forehead and head towards the door of Layla's room.

"Where are you going?"

I steady myself on the doorframe for a second, closing my eyes as I'm hit with another wave of unsteadiness. Then shove myself off of it and storm out of the room. "Out."

+ + +

"Hey, man! I thought you said you wouldn't be able to make it?"

I walk toward the group of guys I've hung out with a few times since I moved here. "Plans change." I fist bump the first guy and high five the second. They stand around a metal trashcan in the park where they've lit a small fire to battle the January nip in the air. Though I don't feel the need to stand near it. I'm already sweating like crazy.

"Dude, my brother totally came through and hooked us up with a couple of six packs," the third guy says, slapping a can into my hand.

"Great," I say, though there's little enthusiasm in my voice.

"What's up with you?"

"Nothing, I don't want to talk about it," I say as I click back the latch.

+ + +

By the time a crumple the third can, the world is starting to spin. *But three is nothing compared to what I could handle in Boston.*

"You okay, man?" one of the guys says, walking over to me, but all I can make out of him is a blurry figure whose movements are lapsing in time. He puts a hand on my shoulder and his hand feels like fire against my skin. I stand up from the log and stumble backwards, startled.

"Dude?"

I'm hit with a wave of nausea and stumble into the woods surrounding the clearing. Afterwards, I steady myself on a tree with my hand, which is covered in thick, black hair. "What the hell?"

Just then a CRV pulls up to the clearing, honking a couple times as it approaches to get our attention. Through my blurry vision, I almost think I recognize the car. Then a girl jumps out of the drivers seat and walks into the clearing. "Layla?"

"Where's Cole?" she says in a demanding tone.

"Who wants to know?"

"His cousin who's willing to kick every single one of you to Canada if you don't tell me." The guy puts his hands up and nods, then points to me as I stumble to a tree closer to the clearing. "Cole, we have to go."

"I... I'm not going anywhere with you..."

Layla walks over and grabs my hand. Her eyes widen slightly when she sees it's covered in dark hair, but it only fazes her for a moment before she shoves that hand into my pocket and grabs my other one instead, pulling my arm over her shoulder. "Too bad. We have to go *right now*."

In my semi-conscious state, I don't fight her. She walks me to the car and helps me to lay down in the back seat just as a sharp pain shoots through my head. "Ah... Somethings wrong." I say, pressing my hands into my head.

Layla gets into the drivers seat, slams the door--which is *far* louder than it should be--and steps on the gas. "You think?"

The pain spreads down the back of my neck and into my chest, causing me to struggle for breath. "What are you doing here?" I gasp.

"The dizziness and cold sweats you had while you talked to me. I recognized why you were having them about five minutes after you left."

"Why? What's happening?"

Layla looks over her shoulder at me. "You're morphing."



Why am I always the one to get caught up in this stuff? Somehow I feel like I'm starting to become an expert on the subject. Whatever the *subject* is. But despite feeling this way, I still consciously have to try and keep myself calm. Whether I'm becoming an expert on this or not, *this* is not normal.

"Do you believe me now?" I call back to Cole. All he does is groan. I press my foot down on the gas pedal, accelerating the car even faster than before. "Hang in there." Looking in the rear-view mirror, I see Cole roll onto his side and he grits his teeth, squeezing his eyes shut.

"How much did you have to drink?" I ask. After a moment, I'm answered with a thud. A quick look into the back confirms that he rolled off the seat and onto the floor. I roll my eyes. *Oh, well that's fantastic.*

Just my luck, he's probably going to morph into a panther or something. Or a bear. Yeah, that would just be perfect. He insults me and storms out of the house, then I go out of my way to save his ass and he eats me. Or, or... oh god. What would happen if he morphed into an elephant? He'd break the car. How would I explain that to Mom? I couldn't exactly tell her an elephant did it. She'd think I lost my marbles.

Cole gasps for breath. I look in the rear-view mirror, but I still can't see him. "We're almost home," I say. But he doesn't respond. "Cole?" No answer.

I pull the car over to the shoulder of the road. "Cole?" I look over my shoulder and reach into the backseat only to come up with a sweat-soaked black tee. I drop it just as something jumps onto the back of my seat. I jolt back to see a capuchin monkey hanging on the headrest. I look at him, and he looks at me. He screeches in my ear.

I let out a shuttered breath. "Oh. A monkey. Well, that's fitting."

* * *

When I pull back into our driveway, I realize I couldn't just bring him into the house without an explanation. An explanation which I don't have. So instead, I grab my backpack, empty it out into the passenger seat and stuff the monkey inside. How many people can say they zipped their cousin into a backpack?

I head in the front door and make a bee-line for the stairs, but Mom is watching television in the living room and stops me. "Layla, what happened?"

"I found him and he's fine. He said he'd be back a little later and that you shouldn't wait up for him."

"Oh... Well, he knows there's a curfew, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, but since when has Cole listened to rules?" I say, trying to act casual.

"True..."

"I'm pretty tired, so I'm going to go to bed." I give her a small smile, then head up the stairs. As soon as I'm out of sight from her, I run up as fast as I can and dart into my room before anyone else can talk to me. I close the door and lock it, then set the backpack on my bed and unzip it. The monkey jumps out onto the bed and looks around. For a second, I think everything might be okay and I let out a breath. Maybe he'll calm down and morph back.

My hopes were too high.

One second he's standing calmly on my comforter and the next he's flying around the room, screeching and wrecking havoc on everything. He jumps on my iPod and music starts blaring through my speakers. I rush over to turn it off, but by the time I do, he's already jumped onto my bookshelf. I catch on a second too late and the whole thing tips over with a loud crash. I cringe, hoping no one heard.

When he jumps off of the bookshelf and onto my chair, I manage to grab him, but he slips out of my grasp and lands on my nightstand. He looks at me and screeches, then picks up a cup and throws it at me. "Hey! Watch it!" He sticks his tongue out at me, then throws my clock.

Someone knocks on my door. "Layla?" It's mom voice. A rush of panic floods through me, but I realize I can't not open the door for her.

I look at the monkey. "Don't make a sound." I walk over to the door and open it just wide enough for me to stick my head out. "What's up?"

"I heard a crash. What's going on in there?"

"Oh, that... I was just doing some rearranging."

"Rearranging? I thought you were going to bed," she says.

"I was! But then I decided to clean my room instead. It's pretty messy."

"Layla, it's always messy." A lamp falls over and crashes onto my nightstand. Quickly, I pretend to have a cough attack to cover up the noise. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine, Mom!" My heart starts beating faster. I'm horrible at lying to her.

She gives me a skeptical look, then after a moment she shrugs. "Alright... If you say so."

"Night, Mom."

"Goodnight, Layla."

I close the door quickly and whirl back around to look at my nightstand. Cole is gone. Then I hear something like paper ripping and I look over at my desk to see him tearing up my homework... and eating it. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me."

By the time I make it over to him, he's already onto the next thing: grabbing a ruler and swinging it around, hitting everything on my desk with it like a baseball bat. When I pull it out of his hands, it occurs to me that Cole had been drinking. It's not just a capuchin monkey I'm dealing with. It's a *drunk* capuchin monkey. *Oh lord...*

* * *

I jolt awake at a loud noise, my head bumping into the door I sit against. This must be the tenth time I've nodded off. Warm, early morning light streams through my window making half of my room glow with gold. I look at the time on my phone which reads: *6:02AM*. After about an hour of the madness, I'd given up on trying to keep him out of trouble. But going to bed wasn't an option. What would happen if he got out while I was asleep? Or if he turned back and was in as

bad of shape as Jinx was and I wasn't awake to deal with it? So... needless to say, it was a long night.

I squint into the room, peering around to figure out where he is. I hear something terrifying: *silence*. "Cole?"

I rub my eyes and sit up straighter. I hear a groan. A *human* groan. "Oh, thank goodness." A hand appears from the other side of my bed, and a moment later he pulls himself up enough for his head to become visible.

"Layla? What happened?"

I stand up and put a hand out. "Don't move. I'll be right back." I fling my door open and run into Cole's room. I grab a shirt and pair of pants off the ground then return to my room, closing the door behind me. I throw the clothes on the bed. "Clothes first. Stories later." *Nobody wants to see that.*

Slow and groggy, he pulls on the pants out of view, then throws his shirt over his head. "Okay," he says as he scoots back to sit with his back against the nightstand. I come around to see him with his arms wrapped around his body, shivering. I throw him a blanket, then sit down in front of him. "What's happening to us?" he says quietly. I've never seen Cole like this. The annoyed, arrogant attitude he normally has is gone and has been replaced with a tired, beat-down version of himself.

"I don't know," I reply. "But we're going to figure it out. Jinx and me, now you. Somehow I've got a feeling this isn't just some weird thing going around. I don't believe in coincidences and I also have a feeling that others from our science class are going through something like this

too." Cole doesn't respond. He just wraps the blanket tighter around him and stares down at the floor. "Do you remember anything from last night?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Not really. The last thing I remember clearly is being in the back of Aunt Jen's car. Then nothing but weird flashes that don't make any sense."

We're silent for a while. What do you say to someone who you vowed to hate but ended up saving? What do you talk about when that someone just morphed into an animal and back?

"Do you know why I went to Juvie?" he finally says, though his words are quiet.

"Umm... Shoplifting I think?"

He nods slowly. "It was a five-hundred dollar watch. I've never told anyone why I did it." He pauses for a moment, then takes a deep breath. "I was going to meet my friends at the mall. There was this woman with her small daughter standing on the corner. They were homeless. I watched as person after person passed by them without so much as giving them a friendly nod. All I had on me was a twenty. In fact, that's all I had left after I bought my guitar that morning. But I gave it to them anyway. I figured they needed it more than I did. Anyway, when I got inside I walked by a jewelry store that was advertising a new line of watches. Hundreds of dollars for something that tells you what time it is. While I waited for my friends, I remember watching person after person walk past the woman, completely ignore her, then come inside and spend hundreds of dollars on a stupid watch. And, I don't know... It made me mad. I don't think anyone should *have* to give to people who were dealt a worse hand than them or anything... but what struck me was that *nobody* cared enough to bother. Everyone is so wrapped up in their own lives that they don't care about anyone else. Just like my dad, when he didn't think twice about me or my sister when he took off without so much as a goodbye."

"Cole, I'm sorry I said all that stuff last night. I was out of line," I say.

He just shakes his head at me and keeps talking. "I was dealt such a crappy hand and no one ever seemed to give a crap about me. So when I saw someone else who was dealt and even crappier one without anyone even acknowledging their existence, it kind of ticked me off and I couldn't take it anymore. So I walked into the jewelry store and slipped one of those watches into my pocket. I was going to give it to the woman. Maybe she could pawn it for some decent cash. But I was being impulsive and didn't think it through. I didn't even make it past the store entrance before security caught on."

"I had no idea..." I say earnestly.

Cole looks up at me, his eyes sad. "I'm sorry, Layla. I overreacted last night. I was being a jerk and you didn't deserve that. And... I guess I should also thank you for finding me."

I nod. Honestly, I'm impressed that he decided to be a big enough person to apologize. Maybe I misjudged him a little.

I give him a smile and lean forward to give him a hug. It took a lot of guts for him to tell me the truth. I know he's been through a lot, and I'm glad I was the person he decided to tell.

"Thank you, Cole."



"So let me get this straight...on the *one day* that I went home early, I missed a *gazelle* and a *lion* running around the school?"

"It's the truth." Gwen said with a grin. "I know its hard to believe, but that's what I saw. And what dozens of other people saw too."

I shook my head in wonder. "And then they *disappeared* ? That doesn't make any sense!"

"Tell me about it." Gwen replied, shaking her head.

Then she checked her watch and said, "Oh sorry, gotta go. Mr.Nelson wanted to meet me early today." and she ran off.

I shrugged and continued watching Stint with Fiction play their song. I was standing by the stage, waiting for Emma. I knew I needed to talk to her about the events of the day before.

I was having a hard time believing it, but I had turned into an eagle. In the morning, I had tried doing it again, and it had worked! I had went out for a morning flight, which was surprisingly pleasant. But I still felt incredibly guilty. I had no proof, and no conceivable thought of how it had happened, but I was now fully sure. I had hurt Emma. She had been the barn owl.

I remembered how I had dove down, tearing into her back with my talons...it had felt normal at the time, repeating the old cycle of predator and prey, but for a human, it was a crime. Then I saw her, standing silently by the entrance, and walked up to her.

I tapped her on the shoulder, and she turned around before saying, "Hey, Dan. What is it?"

I swallowed before saying, "We need to talk." She nodded, seeming to understand, and we stepped out into the hall and went a short distance up it. Then I took a deep breath, and said what I knew sounded certifiably insane.

"You turned into an owl, didn't you?"

Her eyes widened as she replied, "N...no. Wh-what owl?"

My first instinct was to declare it a joke but then I noticed that she was turning pale and stuttering, sure signs that she was lying.

"A barn owl." I said. "I know. You can admit it." she was turning even paler now. She said stuttered out, "H-how?"

I took a deep breath and hoped she wouldn't hate me as I said, "Because I was the eagle who attacked you."

Her eyes became wide as saucers as she backed away and exclaimed, "You hurt me! Why?!!"

"I wasn't in control of myself!" I replied, hoping that she would understand. "The eagle's instincts controlled me! You have to believe me, I would never do anything like that!"

She looked at me for a two nerve wracking seconds before nodding and saying, "I believe you. You'd never do something like this if you had control of yourself."

I sighed with relief before saying, "Thank you. Now, I don't think we're alone. Don't you think its weird, all of us biology students of Mr.Neil getting sick? Not to mention the lion, cape fox, and gazelle appearing in our school..." I said it slowly, working it out as I went along.

Watching Emma's expression, I knew she had come to the same conclusion.

"Other people are morphing." she said with finality.

"Yes," I replied, now sure, "And it's only a matter of time before the rest do too."

A few minutes later, I had reached the door to my first class of the day :World History Just as I was about to step in, I heard voices from behind the door. Curious, especially with the recent events, I put my ear to it to listen.

"-keep a watch on them. And if anything happens, report it to me." I heard Mr.Nelson saying.

Another, much younger voice replied, "Yes, sa-" at that point, he froze as I had leaned too heavily on the door, causing to creak. So that they didn't catch on to the fact that I had been eavesdropping, I walked in quickly.

"Good Morning, Daniel." said Mr.Nelson.

"Good morning, Mr.Nelson." I replied politely. Then I saw who was standing next to him.

He was a thin, blonde haired guy with blue eyes. He stood perhaps half an inch taller than my own 5'10".

"this is Darrin." said Mr.Nelson, gesturing towards him. "He's new, only started school here today. I was just telling to look after our new gerbils." and pointed to a cage on a desk in the corner. *So that's what he meant by keep track of them.* I thought, calming down.

"I am going to make you his partner until he has caught up with the rest of the class and got his bearings in the school." he continued.

"Cool. Okay." I replied, not sure why I had been picked. I didn't usually do this kind of thing.

I took my usual seat at the back, and Darrin sat right next to me, before taking out a book and starting to read.

"Hey, you like Red Rising too?" I asked, noticing the book right away.

"Yup." he replied with a grin. "I'm reading it for the ninth time now."

"Wow, you beat me!" I exclaimed with a laugh. "I've only read it seven times." He laughed at that. *Well, this partnership thing might not be so bad.*

Later on, in the cafeteria, I was sitting at a table discussing zoology with Charlotte and Layla when I noticed Gwen acting strange. As she was walking past our table, she froze. Then she lifted her nose to the air, sniffed, and followed her nose to our table, before sitting down at our table, right next to Layla, to the surprise of everyone.

"Hey, Dan." she said, staring at my munch. "What sandwich is that?"

"Roast beef. Why?" I replied, curiously.

"I see you haven't begun eating it yet. Do you mind if I have some?"

My eyes widened in disbelief at those words. "Aren't you a vegetarian?" I asked, incredulous.

"Mhm." she replied, staring at my sandwich.

"Okay." I sighed. "Have some." and I passed her my sandwich. Within three bites, she finished the whole thing. I stared her in shock as she licked the crumbs from her hands.

Then she seemed to realize what she had done and said, "Sorry, Dan." blushing.

I sighed and replied, "Its okay. I'll just eat my apple in the halls in case you start to crave that too." At that, Gwen blushed even more.

I walked a little distance up the halls, and was about to crunch into my apple when I heard footsteps behind me. I turned around to see Cole, Layla's cousin.

He looked at my apple hungrily and said, "Do you mind giving me that apple? I'm starving."

"Sorry. This is all the lunch I have." i replied.

"Please," said Cole. "I really need it." and he reached his arm out towards me. I then realized to my horror that black fur was growing at an alarming rate on his hand.

"Um...Cole?" I said, but he didn't respond as his entire body transformed, shrinking until it reached its final form. Which was laughably a capuchin monkey. It crawled free of Cole's clothes and leaped at me, shrieking.

I threw the apple down the hall, and Cole flew after it. Then I went to call Layla, hoping that she would be able to help with monkey Cole.

I walked up to the table casually and said to Layla, "Cole's acting like a *monkey*. I think you had better come with me.

Layla's face paled as she said, "You mean..."

"Yup" I replied, my face grave. She leaped up and followed me, both of us leaving a bewildered Charlotte behind.

While we searched the hall, I explained to Layla what had happened. We searched for a while, but to no avail. Then we heard some wild shrieks, that we knew must have come from

Cole, and followed them until we came to the Principal's office. The door was partially open, and as as we got there, I heard something inside fall to the ground with a crash.

"Oh no." I muttered.



The florescent lights of the laboratory seemed to glow even brighter than usual in comparison to the darkness that engulfed the world on the outside. With no streetlights for miles, the only light to cast a blue glow down onto the hard dirt and reflect off of the cold steel structure of the laboratory was the moon.

It was quiet, most of the scientists having gone home hours ago... But the two scientists who remained preferred it that way. The project they needed to discuss was sensitive, to say the least. And if anyone overheard their conversation, it could be the end of everything.

They sat in a small discrete office, the only access to it through the most secure part of the laboratory. The part where inventions were being developed that most people could not even begin to imagine. Inventions that could change the world.

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice," one of the men said, leaning his elbows on the desk with the nameplate that read: *Dr. Liam Bishop*.

"It's no trouble." The man sitting across from him rubbed his tired eyes, then sat up straighter, readjusting the tie around his neck. "I've been wanting to meet with you too, Liam."

"I have some concerns about Project Miles Eximius. Kids calling out sick from school is one thing, but three teens going to the hospital all in one week? And one is in a coma? That's a little harder to write off as coincidence, Neil."

"With all due respect, Liam, it would be foolish to think something like this *wouldn't* happen. First of all, we didn't even know for sure they would survive the initial treatment. And if they were strong enough, which they all were, then that was the easy part for them. These kids had non-human DNA injected into them. Their bodies are trying to adjust and accept that their genes are literally and physically changing to do what we need them to do. It's only logical that a subject or two's bodies would reject the treatment. I did check in on Subject 9 and he's doing better," Mr. Neil said.

"Subject 9?" Dr. Liam raised an eyebrow in question as he thumbed through each of the teens' files on his desk.

"Jinx Gray, sir. He should be back on his feet soon. I assure you, there is nothing to worry about."

Dr. Liam leaned back in his chair, resting his feet on the desk. "Nothing to worry about? I'm only getting started. The way the subjects are handling the treatment is only a small concern of mine. *You* are my main concern."

Mr. Neil tilted his head at him, his brow drawing into a hard line. "Oh?"

"A fox from Africa running wild through a high-school. Dozens of students coming face to face with a lion and a gazelle in a locker room that miraculously disappeared. A capuchin monkey destroying the principal's office? What's next?" Dr. Liam said with a glare.

"Well..." Mr. Neil began, but then Dr. Liam shot forward in his chair and slammed his hand down on the desk.

"That CANNOT happen! I put you in charge of those kids so you could control them. So do your job and *control the situation*."

Mr. Neil tried hard to remain calm. He was smarter than Dr. Liam. *Much* smarter. There wouldn't even be test subjects to watch if it wasn't for him. Yet he still had to take orders from the man, and that really got under his skin.

Dr. Liam was technically the head scientist on the project. He discovered the Japanese research, headed the raid that allowed them to retrieve it and was the one who brought the government into the project for funding... But Mr. Neil was second in charge. He was the one brought in to enhance the technology and find the test subjects.

But he joined the project for one reason, and one reason only. He wanted power... and for a chance to get in one of those chairs himself. He hoped he could bite his tongue long enough for the opportunity.

"I am about to put phase two of the plan into effect," Mr. Neil told him. "They started morphing sooner than I anticipated, but I can assure you... I'm on top of it. I will be keeping a... much closer eye on them from now on as well as introducing them to the idea of being a part of something much bigger than themselves."

"You're planning to tell them about our plans to turn them into an army of super soldiers? Don't you think it's too soon? They're only our first round of subjects." Dr. Liam said, skeptical of his tactics.

Mr. Neil's head reeled at the thought of their ultimate plan going into effect. Soon they would have an army of super soldiers under their control that would help them take over the world, country by country. Young, impressionable youth they could mold and brainwash into soldiers that would follow them without question. This generation was the future, after all, a future they had all planned out.

That would be the ultimate rise of power. The USA would rule everything. And who would dare try to fight back against an army that could turn into vicious wolves and venomous snakes and ferocious cheetahs that could run at seventy-five miles-an-hour at will? An army with spies everywhere disguised as the neighborhood squirrel or the seacoasts seagulls? Air Force eagles. Navy Seal seals. It would be the ultimate dictatorship, and Mr. Neil would be behind it all. And it all started with a unsuspecting group of kids in high school. He knew the kids he chose were smart, he just hoped they weren't *so* smart that they would catch onto the truth.

"Baby steps, Liam. It's all in the presentation. You concentrate on your part of the plan, and I'll concentrate on mine."

"Well, you best be going," Dr. Liam told him, standing up from his desk and straighten out his white coat. "Being a high school school science teacher might only be a cover, but the kids will get suspicious if you start acting out of character. And if you don't get some sleep and are tired tomorrow, or you arrive late to class, the kids might suspect you have something to do with their new found... abilities."

Mr. Neil stood and shook his hand. "Of course. Thank you." Just as he wrapped his fingers around the handle of the door, Mr. Neil turn back to his colleague. "I expect that if I get the kids under control and everything continues to go according to plan, that you'll make a point

of getting me on the list of the next round of subjects to be added to the army. Those kids need a leader, after all." Though the words rolled off his tongue in a casual fashion, the need he had for an answer had been eating at him for days. Yes, the ultimate goal was power. But the reason he got involved in the first place was the promise that was made to him. That he too would get to become an Animorpher. But ever since he signed on, there had been no mention of it. Had it been a bluff to get him on board? Or was he simply being impatient? Because if Dr. Liam was planning to double-cross him, then Dr. Liam must have underestimated what Mr. Niel was capable of. No one double-crossed him. Not without seriously regretting it.

Dr. Liam hesitated on that question a moment, picking at the buttons on his white coat.

"We'll see how things go."

Mr. Neil narrowed his eyes at him. That didn't sound promising. But all he did was nod his head in understanding, and leave the room without another word. He would find out soon enough. But right now, he had enough to focus on. Eleven things to focus on, to be exact.



"Mewww."

"Shut up!" I whispered at my bag.

My mom looked up from her book. "What?"

I shifted my bag nervously, searching for something to say. The only thing I came up with was. "What?"

"Were you asking me something."

"Nope. No. I gotta go. Don't wanna be late."

"But your leaving an hour earl--"

I shot out the door and slammed it behind me.

Smooth.

I began jogging down the sidewalk towards the studio. Holding my bag in my arms to keep it steady. I'd picked up the furball two days ago and I'd already had several close calls.

"Mrrew."

"Hey." I addressed the bag again. "I know I haven't named you yet, but I know what my mom'll call you if she finds you in the house. *This Animal*. As is 'Riley, take *This Animal* out, or *I'll have the dog eat it.*' Is that really what you want?"

The bag was silent.

I stopped at the door of the studio, leaning heavily on the frame as a sudden wave of dizziness swept through me. I shook my head and took a few deep breaths before tottering somewhat unsteadily into the class. Only one other girl was there. A tall, thin girl with her blonde hair pulled into a tight bun, showcasing her lean face.

Annie Prince.

"Hey, Riley!" She greeted, prancing over. She smiled down at my bag and whispered "Did you bring the kitty?"

I nodded vaguely, still feeling somewhat light headed, and unzipped the bag a little. Annie peered in, then stuck a finger in and tickled the kitten inside under the chin. She withdrew her hand quickly as the teacher entered the studio and I zipped the bag back up, moving off to the changing room. Another bout of dizziness overcame me, this time accompanied with nausea. I stumbled a little, and braced myself against the wall. My body began to tremble.

"Riley?" Annie said, her brow creasing in concern.

"I'm...okay." I mumbled faintly, staggering unsteadily into a changing room. I set my bag down and sat heavily down on the bench, holding my head between my knees until the dizziness passed. I stood, and began changing into my leotard. The cat clambered out as I drew the garment out, and curled up facing the opposite wall. What a gentleman. I dressed quickly, rubbing the goosebumps on my arms as I felt the tight fabric of the leotard cling to me. I began

turning the handle...and pitched sideways as burning pain lanced through my body. I muffled a cry as I tripped and fell on my back, cracking my head on the bench. I held my head in my hands as began to tremble again, Twitching and writhing as if I were having a seizure. I looked down at my bare feet, which began to elongate and expand into huge, spotted paws. Another searing pain lanced through my head, roaring in my ears. I gripped my head tighter, and felt something stab into my scalp. I yelped and brought my hands away. through my blurred vision, I saw that my hands had morphed into the same huge spotted clawed paws.

What's happening to me?

I groaned, but it came out as more of a throaty growl. All the color seeped out of the world and my vision grew fuzzy. I levered myself up onto all fours, groaning again as the pain raced through my spine. I crawled over to the mirror, and lifted my eyes to get a look at myself. My blue eyes were large and green with slitted cat pupils. Small tufts of fur were growing on my cheeks and arms, and I could just see a short, stumpy tail flicking behind me.

"Oh mother of pearl!" I gasped to myself.

Large pointed ears burst from the top of my head. My face elongated into a thin snout and grew more fur. My body bulged as I grew and contorted into a different form. My legs gave out, and for a moment my vision faded away altogether.

Help...

....

The lynx opened its eyes, lifting its regal head off its enormous front paws. Its ears flicked as it tried to get its bearings. the room was tiny, empty, and, as far as the lynx could see, inescapable. It growled irately, pacing back and forth and glaring at the door. It sniffed the air, searching for any helpful scent. It did pick something up, though not anything it had expected. The scent of another cat. It turned, and spotted the tiny calico on the other side of the room.

Prey.

The lynx dropped into a crouch, drawing itself forward on silent paws, its eyes fixed intently on the tiny morsel. The calico stiffened as it caught her scent, and slowly turned. The lynx insinctively tensed, not even letting the tip of her bobbed-tail twitch. The kitten bolted.

Chase...Chase. ChaseChaseChaseChase!

The lynx sprang after her target, pursuing it around the tiny room. The tiny creature yowled as the beast caught up to him, and the lynx roared, trapping the kitten under one enormous paw. it bared its fangs, looking the tiny feline in the eye. Without another moment of hesitation, the lynx lunged.

....

With its teeth inches away from the kitten's neck, the lynx jerked to a stop. Pain speared through its head and it stumbled back, shaking its head and growling. All the strength seemed to flood out of it and it collapsed to the ground, shuddering as its fur seemed to fade away, being replaced with pale skin. its ears, limbs, and face shrank. Its tail receded back into its spine. In moments a girl lay unconscious on the floor. A small, thin girl with mousy brown hair in a skintight leotard.



What is this place? Where are all the trees?

I jump onto the tallest object in the room. It reminds me of a tree. With a really wide trunk and no leaves. But the second I jump to the top, I know it's not a tree. It's not sturdy enough. It tips over, hitting the desk and cracking the wood.

I spot something green in the corner. That reminds me of a tree, too. But it's very short and has no trunk. *Maybe the leaves are covering the trunk.* I jump onto it, but the second I do, I find out that's not a tree either. It tips over and something breaks, spilling dirt all over the floor.

"Cole! Stop!"

I turn towards the sound. Two humans stand in the doorway, watching me with wide eyes. They look familiar. Especially the girl. But why?

"Layla, we have to do something! Principal Jacoby is coming this way," the boy says.

What's a Jacoby?

The humans hurry into the office and I screech at them to not come any closer. *What do these humans think they're trying to pull?*

"She's getting closer!"

The girl ignores my warning and grabs me, then shoves me into a backpack. I remember now that this girl has done this before.

The boy looks back at her. "What's your plan, Layla?"

Layla. That name name sounds familiar, too. But why?

I start to climb back out of the bag, but the girl shoves me back down inside. "Stay in there, Cole. And don't make a sound."

Snap! My brain shifts. Cole is my name. And this girl is my cousin. We're in the principal's office and I'm a... I look down at myself. ...monkey. This is not good.

I look up and nod at Layla. She tilts her head at me. "Cole?" I nod at her again, letting her know that it's me. She lets out a breath as I sink back down inside the bag as I hear footsteps approaching.

"What is going on in here?" Principal Jacoby says, flabbergasted as she storms into the room.

"Principal Jacoby, thank goodness your here," Dan says. "We heard noises coming from your office and we came in here to check it out. Whoever it was jumped out the window just as we got here."

"These windows?" she says, walking further into the room. Dan nods. "That's pretty impressive considering these windows don't open." Principal Jacoby knocks on one of the windows with her knuckle. "They don't even have a latch."

I feel my mind starting to slip, and I have to struggle to keep control.

"I only saw them for a split second. They must have been on been on the outside to begin with," Dan says with a shrug.

"So the person you heard in here just, disappeared then?" My foot slips and I slide further down inside Layla's backpack. "Ms. Woods. Is there something in your backpack you'd like to show me?" *Dammit...*

The principal marches over and grabs the backpack, unzipping it the rest of the way. She lets out a squeak when she sees me and takes a step back. "I've had to deal with a lot of weird stuff as principal, but this... *This* brings it to a whole new level.

Principal Jacoby opens the door to her closet and pulls out a small dog kennel. She grabs me. Layla and Dan try to protest, but she ignores them and throws me inside, closing the metal door behind me. She sets the cage on her desk. "You two wait outside while I call animal control."

Layla bends down to my level and whispers, "We'll figure out how to get the principal out of her office. When we do, try to morph back and get the hell out of here, okay?" I give her a nod.

Principal Jacoby throws her arm out and points toward the door. "Out!" They leave the room and the principal closes the door behind them. Despite the fact that I've escaped the clutches of authority half a dozen times in my life, this is something entirely different.

The principal makes her call, and just as she hangs up, the fire alarm goes off, spraying the entire room with water. I let a little monkey grin spread over my face. *Nicely done...*

"What in the..." Principal Jacoby stands up from her desk and flings the door open, then storms out into the hall.

This is my chance. I try to reach my little monkey hands through the bars to undo the latch, but they're just a little too big and I can't fit them through. My only choice is to morph back. I close my eyes and concentrate, willing myself to become human again.

It doesn't work.

I try again and again until finally, the fourth times the charm. The plastic cage stretches until it breaks, causing it to fall off the desk with me still inside. Within seconds, the thick black fur on my arms is gone, my tail has merged back into my tailbone and I'm human again.

A pair of black cargo pants flies through the open door and slides on the ground, ending up a foot in front of me. I put them on as quickly as I can and head out the door. Layla and Dan are waiting for me just outside. "Thanks," I say.

"You owe me big time," Layla says. "Again."

We hurry down the empty hallway as the alarm continues to wail, splashing through the puddles that are starting to collect from the sprinklers that shoot water all over the halls. *Man, are we going to get it.*

+ + +

7:30am in the flipping morning, Layla and I head down the stairs to grab breakfast before school. We got a half day yesterday because of the "unfortunate accident with the sprinkler system" flooding the school. I hoped because today is Friday that they'd just give us the day off, but I guess they were able to get it cleaned up well enough it keep school going. *Yay...* But I guess, considering we have science class on Fridays, that it will give me an opportunity to confront Mr.

Neil about everything that's going on. Somehow, I have a feeling he knows more about what's going on than he's letting on.

When I make it to the bottom of the stairs, I see the usual Spiderman and Superman cartoons Danny watches every morning has been replaced with a Breaking News Cast. A helicopter shoots footage of a burning building, the flames reaching thirty feet in the air. "What's going on?" I ask.

"Hey, guys," Aunt Jen says from the couch. "What was that lab called that your two went to for your field trip?"

"M.E.L.? Miles Eximius Laboratory?" Layla says. "Why?"

Layla and I look at each other, then walk closer to the TV as a newscaster comes on the screen.

"Firefighters are still working to put out the fire that started at the Miles Eximius Laboratory at approximately 6:15AM this morning. It is believed that an accident occurred inside the laboratory, starting the fire and that no foul play was involved. So far, twelve of the scientists inside the lab have been confirmed dead, including the scientist who was heading the experiment that got out of control, Dr. Liam Bishop. Fifteen scientists were employed at M.E.L. and the three who remain have all been confirmed missing. Dr. Marcius Blum..." A picture appears of a middle-aged man with blonde hair and a mustache. "Dr. Brooke Hazleton..." A young asian woman's picture appears next to the first. "And Dr. Neil Terek." The third picture shows a familiar face with a black beard and glasses.

Wait! What?

Layla and I turn to look at each other. *Mr. Neil was a scientist at the lab? And he's missing? What the hell?*

"Dr. Terek looks familiar... Hey, isn't he your science teacher?" Aunt Jen asks, turning back to look at us.

"Yeah, mom. I gotta go," Layla says, shock lingering in her voice. She reaches down for her backpack and misses the handle a couple of times because she doesn't take her eyes off the tv.

"Go? School doesn't start for a half an hour," she protests.

"We've got a...thing. A project we need to finish," I say, swinging my own backpack over my shoulder.

"Oh, okay. Well, have a good day, guys," Aunt Jen calls out after us as Layla slams the door.

Layla looks at me very seriously. "We need to find out what's going on. Today."

+ + +

I sit in Mr. Neil's classroom, staring at the clock and tapping my heel anxiously against the ground, waiting for class to start.

The others file in, taking their seats as usual. Though just about everyone looks uneasy, exchanging glances with each other. I wonder if we all know what's going on with ourselves, but don't know if anyone is experiencing it, too. So everyone is just keeping to themselves. How *do* you just go up to someone and ask if they've turned into an animal? If they haven't, they'd think you're a lunatic.

Right when the clock clicks over to the hour, the vice principal sticks their head in. "Mr. Neil couldn't make it today and we didn't have time to get a replacement for him. So, you kids are free to take the hour off." He leaves, and more uneasy glances are cast around the room. I stand up from my desk, walk over and pull the shades down over the door, then lock it. "I think we all know some weird stuff has been going down lately. We're all here and don't have anywhere to be. I say we stay and... talk about the elephant in the room."

More glances are exchanged, though this time it's more like they're trying to figure out who the elephant is.

Someone taps on the window outside. I look up to see that it's Riley. Right on time.

"What is Riley doing here?" Emma asks.

"I asked her to come," I say as I walk over and unlatch the window for her. She climbs through.

"Cole, what's this about?" Riley says, sitting down at her desk.

"There's something you guys need to see for yourselves."

Layla gets up from her desk and walks over to the TV. She turns it on and flips it to the news station, which is still showing the aerial view of the lab on fire. "The lab caught on fire this morning. Killed twelve scientists."

"And get this," I say. "Three scientists escaped and were reported as missing. One of them was Dr. Neil Terek, also known as Mr. Neil."

"Wait," Michael says. "Mr. Neil *worked* at M.E.L.?"

I give him a nod. "There's no way I can say this without sounding clinically insane, so I'm just going to say it." I take a deep breath. "Who in this room, in the past week, has turned into an

animal?" I raise my hand up in the air. Some widen their eyes while others cast more uneasy glances around the room, then one by one, hands start going up. Within seconds, everyone has raised their hands except for Gwen. "Woah..."

Everyone looks around at each other, shocked, trying to take it all in. Except Gwen, who looks deeply confused and concerned for the sanity of her classmates. "Everyone but Gwen? Really?" I say. I hadn't expected *everyone*.

Gwen looks at me. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I think it was the chairs at M.E.L.," Dan says. "I think I woke up during the test, but I thought it was just a dream until stuff started happening. They were talking about that the test had to run smoothly because *we* were the future."

"What are we supposed to do now?" Emma asks.

Gwen abruptly shoots up from her desk. "Someone better tell me what's going on *right now!*"

Emma looks up at her. "You haven't been having any symptoms, Gwen?"

Gwen throws her arms out to the side. "What symptoms!"

Suddenly, a kitten jumps out of Riley's bag. Everyone looks at it, then back at Riley.

"Riley, you brought a kitten with you?" Michael says, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Well, I couldn't leave him home!" she says, scooping him up in her arms. "My mom would through him out if she knew I had him."

The kitten jumps out of her arms and scurries up to the front of the class room. He sits right in the middle, looking at everyone, almost like he's addressing the class. Then he starts to

grow and change and before our eyes. The fur thins, the paws lengthen and within moments the little calico kitten has become human. No, not human. Has become *Neon*.

Everyone stares at him. Gwen stares in horror, frozen and unblinking. Neon stands in front of the class wearing a shiny black wet-suit thing... "Whew... What a way to start the day," he says. He brushes his hair out of his face. "You guys miss me?"

The room is silent for a moment until Riley stands up and yells, "You were Neon the whole time?!"

Dan looks over at her. "Talk about letting the cat out of the bag."

"A leader like me doesn't show his hand until the last moment." Neon turns to look up at me. "What'd I miss?" He notices the TV playing the newsfeed behind me and takes a step closer to it.

"The lab caught fire," I say.

Neon shakes his head. "But that's not the lab. That's not the lab at all. See look, this building is partially made of wood. M.E.L. is entirely made up of glass and steel. M.E.L. wouldn't even be capable of burning like this."

I take a step closer. "He's right."

Neon looks up at me and shakes his head. "Duh..."

"So if that's not M.E.L.... then what are they trying to hide?" Dan asks.

"We need to find out what's really going on. We need to know the truth of what they did to us," Charlotte says.

"Well," Emma begins, "it's not like we can just march in the front doors of M.E.L. and demand answers. At least, not anymore."

Emma's words intrigue me and I turn to look at her. "Why not? That footage isn't M.E.L.. They're obviously trying to cover something up. If we want answers, that's where they'll be. Who's up for another field trip?"



It was Jinx's first day back to school after the accident, and everything felt wrong.

He didn't feel sick anymore, but there was this sort of uneasiness rooted deep within him, like something had gone terribly wrong, and he had no idea how to fix it. When he heard how many of his field trip classmates were missing by now, how there had been a *lion* in the school, how the principal had been attacked by a monkey... how can you just ignore that?

"You turned into a tiger. And back."

Jinx grimaced and tried to refocus on his English teacher's lecture about Emily Dickinson, but his thoughts were rushing through his head like a wildfire. He glanced at his classmates suspiciously, feeling on the verge of a mental breakdown. What was wrong with him? Why did he feel like everyone was watching him, like everyone knew what had happened during his accident, and he didn't? He gripped his head in anxiety. Layla seemed to think she knew what had happened, and she wasn't one to pull cruel jokes on people, but a *tiger*? That doesn't just *happen*. What if the machines at the MEL hadn't made him turn into an animal, but rather, go crazy?

Jinx grimaced and pulled at his hair. The stress of not knowing was enough to drive him insane, anyway. How could he not remember anything from that night, other than that terrible, terrible dream? It matched Layla's claim far too closely to be a coincidence.

That was it. He needed to find out for himself, before he went completely mad.

He fumbled his way through the last few minutes of class, feeling as if his heart would beat out of his chest. When the bell finally rang, Jinx swept through the doors and out of the school, swiftly deciding that his last period, Mr. Neil's class, was bad luck anyway. After all, it was his field trip that had triggered all this shit.

He hadn't skipped in forever, but this was a dire situation. He'd just tell Dad that he had felt sick again, and needed to come home. Which, after all the stress, was starting to become true as his head began to throb with a headache.

The air was cool outside, and the grass on the school lawn was wet from a recent shower. The sky was stormy, and Jinx glanced up in dismay, hoping that it wouldn't rain on him. A dark cluster of trees rose in the distance, just off of school property. The woods.

He needed to know. Was he crazy? Was Layla crazy? Or had he actually transformed into a... into a cat?

Jinx started off over the field, cringing as his socks dampened uncomfortably through his shoes. This was ridiculous. What kid goes into a forest to see if he can transform into a tiger?

When he reached the shadowed area of trees, he felt a chill go up his back, like someone was watching him. He turned around and scanned the area, but there was no one in sight.

Uneasy, he trekked a bit farther into the damp woods, tucking himself between two large pine trees.

Jinx stared at his shoes for a moment, heart racing. What now? Did he just focus and magic would happen? Should he change his clothes or something? Maybe so... he didn't want to ruin his pants if anything *did* happen...

Glancing around once more, Jinx quickly stripped down to his boxers and his t-shirt, hanging his pants and hoodie on a nearby branch. The ridiculousness of the entire situation pushed down on him, and he winced.

What the hell am I doing? he thought, staring at the goosebumps rising on his arms. *I must be insane to think that any of this is real.*

But even so, there was still the strong suspicion in his soul that said Layla was right. His dream fit. He needed to know what was happening to him.

Jinx closed his eyes and focused, furrowing his brow. He imagined the large Siberian tiger from his dream, the rippling muscles, the yellow eyes, the flashing fangs. He pictured his legs lengthening, his neck contorting, a tail bursting from his tailbone. Becoming the tiger.

There was a disgusting *crunch* sound, and Jinx lurched forward, falling on his hands and knees. There was a tickling sensation on the sides of his head as his ears moved upwards, and a small burst of pain as his knees changed direction. The front of his face elongated into a muzzle, and his tailbone shot out to make a thrashing tail. His heart rate rocketed, and his breathing was too fast.

It's real. Oh, god, it's happening.

But before he could panic, the world snapped into focus.

His bad eye... it was working.

The transformation completed quickly, but at first, Jinx was in a daze. He was seeing out of both eyes. He could *see*.

I'm a tiger.

He staggered backwards, snapping back into reality. The trees loomed over him in shocking clarity, the sounds of the wind whispering through the leaves was magnified by the tenfold, and he could smell at least five small mammals in the brush around him. It was terrifying, overwhelming. There was more to see and hear than he could ever imagine.

It was true.

Panic washed over him, and he pressed to the needle-strewn ground, giant paws pressed to the dirt. A giant tiger in a forest behind the school, and it was cowering like a child.

Change me back changemeback CHANGE ME BACK

His legs crunched back to normal, his ears went back into place, and his muzzle shrunk back into a human face. His tail swept back up into his spine.

Jinx rested on all fours, his whole body shaking, his forehead dripping with sweat despite the chill. His t-shirt lay in shreds on the ground, and his shoes had been ripped in two. He cursed violently under his breath as he stood up, swiping a hand over his face. Thank goodness that he'd taken off his outer layers before transforming...

It's true. Layla really saw me change into a tiger. I can change into a freakin' TIGER.

His chest heaved as he pulled his jacket over his head, mind whirring with a million questions.

What do I do? Am I supposed to do anything? Why am I able to do this?

As he pulled on his pants and gathered the tattered remains of his other clothing, his mind finally settled on one definite solution.

I need to talk to Layla and the others.

If they were experiencing the same problems as him, maybe they'd know how to help him, what they were supposed to do, who they could tell about it. One thing was for sure: Dad could not know.

Jinx started jogging back through the woods and towards the school. He needed to get to his truck, get home, think about it. He could call Layla as soon as school let out.

With a plunge of disappointment in his chest, he also realized that his bad eye had gone blind once more.

The stormy skies roiled over his head and a breeze froze his toes, now bare from his shoes being destroyed. Jinx felt the chill up his back again, the feeling like someone was watching him. He glanced around once more, but this time, his good eye caught on a dark figure lurking by the back wall of the school, facing him. Jinx slowed slightly, his nerves fried. His heart jolted when the figure pushed away from the wall and started towards Jinx at a determined pace. There was something in their hands.

The hair on the back of his neck prickled. Something was wrong about them, something sinister. He started walking faster, trying to plan out a route to get back into the school or to his truck before the figure reached him. The person picked up speed and started crossing the grass, getting closer to Jinx by the second.

Run.

Jinx followed his instincts and bolted for the school doors. With people around, the stalker couldn't hurt him. He shot a glance over his neck to see the figure running after him, closing in--

"Oof!"

Jinx collided sharply with another person, and they both tumbled to the ground in a tangle of limbs. His blood rushing with adrenaline, Jinx rolled over and sprung back up, scanning the field for his pursuer.

They were gone.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" a voice came from the ground. Jinx looked down, suddenly realizing that the girl he had collided with was still lying on the ground in a heap.

"I'm so sorry," he mumbled, his heart still racing. He offered his hand, but she stood up without his help. When she brushed her brown hair out of her eyes and flashed a brace-laced frown, Jinx jolted in recognition.

"Riley?"

"Jinx?" she responded in surprise. "Why were you running?" She looked around his shoulders in concern, then back at his face in question. Her eyes traveled down to his feet. "And where are your shoes?"

Jinx glanced behind him once more, his face darkening as he realized what could have happened. That person must have seen him morph, and had wanted to harm Jinx.

He was fairly sure that that had been a weapon in their hands.

He turned back to Riley, realizing that she had been on the field trip, and was exactly one of the people he had hoped to find. He leaned in close and lowered his voice.

"We need to talk."



Nighttime came all too quickly. Each time my eyes darted towards the window a shiver of fear would sizzle through my body. I had done enough window-climbing in the past week to last a lifetime.

At least I had a car ride with Michael to look forward to. At first I kinda wished Gwen hadn't asked to come along in his car too, but that's being selfish. I like Gwen. It's not her fault she doesn't know about Michael and I.

Michael and I. A smile twitched at my lips. Was I really allowed to think that way, putting Michael's name so confidently alongside my own? Did the words *Charlotte and I* ever swirl around his head, too? I briefly looked back upon that scene in the locker room, praying that his promise to be my lion hadn't been just a fleeting whisper of condolence.

Right when the clock struck midnight, I swallowed back the lump in my throat and pushed open the screen. I let out a little cry when the screen crashed into a bush below, splitting the peaceful serenity of the silent night like a sudden clap of lightning. I went far enough to scramble back under the covers of my bed, half expecting my dad to burst into the room and ask

what that sound was. Thankfully, he didn't, and so after three minutes I had to muster up the courage to climb on my dresser again and clamber through the open window.

Michael was on time. His Jeep was parked a few houses down, as previously planned. "Hey, Gazelle," he said when I opened the door and climbed in.

"Hey, Lion." My stomach felt queasy but I felt better in the car with Michael.

A few blocks down, Gwen was waiting for us at a bus stop. I scooted over to the middle seat so Gwen could settle in, and once Michael finally pulled onto the freeway on our way to the lab, the three of us were squished together in the front seats, talking and laughing together as if the sun was shining and the bombarded lab didn't exist. I've never seen Gwen so talkative or in such a good mood. I was surprised, but grateful. Sandwiched between Michael and Gwen, my knees stopped shaking and I didn't feel so apprehensive about what we were about to do. I already felt guilty enough for sneaking out of the house, but Gwen and Michael helped me forget most of it for time being.

Gwen finally steered us on a more serious subject. "So, guys. Um, you're an antelope, Charlotte, and you're a lion?"

"A gazelle," Michael corrected. "What'd you say it was? A Thomas gazelle?"

"Thomson's," I said. "Based off of the markings you saw, at least."

Gwen rubbed her temples. "What does it *feel* like, changing into another animal and all?"

Michael shrugged. "Being a lion makes you feel like you're the most powerful being in the world. Nothing can stop you. Your vision's sharper and you can smell and hear just about anything. Charlotte and I are hardly experts, of course, having only morphed once."

My heart jumped. *Charlotte and I.*

“What about being a gazelle, Charlotte?” Gwen asked.

I looked over at Michael. He looked pretty hot driving a Jeep. “Pretty much the opposite of a lion, it seems like. I felt small, scared, awfully skittish...” I laughed. “Just like when I’m human.”

I couldn’t help but notice that Michael scooted closer to me when I said that. His shoulder was warm, the sleeve of his cotton t-shirt soft.

We finally turned onto the isolated street where the lab was located. The road was gravelly and dusty, and it lacked streetlamps and buildings. From what I could see from the Jeep’s headlights, only scraggly pine trees flanked our passage.

“Woah!” Michael slammed on the brakes and the Jeep skidded to a stop. “Gosh, I almost ran over a kitten.”

“Neon, you mean?” I asked.

“Yeah, I guess. He needs to be *wearing* neon if he creeps across the road at night like that.”

Neon the kitten scampered down the road and disappeared into the darkness. Mike cautiously edged the Jeep forward until we found the other cars and the rest of our classmates waiting for us.

“Hey guys!” Layla said as we all got out. “We decided to park here instead of too close to the actual lab.”

When we looked back, Neon was Neon again, dressed in the skin-tight black suit that he was so proud of.

Riley crossed her arms and Neon flashed her a smile. “See, perks of having a suit. Don’t you all wish you’d stolen some for yourselves?”

I heard a groan and turned to see Layla’s cousin, Cole. “Fortunately...” he said, shuffling through his backpack. “I stole enough for everyone. I guess now would be a good time to hand them out.”

I couldn’t see very well but at that moment I’m sure Layla was rolling her eyes. “You think?”

We each took turns going into one of the three cars and changing into the suits. It felt awfully strange to wear at first, like I was too exposed. I’d never worn something that skin-tight my entire life. I tied my hair up and climbed out of the back of the Jeep, probably looking like a miniature blonde ninja. Kill Bill the gazelle.

Gwen even put on a suit for the heck of it. She was already out of place enough, being the only one of us who hadn’t morphed into an animal, and sticking in her normal clothes would have surely ostracized her more than was necessary.

After that we all gathered in a circle at the edge of the road, some of us anxiously digging into the pine-needle-strewn earth with our toes, some biting our fingernails, and some creasing their brows in worry. I, for one, occupied all of the above actions, and my heart was drumming along at a sickening pace.

Layla took a deep breath. I loved that she had grown to take the leadership role among us. “Remember guys,” she said. “We’ve come here to figure out what’s going on. Why all of us - well, *most* of us - can morph into animals. We deserve to find out the truth.”

Only a few minutes later we had set off down the road, hugging the edge of the scraggly pine tree forest in single file. Then, all too quickly, we had reached the remains of the lab, and at the same time thousands of butterflies were released into my stomach.

I keeled over and balanced myself against a hunk of concrete. “Wait!” I cried out weakly. The group stopped for me and I felt foolish. I was sick of being the scaredy-cat. The rest of them were so brave and there I was, whining and stopping the whole procession because I felt queasy. I made up my mind quickly enough. “You guys go on ahead. I’ll just look around here.”

“Me too,” Gwen offered. “I’ll stay. The rest of you will probably turn into animals and I’d be out of place anyway.”

I sighed in grateful relief. “Thanks, Gwen.”

“Are you guys sure?” Dan asked. “It might be safest to stick together.”

I nodded, even though he was probably right. It was just that secretly exploring the radioactive heart of M.E.L.’s remains seemed to exceed my scaredy-cat capacity, however hard I tried to push it aside.

So with that, we were alone. I almost immediately regretted letting Michael go on without me, but I swallowed the lump in my throat and sat down on the concrete slab.

“Gosh, isn’t he cute?” Gwen whispered to me.

“What?”

“I’m sorry. Now’s probably not the time to talk about this.” She motioned to me. “C’mon, let’s look over here.”

I stumbled after her, wishing the moon could be a bit brighter. “Who’re you talking about, though?”

She turned around to look at me, a dreamy smile on her face. “Mike. Major crush.”

I froze, my body suddenly becoming rigid. My eyes must have been as big as saucers, but to hide from Gwen’s gaze I quickly ducked my head and studied a perfectly ordinary piece of charred metal.

Gwen continued to amble forward. “Gwen Anthony. Doesn’t that have a lovely tone to it?”

“Uh... yeah.” *But Charlotte Anthony sounds a heck of a lot better.*