

ANIM^{PAW}RPHERS





Before - seven months prior

"You must be new here, eh?" Michael asked. A girl with braided brown hair waves him off, speeding up. She doesn't have the time for lousy people like himself. He shrugged it off, stopped following the girl, and walked in the opposite direction. In the distance, the school bell rang softly. Today was the new school day. The summer sun was overhead, breaking through the clear and cloudless blue sky. Michael quietly made it into the school yard, seeing all the new lower classmen and smiled. He remembered when he was that young. Innocent and weak.

Michael hobbled up the school steps, and into the hallway. Kids of all different ages were walking around, trying to find their classes and lockers. He easily made it through the clogged mess of the hallways, the sound of the sneakers and talking faded as everyone made their way into their first classes.

Michael was lucky to have homeroom first hour, giving him free time to clear his stressed mind. He walked down the hallway, staring at the same windows and the same school announcements, fitted on a yellow paper. He continued walking until stopping in front of the

school's library. It was small but big for his school. He remembered coming down here during lunch and just reading. *Why did he stop?* He wasn't sure. Maybe it was the continuous homework that the teachers gave him or perhaps it was his friends would try to bully him behind his back. Michael put a hand on the cool wood railing and walked down the steps into the library. No one was in there, creating an awkward hung feeling in the air. The smell of books, old and forgotten. His eyes caught onto the school's encyclopedia, faded leather and worn yellow pages. Before, Michael would come down and just read it. Drowning in facts and information about anything and everything. No wonder people made fun of him.

Michael shifted on his feet, standing comfortably while reading. He hadn't noticed a girl, with blonde hair tucked neatly into a bun and glasses enter the library. Neither did she notice Michael.

The girl walked towards the book return, gently sliding them into the return bin. She smiled, wandering off to find some more books to read. Heading towards Michael's direction, the girl went into the book section next to him, not noticing the boy grinning.

Factoids. So many factoids. Michael thought, flipping through the leather bonded book. It was a little weird for a boy his age to be so induced with information. He had often asked himself what he was going to use of the information for, probably a presentation or if likely, his friends were talking about it. Both of those chances were unlikely, he reminded himself.

There was a book. On the high shelf. A pink cover with white lettering. The girl wanted it. She wasn't short but not tall enough to reach the certain book. She could've easily gotten a stepstool and gotten the book - but it wasn't that simple. There wasn't stepstools in sight and you

can't use chairs when in the library for getting books. You either asked the librarian or the librarian's assistant to help you, which neither of them were in the room.

It was then the girl heard Michael, peeking through the gaps and seeing the ginger haired boy. She was perplexed. *Why was a boy like him in the library?* she thought, moving around the book case. The girl noticed the encyclopedia. *What a weird person...*

Michael didn't notice the girl walking towards him. He was in his own little world of rabbits and earthquakes.

"*Ahem*," the girl coughed. She was trying to get his attention. But it was pointless. She hardly knew the guy's name. Groaning, the girl quietly walked towards the boy and tapped him on the shoulder. Michael shook his head and turned around abruptly. He didn't expect the girl to be standing there.

"Why are you reading that?" the girl inquired, pointing towards the encyclopedia.

"Is there a law on not reading it?"

"It is used for educational purposes. Not to read on your free time." Michael raised his hands in defeat, stepping to side of the girl.

"I was reading it for educational purposes."

"Oh really?" the girl asked, crossing her arms. She began to regret speaking to a person like Michael, who she thought was so full of himself. "What subjects?"

"Huh?"

"What subjects are you reading for?" Michael coughed awkwardly.

"Urm.. E-English.. and Soc-cial Studies." *Why am I panicking in front of a girl?* The bell rang, telling everyone in the school that second hour was starting. Michael had Spanish which was across from the library.

"I have to go." he muttered, turning on his heel. The girl was confused, moving her mouth but nothing came out. She became angry with herself, walking towards her second class with her fist by her side. *Ruined a perfectly good chance to be friends with someone.*

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Michael was staring out the classroom window, his chin in his palm. The strong summer breeze was blowing the leaves of the trees in the school yard. There were students laughing, slapping each other on the back. He longed to have something like that. All of his friends either moved or left him for some other people. It was normal, to say the least. However, he felt that this year was going to be something big or perhaps he would get more friends. He only hoped this feeling was true.

In retrospect, Michael wasn't exactly a "positive" person. He enjoyed the simple things in life, sure, but it was all the same. At least that was his philosophy. Staring out that window, he saw a different person's life and wondered what they did.

"Mr. Anthony." The teacher called out. He didn't respond, drifting into a dreamland.

"Mr. Anthony."

"..."

The teacher walked over to his desk, slamming a hand down. "Michael!" It startled him, causing the boy to shake his head and gap at the teacher. "Are you even paying attention?"

"Not the slightest," Michael bluntly said. Anger roamed behind the teacher's eyes, as he straightened up.

"Fine. Then after school, we'll discuss the lesson again."

"Was that suppose to be a threat?" Something was pumping through Michael's veins. Adrenaline? Fear? The teacher groaned.

"Don't speak to me in that tone, mister."

"Whatcha going to do about it?" The bell rang. The eyes were staring on the overwhelming suspense that hung in the air.

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"You shouldn't spoken to the teacher like that, Michael." A friend with raven black hair and blue eyes muttered. Michael grumbled. It wasn't like him to do so. He was loved by most of the teachers and respected as cheerful and calm.

"It's whatever." Michael sighed, putting his hands in his pockets. It was the end of the school day already, the sun was drifting into the horizon creating a fire across the blue sky. The teacher let Michael off with a warning. Of course, Michael wouldn't have mind to stayed after school.

Something was tingling in the back of Michael's mind. *What was it?* He sighed, running a hand through his hair.

"Do you mind if I go back to school, Jackson?" Michael asked the boy.

"Why do you want to go back to that hell?"

Michael shrugged. "I might've left something there. You go one without me." He waved the boy off before running back to the school.

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The girl was in the library, eating a cookie and reading. The sun was shining in her hair, causing it to glow. After school, she would read. Every day. Leave with a book and return it the next day. Normal cycle. The boy was running down the hall, he had something to say. *What was it?*

Michael stopped by the water fountain, panting. The library was to the side of him. Silence. He stood up and looked into the library. *The girl.*

"What are you doing here?" he asked, the girl looked up. She scowled.

"Why are you here?"

"Asked you first," Michael smirked.

The girl narrowed her eyes. "Asked you second." She wasn't going to like this guy. He was interrupting her reading a second time. Or at least, the girl thought it was a second time.

Michael walked down the steps, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"We haven't met properly so I decided to come back and do so."

"Couldn't you have waited until tomorrow?" the girl asked, turning a page in her book.

"Er.. yes."

"Your name is Michael Anthony. You are in the football team. You have horrible grades, and the teachers love you, which is completely ironic."

"Huh?" How-

"You don't have many friends for except Jackson and you are trying to get my name."

"Well, yeah." The girl chuckled.

"Thought so." She stood up, walked towards Michael, and put out a hand. "Charlotte Penn. Nice to meet you."

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Monday

Michael stayed after school. His Math teacher wanted him to tutor the young students into understanding such a difficult subject. He hardly understood it. Just numbers and "find x when you add y to b ". He groaned. The student wasn't exactly helping, shaking and stuttering under their breath. Gwen was here, as well. Her perkiness was annoying and cheerful voice brought forth a headache. She had that feeling of uncoming warmth and enjoyment. Michael, however, didn't see this. He rather teach sad, weak students with shallow eyes rather than stay home and watch football.

"For this, try adding 2.5. That way when you get the answer, it'll equal a ." Gwen suggested, sitting next to a troubled blonde haired boy. He was busy putting the easer in his hair,

staring hard at the paper. Michael was busy helping a boy with raven black hair, sighing heavily as he finished.

"Is that all you needed help with today, Harrison?" The boy nodded quickly, grabbing his stuff equally in speed. He muttered his thanks, walking away from Michael as he sighed. Gwen said good-bye to her last student, leaning back into her seat and yawning,

"My, my what a long day. Don't you agree, Michael?" she asked, gazing at the thinking boy. Over the course of three months, Gwen had come to liking of the ginger haired boy. It was a silly liking- the kind you expect to see in a teen romance movie. She would draw his name, doodling a heart around it, and then stare at it like it was some famous painting.

He only nodded, packing up his things. "There wasn't any many kids here, though. The numbers keep decreasing." Michael grabbed his backpack by the black strap, slowly putting his arms through it. "Maybe, even, the tutor program will be closed."

Gwen rolled her eyes. "I highly doubt that." Michael shrugged, slipping on the other strap.

"See you tomorrow, Gwen." Something was tugging at her heart. Her mind was a battlefield, continuously battling. The girl just sat there, nodding. As Michael was out the first set of doors leading into the cafeteria, Gwen lept up and grabbed her stuff. *It is now or never.*

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Charlotte just finished her afterschool activity - book club. She smiled, holding onto the new books the librarian promised her. They were new. The colors were bright and the pages were

wonderful. She walked past the library and saw Gwen. The preppy person. Somewhere deep down, Charlotte hated her. Could it be from jealousy, she wasn't sure. Shaking these thoughts, the girl walked towards Gwen.

"Hey Gw-"

"Come back tomorrow if you need help with homework," the black haired girl quickly stated. Before Charlotte could put in another word, Gwen was off towards the doors.

Weird..

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Michael was walking into the school parking lot, grabbing his keys.

"Michael!" a voice called out. He stopped. Turning around, he saw Gwen running. *What an awful runner...*

"What's up, Gwen?" The breathless girl stopped in front of Michael, putting her hands on her knees and looked down.

"Y-you forgot-t something," she said, trying to catch her breath.

"I di-" before he could finish, Michael felt lips upon his own. Wide eyed, he stared down at Gwen. It was sudden. Mixture of emotions muffled and uncovered. Before he could even react back, Gwen pulled back and smiled.

"That's what you forgot."

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Books fell to the floor. A girl. She didn't know how to feel. Anger? Jealously? Charlotte didn't even bother picking up her books, as she ran down the hallway. *Such a foolish motion.*

Completely childish. Overdramatic Her thoughts jumbled. Running into the bathroom, Charlotte looked into the mirror.

Why?

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Friday - Some time after Michael drops Charlotte and Gwen off, he goes off into his own searching.

The moon was high in the sky, brighter than most of the awkward stars. It didn't compare to pure light that radiated off the white sphere. Michael used the moon as a flashlight, eyeing the broken pieces of what was left of the lab. Papers were ripped and crumbled, acting like snow as the wind would blow them through the blow up site. The rest of the crew, made up people who Michael never thought twice about talking to, were out in their own part of the lab. They were looking for clues, reasons, as to why they were changing into animals. The crew promised to go out during times when people were forbidden, protected by the guns and tall men with black suits. The guards didn't seem to check the fence, however, providing an easy access into the bombed lab. It had happened fast, and a week after the students took a field trip there. Of course, they hadn't expected it to blow up. Some speculated that Mr. Neil, their teacher, was behind it. He seemed to be the perfect suspect for it. Quiet. Mysterious seemed to lurk behind that man's eye. His

presence was even more creepy, admitting an sketchy feel whenever he would walk into the room. The students didn't seem to realize this, only after the lab was bombed, since they were used to seeing him.

A half an hour later, Michael's back was hurting. Throbbing against the constant bending over, flipping a paper over, before throwing it aside. Yawning, he looked at his watch: one in the morning. *Jesus*. Luckily enough, there wasn't school or football practice for tomorrow. He popped his arms, stretching them out before shaking his body. He glanced around the wreckage: long, cement slabs were leaning horizontal against a white, stone wall. Surrounding the area were orange pieces of glass and thin, silver wires. There was an opening behind the third cement slab, leading into a small room. *Perhaps some info will be in there*.

Skillfully climbing over the cement slabs, balancing himself, he peeked into the lab. There was a big box with different colorful buttons. Red, blue, and green wires came out the front and moved along the floor like a snake. Besides the big box, was a desk.

Michael stepped into the room, a sudden rush of fear welcomed him. He felt as if somebody was watching him, but shook off the feeling. Glass and paper crunched under Michael's feet as he moved around the room. Microphones, chairs, and tables were turned over. On the dashboard, pictures of children and loved ones were seen burnt and ruined. Unrecognizable.

Sighing, Michael ran a hand through his hair. *Guess not*. As he was leaving, a pale yellow folder caught Michael's eye. It was labeled in black sharpie: **In Case Of Danger** . It was like a wire over a cliff, hanging in the balance of things. Either a do or die situation. Or perhaps,

Michael was just overthinking. His brain wasn't sure what exactly he should do: a cause-effect statement. A hazardous, blinking light. Flooding in a poorly done village.

Or, he could just do it.

Michael reached out and took the file from the desk. It seemed new, as if it wasn't present during the time of the bombing. Looking around, he felt the same fear when he first entered. Cowardness. A cat being cornered by a dog. Within a few minutes, the feeling passed as Michael flipped open the file. Pictures. Words. Little snippets of newspaper articles. A roll of film.

Just what I was looking for. He smirked, closing the file.

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In the shadows, someone lurked. Watching Michael. They bent behind the cement slabs, peeking. They waited, hoping for the boy to walk out. A few moments later, the ginger haired boy ran out, gleefully onto the file. The person smiled, running quietly through the bombed building.

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"I found something that'll lead us into the right direction," Michael stated. Surrounding him were Charlotte, Gwen, Neon, Layla, and Daniel. He hardly knew three out of the six of them. He didn't even realize they went to their school until on the day of the field trip. Heck, he didn't even know most of the people on the field trip. He'd forgotten most of the field trip, consisting of singing and silence.

"What is 'something' exactly?" Gwen asked, stepping closer to Michael. He shrugged.

"Just some files, a flim, and paper."

"Are you sure it'll be correct?" asked Daniel, putting out a hand. He wanted to see it, confirm if what was inside true enough to believe. Michael handed it to the boy. Putting his hands in his pockets, he spoke.

"I found it in some lab. Completely trashed and wreck. It seemed as if nothing was alive. I was going to leave, hang my head but then this file caught my eye. You see, it wasn't damaged like the other things. Can I see that? Thanks," Michael said, grabbing the file from Daniel's hands. The boy frowned deeply. Michael opened it up, gazing his eyes over the papers before closing it once again.

"It seems to be the right information."

"Great. Can we leave now? I'm freezing my butt over here." Gwen asked, putting her hands on her arms and started to shiver. Michael sighed.

"I suppose so." Everyone else mumbled in agreement, heading towards their cars when they heard a pop. Like the sound a toy gun would make. Charlotte jumped as Michael turned around. He couldn't see in the dark, only the fading stars. The moon had disappeared behind some incoming clouds.

"Who goes there?" Laughter split throughout the area, chilling everyone's backbone. As the moon came out, a figure emerged. They wore a black hoodie with faded, ripped blue jeans. Sweeping black hair covered their eyes. The person looked up at Michael, gripping onto a party popper.

"Don't *you* remember me?"



How does everyday feel lately?

Like Drowning.

At first you don't know what's going on, and you just have to let yourself get submerged in it. At first you try to put on a brave face, and find a way to make it out, but then when you finally realize the reality of it everything goes into panic mode. Adrenaline rises, and your eyes go wide. You can't breathe, or scream. Darkness and silence surround you, and then...there's nothing. You close your eyes, and you forget what just happened the day before. Because now you can finally do what you wanted to do that whole time while you were struggling to fight...Sleep and let go.

After everything that has happened recently, I've completely been thrown off. It feels like everything I do is one step behind. Everything I do is wrong.

I hear the high pitched ding of my phone, and I look up to see the notification. A text from mom. She's wondering when I'll be home. I can tell she's worried, because she didn't use any cheesy emojis. I look up at the clock across the room.

11:30 pm

"Shit." I've been stuck at the school for over 8 hours, and I've barely written two words. The same tune plays through my head over and over, but I just can't find the words. I rub my eyes, sigh.

I more time...123

I place my hands gently on the keys, and start the slow tune again. I try a few lyrics I had written previously, but they come out like mush. My flow is gone. I slam my hands down on the keys in frustration.

"Dammit!"

"Now, what did that poor piano do to you?" I look up abruptly to see Gwen standing in the doorway. She was wearing pajamas, and her hair was pulled up.

"What are you doing here?" I ask curiously.

"Your mom was worried. She called, and asked me to call you because she thought you would actually answer if it was me. But when you didn't I knew I had to come find you." She says crossing her arms.

"I'm sorry, but I'm busy." I turn back to the piano."

"Em. It's 11:30. You need to go home. If you needed me to I could even ask my mom if you could spend the night." I turn back again to face her.

"How'd you even get into the school anyways?"

“The same way you do when you come here after hours. Mrs. Leachman's window. People don't know that the locks are broken, but she told you...so that you could practice, because you don't have a piano at home.”

“I never told you that.”

“Actually you sort of did. I was standing outside the music room when she was telling you about it before lunch one day. I was waiting for you when I heard her stop you.” She looks down.

“Of course.” I roll my eyes, and turn back towards the piano once more.

“Why is this piece so much more important than the others that it needs to be worked on at midnight? Riley already mentioned how ready they were for the battle of the bands. They don't seem to need any more hits.”

“This one isn't for Riley...It's for me. After everything that's happened recently...I just wanted something normal. I used to be able to know exactly what I wanted to say, but now...I don't feel like I have anything to say anymore.”

“Em-”

“And there's something else...Mrs. Leachman recommended me in the showcase letter to Juliard. We're supposed to compose something, and then perform it at the showcase at the end of this semester, but everytime I try to think of something my hands start shaking and sweating. I can't perform for regular people, let alone people who could determine what happens in my future. And besides I don't think Juliard exactly wants a barn owl in their student population.”

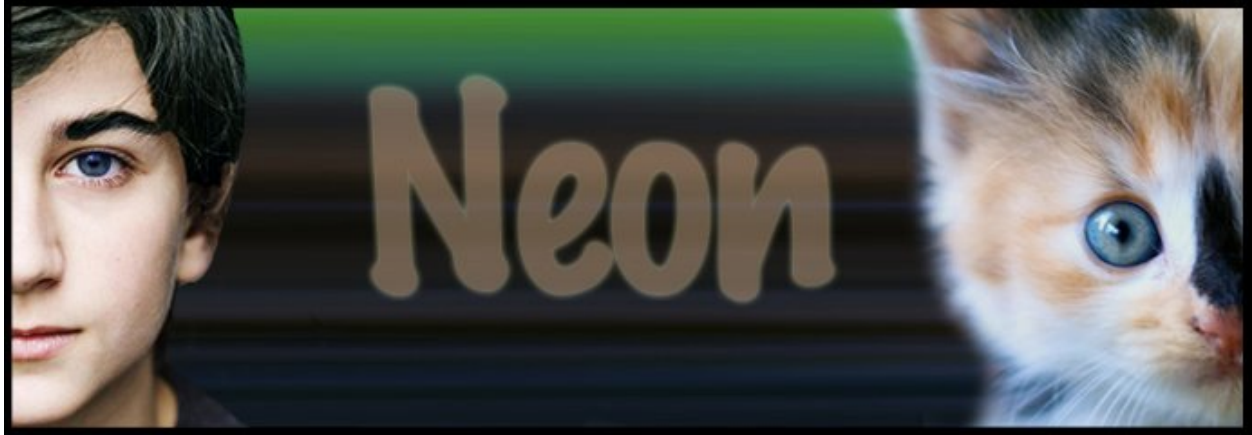
“You can't let your fears stop you Emma. I know you constantly say that music isn't what you want, but I know it is. Yeah you will have to get over your shyness, and yeah you will have

to come up with something amazing to impress them. Yeah we will have to figure this whole everyone's changing into animals mess, and yeah you might fail. But if anyone can do it, it's you. You're my best friend Em, and you can do it. But you need to sleep, and take care of yourself." I sigh, and slowly stand.

"Okay let's go." I say grabbing my bag. She smiles, and I cross my arms.

"We'll figure all this stuff out. I promise." I walk over to her, and she puts her arm over my shoulder.

I sure hope so.



Neon was running, this time to avoid being run over. The Jeep's headlights cast a long shadow, and he pounced on it continuously, scampering up the road.

The night sky swirled with indigo hues above them, making the spiny pine trees beside the road all the more intimidating. Dusky beetles flitted lazily between the emerald fortresses, buzzing away as the students rolled by. It was a perfect night to ransack some ruins.

As Michael's car crept into the clearing, Neon arched his back, hissing softly. Slowly, his tiny claws retracted, fur shrinking back into his body. His tail shot back into his spine, and his paws warped into pale fingers, clutching at the dirt.

Neon sucked in a breath as he stood up, tasting the night air. As he walked over to the others, he caught Riley's piercing stare. *What's she looking at - wait, did I forget-?* Frantically, he glanced down. The slick black suit still clung to his body; he'd remembered to wear it after all.

He sighed invisibly. Riley seemed to pout, crossing her arms.

Tucking his captivation into his pocket, Neon waltzed around her. "See, perks of having a suit," he said airily. He struck a pose, accentuating the outfit's contours. "Now, don't you all wish you'd all stolen some for yourselves?"

Cole seemed to say something, but the kitten of darkness was on a roll. “Of course, that doesn’t mean I couldn’t give you one.” He lifted Riley’s chin with a finger, leaning close. The effect was somewhat diminished by the fact that she was still looking down at him.

Riley turned pink and averted her eyes, mumbling furiously. Neon grinned. His infiltration mission had gone off flawlessly. He’d hoped to stay undercover a bit longer, maybe sneak a peek into her diary; but alas, the stage had presented itself, begging for his presence. Now, Riley West would finally fall in love with-

Something struck him hard in the back of the head, knocking him forward. Neon yelped as his face hit the dirt, and the wallowing taste of mud filled his mouth.

“Oops,” Cole said calmly, tossing and catching a suit package in his hand. “Sorry, Neon. That was for Riley.” An empyreal aura, darker than the night, emanated from his body, causing Layla to back away.

Riley bent over, scooping the package from Neon’s back. “Need a hand, kitty?” she said, extending her hand smugly.

“I’m fine,” Neon spat, wiping the dirt from his lips and sitting up. “And...don’t call me kitty,” he mumbled.

Daniel shook his head and sighed. Riley smirked, the confidence returning in her eyes.

“Okay,” said Layla, addressing the group as a whole. “Let’s get changed, and head out. Who knows what we’ll find at M.E.L.”

Neon bounced to his feet, flipping his hair matter-of-factly. “I do, of course.”

The rest of the class rolled their eyes and began to get changed.

The moon was in that odd shape again - not the elegant full, or the mystical crescent, but a gibbous. Just a misshapen lump of silver in the sky, the stars scattered around it like needles. Still, Neon was glad for the light to see by.

Gwen and Charlotte had stayed near the entrance, while Michael had ventured off to who-knows-where. That left the rest of them picking through the rubble, Layla directing them across the area. The other students had fanned out, searching and poking inside the steel skeleton of science.

Neon, meanwhile, had his fingers hooked around a large slab of concrete, trying desperately to lift it from the ground. The metal reinforcements jutted from the stone, scratching his arms as he struggled.

“Here.” He looked to see Riley squatting beside him, arms straining as well. The kitten of darkness made no reply, simply lifting more so as not to make her do all the work.

Eventually, the slab gave, scraping aside like some ancient tombstone. Neon leaned on his knees, peering into the revealed crevice. “Nothing,” he breathed, falling back onto his bottom.

Riley sat down beside him, sighing heavily. Neon glanced at her quickly before scooting a bit farther, tapping his fingers in the earth.

The brown-haired girl chuckled. “What’re you doing? Running away?”

Neon blushed, immediately moving back beside her. She breathed out slowly, letting the wisps drift into the clear night air.

“So,” Neon began, grinning cheekily, “belly rub?”

“Ugh.” Riley rested her chin on her hand, staring across the blast site. “Worst. Pet. Ever.”

“Coming from the owner who tried to eat me?”

Riley’s entire body tensed at once. Neon bit his tongue brutally, looking down. *What was that for? It wasn’t her fault.*

His nemesis quickly disregarded it, turning to eye him in amusement. “So, I guess you’ve been busy: curling up in a gym bag, nuzzling hands, licking yourself all the livelong day-”

“Hey! That was one time!”

Riley leaned back, guffawing, “So you actually did it?”

The boy stopped, stuttering. “Um...no.” He rubbed his neck, hiding his blush in the shadows. His throat was still sore from his first, and last, hairball.

Her azure eyes shone in the gibbous-light, her smile like the moon's final shard. “How goes the conquering, my Romeo?”

Neon clasped his hands behind his head, lying back with a smile. “Quite well. I’ve just gotten finished conquering the sect of hooligans that bothered us so often. Once you return to school, you shouldn’t have anything to worry about.”

“Really?” Riley looked mildly surprised. “Thanks.”

“D-don’t thank me, stupid,” Neon said, drawing himself upright stiffly. “I only did it because I wanted to. My enjoyment alone was worth it.”

Something flickered in her eyes, a shade of guilt and pity. “Worth getting expelled for?”

Neon’s spirit collapsed in his chest. His smile faded away, head drooping. “I wasn’t aware you’d heard,” he said solemnly.

Her blue eyes grew all the more sympathetic. “Emma told me.”

They sat there in silence, words burning at the tips of their tongues, unwilling to be released. Pale moonlight shone on their shoulders, two students sitting in the carcass of a laboratory.

"Look,-"

“I’m sorry.” The phrase escaped his lips before he could silence himself. Neon clamped his hands over his mouth, fervently cursing his luck.

Riley blinked. “What?”

“I was...selfish.” Neon hissed the words. “I didn’t realize what kind of effects my actions would have. I may have made things worse for you in the process, a disgraceful tactic. It’s unbecoming of an overlord.” He sighed out wearily, scratching his hair.

“Also, while I was with you, I should’ve at least warned you about these powers.” Neon shook his head gently. “I figured this out first, but I let you face it alone. Back then - you looked so scared, so weak...”

“H-hey.” The shock still hadn’t fully worn off. Riley stared at him worriedly. “What’s gotten into you?”

Neon hid his eyes, grinning fakely. “Nothing. Nothing at all.” He swallowed hard, turning away. “I just don’t like seeing my rivals like that. You’re my nemesis, so nobody gets to hurt you but me.”

He stared across the landscape, the broken glass glimmering in the moonlight like a second set of stars. The gibbous gave plentiful light, but that didn’t mean people had to care

about it. There was nothing poetic in being more than pitiable, and less than respectable.

Mediocrity was just that.

He could feel Riley reaching out to him, resting her hand on his shoulder. He couldn't tell if it was the calico talking, but...she was so warm...

“Forget we ever had this conversation,” he muttered abruptly, shifting away.

“But Neon-”

“Forget it.”

The kitten of darkness stood up coldly, dusting off his scratches. One of them had begun to bleed. He gazed up at the misshapen moon, the light reflecting in his eyes. His smile reappeared as he turned back to the brown-haired girl.

“Just remember, Riley West-” He struck a pose dramatically. “You and I are enemies. And next time, I’ll defeat you for sure.”

With that, he strode off, leaping over the ruptured earth. The smile died with each step he took from her. *Just as I thought. I'm still so selfish.*



I eye the guy suspiciously as he approaches, the hairs on the back of my neck instinctively rising.

Who the hell is this?

He takes a few steps closer, keeping his eyes on Michael. The expressions on both of their faces tell me they know each other. "Michael, you know this guy?"

The others come up behind us. "We didn't find anything over there," Riley starts to say, but stops when she notices our visitor. "Who is-"

Michael walking up to the guy. "Jackson? What are you *doing* here?"

The guy pulls his hood down, exposing icy blue eyes that glint in the moonlight like the pieces of broken glass all over the ground around us. "I was about to ask you the same thing, Mikey."

"Seriously, you shouldn't be here," Michael says. "Did you... follow me?"

"Yeah, I did." He shoves his hands into the pockets of his blue jeans. "Now are you gonna tell me what's going on, or what?"

Everyone is quiet for a moment. Michael avoids his eyes. Then I break the silence when I step forward and say, "How did you get in here?"

Jackson sighs with agitation and turns to me. "What?"

"There's a barbed-wire fence all the way around the bomb site. How did you get in here?"

"How did *you* get in here?" Jackson shoots back.

I nod my head to the west. "There's a gate, but it's locked. I picked the lock when we came in, but I also locked it behind us."

"That's the same way I got in, but it wasn't locked. The gate was standing wide open," Jackson says. He shakes his head. "Why does it matter?" He turns back to Michael. "So, you gonna tell me what you've been up to, or what?"

I *know* I locked it behind us. And that file is untouched. If this guy isn't responsible for either then...

A bullet whizzes by my ear and hits a slab of concrete behind me, a crater exploding into the stone. Someone screams.

"Get down!" I yell, scrambling to the other side of the concrete slab. Dan and Emma take cover with me, a bullet grazing the side of the slab just seconds after they get in the clear, sending pieces of rubble exploding into my face.

I look around for the others and see that Layla, Gwen, and Neon have taken cover behind a similar slab opposite ours, while Jinx, Michael, Charlotte and Jackson duck behind a giant mountain of rubble. "Where's Riley?" I say under my breath, my heart pounding in my chest. "Dammit! Where's Riley?!"

Shots continue to fire, hitting the other side of the concrete slab and causing it to tremble. I peek around the slab and see Riley cowering behind a metal door, which is tipped over and leaning up against other rubble. She tucks her head down as much as she can, the door barely

being tall enough to give her complete cover. She presses her hands against her ears and takes deep breaths, trying to keep it together. I duck back behind the slab just as another bullet whizzes by.

"Did you see her?" Emma asks desperately. I give her a quick nod, then throw myself onto the ground and army crawl towards Riley as quickly as I can. Shards of glass rip through my clothes and the black jumpsuit underneath. I throw myself against the door the second I make it there.

"You hurt?" I ask.

Riley shakes her head. "Who's shooting at us? The police?"

"I don't think it's the police, but I have no idea. What I do know is that we can't stay here. I think they're using one-shot sniper rifles. Which means they have to reload each time they fire. We'll wait until they fire again, then make a run for the slab. Got it?"

She gives me a quick nod. A moment later, a bullet whizzes over our heads and explodes into the concrete. "Go! Go!" I push her forward and we scramble to the safety of the concrete once again.

Emma throws her arms around Riley. "Don't scare me like that!"

"What now?" Layla calls from the other slab.

"Why am I in charge?" I yell back.

"Because this was your stupid idea to begin with!"

Dammit.

Just then, a bullet hits the concrete on our side, sending gray dust raining down over our heads. They've got us surrounded. "We have to get back to the cars," Jinx yells.

"What if they shoot us?" Gwen says.

"They're *already* trying to shoot us! We stay here and we die."

Ah... shit.

Another bullet hits, missing Emma by inches, pretty much making the decision for us.

Jinx, Gwen, and Jackson get up and make a run for the fence. Dan grabs Emma's hand and yanks her to her feet, then shoves her forward. "Run!" he yells.

Neon shrinks back into his kitten form and takes off running, his tiny tail bristling. Layla watches him and sighs, realizing his method makes the most sense for the small, fast animals. "Crap," she says, then yanks her shirt off to expose her jumpsuit. She shrinks into a fox and scurries after Neon.

I take off running behind Riley. Michael takes Charlotte's hand and pulls her along behind him. I hear an explosion from behind us, and turn to see a giant hole blown through the fence. Men in black tactical uniforms start spilling in with tranquilizer guns. *What the hell is happening?*

Their faces aren't covered. They all have black hair and narrow eyes. Asians? It's hard to tell just from the moonlight. "Go, go, go," I urge Riley as she scrambles up a mountain of rubble.

I hear someone scream. I whip my head around to see one of the men grabbing Charlotte's arm, yanking her away from Michael. He yells at the man, then two others grab his arms from behind and hold him back. His eyes flash golden, and the men lose their grip on him as his body transforms into a lion. He whips his head toward the men who had been holding him as they pull out their tranquilizer guns. Roaring, he swats a giant paw at them and knocks the

guns out of their hands in one blow. He turns to Charlotte's capture and tackles him with his giant lion body, slamming him into a wall of concrete.

Charlotte stares in shock at the scene in front of her. "Charlotte," I yell. She whips her head in my direction, startled. "Run!"

She shakes her head and takes off again. I turn my attention back to Riley, who jumps down off the pile of rubble and sprints for the gate. I'm right behind her when she slows down and stumbles into a wall. She keeps going, but staggers, losing speed by the second. Then she trips over a bar and catches herself on her hands. I slide to a halt and drop to a knee next to her. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I just..." Her arm gives out and she topples over. That's when I notice the tranquilizer dart sticking out of her thigh.

I yank it out, I throw my arms under her knees and behind her back, then hug her against my chest and keep going.

Finally, we make it to the gate and I see the others scrambling into the three cars we brought. Original riding arrangements go out the window. Jinx jumps in the drivers seat of the jeep, followed by Neon and Dan. Layla scrambles into the drivers seat of her mom's SUV with Emma and Jackson. Gwen and Charlotte hurry into the front of Jinx's old pickup truck. The other two cars have already started to drive away, so I hurry over and throw open the back door. I quickly but carefully lay Riley down in the back seat and sit down next to her, letting her head rest on my lap.

"What are we waiting for?" I gasp, pulling hard for air.

"Michael," Charlotte says. "I haven't seen him since-" she's cut off when Lion Michael comes out of the darkness and jumps onto the hood of the truck, then onto the roof, denting it. A moment later, he jumps down into the bed in human form and repeatedly taps his hand on the window.

"Go!" he yells, muffled through the glass.

Charlotte stares at the steering wheel, which she's sitting closet to. "I don't have my license!"

Gwen groans and scrambles over Charlotte into the drivers seat. "Hang on, guys!" She turns the key in the ignition and slams her foot down on the gas, throwing us forward. Six men stand at the edge of the gate, hoisting guns. Sparks fly off the back of the truck as they fire and Michael flattens himself down in the bed. Finally, we turn onto another street, leaving our attackers behind. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding in and slump down against the back seat.

Gwen looks over her shoulder at us. "Everyone okay?"

I nod, then look down at Riley who's breathing steadily. Charlotte examines a graze on her upper arm. "I think I'll be okay," she says, her voice shaking.

"Good." Gwen sighs and turns her eyes back to the road. "Lets not do that again. Yeah?"



Jinx and Dan were silent. For once, Neon was too.

Jinx's fingers felt cold and numb wrapped around the Jeep's steering wheel, as if he were trying to drive the car with a frozen disc of frostbitten metal. He'd try to rub his hands against his jeans, one and then another, to warm himself, but that could hardly melt his nerves. His feet were jittery. His bad eye tingled at the back of its socket. And all the while, one sentence echoed in his mind and reverberated across every inch of his body. *I almost died.*

When they finally reached a paved road that cast a few meager spots of amber light on the road with its line of rusty streetlamps, Jinx's eyes darted to the rearview mirror. He saw his friendly old pick up huffing along behind him, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

He drove for ten more minutes, he and his subdued passengers only uttering a few words, before surrendering to his nerves and pulling over. The other cars followed suit, and one by one each student climbed out of their respective cars and gathered together. Riley was unconscious, having been unfortunate enough to have been darted in the scuffle at the lab site. Of course, it could've been much worse.

"We'll need to get home soon," Layla said. "But I don't think any of us are ready to return to our normal lives right now and pretend that everything's okay."

Dan looked up. "I think we need to tell someone about this. Our parents or something. We'll just have to morph in front of them and they'll call the police and we'll get help."

"Right," Layla said. "But whoever these people are, I think they're going to be making sure that doesn't happen. They're watching us. They might even have followed us here."

Jinx agreed. Whoever their enemy actually was, they certainly were capable of stalking them and toting weapons along at the same time. He recalled the figure of the guy who had seen him morph earlier that day.

Layla continued speaking. "We'll have to meet again this weekend, somewhere safe and quiet and spacious, where we can talk about everything and look over the files we found. Mr. Neil's classroom is hardly safe anymore."

"There's the forest behind the school," Gwen offered.

"No!" Jinx cried. He cleared his throat. "Not that forest."

"Why not?" Neon asked, his arms crossed.

Jinx sighed and briefly recounted what had happened, all the way up to the point where he ran into Riley, disheveled and shoeless.

"They're stalking us at school," Layla said. "Great."

"My family has a cabin," Michael said. "It's an hour and a half away. Kind of far, but it might be perfect for getting together safely."

"The further the better," Cole said. "How can we make sure these jerks don't follow us, though? They know our cars, for sure."

They were silent for a few moments, the wheels turning in each of their brains.

Charlotte was the first to speak up. "We can all change into animals except Gwen and Ashton. Can we use that to our advantage?"

"I fit in a backpack," Neon said. "Cole fits in a cage. We could probably all condense ourselves into one car, one that's different from any of these, and drive on over to Mike's cabin."

"Right," Layla said. "I could morph, the birds could morph, and maybe even Riley or Charlotte could morph, if it means that we take up less space. We're just going to need a big car."

"I'll find a way to use my parents' car," Michael said. "It's pretty big. All of you, meet at my house at 10:00 AM tomorrow - er, today - and tell your parents you're going to the library to work on a bio project or something, and you're sleeping over at your friend's house. Walk if you can, and if you have to drive try to carpool and leave your car a few houses down from mine."

"Well," Layla said. "This might work. We should all wear our suits and a layer of clothing over them. I assume the cabin only has a few beds?"

"Right. Bring a sleeping bag and some blankets if possible, but nothing that takes up too much space. We can stop by a store on the way there to buy some food and extra supplies."

"I've been craving cat food," Neon said. "Is that normal?"

"Ever since the lab, bananas have tasted better than ice cream," Cole said. "I think it is."

Layla checked her watch. "Alright, we should get home now before our parents find that we've been gone. Try to get some sleep before ten comes."

Satisfied and exhausted, they bid one another goodbye. Jinx climbed into his old pick-up, grateful for its friendly warmth and familiar smell. He drove as quickly as his car would allow.

He was eager for those five hours of sleep, as restless and meager as they were sure to be.



I whistled as I cycled along towards Mike's house. My mind was in a whirl though. I couldn't believe what was happening! I mean, all of us being able to transform into animals, Ryker nearly dying, being shot at! The only good thing that had come of it was that I could turn into a huge, powerful eagle (a fact that I was rather pleased about).

However, the danger was far too much. *Well, at least I'll get a couple days to calm myself down now.* I thought as I came up near Mike's house.

It appeared that I was the last one there. Everyone else was debating how they were all going to fit in one car.

"Oh hey Dan." said Layla as I walked my bike up to the group.

"We're having problems." said Charlotte. "You see, we've figured out that you can fly to the lodge, and Emma, being an owl, will seem like a pet when we bring her around. Cole will morph and is going to be hidden in my backpack, which is a big one and Neon fit in a cage with Riley, as that will make Riley look like more of a big cat, since she'll appear to have a kitten. However, with all the bags, only five people will fit in the car, and that's even while carrying bags on their laps! And the rest of us will be too noticeable if we morph. Got any ideas?"

I thought for a moment then fixed my eyes on Layla. "How big is a palm fox?"

THIS IS TERRIFYING! Layla screeched in my mind as I flew, carrying her in my talons. At the beginning of the flight, we had learnt that that we could communicate in our minds. I wasn't sure if all of us could do the same thing, or if it was restricted to just me and Layla. All I was sure of was that it was bloody annoying.

Please stop shouting. I implored her. ***And stop wiggling! It's hard enough to resist my instincts to rip out your throat and eat you without the risk of dropping you as well.***

Sorry. she replied. ***But this really scary and my fox's instincts aren't really helping. They're really acting up and OH MY GOD IS THAT A HELICOPTER? HOW HIGH ARE WE? OH NO WE'RE GOING TO CRASH! I WANT TO GO HOME!***

Calm down. I replied as I swerved to fly past the helicopter. ***I'm not so bad a flyer that I'd crash into something as big as a helicopter.*** As I passed it, I got a glimpse of the person piloting it, and the sight of his face shocked me.

Did you see the guy driving the helicopter? I asked.

No. replied Layla. ***I was too busy watching the propellers. Who was it?***

Well...He kind of looked like Darrin.

Darrin? The new kid? replied Layla. ***Are you sure?***

Well, it looked like him. I replied, wondering. ***It probably wasn't, though. Still, given what's happening, it's a weird coincidence.***

Yeah. agreed Layla. ***But it can't have been him. I mean, he's what, 16? He couldn't have been piloting a helicopter.***

I guess so. I replied, though I felt a little unsure. *Well, here we are.* I said, pushing those thoughts to the back of my mind as I noticed that the car (which we had been tracking from the air) had stopped at the lodge.

I flew down and dropped Layla softly on the ground before landing myself and demorphing.

As I got up, I said, "Remind me never to do that again. My head is still hurting from your shouts."

Layla gave a rueful smile and replied, "Sorry. Foxes aren't meant to fly. And since you're an eagle, all that time the fox's instincts were telling me to get away as fast as I could before you ate me."

"It's alright." I replied, stretching. "Well, we should go and catch up with the others."

Layla nodded and I shook the stiffness out of my limbs (which always seemed to be there when I demorphed) as we walked towards the parked car, where some people appeared to be arguing.



The kennel was big enough for me to tuck under the seat and just big enough for me to lie down in comfortably in my lynx form. I rested my head moodily on my paws, trying to force down the mother cat instincts poking at the back of my mind as Neon sat awkwardly near my big paws.

'This sucks. I mean, this just REALLY SUCKS! what the heck do those labmonkeys thing their trying to pull? What, were they going to let a couple of kids in here to just mess around? In WHAT UNIVERSE would ANY of this be a good idea. "Hey, kids! We'd like to thank you for showing an interest in our special and highly exclusive Science program! Where we secretly experiment on you and completely eradicate any chance of you having a normal life! But don't you worry, we give our word that you'll be out of harm's way and in no danger of losing your life at any second! Except for the Ninety-nine percent of the time when your NOT. We at the lab assure you this is all a necessary life skill to obtain, because normal people who DON'T have ANIMAL GENES SPLICED INTO THEIR DNA all have to keep looking over their shoulder to make sure no one's stalking them or pointing a RIFLE at them! We thank you all for being COMPLETE IDIOTS and blindly walking straight into our death trap!" WELCOME TO HIGH SCHOOL!'

Neon was giving me a wired look. A cross between trying not laugh and just feeling uncomfortable. The car had become eerily silent. A few long seconds later, Cole's voice echoed from somewhere in space.

[i]Wow. That was actually kind of impressive.

With a sort of sick jolt I realized his voice wasn't coming from space, it was *in my head*.

Wh--waita minute. He can hear me? He heard all that?

Judging by the looks on the other guy's faces, I'm pretty sure we all did.

Sorry...guys. I guess I'm just feeling a little funned out right now. And also a little freaked out by the fact that you can hear my thoughts.

The car stopped in front of a big two story wood house nestled comfortably between the trees at the end of a long, lonely dirt path. Perfect place to hide. The ones who hadn't morphed jumped out, and Emma De-morphed and dragged our kennel out from under the seat and undid the door. Neon and I De-morphed and the three of us clambered from out of the car. I tugged at the tight fabric of my suit.

"Hey, Emmy. Do you still have my pack?"

Emma nodded.

"It's in the trunk."

After I'd collected my bag, we all walked into the cabin. I rushed into the bathroom the minute we got through the door and slipped my clothed on over my suit. Loose, faded jeans, and a black t-shirt with a design so faded I couldn't even tell what it was anymore. I Took pa pair of sock and black converse sneaker out of the bag and put those on too. Feeling slightly better, I

bounced out of the bathroom and emerged right in the middle of an argument. I leaned over to Emma.

"What's going on?"

"They're fighting about the attack last night."

"Well, not getting caught up in that mess again. Besides, I've had writers block for the longest time, and there's no better cure than a change of scenery. Wanna help me out?"



I can hear the angry voices of Cole and Jinx before Dan and I even make it onto the porch. I step through the front door just as Riley and Emma head out the back door, escaping the argument.

"I'm telling you! I saw the people who were shooting at us and they were asian!" Cole yells.

"Cole, I saw one of them up close when they tried to grab me. They weren't asians! They were americans. Don't you think I would have been able to tell? I was face to face with one of them. How far were you? Thirty feet?"

"Dammit, Jinx! I know what I saw!"

Dan frowns at the argument, then looks down at Neon, whose looking at them like they're the biggest idiots in the world. Dan points to the roll of film on the coffee table and Neon nods, as if to agree to help him with it, then they both head into another room, trying their best to avoid the drama by working on the film.

I sit down next to Charlotte on the leather sofa as we, along with Michael and Gwen, continue to watch. *Oh, boy. Here we go.*

"I'm sorry, but that just doesn't make any sense! What the heck do asians have to do with anything?" Jinx yells back.

Cole throws his arms up. "How am I supposed to know? I was a little busy running for my life. But tensions are really high between the US and China and Japan. Maybe they're involved somehow!"

"Why the hell would China care about some secret *American* experiment. Just because we were at war with them doesn't mean they have anything to do with this!"

"But, I *know* what I saw!" Cole snaps back. He's on the edge of fuming now.

"So do I!"

"Well, quite frankly I don't think you know what you saw. You're blind in one eye, and it was dark out! How could you have seen anything?"

Jinx clenches his hands into fists. "Are you calling me a liar?"

"If. The Tiger Paw. Fits," Cole says with a taunting tilt of his head.

Jinx takes a step toward him and lets a tiger growl rise up from deep within his throat.

"Guys, come on," Gwen tries, but they completely ignore her.

"Get away from me, man!" Cole shoves him backwards which only makes him madder.

Jinx growls louder and steps closer again which prompts Cole into raising his fists to his face.

The second Jinx's eyes flash orange, we're all on our feet and Michael steps between them. "Move, Michael!" Cole snaps. "It's about time I've taught this arrogant *jerk* a lesson."

Jinx takes another step closer and Michael pushes him back with his hand to separate them. "Stop! What are you doing? This is the last time we should be fighting! And about something as stupid as who's right or wrong."

"Get out of my way, Michael, or I'll make you," Cole says, fuming.

Michael doesn't say anything, doesn't move. Nobody does. Everyone holds their breath. After a moment of tense silence, Cole grabs Michael's arm who whips his head towards Cole and roars in his face, Michael's own eyes turning golden.

Cole's eyes widen a little. He puts his hands up and takes a step back, startled. Jinx takes a step toward him and Michael turns his attention to him, growling so deep it makes the floorboards rattle. They stare at each other for a long moment, and ironically, it reminds me of two cats trying to figure out who's going to pounce first. If they had tails, they would be lashing.

Finally, Jinx shakes his head and storms into the kitchen and Cole leaves out the back door. Michael's eyes fade back to their normal blue-green color, but his body is as rigid as stone.

"Nice going, Michael," I say.

"Someone had to do it. They were being idiots." Michael looks just as mad at this point as Jinx and Cole did. He storms out of the room and leaves out the front door, then the three of us are left alone in the living room with the vibe of hostility still hanging in the air.

No one says anything for a while, still shocked into silence. Then Gwen smirks a little and quietly says, "They were Asians."

I give her an amused look as I stand up from the couch. "I should probably talk to Cole. Calm him down before he does something stupid."

Gwen and Charlotte stand up in a rush and at the same time say, "And I'll talk to-"
Gwen's mouth snaps shut. Charlotte's cheeks flush.

"You know... Jinx probably needs to be calmed down more than Michael does," I tell them. "Why don't you guys help him scrounge together some food or something."

They nod and both head for the kitchen, relieved to have gotten out of an awkward situation so easily. So with all bombs defused for the moment, I head out the back door after Cole.

~ ~ ~

About two hours later, Dan and Neon call everyone back into the living room where they've set up an old film camera and pointed it at a white wall where a painting once hung. Everyone sits down on the various sofas and chairs. Neon grabs the leather recliner that swallows his tiny figure and claims it as his. Cole and Jinx have calmed back down, but I notice that they choose to sit in opposite corners of the room from each other, as do Charlotte and Gwen.

Dan turns to face us. "Ok, whatever happens, at least we'll know the truth. Is everyone ready?"

We all nod, and Dan flips on the power. For a moment, the screen is blank, then an image of one of the M.I.C. rooms flashes into focus from the angle of one of the ceiling corners, looking down on the chair.

The room is empty for a few seconds, then Dr. Liam, Mr. Neil, and Charlotte walk into the room. She glances back at Mr. Neil as he closes the door behind them and gives her a reassuring smile.

It's clear that she's nervous, both on the video, and sitting next to me. I give her shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"Just take a seat, and I'll walk you through everything," Dr. Liam says.

Charlotte hesitantly lowers herself into the chair and leans back. The L.E.D. lights begin scanning over her body just as he says, "It's a completely natural side effect for patients to fall asleep during the procedure, so don't worry if you dose off."

Before he can finish his sentence, her head lolls to the side and she goes out cold. Then Dr. Liam turns to Mr. Neil. "You've succeeded in your task better than expected."

"I know these kids. If anyone would be up for trying out the chairs, I knew it would be them."

Dr. Liam shoves his hands into the pockets of his white lab coat. "And you were right, as usual. By the looks of it, they will all be perfect candidates for our plans for the future."

"I couldn't agree more."

He peers back at Charlotte and holds a walkie talkie up to his mouth. "Prepare the serums. Proceed with the procedures. Project Miles Eximius is a go."

Everyone watches the screen in total silence. I realize that I'm tense now too. Everyone is.

We watch for several minutes without anything happening. Dan stands up and starts fast-forwarding through the footage until they come back in, promptly at the ten minute mark, with a rolling tray with various syringes and bottles on it. This is *definitely* not some ten minute check up like they told us it would be.

Dr. Liam and his assistant begin strapping down her arms and legs with velcro and hooking her up to various wires and IV's, as well as placing nodes on her forehead. The assistant takes her blood while Dr. Liam picks up a small vial with blue liquid and inserts it into the chair.

"Which animal DNA is that again?" his assistant asks.

"Thomson's gazelle."

His assistant nods and writes it down on a clipboard. Dr. Liam presses a button and a moment later, the blue liquid begins running through one of the clear tubes into her arm. Still unconscious, she lazily fights against the restraints.

"What did they do to me?" Charlotte says quietly. Dan fast forwards again, through a half an hour of scientists and doctors leaning over her. Some things are easy to see, while some hard to catch at all. Eventually, they remove all of the IV's and wires and Dan stops fast forwarding just as an assistant brings Dr. Liam something that looks like a syring gun.

"Ready for the tracker stage?" his assistant asks.

"Yes, thank you." He takes the device from his assistant, then clicks a button on the chair and it straightens up, forcing Charlotte into a sitting position. He pulls the head cage away and lets her head fall forward, then places the device at the back of her neck and injects something just under the skin.

Charlotte winces next to me, then reaches up and feels the back of her neck with her fingers. She lets out a shuttered breath. "I can feel it." She looks at me with wide, glossy eyes.

"They put a tracker in my neck."

I reach up and feel my own neck. My stomach sinks when I too feel a nearly unnoticeable lump under the skin. "Mine too."

Dr. Liam lowers the chair back down and leaves, then comes back in a minute later and turns off the machine. Charlotte slowly comes to. "Rise and shine, Charlotte!" he says. "You're all done!"

She lifts herself out of the chair with shaky arms. He tells her her results and she leaves the room.

Charlotte's hands shake next to me. "Are you okay?" I ask. She nods reluctantly.

Dan fast forwards through the other footage, which is all more-or-less similar to each other. He stops as each person wakes up. Cole falls into a counter. We find out that Ryker's animal is a Panda, then he sits in his chair for a minute, trying to recover. Riley whispers his name under her breath with sorrow in her voice, but she pushes it aside when her own video comes on and Dan stops it just as she's getting up.

The scientist stares at her, but before they can speak, she says, "Lemme guess. Everything fine except... A heart defect that causes the subject to lose consciousness after long periods of exertion. I know."

I draw my eyebrows together. *A heart condition?*

Everyone looks at her as she sinks down a little in her chair. She risks a couple side glances at the people around her. "What?" she says defensively. "It's not that serious and you guys were bound to find out eventually." She crosses her arms over her chest. "So, can we just forget about it?"

Everyone turns their attention away from her when Dan stops on the next set of footage with Emma. In the video, she takes a minute to gather herself.

"Can we skip mine? Please?" Emma asks us.

"Emma, we've watched everyone else's. Yours is the last one," Dan says.

"I know, just... can we end it here?"

"Emma, it'll be fine," he assures her.

Before she can protest any further, the video shows her head for the door and she collapses onto her knees as soon as she makes it there.

The scientist rushes over and asks if she's okay. "Yeah. I'm sorry. I just...kind of blacked out I guess," she tells her.

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

Riley looks over at her. "Emmy?"

Without a word, Emma shoots up from her place on the couch and storms out of the room, sniffing. Riley and Gwen get up and follow after her. "Nice going, Dan," Gwen says as she disappears around the corner. *Well, this is going well.*

The tape runs out, and the screen cuts to black. Everyone sits, staring at the empty wall and trying to take it all in. Both trying to process the new information and disturbed at what we saw... at what was done to us. My stomach is in knots. *So we were right. The bastards turned us into lab rats. Literally. Does this classify as animal testing?* I run my fingers through my hair. *How can they justify turning us into science experiments and essentially ruining our lives without so much as telling us?* There's a thought that keeps struggling to the front of my mind. *What am I?* Which is something I never thought I'd have to question, and it's terrifying.

Cole looks up from his phone. "Guess what. Miles Eximius isn't the name of some scientist who named a lab after himself. It means Super Soldier in latin."

"What does that have to do with us?" I ask.

"I'm not sure I want to know," Cole says with a shake of his head.

Dan wipes a hand across his face as he sits down on a footstool. "Man, did we got played."

"Like a fiddle," Neon says, angrily. I doubt he's been tricked very often in his life.

We're quiet for awhile, unsure of what to say. Or do, or think...

Finally, Michael is the first one to break the silence. He stands up and says, "Well, first thing's first. We need to get those trackers out of our necks."



As my video played, I felt my stomach drop. Everyone was looking at me, and I rubbed my arms self consciously. Riley turns to me, her face sad.

“Emmy?” She says concerned.

I can't do this.

I bolt from my spot on the couch, and I quickly make my way out of the room. I burst through the door to the cabin, and start removing my regular clothes.

“Emma! What are you doing?” Gwen yells running up to me.

“Getting away from here!”

“Emma stop! It's okay. Dont go! It's almost dark outside.” Riley tries to argue. I ignore her suggestion, and start running. Faster and faster until I feel my body begin to shrink. Suddenly my feet are no longer colliding with the ground, and I’m soaring farther away. Behind me I hear the distant yelling below.

“Emma!!” Riley yells. “We’ve got to go after her! She can't be alone out there by herself.”

“Riley...I don't really think there is much we can do. Both of us can't fly, and she is too small to see with the naked eye in the dark.”

“What are we gonna do?” Riley asks. The rest of the conversation is left unknown, as I continue zooming away. The cool air beneath my wings makes my head spin, and my heart beat faster.

I don't realize how long I've been flying until I see the moon shining brightly over my head. I take leave in the crook of a large tree branch surrounded by large leaves. I snuggle my tiny body closely against the rough bark, and listen to the sounds of the forest echo all around me. I can feel my senses heightened, which means my fear is also heightened. Every sound makes me turn my head quickly. The sickening reality has finally come to my mind.

I don't know how to get back.



The night air was cold and clear all the way up in the mountains, but it didn't clear my head like I'd thought it would. I listlessly pushed myself on the porch swing, staring out at the moon.

How could we have been so stupid?

"Hey." It was Cole's voice. I turned around, fixing a small smile on my face.

"Hey!" I replied in what I hoped was a convincingly upbeat tone. Cole came over and sat next to me on the swing. He takes a sideways look at me.

"Can we...talk about earlier?"

I sighed.

"Cole, I'd really rather not. It's...it's personal."

Cole looked down at his hands. For a while the only sound we heard was the buzz of night insects. Cole was the one to break the silence.

"Why didn't you tell anyone?"

I slouched in my chair, clenching my hands together in my lap.

"I did tell Emma..."

"You could have told me."

I looked up at him, hesitating.

"I know. I just--I dunno, I--I guess I just didn't want anyone to worry about me, that's all."

"I'm not worried. And actually, I kind of already knew."

My eyes widened a little and I sat up straighter.

"What? How?"

"I heard your mom and Emma talking about it the day you fainted." Cole chuckled.

"Emma was so surprised to see me there, you should've seen the look on her face."

Despite myself, I felt myself smiling a little. You could call that his gift.

"I bet I was more surprised than she was." I rubbed the back of my neck self consciously.

"I didn't think you'd be so concerned about me."

Was it just me, or was there a bit more color in his cheeks than usual?

"Well I don't know if I'd go so far as to say I was concerned...but I drove you there, and I wanted to make sure you were okay."

Yeah, it's just me.

I forced out a small chuckle, then my smile faded. I pulled my feet up onto the bench, resting my cheek on my knee. I could almost feel Cole's eyes on me.

"What's wrong?"

I shook my head, laughing dryly. "We're all such idiots..."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we let them do" I held out my arms in a universal gesture "Whatever the heck *this* is to us!"

Sure hope I didn't hit him in the face or anything...

"Well, we didn't exactly *let* them. They lied to us."

"That's exactly it! They lied to us! They could have done so much with an invention like that and they decided to do *this* instead. And we don't even know why!"

Cole is silent for a moment, an unsure look flickering in his eyes. "I...might have an idea about that."

I furrowed my brow, an uneasy fluttering entering the pit of my stomach. "What?"

Do I even want to know?

Cole takes a deep breath. Oddly enough, this kind of reminded me of the time he'd been preparing to ask us if we'd morphed into animals.

"After you and Gwen ran out after Emma, I looked up who Miles Eximus was. Turns out it's not a someone, but a something. Miles Eximus is Latin for Super Soldier. And that's what they called our...experiment. Miles Eximus."

"our experiment"...

I scoffed. "So we're soldiers now. Wonderful."

Cole shook his head. "I don't know what it means. But I have a feeling that Dr. Liam had more planned for us than just turning us into lab rats. But hey." He puts a hand on my shoulder. "We'll figure this out, okay?"

I'd expected to feel better after that, but I found myself getting angrier.

This is all so stupid.

I shrugged his hand off, blinking my eyes as my body began to heat up.

"We wouldn't *have* to figure *anything* out if we'd just stopped to think!"

"Stopped to think that our science teacher was secretly an evil scientist plotting to turn us into super soldiers on a high school field trip? Yeah, I have no idea how we didn't see that one coming."

I felt tears start to prickle the edges of my eyes. I jumped up from the swing and whirled around to face him.

"You don't understand! I had so much riding on those chairs! And they turned out to be fake!" The tears that had been threatening to fall were now cascading down my cheeks. I didn't bother wiping them away.

"Riley, what are you talking about?" Cole asked, rising from the swing.

"If those chairs did what they told us they did they may have found some sort of cure! They could've found out what's wrong with--" I caught myself before I could say any more, wiping some of the tears away with the back of my wrist. Cole took a step forward, and tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"A cure for what, your heart?" He asked softly. I took a few steps back.

"No! I--"

I gotta get out of here.

"I don't want to talk about it!" I turned away and started to rush down the steps.

"Riley, stop."

I stopped, still not facing him.

"Cole, just leave me alone."

Silence.

"I...was just going to tell you you left your phone."

Whoops.

I turn and he picks up my phone and holds it out to me. I started feeling a bit guilty.

"Oh...right. Sorry."

I walk back over to him and take the device. I began to turn back again, but stopped. I shifted from foot to foot, biting my lip a bit.

Oh to heck with it.

I close the rest of the distance and hugged him. I felt him tense for just a second before I felt his arms around me. Felt his hand stroking my hair.

"We're all gonna get through this."



Dan paced the room like a nervous wreck. It had been an hour since Emma had disappeared, and she was nowhere in sight.

“She could be anywhere!” Dan cried, curling up his fists in desperation. “She could be captured, she could be lost, she could be injured, she could be cornered by a wild animal... And it’s all my fault!”

Layla stood and lifted a sympathetic hand. “Calm down, Dan. Should we try to find her now? It’s been long enough, and she’s probably just lost. A few of us could go and -”

Dan spun on his heel. “No, just me. I’ll find her. I have wings.”

She raised her hands. “Alright, I thought so. Traveling together would be safest, but you’re right, you have wings.” She winced, rubbing her side. “And being carried in your talons is not something I’d like to experience again.”

Dan nodded and turned to leave, but Jinx stopped him at the doorway. “Remember the telepathic thing we can do with each other? Use that to your advantage. Look for her with your mind, and maybe you’ll be able to talk with her when you’re close enough.”

“Right. Thanks, guys.”

A minute later, Dan the eagle climbed the sky and swept off, flying deeper into the forest. We watched him from the front porch until he disappeared.

“Now,” Michael said, “the trackers.”

I winced, rubbing my bandaged arm. Getting grazed by a bullet offered enough injury to satisfy me for a lifetime. “Gosh, Michael, why do you have to keep bringing that up? What are we going to do, cut them out with a steak knife?”

Mike shrugged. “Well, that’s not a bad idea.”

I froze. He was being completely serious.

“What else could we do, really?” Layla asked, fingering the back of her neck. “The trackers aren’t very deep and they’re very small. Shouldn’t be that big of a deal, right?”

My heart started pumping so hard, the jugular vein in my neck felt like it was going to burst. “Are you guys crazy? We need professional doctors or something to cut these out. We could slice a big vein, or damage our spine!”

“Charlotte...” Layla said.

“What about all the blood? Don’t we need a sterile environment? Don’t we need to be knocked out or something? Isn’t it going to hurt?” I turned to Michael and tugged on his hoodie strings. “You guys aren’t thinking about really doing this, are you?”

In my blind fear, I didn’t notice the meaningful glances Layla and Michael were exchanging with one another.

Michael looked down at me and smiled a little. “You’re right, Charlotte. The knife thing is kind of crazy. Let’s take a walk outside so you can calm down, alright? Then we’ll come back and talk it over as a group.”

I almost collapsed with relief. “Yes, yes. That would be good.”



Cole and I jumped apart the moment the door opened. Our heads snapped around. Charlotte and Michel were standing just outside the doorway.

"Oh. Hey guys." I smiled.

Michel gave us a weird look.

"You may want to help Layla out. We still haven't figured out how to get these trackers out."

"Yeah, okay. I was just about to head in anyways. Coming, Cole?"

I turned back to the house and Cole followed me in. I glanced back at him.

"Hey...thanks."

"Yeah. No problem."

I smiled. "I guess it's what any good twin brother would have done."

"Who told?"

My smile widened. "The desk lady."

...

Layla was sitting on the couch with Gwen and Jinx. Neon was in his recliner, still looking slightly pouty. I perched on the arm of the couch next to Jinx and Cole took a seat on a footstool on the other side of the room. *Oh good grief.*

"Any sign of Emma yet?"

Layla shook her head. "She hasn't come back yet. Dan just went out to look for her."

"On his own?"

"He wanted to go out alone. He is the only other person with wings."

I suddenly felt a little colder and I rubbed my arms. "I don't like this. She's been gone for almost an hour. And Dan's all alone... I don't like this at all."

"Riley, they'll be okay. Emma probably just got lost. They'll be back soon."

You don't know that. I pushed the thought from my head. She was probably right. I smiled a little.

"Hope so. Now, I dunno about you, but this whole tracker thing is really getting under my skin."

Jinx groaned. I grinned sheepishly and Cole smirked at me.

"Alright, be honest. How long have you been waiting to use that?"

"All day."

Layla shook her head, a smile playing on the ends of her mouth. "Well, we should probably wait for Charlotte and Michel to start figuring this out."

There was a general mutter of agreement and the room went silent. I watched the window. The moon was high above the treeline and I could see the tops of the trees and the reflection of the sky in the lake, but nothing that looked like two birds flying towards the house.

The door opened and soon enough Charlotte and Michel joined us. I waved them over. "That's pretty much everyone, right?" *Except Emma and Dan...*

"Let's start figuring things out."

...

Cole rested an elbow on his knee. "I don't see any other way." Charlotte began wringing her hands.

"But we can't do this ourselves!"

"Relax. It's not like we're gonna just hack it out with a knife."

"That's exactly what you're saying!"

I shrugged one shoulder. "I'll have to agree with Cole on this one. We'll have to cut them out."

Charlotte gripped Michel's arm tightly. "You guys can't be serious. This is a really, really bad idea!"

"Charlotte, calm down. The trackers are just beneath the skin, so all we have to do is slit the skin open and slide it out."

Charlotte didn't look convinced.

"Look," I hopped off the arm of the couch and flopped down on the other side of Charlotte. "normally I wouldn't be pressuring you like this, but as long as these things stay in we're in...well, more danger than we're in already. Here. I'll go first. Cole, could you--"

Neon jumped out of the recliner before I could finish. He dashed out of the room, the tails of his scarf flicking behind him as he sprinted into the kitchen. Cole folded his arms. No doubt if there was a wall near where he was, he'd have leaned against it.

"What. Does he not trust me with sharp objects or something?"

I put on a thoughtful look. "Now that you mention it, he may be on the ball with that one."

"Har. Har."

I made a face at him, puffing out my cheeks and sticking my tongue out at him. Charlotte let out a breathy sort of laugh. I pulled up a footstool as Neon came back into the room with a small pocket knife. I sat with my back to him and lifted my hair away from my neck. I felt the cold metal poke against my skin for a second, and then the stinging as Neon quickly cut the slit. A sort of odd tingle snaked down my spine as he slid the tracker out.

"Victory!" He announced grandly, holding the tiny chip aloft between two fingers. I plucked the tracker from his fingers and quickly snapped it into four jagged pieces. I could feel a bead of blood begin to slide down my back.

I leaned over and plucked a tissue from a box on a small table and swiped it quickly across the cut. "See? Nothing to worry about." Charlotte took a deep breath.

"Alright."

I smiled at her, wiping the tissue across the cut again. *I think I may need a Band-Aid.*

...

"Riley."

"Mmgph." I rolled over in bed, burrowing my face into the pillow.

"Riley, come on. It's ten in the morning. You missed breakfast."

"Grrmph."

"Riley, wake up!"

I slowly rolled over onto my back, groaning. "Fine, fine I'm--" I opened my eyes just as the door opened, Gwen stepped aside so I could see who was in the doorway. I was out of bed and running to the doorway in about half a second.

"Emmy!" Emma yipped in surprise as I jumped, catching her in a flying bear hug. (Or flying Lynx hug, I guess?) We toppled to the ground with a thud. Emma rapidly tapped me on the shoulder.

"Riley...I can't...breathe..."

I let go and crawled off her and she sat up, looking a little dazed. I gripped her shoulders.

"Are you okay? Did you get hurt?"

"No, I'm fine."

I let out my breath in a relieved sigh, letting my head drop. Then it snapped back up.

"What the heck were you thinking?!" I yelled, shaking Emma by the shoulders. "I hardly slept at all last night! Do you know how *worried* I've been?!" I stopped shaking. "Yeesh. I sound like my mother." Emma hugged me.

"I'm sorry, Riley. I'm really sorry."

I hugged her tighter. "Hey, you're safe now, aren't you? It's alright." I took her shoulders again, and held her out at arms length, giving her a stern look. "But don't you scare me like that

anymore." I hopped up, then held out my hand to her. Emma took my hand and I pulled her to her feet.

"You got your tracker out, right?"

"Yeah. Just this morning."

"Well then we're all microchip free. Great!"

I bounced back into my room and rummaged through my bag, gathering a dark purple tee and a pair of jeans in my arms along with my black suit thingy and headed into the bathroom. I changed quickly and shot out of the bathroom to my room. I snatched my journal from the bed and took a glance out the window. The clouds were starting to get dark. I rifled through my bag and pulled out my black jacket. My eyes flicked to the pocket. It was bulging a little. I stuck my hand in and grabbed the whatever-it-was and pulled it out. A wadded up, bloody tissue. Gross. *Wait. Didn't I--?* I hurriedly unwrapped the tissue. There sitting in the center of the paper, was the four pieces of the microchip.

Crap on a stick.

I shook the pieces out into my hand, and stuffed the tissue in my pocket. I zipped up my jacket and hurried back out to the landing and down the stairs.

Emma was sitting on the couch, reading. She looked up when I hurried past.

"Hey. Where're you off to?"

"Just forgot to get rid of this." I showed her the broken chip. "I know it's probably useless now, but I'll feel a lot better once it's gone."

"I know what you mean. What are you planning to do with it?"

"I dunno. I was thinking I'd throw it in the lake."



Looming trees and assortment of noises were echoing in the night as both Charlotte and Michael began walking. He suggested it, almost thinking it could calm down the girl. An awkward silence was between them both, enough to be sliced by a knife. He was trying to think of something to say, anything, to bring some form of communication between the two. Every now and then, Michael would look down at Charlotte's wound. A sickening feeling crept in his stomach. He didn't like the thought of some form of injury to Charlotte and why he wasn't there to stop it from happening. Sighing, Michael changed his view to the starry skies above him.

"You can see the Big Dipper from here," Charlotte muttered.

"Huh?"

Charlotte laughed softly before raising her left arm and pointed in front of them. "Right there." Michael followed her finger to see the stars aligned to form a ladle.

"I don't know much about constellations. I always used to stay indoors when it was a night like this," Michael explained. They both stopped walking and were now looking up at the stars. Charlotte seemed contented with this plan, marveling at the stars. *She's so cute*, Michael thought, looking at her.

"Oh! Look over there," Charlotte exclaimed. She pointed left of the Big Dipper, to another group of stars that were in a form of a hunter. "That's Orion. Named after the famous Greek Hunter." Michael laughed before sighing again.

"How do you know so much about stars?"

Charlotte shrugged, letting her arm fall. "I went through a phase where I would look up the different constellations. Canis major. Draco. Little Dipper. All of them. For my tenth birthday, I was given a telescope. I forgotten about it, though." She smiled shortly. "I've always have a fascination with space. What is out there. That kind of stuff." Charlotte gazed at Michael. "I wanted to be an astronaut."

"What stopped you from doing so?"

Charlotte shrugged, looking back at the stars. "I guess my mind thought that books were more important than space itself. I think, though, both are similar. They hold secrets and stuff that is beyond our imaginations. It's a little thrilling." Michael slowly walked until he was beside her.

"Space is also unpredictable. You don't know what could happen up there," Michael stated. Charlotte nodded. Their fingers lightly brushed against each other.

"I know you're scared of getting the chip out of the back of your neck, Charlotte. Hell, I'm a little scared but we've got to do it."

Charlotte only sighed. "I know. It is just... life's so unpredictable. Much like how space is. I want to do it but at the same time, what'll come out of it, you know." She slowly turned around to face Michael. "I'm scared of what is going to happen next. I mean, I nearly died." She slowly lifted her wrapped arm. Michael gazed at her raised arm.

"I'm really sorry," Michael whispered. Charlotte only smiled a sad smile. She slowly reached out to grab onto his hand and looked down shortly after.

"I've always longed to be as strong as you, Michael. You've always had some form of courage and caring for everything. In all honestly, I'm a little jealous."

"Charlotte..."

She chuckled before sighing. Her voice cracking from choked tears. "You were kind enough to walk out here, to get my mind off of the stupid chip. In that single moment, I was happy. Whenever I am around you, I feel the confidence to do anything. A cliché type of feeling, I know. That's the only way I can describe it."

Michael tightened his grip on her hands. They almost felt as if they were made for his hand, snug nicely against his larger ones. The lion and the gazelle. Two enemies in the animal kingdom. One chases the other continuously without fail while the other runs away. At this moment, though, they seemed to think running was a failed instinct.

"I'm not always as strong as you may think, Charlie." Michael said, breaking the silence. Charlotte looked up, her eyes watering. "Even though they say the lion is the strongest, I beg to differ. Even the greatest of beasts can have their downfalls."

"Michael..." And with that, he slowly leaned down and kissed Charlotte. A gentle one. A hopeful one. Though it lasted for two seconds, it felt like an eternity to both of them.

"We should head back," Charlotte suggested afterwards. Michael smiled, intertwining their hands as they began the journey back.

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The journey back was a pleasant one. Michael and Charlotte both smiling real smiles for the first time in their lives. They both felt giddy but nervous. What did the relationship hold ahead? The future would only tell. As they both neared the cabin, Michael gave some form of prep talk to Charlotte before she went under the treatment of getting the chip out of her neck. Though painful the operation, it was over within a minute.

Afterwards, Michael and Charlotte were laying on a wood swing. Charlotte was curled under his left arm, while Michael's hand was cupped around hers. They were staring at the same stars as before, a blanket over both of them.

"Was it really that hard?" Michael asked. Charlotte rolled her eyes, lightly jabbing him in the side.

"I'm just glad it is over," Charlotte muttered before snuggling closer.

"I'm as glad as you are."



I must have fallen asleep. It's still dark outside, but time has passed. The air is quiet. Almost too quiet. I have not yet morphed back, and I feel the cool breeze against my wings. I jump from branch to branch looking around. Looking for any indication of familiar surroundings. Suddenly I hear the sounds of footsteps behind me. I whip my head to see a dark figure approaching. I prep myself to fly away, but that is just what they wanted. I fly straight into the confines of a small net. I struggle to move my wings as I fall towards the ground.

“Help! Help!” I scream in my mind, but no one is close enough to hear. The figure approaches with a smile on his face.

“Hello Emma. We need to have a little chat.” The voice is familiar, but before I can even think I suddenly feel the sharp prick of a needle the world begins to slip away.

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I wake up unable to move. I shake my limbs to find my hands and feet bound with rope. I must have morphed back in my sleep. I still feel groggy from the serum, but I can see that I am still in

the woods and it is night time. A small portable camping lantern sits by me, and in front of me the dark figure sits on a seat made from a fallen tree. Behind him a man stands with a gun on his hip. I struggle to move again, but it's no use.

“Who-Who are you?” I ask timidly. My throat is dry, and my heart beats faster with every minute. The sitting figure looks up into the white light, and his face is revealed. My eyes go wide. “Wait-what?”

*Its Mr. Neil...*

“Calm down Emma. I know you have a lot of questions, but not all of them can be answered right now.” My hands shake in my lap.

“Why-Why did you tie me up? You disappeared. Are you working for the people who did this to us? Why did you do this to us?”

“Enough of this! Just get to the point Neil, and shut her up.” The man behind him finally speaks. There is a trace of a Japanese accent. Mr. Neil sighs.

“Emma, I tied you up so you would not run away, and yes I disappeared and it will stay that way. I have my agenda when it comes to who I am working for, and I did this to you because of many reasons. You all were not just chosen randomly out of a mass of teenagers. Each one of you was chosen for a specific reason. You care about your friends yes? And your family?”

“Yes-yes I do.” I say trying to stop my voice from wavering.

“Then you will do me the favor of not telling anyone about this meeting. We have a lot planned for you kids, and I don't intend for any of you to die. But it will come to that if you so much as say any of this to anyone else. Do I make myself clear?” I nod in understanding. “Great. Now we have two matters to attend to. First, it appears your friends have discovered their

tracking devices implanted in their necks, but we expected this of course. Due to this we need to come up with a replacement option...so we are putting another one in you. We assume you all will mostly be together all the time so one should be enough. And we will take extra measure to make sure this one does not get taken out.” He explains.

The Japanese man walks towards me placing his gun over his shoulder. He takes out a tiny knife, and places it against my forearm. I shiver, and whimper a little as the metal slices my skin. I watch blood swell from the cut, and my stomach flips. He forces a small object deep into my arm making me scream in pain. Afterwards, he wipes the blood and stitches it shut. Lastly, he wraps a bandage over it.

“Why?” My voice cracks. “Why are you doing this?” I ask suddenly feeling sick. Ignoring my question the Japanese man continues the explanation of the chip.

“It's about the size of a grain of rice, and its close enough to the artery that if an untrained teenager tries to cut it out of you, you will die. Understand?” I nod. “Good. Continue Neil.”

“The second point of business is this. You will be...let's just call it our little inside spy. When we contact you, you will tell us what you know.”

“Why me?” I ask.

“Because, you have always been the little actor Emma. Hiding your disease from everyone else. Acting happy. Acting alright. You lie to the ones you love everyday to protect them. Why is this any different?”

“I won't do it.”

“No no no Emma. I will not have that attitude. Remember earlier when I asked you if you cared about your friends and family? This still applies, because if you do not comply then I will

kill those you love. We can easily finish this experiment with a new group of candidates, but we don't want to waste time doing that. So I would prefer you don't go against my wishes.”

“How do I know you're not calling bluff.” I say suddenly earning a feeling of bravery. He stays silent a moment walking closer and closer to me. He kneels down next to my ear, and whispers.

“Do you really want to put your friends and families lives on the chance of a bluff?” I stay silent tears falling from my eyes. “That is what I thought. Don't doubt my threats Emma.” He spits. He stands now turning to his comrade. He whispers something to him, and starts walking off.

“Don't forget what I told you Emma. Do. Not. Disobey me.” He turns to the Japanese man and nods. “We will be watching you miss Tanner.” He says with a smile.

Then just as soon as he was there he was gone. The Japanese man walked towards me, and began cutting the ropes. His face was cold, and distant. I tried to hide the tears, but it was no use.

“I suggest you run. You have a friend nearby, and I would hate for them to meet me.” My eyes widened. I stood, and started running. Even though I knew the man wasn't chasing me, I still felt the feeling that he was. I ran straight into something...someone, nearly knocking them over. I screamed as they grabbed my arms tightly. It took my eyes a moment to adjust to see that it was Dan, and he hugged me telling me it was alright. I hugged him back feeling my knees give out from under me. He came down with me holding my face.

“God Emma, what happened to you! We were all worried sick...” I stayed silent not sure what to say. He hugged me again. “I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I- I shouldn't have had everyone



watch the video when you told us not to. I didn't know that-I didn't know you-" I pulled away grabbing his face shutting him up almost instantly. His eyes were worried, and we were close enough that I felt his warm breath against my cheeks. His eyes traveled across my face. I felt my cheeks become warm. I wanted to tell him everything. I wanted to fall into him. I wanted him to hold me and tell me it was gonna be okay. But then, the words of Mr. Neil filled my mind.

*If you do not comply, I will kill those you love...*

I had a job to do, and that was protect the ones I love. I had to do that by distancing myself as much as possible. I slightly smiled pulling away from him even though every muscle in my body tried to contradict me.

"No. I'm sorry. I-I shouldn't have overreacted...Let's go home." He tried to say something, but I stopped him by standing up, and holding out my hand. He grabbed it skeptically, and we started walking back towards the cabin in silence. Thankfully he knew the way. He grabbed my hand, and even though I knew better... I let him.

And I don't know if I was imagining it, but I could almost hear the distant shuffling of someone watching us. Someone making sure I was doing what I was supposed to...and I had no intention of failing them.



The rickety old bed creaks under me as I roll onto my side, slowly coming to. The bedroom Michael assigned me is small. Just big enough for two twin beds, an end table between them, and a closet at the end of the room, next to the door. Early morning light streams through blinds, dappling the quilt draped over me in glowing yellow spots.

My eyes flutter open to see Neon sitting on the opposite bed from mine, feet together on the ground, hands gripping the edge of the mattress, staring at me. It startles me, and I shoot up in bed. Too many movies start with a group of teenagers going to a cabin in the woods, and waking up to the kitten of darkness glaring at you isn't a good start.

"Neon, how long have you been watching me?"

"We need to talk..." He strokes the red scarf wrapped around his neck. *Does he ever take that thing off?* "I saw you talking to Riley last night."

I shake my head at him. "So?"

"I thought I told you to stay away from her." His jaw is tight. He looks like a little kid who's trying to look all mad and tough, the expression they give you when do something to annoy them--like holding a toy above their head, just out of reach--and they're not amused.

"Hey, I never agreed to anything, Squirt."

He blows a breath out of his nose. "Don't call me that!" He's silent for a moment, then hesitantly asks, "Did you kiss her?"

I shrug. "Maybe."

I squints his eyes at me, trying to figure out the truth. He leans back and crosses his arms over his chest. "You didn't."

I get up and head for the closet. Pull on a black teeshirt. Pull on a pair of jeans over my boxers. "Okay, sure. We'll go with that."

It takes everything I have not to laugh as I leave the room. His eyes wide. His body stiff. Man, is it fun messing with that little dude.

The smile fades the second I slide my foot into my sneaker. *Squish*. Toothpaste. The little dude put toothpaste in my shoes. *Why, I'm gonna...*

Neon walks out behind me, points two fingers at his eyes, then directs them at mine. *I'm watching you...*

You're not the only one who can pull pranks, Neon. So, You're on, Little Man. You're on.

+ + +

I wash my sneakers out in the kitchen sink, then head out the front door to put them on the porch railing to dry. *These are the only shoes I brought...*

Out of the corner of my eye, I see someone sitting on the dock, looking out over the lake. It's Riley.

I head toward her, my bare feet brushing through the green mountain grass. Neon's threats have nothing to do with it; he doesn't scare me. I just figure I might as well say hi.

Coming up behind her, I see that her feet are dangling over the edge, her toes brushing the water. She's looking down at a book. Reading or writing, I'm not sure. Then I get a glimpse of it. A notebook with a faded cover and a spine falling apart to the point where it's been reconstructed with several layers of duct tape. I know exactly what it is. *It's her journal.*

I remember when I'd seen Riley with it on the field trip, holding it so tightly that you'd think it was the key to life. I made it my mission that day to find out what was inside.

That mission still stands.

I quietly walk up behind her and peer over her shoulder. She's listening to music through earbuds. No wonder she hasn't heard me.

Lots of hand written words fill the pages, but I can't quite make out what they say from so far away. Riley continues writing, calm and unaware of my presence. I lean down a little closer. She starts flipping back through the pages, looking for something, and with this, she sees me in her peripheral vision. She jumps a little, slamming her journal closed and pulling out an earbud. "Cole?! You scared me. What are you doing?" She narrows her eyes at me. "You were trying to get a look at my journal, weren't you?"

I shrug. "No... not at all. I just walked up. I wasn't looking at anything."

"Sure..." Riley gives me a look, then looks down at her iPod, pausing her music. I sit down next to her, letting my own legs dangle over the side.

"Emma's back," I say.

"I know. I saw her this morning. Back safe and sound," she says with a smile.

"Neon put toothpaste in my shoes."

Riley snickers. "Sorry, but... Knowing you... You probably deserved it."

I shrug. "Touché."

When we're silent for a moment, she opens her journal again, turns it slightly away from me. She gives me a look. "Can I trust you?"

"Me?" I say, pretending to be offended. "Who do you think I am?"

Riley stares at me for a moment, then goes back to her journal. I find myself watching her. How content she looks as she gets lost in whatever it is she's writing. The way a musician gets lost in music or a painter gets lost in their art. I slowly lean to look over her shoulder, trying to see what she's writing.

Riley catches on. "Hey!" She shoves me, half playfully, but it's enough to make me lose my balance, and I fall off the dock into the lake.

I gasp at the shock of suddenly being submerged in water. It's *cold*. When I resurface, Riley's standing, slightly panicked. "Cole, I'm so sorry!" She seems genuine, but I can tell she's fighting back a smile. I just stare at her, my jaw tight, my hair sending water running into my eyes. She covers her mouth, trying to keep from laughing.

"This is the only shirt I brought," I say, holding up the soaked black material.

That does it. Riley bursts into laughter. "I really didn't mean to do that," says between laughs.

*Yeah, I can tell you're real torn up about it.*

Payback time.

"Well, you could at least help me out," I say, wading closer to the dock. I lift my hand up for her to grab. She takes it, and I pull her in with me.

Riley lets out a scream as she falls into the water. When she comes up, she glares at me.  
"You didn't."

"I did."

"My iPod is in my pocket."

This time I laugh. *Whoops*.

"Well, you shouldn't have pushed me in," I retaliate with a shrug.

"*You* shouldn't have been snooping. If I recall correctly, we had a deal that if you tried to look at my journal again that you'd be out of the band."

"Alright, but Battle of the Bands is this Friday. How ever will you find a replacement on such short notice?"

She opens her mouth, then closes it again. I pose a good point.

I wade closer to her, looking into her eyes. "Admit it. You need me."

This seems to startle her; catch her off guard. She stares into my eyes, her lips quivering with unspoken words. Then she gets a mischievous grin, dunks down in the water enough to let water into her mouth, then comes back up and squirts it into my face.

I retaliate by putting my hand on her head and playfully pushing her back under the surface.

"Hey!" she says when she comes back up. She splashes me. I splash her. Riley's smiling. I like her smile.

"Hey! Guys!" Michael calls from the shore. Riley and I both turn to look at him. Neon trails closely behind him. "Breakfast!"

We nod and wade back to the dock. I put my hands on Riley's hips and hoist her back up onto the dock. She's light as a feather. Then I hoist myself out, sending gallons of water onto the dock, turning the wooden boards a darker shade of brown. Riley grabs her journal and hurries back to the shore, also dripping wet.

I follow after her, and as I near the shore, I see Neon staring daggers at me. Riley hurries into the house with Michael just as I get to the end of the dock. I shrug. "What? I didn't kiss her."

Neon nods slowly, then shoves me back into the lake.



The wind rustled through my feathers as I flew through the air. My golden eyes darted here and there, looking furiously for Emma's small barn owl form. I was getting more and more desperate the later it became, and not just for Emma. The light was dimming rapidly, and the eagle's mind had a primeval fear of the dark.

As I moved rapidly through the air, dodging trees as I flew, my eyes caught sight of an owl on a branch some way ahead of me. As I flew closer, swiftly and silently, I noticed with a relief that it was a barn owl, and immediately assumed it was Emma.

I slowed my flight so as not to startle her, and steadily approached. Suddenly, I noticed movement in the upper branches, and saw that I wasn't the only predator in the area. A large great horned owl had taken position above the barn owl, and was preparing to attack.

"Noooo!" I tried to say, but it came out as a loud screech as I flew straight at the Great Horned Owl, and it gave a surprised hoot as it fled from the much larger bird.

The Barn owl flew up in surprise at the turn of events, and fled. I attempted communicating with it in my mind, but after it didn't respond I realized that it wasn't Emma.



Feeling a sense of defeat and depression, I alighted on the closest branch and thought about what had happened that day, and everything I had done wrong. *I never should have shown everyone Emma's tape.* I thought. *I've ruined everything, just like always.* Once again, I felt myself falling into a now familiar sense of depression.

In fact, I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that I never heard what was creeping up to me before it was too close. Suddenly, I heard a sound above me, and looked up to find that I was staring down the barrel of a rifle, with an emotionless asian face staring at me above it.

"Die, American." he muttered in an accentless voice, and I watched him pull the trigger, frozen in fear. But just before he shot, an arm knocked it to the side, and it fired into the tree's lower branches with a crack. I stared, transfixed, as my attacker struggled with another man wearing a ski mask who had appeared out of nowhere.

After a few minutes, it was clear that the masked man had the upper hand as he grabbed the man's throat and pressed a pistol to the side of his head before firing. He then glanced at me for a moment before climbing rapidly down the tree, dragging the body along with him.

I shook my head, shaking myself out of a daze before i flew after the guy, catching up with him at a small clearing where I arrived just in time to see him getting into the helicopter before flying away.

I demorphed as I watched him flying away, and gaped as soon as my mouth had formed. What had just happened had shocked me completely. However, before I could completely process it, Something-or rather someone-ran into me, driving the air out of my lungs. I looked at

it, immediately recognizing her as Emma, and embraced her, happy to finally see her again, and know that she was okay.

I noticed her eyes tearing up as I held her, so I said, "It's okay, you're gonna be alright..."

She fell to her knees, and I fell with her. I held her face, still shocked that I had actually found her.

"God Emma, what happened to you! We were all worried sick..." I said, but then noticed her frightened silence, and feeling myself start to tear up as I remembered what I had done, I hugged her again.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I- I shouldn't have had everyone watch the video when you told us not to. I didn't know that-I didn't know you-" i muttered, but then she pulled away and grabbed my face, and I immediately stopped talking.

I glanced over her, and started to slowly lean closer until I could smell her breath, and was about to sum up the courage to kiss her, when she suddenly pulled away.

"No. I'm sorry. I-I shouldn't have overreacted...Let's go home." she said, not looking at me, and I got the sense that she was holding herself back. There were so many things I wanted to say, but they died in my throat.

We got up and started to walk briskly towards the cabin. As we walked emotions churned within me. After a while, I finally summed up the courage to hold her hand. When i did, she turned to look at me, smiled and...let me.

As we walked, i felt a warm feeling in my heart. But even that was quickly cut off as my senses picked up something nearby. Ever since I had first fully transformed, my senses had been greatly heightened, as if that part of the eagle stayed in me even after I demorphed.

And now my senses were tingling. I could tell that something was following us. To make sure, i changed my pace, and heard distinct, but slight and hard to hear, footsteps before the person adapted to my new pace.

I had a feeling that it had something to do with what Emma was hiding from me, and I didn't like it. But i decided to let things lie...for now.

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The next day, I woke up in cold sweat on the couch in the living room. I pulled out my phone from my pocket as soon as I had my eyes open, and shot up as I realized that it was nearly noon!

"Good Morning Sleepyhead." said Gwen with a smile, as she sat in a chair nearby. She put the book she had been reading down..

I shook my head before remembering what had happened the day before, what with the the Japanese assassin and my savior.

"Stay here, I need to talk to you." I told her. "I'll just go and call everyone else."

Luckily, as I had slept in my clothes, I didn't need to change, and just brushed my teeth before going around the cabin calling everyone, before coming to Michael who was sitting on the porch, lying back.

"Hey!" I called out.

He opened his eyes for a moment before saying, "Oh, go away wimp."

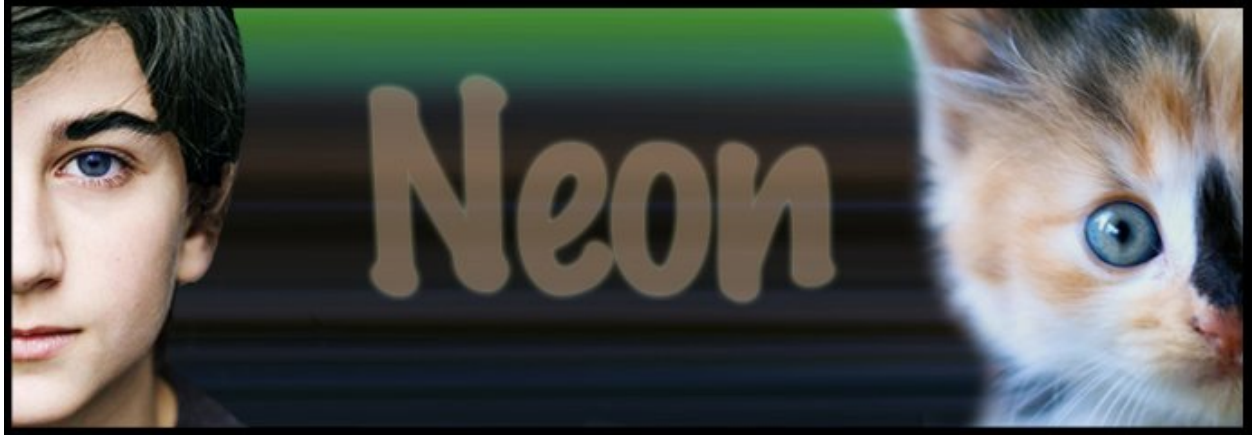
Usually, I'd take that in my stride, but that it struck a nerve. The eagle in me could no longer accept such comments, and for the first time, I felt the need to stand up for myself.

I slammed my hand on the side table, causing a glass of water to fall over and spill on Michael's shoes. Michael looked up at me, "What the-?" he said before I cut him off.

"You've been calling me that ever since I first knew you, and it's really starting to piss me off!" i growled. "Just because I'm bad at sports doesn't mean I'm weak. Now, you either start treating me with some goddamn respect or i will fly in at an opportune moment and crush your skull with my talons. Got it?"

He nodded rapidly as he stared wide eyed at me. "Good." i said, moderating my tone. "Now, come into the living room. I need to talk to you and the others."

And as i walked into the living room, I felt a sense of accomplishment, having for the first time, actually stood up for myself. but i pushed that to one side as I took a deep breath and prepared to tell everyone what had happened, and the news of the threat that was all around us.



Neon ran his fingers through his hair, leaving it as chaotic as his mind. Burying his chin in his scarf, he stared at the food in front of him. The pancake was badly burnt at the edge, his brunch tainted by the blackened crescent. His glare threatened to crisp the rest of the pancake.

“Pancakes again,” he muttered, eying the empty box of instant-mix in the trash bin.

Michael eventually noticed his look, and sighed. “Neon, I know it’s not a royal feast, but it’s all we have.”

“You could have at least done a proper job,” the kitten murmured.

“Would you prefer cat food?”

After a moment’s silence, Neon simmered, sticking his fork into a chunk of pancake and eating it. Chewing poutily, he glanced around the table at his cohorts.

He himself was sitting at the head of the table. Directly across from him was Michael, flanked by two smiling girls. Gwen and Charlotte talked cheerfully to and through Michael, but seemed to deliberately avoid conversation with each other. Neon swallowed, yawned, and looked elsewhere.

Jinx was eating solemnly, his good eye staring right through the table. Riley and Cole were joking around with each other, much to Layla's annoyance while sitting right next to them. Riley's smile was wider than Neon had ever seen it, in all the time he'd known her.

Realizing that he was staring, the kitten of darkness turned his gaze to the last two members at the table. Emma sat beside Gwen, watching everyone and smiling kindly. But there was a certain tiredness to her eyes; she'd probably undergone the most stress through all of this.

A spark of guilt crackled through Neon's chest, and he stared down. Up until now, he'd taken her for granted, treating her as a background character, a minion through which he'd accomplish his goals. For someone who would take over the world, blind destruction was unacceptable, and he made a mental note to be more conscious of her from then on.

Daniel was sitting with a pensive look, nodding slightly to himself. He was the one who'd called their meeting, and seemed to be running over the facts to make sure he didn't miss anything.

Eventually, the Indian boy looked up, staring around the table. "We're not alone out here."

His words were forceful enough to silence the chatter, and all eyes turned to him. Emma went rigid, staring at him. Dan noticed this, and blushed, coughing a bit.

He took a deep breath before continuing. "Last night, when I went after Emma, I saw someone in the trees. And he had a sniper rifle, pointed straight at me."

A week ago, that line would've earned scoffs and laughter across the board. But now, the room was deathly quiet.

“Before he could shoot me, though,” said Daniel, “some other guy came up from behind and grabbed him. He had a gun, too, and...used it.”

Cole blinked, leaning forward in his seat. Emma was getting paler by the second. Even Jinx was visibly disturbed. Nobody said anything. Nobody could.

Dan kept talking. “After that, the guy - the killer - ran away, dragging the body with him. I tried following him, but he got into a helicopter and flew away, too fast to fly after. Besides, I had, um, other priorities.” He coughed, trying to keep the red from his expression.

Neon glanced at Emma, but rather than being embarrassed, she was staring down as if the world had crashed upon her shoulders. Dan noticed this too, and wilted, falling silent.

It was a long time before anyone could say anything. “So,” said Cole finally, arms folded, “in other words, we’re screwed again.”

“That’s not what Dan said,” Jinx countered from across the table. “Someone was aiming a gun at him, and some other guy killed him. That means the other guy was protecting him. Protecting all of us, maybe.”

“But if he left in the helicopter, that means he *won’t* be protecting us.” Cole wagged a finger, then turned to Dan. “By the way, this sniper guy: Was he American, or Japanese?”

Dan thought for a moment before replying, “Japanese, I think.”

Cole smirked at Jinx, who furrowed his eyebrows in annoyance.

“Anyway,” said Layla, regaining control, “I think the most important part is that these people know where we are. Probably because of those trackers.”

Michael sighed. “We were never safe to begin with, were we?”

Layla glanced at him. “No, I guess we weren’t.”

The meeting table was punctuated with dead silence. Eventually, it was broken, by soft, cruel chuckling.

Riley was smiling bitterly, clenching her hands. “So, does anyone want to take a guess at what the *hell* is going on?”

“*Miles Eximius*. In English, super soldier,” mused Neon, tapping his fingers on the table. “That’s what we are, apparently.”

“Maybe the scientists developed this to fight the Japanese. That would be why Japanese snipers attacked us, right?” Daniel spoke, surprisingly composed for the situation.

“*Carpe Terrarum*,” the kitten of darkness agreed. This technology was obviously part of that war.

“But why us? What possible reason did they have to test it on a bunch of high schoolers!” Riley spat, anger filling her voice.

It was Charlotte who spoke next. “Maybe...Mr. Neil.”

The room darkened significantly, the reality sinking into their minds, festering with hatred. Layla just nodded. “Maybe,” she said.

Cole let out a low whistle. “The Japanese, the scientists, and now the helicopter guy. Gotta say, I’m flattered by all the attention.”

Neon smiled sharply. “Yeah. Looks like things are finally getting interesting.” Finally, someone who truly deserved devastation had appeared. He had a whole arsenal of potato-based weapons ready to assemble and use, including but not limited to potato-EMP, potato-cannon, and french fries.



“So, what now?” Gwen asked, staring around at them, the teenage super-soldiers, the helpless fugitives who held the fate of the world in their hands/paws/etcetera.

Michael shrugged. “I dunno. Parcheesi?”

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Surprisingly, they did just that. Michael brought out a stack of dusty board games from the closet, and soon everyone was playing in the living room. Dan hung his head as he rolled a four in Monopoly, landing him straight on the *Go to Jail* square. Michael dangled a *Get Out of Jail Free* card in front of him, grinning.

Gwen was tearing up the Parcheesi board with flawless rolls while Charlotte barely kept up, and Jinx stayed silent due to being hopelessly behind. Riley, Cole, and Emma were playing an impromptu game of blackjack, except every time Cole said “hit me,” Riley would bonk him on the head with a foam bat she’d found in her room.

Neon was draped over the couch, watching the games unfold. Layla seemed to be frighteningly good at Monopoly, cheating Michael out of his red properties in one fell swoop. The room was alive with victory and despair in equal counts, all blending into careless abandon.

The kitten fought a yawn, smacking his lips drowsily. Sleep permeated his body, begging him rest. He hadn’t slept much last night. In fact, he hadn’t slept at all.

His mind still churned with loads of information, the cortex spinning and scrapping plethoric theories. The people who’d attacked them were Japanese, and they were probably the ones who bombed the lab, too. Where were the scientists then? Dead? In hiding? If the situation

was this bad, they should have recaptured them by now. But they didn't, so...were they out of commission? And if they were, who was the person Dan saw? Maybe...a third...

He was jerked out of his thoughts by snorting laughter. Cole had keeled over, his tongue lolling out from the "killing blow". Riley and Emma were laughing at him, and he eventually admitted defeat, sitting up. Riley bonked him again as he bowed his head.

"And I knight you, Sir Cole of Losing at Blackjack," she said, hitting him once on each shoulder with the bat. Cole stood up and took a sweeping bow, prompting the girls to burst into laughter again.

Neon's eyelid twitched, and he stood up. Grabbing a chessboard from the stack of games, he walked over and thrust it in Riley's face. "This is my thrown gauntlet, Riley West," he said airily. "Do you think you can defeat me?"

"That's my line, Romeo." Riley shifted to face him as he plunked down haughtily. Emma went to sit by Dan in his jail cell, while Cole left to hype up the Parcheesi.

The kitten of darkness flung the pieces into their places, slamming his king down squarely on his end. "I look forward to this match. If you're as skilled as you think, then I won't hold back."

"Wait!" Riley held up her hand, stopping him.

Neon cocked his head. "What?"

"I don't, technically...know how to play chess."

Neon fell over. "What!"

"I'm a fast learner, I promise!"

She wasn't lying. Five minutes later, both players had completely decimated each other's forces. Neon thumbed his chin thoughtfully, mulling strategies from behind his battered armaments. Riley was huffing confidently, though she was three pieces behind.

Eventually, Neon pressed his knight forward, unexpectedly cornering Riley's king. "Check," he proclaimed.

"Right." Riley leaned close, examining the board closely before giving Neon a thumbs up. "Yep, that's definitely a legal move."

Neon practically exploded in place. "Not...that...kind...of...check," he eked out, shaking with frustration.

Riley gave him a knowing smile. "Of course it isn't." She cut back in with her bishop, taking out the knight while targeting Neon's king with the same move. "Check that," she taunted.

"I will," Neon replied, swiftly grinding his rook down the board, slamming the bishop off of the board. "Body check!"

This continued for some time, the threats piling up, each combatant keeping each other's moves in check.

"Check this out!"

"Cashing the check!"

"You might as well check out!"

"Victory, check!"

"This may be chess, but I'm the checker!" Riley cried as she blazed her queen straight into Neon's territory. At this point, Neon was pinned down, his mind and troops exhausted by the match. The only way to deflect this attack was to move his own queen into the line of fire.

Neon thought for a moment, imploring his genius mind to find a way around the lock. *Sleep*, his tired brain replied. *Sleep now. Sleep with Riley.*

He immediately punched himself in the side of the head, knocking himself to the floor. Riley gave him an odd look, and he blushed. “Never mind that,” he said, sitting back up, “anyway....” His finger flicked out, knocking his king over with a *plink*. A definitive surrender.

“Huh?” Riley backed up, surprised. “Wait, you - you’re giving up? But you didn’t even move your queen!” It was the truth. His other pieces had fought and died, but his queen had stayed right on her throne for the entire game.

Neon shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. For today, I concede to you, Riley West.” He folded his arms and nodded. “An army exists to protect a king, but a king exists to protect his queen.”

The girl rested on her elbows, grinning. “Aw. That’s sweet.”

Crimson blasted up Neon’s neck. “I wasn’t talking about you!” he shouted, the heat from his scarf suddenly doubling

Looking around, he saw that the others were crowding behind him, their games having finished while he wasn’t looking. “What’re you looking at?!” he yowled, glaring at all of them.

Cole smirked. “Nothing, nothing, just...a Kingsley and his queen.”

Neon sputtered, his face rising into molten red. “Y-you...all...are my nemesis!” He stood up, bristling, and stalked off as fast as his short legs would carry him. Still, he wasn’t quite out of earshot when the living room burst into laughter.

The hallway was dark except for the squares of light shining in from the windows, and the creaky floorboards were silent for his footsteps. Neon walked away to his room, fumbling the

tails of his scarf between his fingers. “That was exceptional, right?” he mumbled under his breath. “That was extraordinary.”

He nodded, reassuring himself. It was fantastic. The morphers needed to laugh, especially when things were this bleak. Some of them were barely holding it together as it was. It was good.

He poked his head into the bathroom, flicking the light on to look in the mirror. His complexion was flawless, his eyes a charming blue. He attempted a smile; it appeared as sinister as ever.

The kitten of disaster walked into his room, scouring it for nothing in particular. Eventually, he crawled into bed, ready to cat-nap until the Japanese blew his house down.

He closed his eyes and shrank, cat ears sprouting from his head. Fur grew on his feline form in patches of white, orange, and black, while a short tail flicked out from behind him. A fuzzy calico kitten wriggled out of the folds of Neon’s scarf. Already, he’d mastered the change.

The kitten curled up on the pillow, sleep falling like a curtain. Neon pushed his problems to the back of his mind, because for now, rest was enough. And a part of him knew that this was the last peaceful sleep he’d get in a very long time.



**Wed, Jan 12th - 8 Days After Field Trip - 15 Minutes Before M.E.L. Is Bombed**

Mr. Neil took off his glasses and rubbed his tired eyes as he waited for Dr. Liam to finish looking through the progress reports on his students. Everything was going better than expected... he just wished his superior saw it that way.

It was a clear, cool night in January, and despite the fact that Mr. Neil needed to be to Silver Creek High in less than five hours, Dr. Liam always insisted they meet in the dead hours of the night. It was less likely for others to overhear their conversations that way.

Mr. Neil's gaze wandered over to the security footage on the screen behind his superior. One by one, scientists were starting to come in for their early shifts. Mr. Neil remembered when he, too, had to come in at four o'clock in the morning to work on the chairs, and he hated it.

Finally, Dr. Liam looked up from the files and leaned back in his chair, regarding Mr. Neil carefully. "Alright, what did you want to talk about?"

"I thought we could discuss the part of our deal you've been conveniently avoiding."

"Oh? And what would that be?" Liam asked, raising an eyebrow.

“When you first came to me, I made you agree to one condition, or I said I wouldn't help you,” Mr. Neil began sternly. “And that was, if I enhanced the technology in the chairs, recruited the test subjects, and the technology worked to turn them into super soldiers, that I would be put at the top of the list to get in one of those chairs and be turned into an Animorpher myself. I've held up my end of the bargain, Liam. It's time for you to hold up yours.”

“Ah, yes... It does seem like I agreed to something along those lines. The thing is... You *didn't* hold up your end of the bargain.”

Mr. Neil shook his head. “What are you talking about?”

“The technology didn't work to turn them into Animorphers. Not all of them. Ryker rejected the panda DNA you put into him and because of that he's in a coma, which he may never come out of. And if I'm not mistaken...” Dr. Liam sifted back through the files and pulled out Gwen's. “Subject 3 hasn't shown any signs that the procedure did anything at all.”

“Ridiculous,” he spat. “It worked on everyone else. How many times do I have to tell you that it was expected for at least one of them to have rejected the treatment?” Mr. Neil sat back in his seat. “Hold on... This has nothing to do with Ryker and Gwen, does it? Not really. You're just trying to find an excuse. Well, I'm tired of playing games, Liam. We had a deal.”

Dr. Liam sighed in agitation. “You want to know the truth? I never intended to let you anywhere near those chairs after they were finished.”

“You *bastard*.” Mr. Neil shot up from his seat. “You would be nowhere without me! You'd still have a stupid chair that was only strong enough... that's only *purpose* was to put cat ears and fox tails on stupid rich people that were willing to pay to be part of a new fashion fad. I made it into something useful. Something powerful!”

“We have to be selective with who we allow to sit in the chairs,” Dr. Liam said. “And right now, those we're selecting are young recruits. Gullible, bright, strong kids whose minds and bodies are just waiting to be molded and manipulated into perfection.” Dr. Liam stood up from his seat at his desk and looked Mr. Neil in the eye. “And if I remember right, you told me teens bodies had the best chance of surviving the treatment. So what makes you think you would even be able to survive becoming an Animorper, let alone surviving the chair treatment to begin with? You want to know the total truth? The total truth is that I don't trust you with that kind of power and we can't risk you dying in the middle of the project. We need you.”

Mr. Neil curled his hands into fists. “You stab me in the back and then you tell me you need me? That's not how deals work, Liam. You need me for what you want, and I need you for what I want. So why should I continue to hold up my end if you're not planning to hold up yours? What's to keep me from walking out of here right now?”

“Well, like I said, Terek...” Dr. Liam pulled open a drawer in his desk and placed a handgun on the smooth mahogany top. “It would be a real shame if something were to happen to you before the project was over.”

Mr. Neil stared at him, jaw clenched and face red with anger. He had a bad feeling about Dr. Liam from the second he met him. He should have known that extortion wasn't below him. In this moment, he wondered if much of anything was below him.

“Don't you have some kids to be watching over?” Liam said, prompting Neil to leave. But he didn't move. He was afraid if he moved so much as a muscle that he wouldn't be able to restrain himself from attacking his superior where he stood. “I would probably check in on their trackers if I were you.”



Mr. Neil stared at him for another moment, fuming, then flung the door open and stormed out of the office without another word.

« « • • » »

He headed into M.E.L.'s most secret laboratory, where he had spent many months and sleepless nights putting his blood, sweat, and tears into those chairs. And for what?

Sitting down in front of the computer connected to the subjects trackers, he stared down at the keyboard. Furious, defeated, frustrated. In an outburst of anger, he swept his arm across the desk and sent everything on it crashing to the floor. Papers danced in the air around his head before settling softly to the cold white floor.

Mr. Neil wiped a hand across his face and turned on the screen. The eleven red dots were right where they were supposed to be; safe and secure in their own homes.

A red flashing "WARNING!" window popped up in the middle of the screen, in front of the tracker map. Concerned, Mr. Neil clicked on it, which pulled up a larger flashing window that read: *'Warning! Impending Missile Threat. Incoming Missile expected to hit in: 10 minutes and 27 seconds. Evacuate The Building Immediately!'*

Panic shot through him. Instinctively, Mr. Neil yanked the phone off of the hook and brought his finger to hover above a red button. The button that would warn the entire laboratory of the impending attack.

His finger stopped. Mr. Neil looked up at the security feed of the M.I.C. rooms on the computer next to the one he was using, then back at the 'Warning' window, which continued to

count down by the second. There was no way they would be able to get the chairs out in time. And like hell he wasn't going to get a shot at becoming an Animorpher. He created the very word. And worst of all, he was trapped now. Dr. Liam had shown his true colors, and there was only one way to get out from under that.

Slowly, he put the phone back on the hook. Dr. Liam had made his decision, and so had Mr. Neil. He knew that a dozen scientists wouldn't make it out because of him, but he didn't care. Maybe he was stooping even lower than Dr. Liam had, but he didn't care about that either. The only thing that mattered was himself, and the experiment succeeding. He stared at the number counting down for a moment, then he bolted out of the chair.

He flew into his office and downloaded all of the M.I.C. blueprints onto a data stick, then yanked a dozen files out of his cabinet titled "Animorpher Serum."

His hands shook as he loaded a tray of vials filled with blue liquid into a foam lined briefcase. He then threw it into a small cardboard box, along with the other things he had collected.

Lastly, he ripped apart one of the M.I.C. chairs, leaving pieces scattered all about the floor. Finally, he reached deep into one of the back panels and carefully pulled out a microchip the size of a dime--the key to everything--held carefully between the tips of needle nose pliers.

Checking his watch, he had three minutes to get out of there. Mr. Neil yanked the box up off the floor and hightailed it out of the laboratory. He threw it in the back seat of his car and jumped into the drivers seat, then turned on the engine and slammed his foot down on the gas.

He made good distance, the laboratory quickly shrinking in his rearview mirror. Then he saw a missile fall from the sky, right over the laboratory. Upon impact, the building exploded in

every direction, a blazing ball of fiery light. Steel was ripped apart, concrete pillars crumbled to their foundations, glass window panes blew apart in a million shards... and the Miles Eximius Laboratory was no more.

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The dark circles under Mr. Neil's eyes were even more prominent in the early morning light streaming through the windows of the diner in which he sat. His hands shook as they were wrapped around the mug of bitter coffee which he'd ordered over an hour ago, and had since gone cold.

The TV anchored to the wall a few booths down from his played a breaking news report. A woman in a red blazer and sparkingly white teeth droned on. "It is believed that an accident occurred inside the laboratory, starting the fire and that no foul play was involved..."

"Pssh..." Mr. Neil took another sip of his coffee. What a joke. They weren't just keeping the details from the public, they were burying them under a pile of lies.

"So far, twelve of the scientists inside the lab have been confirmed dead. The three who remain have been confirmed missing. Dr. Marcus Blum, Dr. Brooke Hazleton, and Dr. Neil Terek."

He abruptly turned his face away from the tv as his picture came up on the screen. He had already flipped his hood up and slid sunglasses over his nose to conceal his appearance, and just before he'd gotten to the diner, he'd shaved off his beard and removed his glasses, hoping it

would change his appearance enough to keep anyone from recognizing him, but he could never be too careful.

Just then, a man he'd never seen before slid into the other side of the booth. He looked warily around, then leaned in close and said, "Neil Terek?"

He stiffened and tightened his grip on his coffee mug. The man had almond eyes and short black hair. He was tall but thin and fit. "Who are you?" Neil asked.

"A friend. I know about the bombing, the experiment, and what roll you played in both of them."

"Who *are* you?" Neil said again, more sternly.

"My name is Hironori Cho, But you can call me Hiro."

Mr. Neil narrowed his eyes at the man. "How do you know so much?"

Hiro nodded toward the TV behind him. "Dr. Brooke Hazleton was a spy for us. She relayed everything she could find out about the experiment to us."

"Us?"

"I'm with the Japanese government. Specifically, the branch that was working to develop the blueprints for the chairs which Dr. Liam Bishop stole from us." Hiro put up his hands. "Now, before you say anything, know that I'm on your side."

"You... you didn't blow up the laboratory, did you?"

Hiro chuckled. "No, but I know who did." He looks around again, then lowers his voice. "I was one of the scientists hired to work on the original project. My superiors didn't know who stole the research until a couple weeks ago. They sent in their spy, Dr. Brooke Hazleton, to infiltrate your project and find out what you were doing with the research. When she did, my

superiors were outraged, and quite frankly, afraid. They weren't happy about the research being stolen, and they saw what you did with it as a major threat. My superiors decided the best course of action was to destroy everything and everyone having to do with the experiment."

"How are you different from your superiors?" Neil asked him.

"I thought what you did with the research was brilliant. Exciting. Revolutionary. I didn't believe that everything needed to be destroyed or that anyone needed to get hurt. The way I saw it, if we aligned our countries as allies and worked together on the project, it would produce results and be better for both of our countries than we could even imagine," he said. "Some of the scientists agreed with me, but most of them didn't, and they initially decided to go through with bombing the lab. I tried to get into the United States fast enough to warn you before it happened, but I was too late."

"So, if you were too late, then why are you here now?"

"The lab was only the beginning," Hiro warned. "Their next target is the Animorphers, and they're not going to stop until every single one of them is dead. My allies and I want to keep the Animorphers safe at all costs. None of this was their fault, and I believe in what you're trying to do. Those kids are the future, and there's nothing I believe in more than securing our future. And somehow, I have a feeling you feel the same way."

Neil stared at the man for a while, trying to decide if he could trust him. It seemed strange that he just came out of nowhere, but at the same time, Hiro seemed genuine. And honestly, Neil had suddenly found himself short on allies, and he needed someone on his side. Especially if someone, whether it be the Japanese or American government, were going to be coming after them.

"Mr. Terek, there is nothing my allies and I want more than to protect these kids," Hiro lied. "I will do everything in my power to keep them safe from my superiors... but to do that, I need your help. All of the research was destroyed in the bombing, and the kids trackers became ineffective as soon as the computer they were connected to was destroyed. You are the only one who knows these kids identities and where they are." He held out his hand. "I can't protect them without knowing what you know, and you can't protect them without my help. What do you say? Do we have a deal?"

Neil stared at the man's hand for a long while, then he set down his coffee mug and shook it.

The next night, Neil would lead Hiro to Michael's lake house and help him inject one of the Animorphers with a new tracker. "The only way we can be sure they're safe is if we know where they are," Hiro told him. "We'll say whatever we have to to make sure this one lasts, even if we're falsely threatening their families."

Something felt off about the man, Neil decided, but he couldn't put his finger on what, and he knew he needed allies. And if there was one thing he cared about nearly as much as himself, it was seeing the experiment succeed. Too much had been put into it to have it fail now. Hiro's story checked out, in his mind, and he found himself ignoring that feeling and trusting the man more and more with each passing hour.

He did not suspect that Hiro's story of disagreeing with his superiors was a lie, or that the bombing of the lab had actually been Hiro's idea to begin with.

And he certainly didn't notice that, as he watched his student, Emma Tanner, flee from them into the woods, terrified and cold, that Hiro was texting the coordinates of the cabin to the

very superiors he claimed to betray... or that they planned to send assassins into the lake house that night to take them out, one by one.



Nikko gulped before walking into his superior's tent, knowing that the news he bore would depress him even more than he was already.

"Captain?" he said, popping his head into the tent. "May I come in?"

Captain Tanaka Koto, who had been placed in charge of eliminating the Animorphers, raised his pale face and replied, "Yes, fine. What is it, lieutenant?"

Nikko entered and took a deep breath before saying, "Sir, Sugai has gone missing. I've got the men searching for him, but...I doubt we will, if his disappearance is anything like the others."

The Captain frowned mournfully and said, "That's the third gone this week." before grabbing a bottle off his desk before putting it to his mouth and gulping.

Nikko looked with concern at the depressed man and said, "Don't you think that's enough sake for today, sir? You're on your fifth bottle now."

The Captain stroked his beard and mustache thoughtfully before replying, "No, boy, I don't. I have a much stronger stomach than yours, kid. I can take it. Plus, I need the stuff to numb how badly my superiors are gonna berate me about this."



Nikko sighed at that. "May I leave, sir?" he asked. The Captain nodded as he started to open another bottle, and Nikko left the tent.

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Nikko wandered around the camp observing things, and ignoring hostile looks from the soldiers under his command. He knew they resented him for his post at the early age of seventeen, and knew exactly why he had gotten it; his family connections.

Nikko's father, Nikko Kasumi, had been a General during World War III and had made great gains against the American Armies with his troops. His father now worked as a military adviser to the Japanese Government, and Nikko had no doubt been promoted by an official to win favor with his powerful father.

Nikko sighed as he thought about this. He only wished that he could prove himself to the soldiers so that they would stop treating him with hostility. However, he pushed these thoughts to the side as he noticed Dr.Brooke Hazelton at the edge of the camp, talking to someone.

The man's face was turned away from him, so Nikko couldn't see him, but Nikko's instincts and training told him something was wrong. Dr.Hazelton seemed to be talking to him softly, and Nikko started walking towards her to find out what was happening.

Noticing Nikko's approach, Brooke said something to the man, and he ran into the forest.

"Hello, lieutenant." said the young scientist with a smile. "How may I help you?"

Nikko's eyes bore into her as he asked, "Who was that man?"

She replied, "Oh, one of our scouts. I was telling him to stay below the top branches of the trees to make sure that he's not spotted by the flying Animorphers."

Nikko observed her carefully, and felt instantly that she was hiding something. He was about to start questioning her when a man ran up to them and took a breath before saying, "Sir, the Captain wants you. He says to come fast. You too, Dr. Hazelton."

Nikko nodded. His instincts screamed that the Doctor was hiding something, but he decided to let things lie...for now.

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Nikko's heart rose as he read the text on the Captain's phone. He breathed deeply as he handed it to Dr. Hazelton. "This is...stupendous!" he exclaimed.

The Captain looked at him, his face bearing the same expression. "Yes." he said, "Now we can end this once and for all! Not to mention that this just might get my superiors off my back about the missing men."

Brooke handed the phone back to the Commander and grabbed Nikko's arm. "This is wonderful!" she said, smiling flirtatiously at him. "Why don't we go and celebrate in my tent? I have some wine that I've been saving for just this occasion!"

Nikko glanced at her warily. She had been making advances towards him ever since she had joined the camp, him being the closest to her age there (him being less than two years her junior, and the rest being grizzled and much older veterans) and rather good looking. And truth be told, Nikko was interested in her, as she was intelligent and quite attractive.

However, Nikko had decided it was in his best interests to keep his distance to avoid his reputation with the men declining even further. So he was relieved when the Captain said with a grin, "As much as I'm sure that the lieutenant would enjoy that, Doctor, he will be busy. I have some new orders for him."

At that, Brooke frowned. Nikko smiled apologetically at her as he said, "Sorry, Dr.Hazelton. Perhaps another time?"

Brooke smiled and replied, "Of course, lieutenant. For you, any time." before walking out of the tent.

Captain Tanaka smiled knowingly at the lieutenant after the Doctor had left, and said, "Anything you'd like to tell me about you and her, boy?"

Nikko blushed and replied, "No, sir. Nothing to tell."

The Captain chuckled and replied, "Very well, boy. I won't pry into your private life. In any case, I have a job for you to do."

Nikko nodded and said, "Yes, sir. I'm ready."

The Captain smiled. "Good! I want you to lead a team of assassins into the Animorphers' house and eliminate them. You may pick any two men from our section to assist you."

Nikko felt as if a cold hand had gripped his heart at that. "Sir.." he croaked. "Sir, you know I'd do almost anything for Mother Japan, but...they're kids, and even younger than me!"

Th Captain slammed his hand on the desk angrily. "They're Americans!" he yelled. "And they'll be our doom i we don't take them out!"

Nikko nodded rapidly and replied, "Yes, sir, I understand but...I've never killed before! How could I get the stomach to kill kids?"

The Captain calmed down at that and looked at Nikko sympathetically before saying, "I understand your hesitance, lieutenant. But don't think of them as kids. think of them as what they actually are; Weapons. Have you forgotten what happened two mere decades ago? They USA attacked *our* side. They started a war which ravaged our country and our allies. And those hostilities have never ended. There's a reason why the period in which we live is called the Second Cold War! And they will do worse if they manage to use the Animorphers for their own ends. So, for the sake of our motherland, do it."

Nikko swallowed and replied, "But sir, why me? There are plenty of veterans in camp who would be happy to lead this mission."

The Captain sighed before saying, "I'm making you do this because this is your chance to prove yourself to the men. This is your chance to get them to show you some respect. Don't mess it up. Now, you are dismissed."

Nikko nodded. He felt scared, but he steeled himself for what was to come. "I won't fail you, sir." he said resolutely before striding out of the tent to prepare to attack the Animorphers.



The open window lets the cool mountain breeze through its opening, tossing the curtains lazily around. Rolling onto my side, I look over at Charlotte sleeping soundly in the bed on the other side of the room. So not fair. She's the biggest worrier of the group and she's sleeping like there's not a concern in the world. And here I am, staring at the ceiling, wide awake and have been for hours. I've never slept well under stress.

I sigh in agitation as I flop back over to the other side. I just can't get comfortable. Looking down at the blue glow of the moon reflecting onto the polished floorboards of the bedroom, I catch the tail end of a shadow flicker at the corner of the light.

I figure it's probably a bird, but with everything going on, we really shouldn't assume anything. So, I swing my legs out of bed and step up to the window.

Nothing's there.

I tug on the collar of the jumpsuit under my shirt and pull the window closed, then slip back into bed. Just as I feel myself finally start to drift off, the door slowly creaks open. Through half closed lids, I watch a figure emerge. Face covered and dressed in black, a rifle is strapped to his back and a silenced pistol is held tightly in his hands.

My heart starts to pound. *Oh, god. Oh, god. Oh, god. We're screwed.*

I don't move, don't give any indication that I'm awake. The figure creeps toward me, no louder than a mouse. He comes to hover over me at my bed side, and raises the gun up to aim it at my head.

In one fluid motion, I kick my leg out and hit his hand, knocking the gun out of his grasp. He staggers back and lets out a grunt of surprise. I'm on my feet before he can even process what's happening and I shove my foot into his chest, sending him crashing into the wall. He hits a picture frame and they both fall to the ground, one with a soft thud, the other with a loud shatter.

"Layla?" Charlotte says, still half asleep. She prompts herself up on an elbow and squints at me in the dim light, her glasses still on the end table.

"Charlotte, run! Get out of here. Wake everyone up."

"What's going--"

I grab her glasses and throw them at her. She barely catches them and juggles them in her arms for a few moments before getting a grasp on them and sliding them over her nose. Her eyes shoot open. "Oh my god!"

The man struggles back to his feet. "Charlotte. Run. Now." She bolts from the room just as he pulls a ten inch blade from his belt. He lashes it at me, and I just barely dodge the swipes, taking a step back and ducking my head backwards each time. Finally, I hit the edge of the bed and lose my balance, falling back onto it. He jabs the knife toward me and I roll out of its line of attack just in time, sending it plunging into the mattress. I shove him backwards with my feet again and flip over to the other side of the bed, away from him. Then I crawl as quickly as I can

to get behind the second mattress, putting myself between the bed and the far wall, and as far away from him as possible.

He grunts angrily and swings his rifle off of his shoulder into his hands, then lets loose. I duck down behind the bed and bullets explode into the wall behind me, sending dust and drywall raining down on top of me. The mattress bursts apart, sending feathers flying in every direction.

Then it stops and everything is completely silent. My heart pounds so hard I think he *must* be able to hear it. How could he not? It's like a percussion of sonic booms.

Slow footsteps start toward me, the floorboards creaking under the man's weight with each step. I'm trapped, and cornered. There's only one thing I can do.

Gosh, I hate doing the thing.

I yank my teeshirt off to expose the special jumpsuit, then begin shrinking. Tan fur spreads across my arms, and my fingers shrink back into my hands. The world grows around me at the same time the colors of it dull to near black-and-white.

With tiny fox paws, I scurry under the bed, my ears brushing the underside of the mattress, then under the end table between them. The man abruptly shoves the first bed with his foot, then takes a couple steps and shoves the second, which would have pinned me against the wall, had I not moved.

I don't wait to see what happens. I run under the first bed and scurry out the door just as he realizes I've disappeared, and starts spitting out curses in Japanese.

Running down the hall, towards the stairs, I gradually morph back into my human form. Someone practically runs into me when I get there and I grab them to see that it's Charlotte, in a complete and total tizzy, on the edge of tears. "I can't find him! I can't find Michael!"

"Calm down! We'll find him." Just then, someone on a rope crashes feet first through the large window beside the staircase sending shards of glass flying towards us. We both scream. Then out of nowhere, the guy is hit with a bullet square in the chest. His chevalier lining catches it, but the impact is strong enough to knock him back out the window.

We whirl around to see a third guy standing down the hallway. He's different from the others. He's not Japanese, and while our attackers are decked out in black tactical uniforms, complete with bulletproof vests and a special mask that only covers the bottom half of their faces. This guy wears camouflage pants and a slick grey jacket. A black ski mask and sunglasses conceal his face, and he holds a gun in his hand, but he doesn't shoot us.

He holds something like a walkie talkie up to his mouth. "Get out of here," he says in a deep, mechanical-like voice. The walkie-talkie must change his voice. "There's a second car parked next to the shed. Take these keys..." He pulls car keys out of his pocket and tossing them our way. I catch them, totally bewildered. Who *is* that?

"Go!" he yells again. Then my original attacker charges out of the bedroom behind him and he whirls around only to have the butt of the Japanese guy's rifle slammed into the side of his face, and he goes down.

"Run... Run!" I shove my hands into Charlotte's back and she stumbles forward, towards the stairs.

Just as we reach the bottom, two guys burst out of the swinging kitchen door, one tackling the other and sending them both crashing into the wooden coffee table. The guy on top is in a tactical uniform, and the guy struggling under him... is Michael.



Charlotte squeaks in surprise next to me, but before either of us can react, Neon shoves his way between us from behind and yells, "Michael, get down!" Then he lifts up a potato cannon that's nearly bigger than he is and launches a potato at the guy, knocking him off of Michael.

Michael gets up fast and bolts away, just before the potato explodes in a giant cloud of smoke, completely hiding the guy from view. Michael takes Charlotte's hand and they head for the front door. "What is it with you and potatoes?" I yell.

Neon shakes his head. "Where's Riley?"

"Here!" she calls from the top of the stairs. She hurries down with Emma. Cole and Gwen fly down right behind them, him trying and failing to get his arm in the second sleeve of his jacket. Near the bottom, he jumps over the railing and lands on the other side, then shoves his feet into his sneakers.

"Dammit, Neon!" he yells. "Toothpaste! Again?!"

Dan flings the front door open from the outside. "Come on! Michael and Charlotte are outside with the car!"

Everyone heads for the door. I'm the last one out, the door closing just before I get there. Just as I place my hand on the handle, I hear a round being racked into the chamber of a gun behind me.

"Turn around slowly," a voice said, strong with a Japanese accent.

I do as he says, putting my hands up. A man stands there, surprisingly young. A bullet is wedged in the center of his bulletproof vest; this is the guy that fell out the window.

I try to stay calm... to keep my hands from shaking. And I do a better job at it than he does. We both stand, completely frozen. Me with my hands up, him pointing a gun at me. What is he waiting for?

"Who are you?" I ask. "Why do you want to kill us?"

"Shut up! Just, shut up!" His breathing becomes quicker, his hands shaking more vigorously. He shakes his head and repositions himself.

Just as I begin to wonder if he's ever killed someone before, and think that he won't be able to kill me, he's tackled from the side in a flash of orange fur. The gun goes flying from his hand and his head knocks against the floor, leaving him unconscious. The tiger looks at me, and although I know it's Jinx, it's still startling to see up close. The last time I saw him as a tiger, he tried to eat me.

Then the yellow glow of his eyes fades and he morphs back into human form, the skintight jumpsuit making his muscular frame look even more distinct than usual. "Thanks," I say.

"No problem," he replies.

Michael honks the horn outside and yells, "Let's go!" And just as the assassin up stairs staggers to the railing and Michael's attacker starts to come to, Jinx and I bolt out the front door.

Michael, Charlotte, Cole, Dan, and Gwen are already inside the car. "We're not all going to fit and we don't have time to figure out riding arrangements like we did the first time," Riley says.

I hold up the keys. "There's another car. I'll explain later." I run around to the back of the shed and find a black SUV parked there. I throw the keys to Jinx and he gets in the drivers seat. Riley takes shotgun and I jump in the back with Emma and Neon.

Jinx backs the car out, then slams on the gas, leaving the lake house behind us and following closely behind Michael as we head towards the main road. "Who was *that*?" Riley asks, looking directly at Jinx as if he knows.

"Sorry, I forgot to ask them when I was trying to keep from getting killed!" he exclaims.

Neon puts a piece of bubblegum in his mouth and starts chewing it.

Riley shakes her head and looks in the rearview mirror. "Well, who was the other guy?"

"All I know is he saved Charlotte and my lives and he gave me the keys to this car," I say.  
"I... I think he was protecting us."

Neon blows a bubble with his gum and it *pops!*

"What *I* want to know," Jinx buts in, "is how they found us. We all took our trackers out, right?"

Emma stiffens next to me. "Emma, you took yours out, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course! As soon as I got back," she says, avoiding looking at me. My eyes wander down to a bandage wrapped around her arm.

"What happened?"

"Oh, this? I, ah... scratched it on a tree branch. I'm fine." She lets out a nervous chuckle, and I'm not convinced, but I leave it be for now.

Neon blows another bubble. *Pop!*

"So, what happens now?" Jinx asks, growing calmer the further we get from the lake house.

"I think we need to be a lot more careful from now on," Riley says. "I don't think we should ever be alone. Not until we have a better idea of what's happening. We should go everywhere in pairs, no matter what."

*Pop!*

"I don't know about that, Riley." Emma shrugs. "I mean, won't that just put more people in danger at the same time? If we split up, they'll have a harder time tracking you gu- Us. A harder time tracking *us*."

*Pop!*

"I don't know, I think Riley has a point," I say. "We're more vulnerable when we're alone."

*Pop!*

I've had it. "I swear to god, Neon! If you pop another bubble, I'm going to strangle you with your potato launcher!"

The color drains from his face. He swallows it.

"How far should we take this?" Riley asks. "Should we stop going to school? Because I don't know how I'm going to explain that to my parents."

"No, that'll only draw more attention to ourselves," Jinx says. "We have to act like nothing is going on. We don't know how much those guys know about us. For all we know, they tracked our trackers there before we removed them and they don't even know who we are. We need to blend in, no matter what."

"What about Neon?" Emma asks. "He got expelled, remember?"

Riley looks over her shoulder at us. "I've got an idea for that."



Nikko woke up to find that he was lying on the floor of the lodge where the Animorphers were staying at. In a flash, he remembered everything that had happened, including, all too well, the tiger that had slammed into him. Not to mention that he had failed to kill an Animorpher, even when he had the chance. he cursed himself for that.

Nikko rubbed the sore bump on his head from where he had hit the ground and stood up, and a small piece of paper fluttered down from where it had lain on his chest.

Frowning, Nikko bent down and picked it up. On it were scrawled a few words which read: Let this be a lesson to all who cross the protectors of peace.

Nikko considered the paper as he walked out the door, before gasping as he saw what was there.

The bodies of his two comrades lay on the ground outside the door. One had a bullet wound to the head, and lay senseless, his staring out lifelessly. The other had taken a bullet to the stomach and lay with his eyes closed.

As Nikko watched, the man with the stomach wound gave a cry of pain and stirred to life. Nikko gave a sigh of relief as he went to the man's side, and tore a piece off the shirt he wore under his armor to bind the man's wound.

While he did so, the man whispered to him, "He came...too fast...flash and then gone...couldn't stop him."

Nikko nodded to the man several times before helping him to stand and putting the man's arm around his shoulder so that Nikko could bear the brunt of his weight. They then stumbled into the forest, towards the camp.

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Nikko and the man (who he remembered was named Suto) were stumbling along at an uneven pace through the forest, when Nikko thought he saw a grey flash out of the corner of his eye. At once, Nikko grabbed out his silencer pistol and pointed it around him.

Then he saw it again and Nikko cried out, "Show yourself!"

"I thought the tiger had killed you." said a soft voice with a deadly edge, ignoring Nikko's demand.

"And I thought that I had finished off your friend. Well, now I have to complete the job."

Nikko felt frightened and his heart beat accelerated. "What do you want?" he cried out, trying to keep the fear out of his voice. "You saved the Animorphers already, why can't you just let us be?"

"Oh, I wish I could." said the voice wistfully, and Nikko got the sense that he really meant it.

"But orders are orders," he continued, "And I was ordered to kill you all to teach a lesson to the breakers of peace. So, as much as I wish I didn't have to, I'm going to have to finish you off."

Then Nikko heard the unmistakable sound of a gun being prepped to fire and grabbed Suto and pulled him behind a tree as the attacker started firing rapidly. A few bullets clanged off Nikko's Kevlar vest before he managed to take cover, his blood pumping rapidly.

Bits of bark went flying from the trees around him as Nikko tried to keep himself covered as much as possible.

Then, all of a sudden, the firing stopped, and Nikko heard the sound of a gun chamber being opened to reload, but Nikko didn't let him finish.

He grabbed his rifle from his shoulder, and leaped out from behind the tree. He still couldn't see his mysterious attacker, but while he had been firing at them, he had listened and now had a good sense at where he was.

He lifted his rifle and fired at the spot where he thought the shots had been coming from and was rewarded with a cry of surprise as his attacker dropped down from the trees to save himself.

Now, finally he could see the masked figure with a grey jacket. He tried to load his weapon but Nikko wouldn't let him, firing rapidly in his direction. His hand was shaking, so bullets were spraying everywhere, and not hitting his target, but it was enough to deter his opponent.

Suddenly, he got a lucky shot, and a bullet grazed his enemy's right arm, causing him to drop his pistol with a cry of pain. At once, Nikko took advantage of the situation and charged forward, firing continuously, forcing his attacker to flee through the forest.

Nikko picked up his enemy's gun and went back to where Suto was slumped against a tree, staring wide eyed at him.

"That...was amazing." he muttered, stunned.

Nikko nodded his thanks, and supported Suto once more so their journey back to camp could continue.

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Nikko stumbled into camp with Suto, and immediately they were surrounded by people asking questions.

"What happened?" asked one.

Suto replied, "This guy saved my life. He pulled me all the way through the woods and sent a Protectorate agent running." before gasping for breath, that one sentence seeming to have exhausted him

"Really, this guy?" asked another incredulously, and Suto nodded, causing a number of other soldiers too murmur excitedly and look at Nikko with surprise and amazement, and even some with a little respect.

As Suto was led away by medics, Captain Tanaka Koto walked up with a fearful look on his face.

"I take it the mission failed?" he asked warily.

Nikko looked back sadly at his Captain and replied, "Yes, sir, I'm sorry but it did. We were attacked out of nowhere by a Protectorate agent, who killed my other soldier."

At that, the Captain's face crumpled in sorrow, showing his sadness at the loss of his men, not to mention for the damage to his reputation.

"Then I'm doomed." the Captain muttered listlessly.

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Nikko walked into the board room with fear and trepidation beside his Captain. Once in, he blinked at the bright lights. The room was small but functional, entirely done in white marble.

Right in front of them was a crescent table on a low platform, set so that anyone sitting there would be able to look at where they were standing now with ease.

Sitting along the table were five people in swivel chairs. In the middle was Yasutake Kenishi, head of the Japanese Secret service. He was dressed in suit, his slightly receding black hair styled neatly as his piercing grey eyes bore down at his subordinates.

The other four were distinguished military commanders, tacticians and spies, who had been selected by the Government to help Yasutake head the service.

"Well," said Yasutake, his glare focused on the Captain. "We shall begin."

One of the other board members brought out a file and placed it on the desk in front of Yasutake. Then Yasutake slammed his hand on the file, and narrowed his eyes at the Captain before saying, "We are not impressed with your performance, Captain Tanaka Koto."

The Captain turned his face down in shame as Yasutake continued. "You sent an *inexperienced novice* to lead a vitally important mission, when you had your pick of veterans to choose from. If you had had a more experienced man to lead the mission, this might not have even happened! Not to mention that three men went missing under your command, and one was found dead! That's *four* lost in one week, Captain. Given your record, we expected much more from you."

As Yasutake continued to scold his Captain, Nikko felt he had to speak up. "It wasn't his fault!" he said, "I failed the mission. It's on me."

Yasutake turned to the lieutenant, who withered under his gaze. "Your support for your commander is admirable, lieutenant." he said, "But you are not at all experienced, and Tanaka should have thought twice before sending you."

Nikko replied pleadingly, "He was just trying to give me a chance to prove myself to the men, sir."

"It's alright, Nikko." said the Captain resignedly. "I'll accept my fate."

Yasutake nodded and turned back towards the Captain, and said, "Captain, you allowed sentiment to come in the way of your mission. Now, you are one year away from mandatory retirement. However, we feel that you are growing too sentimental with age to continue your duties."

At that, Tanaka looked up in shock and started, saying, "But sir, I-" before he was cut off by Yasutake.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but our decision is final!" he snapped. "You are, as of now, retired from active service. You will stay here to serve as a military and tactical advisor, and nothing

more. As such, your salary will be cut. However, given your previous good record, your pension will remain unchanged. Is that understood?"

The former Captain nodded listlessly at that. Then, Yasutake turned to Nikko. "Under normal circumstances," he started, "You, as lieutenant would be promoted to fill your superior's post. However, given your lack of experience, we have seen fit to keep you where you are. We have called for a replacement from Japan, and he will be here within a month. However, until then, you will be Acting Captain. You may select your own acting lieutenant from your men. However, we want you to get started on the task we have for you first, which is that we want at least one Animorpher dead within a month. Is that understood?"

Nikko nodded listlessly, still shocked at what his strong, stern commander had been reduced to.

Yasutake then nodded, and said, "Good. Then you are dismissed. Now, leave us to fill in Tanaka on his new duties."

Nikko then saluted and left the room, his heart sinking with sorrow for his old Captain.

~~~~~

Nikko stared desultorily into his cup of coffee as he thought over the events of the day while sitting in the soldiers' cafeteria. His captain had been removed from office, which Nikko felt he hadn't deserved.

His Captain had been the only one who had sympathized with Nikko, and understood that he was just a kid, who had been thrust far out of his element. And now he was gone.

*Not to mention that I'm now in charge of the Hunting Section.* he thought with a frown. He knew that now he had to accomplish the mission, or be sent back to his father in disgrace. And he couldn't bear to have his father disappointed in him. Plus, he also had to do justice to his Captain, and do it for him. *I won't hesitate this time.* he promised himself angrily.

Japanese folk songs played from the speakers, annoying Nikko. He knew that the Government back in Japan had specifically ordered that music to be played as they thought it inspired patriotism in their spies and soldiers overseas, but they weren't even good tunes, and Nikko felt that playing the same tunes over and over again was just irritating.

To distract himself, Nikko turned to look out the window he was sitting next to. The Secret Service Headquarters was on the edge of town, and the only tall building amidst dozens of two and three story structures.

It was disguised as an ordinary office building, with hired American mercenaries (with little to no sense of patriotism besides that to their own greed) as guards and receptionists. Also, most people lived in the building, so people didn't notice huge numbers of Asians leaving the building every day, and no non-agent was allowed to enter the building.

The window Nikko was looking through gave a good view of the city and the forest on the other side, and Nikko scanned it with boredom until he heard a particular song being played on the speakers, and sat up, listening intently.

The song was of the sakura blossoms floating away on the wind, and the beautiful butterflies and fairies and that flew among them, and the song transported Nikko back to the day he left Japan.

*Nikko breathed in the scent of the sakura trees that lined the park path he was walking along. Occasionally he would turn to the girl next to him and make a joke, and she would laugh, lighting up the world around her. Eventually, they came to the end of the path, where a car was waiting. In the background, a woman on the street side sang an old folk song, of the sakura blossoms and the beautiful creatures that flew among them*

*Nikko turned to his long time girlfriend, whose lip was trembling as she knew what was about to happen, but still hated it.*

*"Chiyo...I'm going to miss you" he whispered, using her familiar name, instead of her first name, as people were spoke to generally in Japan.*

*"Takumi..." she whispered back, her eyes filling up with tears, and pulled his face down to kiss her, and they held there for a few moments before braking apart.*

*Her hand went down to his arm, where she gripped tighter. "Why do you have to leave?"*

*Takumi smiled sadly at her as he replied, "You know, Chiyo...I have to do my duty to our country.*

*Chiyo hugged Nikko tightly and whispered, "I know. And I also know that your parents pushed you to do this."*

*Nikko smiled wider at that, "Yeah, that too." he said.*

*"I'll miss you." she whispered to him. "And when you get back, I'll be waiting for you."*

*"Don't." Nikko replied, straightening up.*

*"What?" asked Chiyo confusedly.*

*"You know how I feel about you, right?" asked Nikko.*

*"Yeah..." replied Chiyo, frowning.*

*"Well, I don't want to keep you waiting for me as I go across the world to the enemy's home for God knows how long. You deserve better."*

*"What are you saying?" said Chiyo, crying now.*

*"I think you know." replied Nikko, looking in her eyes. "It would be unfair to you to keep you attached to me. I think it would be best, now that I'm leaving, for us to separate. And I think you knew that this was going to happen."*

*Chiyo turned her face down at that, and said, "Yeah, I knew it was hopeless to continue our relationship like this...I just hate it when good things end."*

*Nikko looked sadly at her. "You'll always be my friend, Chiyo. No matter what happens."*

*Chiyo nodded and replied, "Of course. And when you get back-and you will come back, I'm not hearing anything to the contrary-get back in touch. We could get a meal together, but as friends." and then she smiled mischievously and said, "And maybe, who knows? Anything could happen...even us getting back together."*

*Nikko smiled back and said, "Maybe." and then embraced her before saying his last goodbye and walking towards the car. Right before he got in, he dropped a coin at the feet of the woman who was singing the folk song.*

*"You okay, sir?" asked the driver (an old driver for the family, who had grown close to them ) with concern he looked at Nikko's sad face.*

*"Yeah, I'm fine." replied Nikko, and he turned his face down so the man couldn't see that he was crying.*

Niko shook himself out of the memory and realized that his eyes were starting to well with tears. He quickly blinked to get rid of them, and walked away to prevent any involuntary displays of emotion from ruining his newly forged reputation with the men in his section.

Once he was out of the room, Nikko's thoughts turned back (or rather, he turned his thoughts back) to the task at hand, which he knew he had to accomplish to do his duty to his country: Killing the Animorphers, any way possible. He knew it was the only way to save his country from destruction.

"I will not fail." he muttered to himself, as he marched off to his quarters.





*Its strange how only a few days can change everything.*

*Everything feels different now that we are back.*

We weren't gone that long, but it's all strange now. The way people maneuver through the halls, the way people whisper and laugh at their lockers, the looks teachers give students who pass by, but most of all the air feels different. School was always suffocating, but not like this. With every step I take down the hallway I feel like the tile is cracking under my feet. Like, at any second I am gonna fall through the floor right into a cage.

For most of our first day back I have avoided pretty much everyone. I know I shouldn't throw up red flags like this, and I know it's selfish but I can't help it. Hiding is what I've always done in the midst of fear and confusion. When Riley tried walking with me this morning, I turned away pretending I left something in my locker. Then, Gwen asked me to hang out after school and I lied to her telling her I had a study session with Dan.

*I never lie to her.*

I skipped lunch today, and went to the music room by myself. Then, in science (with our unnerving new substitute) even Dan tried to ask me how I was doing, but I just kept my head

down and kept my answers short. I couldn't seem to look at him. Like, if he looked in my eyes he would know the truth. He would know that I'm trapped between my friends lives, and the barrel of a damn gun. I have no intention of letting my friends get killed. Even if that means I hurt them all in the process.

I know questions will start being asked soon, but the screaming in my gut pushes that thought aside for now. For now I have to do my best to do this on my own.

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On my way home I couldn't stop fidgeting with a small piece of string that came off my sweater that day. I would wrap it once...twice...a dozen more times around my finger until it would turn purple. Then, slowly I would unwrap the string letting the blood flow back into the tip of my index finger. Even though the weather was warm and humid I still kept my arm and bandaged covered.

After a few blocks I had this strange feeling I was being watched from the nearby brush. Without thinking I grabbed a large rock by the sidewalk and threw it into the nearby bushes. I heard a soft whining sound, and the leaves began to rustle. A small golden fox appeared from the brush, and transformed into a face I knew quite well.

*Layla.*

“Were- Were you following me?” I ask suspiciously.

“Psh! Of course not.” She brushes a strand of hair out of her face. “I uh- I was just trying to get home. I am faster as a fox you know.” She laughs trying to play off the fact she had been caught.

“I thought you had a car?”

“Cole asked if he could borrow it for some reason today. Something about taking Riley to this cool music shop across town.”

“Oh. Alright. I guess I'll see you around then.” I start off again when she interrupts me.

“Look Emma. If there is something you need to talk about...you know we are all here for you. I mean you're not exactly alone in all this craziness. I admit the first day back was hard, but if we don't stick together then it's going to get harder...” She assures. I sigh turning back to face her.

“Layla...”

*I knew I would regret this the moment I said it.*

“Please just...Leave me alone. I never asked for this. I don't want this. I don't want to be apart of this! I don't care whatever club you think we all are apart of, but I'm done getting dragged into all this. I'm done with all of you. Now leave me alone!” Layla looked at me in confusion and shock.

“I don't buy that stupid speech for a second, and you know it. I know something else is going on here and I don't intend to let it go. But fine Emma. If you want to choose to be alone for the rest of your life then fine. If you honestly think that shoving people away for the rest of your life is gonna protect you then you are wrong! We are all apart of this together. It's not like any of

us chose this. It's not like you're going through harder stuff than we are! We have to stick together to make it through this, and you know that...right?"

"Yes Layla I know. This experiment has bonded us all together! And yes, it has made us some kind of screwed up misfit family. And you know what? You do whatever you can to protect your family, and that's what I'm doing. Now like I said. Leave me alone!" I felt myself beginning to cry, and for once I didn't care if anyone saw. I turned away from her once more, and she grabbed for my arm. I winced as she touched the still tender incision. I ripped my arm from her grasp, and she stared at me with a still confused but newfound understanding.

"What are you so afraid of?" She asks.

"What am I not afraid of?" I walk off ignoring her completely. She returns the favor, and doesn't come after me.

*Questions came a lot sooner than I expected, and questions come with consequences.*



I woke to the sound of someone banging on my door. My eyes shot open and I lay rigidly beneath my covers. The person rattled the doorknob and continued banging. I jumped out of bed, glancing around my room for some sort of weapon. Unless I could somehow subdue whoever was out there with a few stray pieces of clothing and a dull pencil, there was nothing. I heard whoever was out there growl softly. My eyes flicked to the window.

*Okay. Climb down the tree outside my window, then make a break for it. Unless they're waiting outside too...*

"Riley, for the love of Pete! *Open the door!*" Janey's voice shouted through the woodwork. I let out the breath I had been holding, then unlocked my door and poked my head out.

"Who's Pete? Does Cameron know you're cheating on him?" I cocked an eyebrow and Janey scowled at me.

"I've been out there for ten whole minutes. Since when do you sleep with your door locked?"

*Since I nearly got killed. Twice.*

"Maybe I just don't want you barging into my room every morning." I strolled over to my dresser and began digging through them. I heard Janey sigh and I imagined her rolling her eyes at me.

"Well, Mom's in bed with a headache, so I'll be driving you."

"No, you won't be." I hung my clothes over my shoulder and pushed passed Janey and into the hall. "I'm walking over with a friend this time."

"Emma?"

"No, she said she was driving over with Gwen or something. You haven't met this friend." I shrug, closing the bathroom door behind me. I zipped through my morning routine, and paused to give my rabbit a quick pat before hoisting my backpack over my shoulder. I sat near the window, opening my journal on my lap and beginning to write, pausing every so often to glance out the window. Cole came strolling down my walkway a couple minutes later. I waved at him. Janey glanced over from where she was sitting and caught a glimpse of Cole out the window. She raised her eyebrows at me. I scowled.

"He's just a friend." Janey smirked.

"Uh-huh."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm leaving. I'll be walking back again, so you don't have to pick me up." Janey's smirk widened into a smile.

I sighed a little, feeling my face heat up a little. "*He's just a friend*, alright?!" I opened the door, and hopped down the steps of my porch. Cole cocked an eyebrow.

"Your face is red." He pointed out. I hit him lightly on the arm with my journal, a small smile tugging at my lips.

"Don't flatter yourself." I strolled back over to my porch, where I could just barely see two blue eyes glinting in the shadows underneath. I knelt down and set my backpack down beside me, pausing to glance up. No one could see me from the window. I unzipped a side pocket on my bag. Kitten Neon darted from under the porch and jumped in, wriggling down to the bottom and looking up at me. I tousled his fur good naturedly and Neon batted my hand away. Chuckling a bit, I zipped the pocket closed and stood again, slinging the bag back onto my back and strolling down to the sidewalk where Cole was waiting.

"So you're really gonna haul the squirt around like that?"

I shrugged. "Why not. I mean, he's small enough to fit in your hand. And his kitten for is even smaller."

A mewl of protest erupted from the pocket. I laughed.

"Oh don't you even start. If I'm gonna be dragging your fuzzy little tail around everywhere, I'm at least going to get a good laugh out of it."

Cole and I walked the rest of the way to school together, talking and joking back and forth. Cole occasionally "accidentally" bumped into my bag until I pushed him off. By the time we reached Silver Creek High, we were racing each other down the sidewalk. Cole burst through the doors first, then waited as I caught up, grinning and breathless.

"Told you I'd get here first." He smirked "Even with you jumping on my back at the beginning."

"Hey. That was once. Didn't mean you had to cheat like there was no tomorrow." I panted, still smiling. I straightened, stretching my stiff muscles. "Anyways, we should probably get to rehearsal. The other guys will be there already by now."

...

The rest of the day passed like any normal day would, but I still felt like something was off. Like there was someone watching me. Which, face it, there probably was. I had to resist the urge to jump when someone bumped into me in the hall. And as if that wasn't enough, Emma was acting strange too. More on guard than usual.

Around the end of first period, I spotted her in the hall. I called her and she startled a little.

"Oh...hey there." She mumbled when she saw me.

"Hi! Sorry about that, I didn't mean to startle you." I fell into step beside her. "You doing alright? No doubt we'll all have to play a bit of catch up after disappearing like that."

*Like I have room to talk...I've been gone all week.*

Emma shifted a little as she walked, avoiding my eyes. "Yeah, I'll be fine. I--I think I may have left my book in my locker. Don't wait for me, okay? I'll see you in class."

She quickly turned away, and scurried down the hall. I stood there, pressing my eyebrows down as I watched her.

*She's not fine. Not fine at all.*





The bell at the top of the door jingles as Riley and I push our way into the music store. Guitars of all shapes and colors line the walls, rows of record bins cut a line through the middle of the store, and pianos and drum sets are set up in the various dusty corners or anywhere there is space for them, really. Old, eclectic, family run.

"So, how'd you find this place?" Riley asks, looking around.

"Stumbled across it a couple days after I got into town. The strings on my guitar were pretty much shot when I joined Stint with Fiction, so I had to get some new ones."

Riley lights up when she sees a sleek black piano sitting by the front windows. "Oh, cool! They have pianos."

"Do you play?" I ask.

"Psh... *Do I play.*" She gives me a mischievous side glance, then hurries over to the piano and sits down on the bench. "Any requests?"

"Stairway to Heaven."

"Ugghh..." Riley's head falls back. "Anything but that."

"Fine, what do you want to play?"

She thinks for a moment, biting her lip. Then she places her hands on the keys and begins flawlessly playing a melody, the chords overlapping each other so smoothly that I find myself being thoroughly impressed. I didn't even know she played. "What song is that?" I ask.

"This Is Gospel." She looks over her shoulder at me and notices my lost expression. "Panic at the Disco?"

I just shrug and shake my head at her. "Panic at the Disco?"

"Seriously? You not knowing who Panic at the Disco is, is not okay." Riley turns away and pays closer attention to the notes she's playing, progressing into a more complicated part of the song, which successfully blows me away. Somehow, she seems to have the ability to do that whether she's playing music or not. "So, what do you think?"

I cross my arms over my chest. "Not bad..." I say, remembering that she said that to me when I auditioned for Stint with Fiction.

She doesn't say anything, so I sit down next to her on the bench and begin hitting random keys.

"Hey!" she says playfully. "You're messing me up."

"I thought I was helping. People play piano duets all the time."

"Only when they both know the song... Or when they both know *how* to play the piano," she says.

"And how do you know I don't know how to play the piano?"

"Well, do you play?"

"Psh... *Do I play.*" I flash her a smile.

"Alright, then it's your turn to impress me." Riley gets up and stands behind the bench as I scoot into the middle.

"You might want to step back. I don't want you to get caught in the shockwave of my talent."

"Alright, but you're talking yourself up pretty big. Are you sure you'll be able to live up to the hype?" she teases.

"I think the better question is, can the hype live up to me." I crack my knuckles. "Okay, I need a second to prepare. This piece is so difficult, that if I try to play it without stretching first, it won't be possible to perform properly." I shake out my arms, stretch my wrists forwards and backwards.

Then I place a single finger on a single key... and play Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.

Riley laughs. "*Wow...* You are so full of it."

"What can I say? You're affecting my ego with your mad skills."

"Well, fine then." She points at the wall. "Play one of those guitars if it'll make yourself feel better."

"I could... But I think it would be better if *you* played one."

"I don't know how to play the guitar. If I could, I wouldn't have needed a new guitar player for Stint with Fiction."

I smile. "Exactly."

She scoffs and slaps me lightly on the arm. "*Thanks.*"

“Well, I played piano for you.” I walk over to one of the acoustic guitars on the wall, pull it carefully off, and walk back over to Riley. I hold it out to her. “So it’s your turn to play guitar for me.”

Riley gives me a look, then sighs and takes the guitar. “Fine.” She sits back down on the bench. “I think I’ve seen Drew make a chord that’s something like...” Her hand makes the shape of a chord that, to my knowledge, doesn't exist. Then she strums down on the strings in a twangy, cringeworthy fashion.

I grit my teeth. She look up and she sighs in exasperation when she sees me. “Hey, I *told* you.”

“I know. I know. Here, you’re close.” I sit down next to her, then take her hand and slide it up the neck of the guitar. “So, if you put this finger here... and this one here...” I carefully reposition a couple of her fingers a fret over so her hand has formed a D chord. “Try now.” She brushes the pick over the strings and the notes of the chord ring out flawlessly. “See? Who says you can’t play the guitar? And if you memorize that chord along with the G and C chords, you’ll be able to play about three hundred songs.”

Riley looks up at me. “Seriously?”

“No joke. If guitar players are known for anything, it’s not their originality.”

“Well, I guess I don’t need you in the band anymore, then,” she jokes.

“Ha ha, very funny.”

She looks back down at the guitar. “So, what is the G chord?”

“For that one...” I scoot a little closer. Her hair brushes against my cheek. I start repositioning her hand. “This finger goes here.”

“Yep.”

“Then this one below it...”

“Mm Hmm...” I feel her warm breath against my neck. It smells like strawberries.

“And... and then...” *What chord was I showing her again?*

I’m startled out of my thoughts when the store owner comes out of the back. “Cole! I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Oh hey, Mr. Gonzalez.” I stand up quickly. “We were just looking around.”

“It’s great to see you back so soon. Who is this?” he asks, gesturing to Riley.

“Oh... This is Riley. Riley, Mr. Gonzalez.”

She gives him a small wave as she stands up and puts the guitar back on the hook. “Hey.”

“Well, let me know if you need anything,” he says. “You and your girlfriend are welcome to play any of the instruments on the floor.”

“Oh, it’s not like that. She’s just a friend,” I correct him.

His gaze lingers on me for a moment. His eyes shift to Riley, then back to me. “If you say so.” He gives me a knowing look, then turns around and goes back into the back room.

I turn around to look at Riley, who is closely examining the guitars, but I can tell it’s just so she can pretend she didn’t hear what the shop owner said. If you don’t hear the inappropriate thing someone says to you, is it still awkward?

“What do you say... we get out of here? There’s a café down the block that sells some mean coffee.”

+++

The icy January wind nips the tip of my nose. A thin layer of snow has fallen, dusting the sidewalk in white.

“Mr. Gonzalez seemed to be really fond of you,” Riley says, looking down at the white coffee cup she holds in her hands. “I thought you only moved here a couple of weeks ago?”

“I did. But I’ve been in there several times and we got to talking one day... Turns out he’s from Boston, too.” I shrug. “I don’t know, he took a liking to me, I guess.”

We’re silent for a moment, then she asks, “So, what was Boston like?”

“Cold.” I laugh. “And loud. The streets are always busy. Everyone always had somewhere to be.”

Riley looks up at me, her cheeks rosy from the cold. “Kind of like New York?”

“Kinda... Bands played down town *all the time*. And there was this place called Taylor’s that sold the *best* deep dish pizza you will ever eat in your entire life. And if you went to the top of the John Hancock tower, the tallest building in town, you could see the entire city. The *whole* skyline. My friends and I used to go up there and talk about anything and everything for *hours*.”

“You really loved it there, huh?”

I shrug. “It was pretty great. Have you ever been?”

“Nope. Never.”

“Oh, man. You have to go someday. And when you do, make sure to visit the ocean, and Fenway Park.”

“Fenway Park? What's that?” Riley asks.

I look over at her in disbelief. "Fenway Park. The home of the Boston Red Sox. It's the oldest ballpark in the MLB." I laugh. "You know, my friends and I snuck in there in the middle of the night one time."

Riley gives me a look of amusement. "You snuck into the oldest ballpark of the MLB?"

"Haha, yeah. We played baseball 'til two, three o'clock in the morning... until the security guards caught us. Totally worth it, though."

"You get into a lot of trouble... don't you?" she asks hesitantly.

"What's the worst that could happen? It's not like we were spraying graffiti on the walls. My buddy Jonas, his dream is to play major league ball. He's pretty good, too. It was his birthday, so we thought it would be fun to sneak in there. We joked that it would make for a funny story when he joined the team one day."

"I'm sorry you had to move away from them. I can tell you really cared about them," she says sympathetically.

I shrug. "We did everything together. They were my brothers." We're silent for a moment. "You know, I actually went to the 2049 World Series at Fenway."

"Really?"

"Yeah, my dad took me as a kid. Got front row seats. He pulled a few strings and actually got me a signed baseball by my favorite Red Sox player. It was addressed to me personally and everything. It's one of the few things I brought with me when I moved, actually. It was the last thing my dad ever did for me..." I trail off. Anytime I talk about my dad, even if the memory is a good one, it brings me right back to the day he left us, to how everything ended with him.

I toss my coffee cup into a trashcan as we pass by. “Anyway, that’s enough about me.” I turn to look at her. “So, tell me. What animal can you turn into?” I ask, changing the subject.

Riley sighs. “Oh gosh...” She steels a sideways glance at me and gives me a bashful smile. “A Lynx.”

“Really? I imagined something more like... a raccoon.”

“Why a raccoon?” she asks.

“Well, they’re just so *annoying*.”

Riley scoffs and slaps me lightly on the arm. “Gee, thanks... So, what animal are you, then?”

I shove my hands into my pockets and give her a lopsided grin. “Guess.”

“Hmm... An otter?”

“Nope.”

“A horse?”

“Getting colder.”

“A chipmunk?”

“A chipmunk? Really?” I say.

“I don’t know! Give me a hint.”

“Okay... It’s not an otter, a horse, or a chipmunk.”

Riley groans. “You’re impossible.”

“Nope, not that either,” I say with a laugh.

She glares at me. “You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“And ruin the fun? Who do you think I am?”



“I don’t know. I’m still trying to figure you out, Ashton Cole. Just from the feild trip I thought I knew exactly what kind of person you were... But now I'm not so sure.”

“Well, I guess I’m full of surprises.”

She tilts her head and gives me a curious look. “Yeah. I guess so.”



I entered the school lost in thought. I looked around the halls, watching people talking and laughing, and wished my life was more like theirs.

*Why did this happen to me?* I wondered as I walked quickly, hoping no one would stop me.

"Hey, Dan." said a voice, and I turned to see Darrin walking up to me.

"What happened to you these past few days?" he asked with a grin.

"Flu. It's been going around." I replied, using the excuse that I and the others had agreed on.

Noticing that Darrin's left forearm was bandaged up, I asked, "What happened to you?"

"Scratched it when I fell off my skateboard at the park. Stings a bit, but no biggie." and he smiled at me.

Somehow, he threw me off. Something about the way he talked about his wound seemed...rehearsed. Like an actor, not like what an actual person would say. Not to mention that Darrin went a bit out of his way to talk to and be friends with a nerd, which was uncommon for someone with Darrin's sports skills and characteristics. But I dismissed the thought.

"I gotta go." I muttered as I checked my watch. "It's nearly time for English."

"Okay." said Darrin, furrowing his brow. "Catch you later."

"Sure." I replied, and walked off.

A minute later, I heard someone say, "Stop right there, Dan."

I gulped as I looked up to see Terence Matthews walking towards me. He had a neck brace on, and a couple of his lackeys were right behind him.

He stopped in front of me and grinned. "I think I owe you something. Do you recall it?"

The hundreds of dollars that Terence had pilfered from me over the years came to mind, but I knew that that wasn't what he had in mind.

"Nothing?" I tried hopefully.

Terence shook his head. "Last week, you rudely bumped into me. So, I decided to pay you back in turn. But before I could, Layla stopped me. But I don't see any lady knights coming to rescue your arse this time. Now I'm going to pay you back, and the fact that a girl had to save you makes me even more eager." And he cracked his knuckles.

Usually, I would meekly submit, but this time I didn't. The eagle in me would not let the king of the skies be humiliated.

"I don't see you doing any better, Terence. You were beaten up a scrawny kid half your size." I snapped, my anger rising.

Terence's friends chuckled at that, and he gave them an angry glance before saying defensively, "He had a metal box!"

"Oh, you poor thing." I muttered with mock sympathy. "I mean, what can a jock who took boxing lessons for three years do against a scrawny kid with a metal box? I mean, the seven of you jocks must've been at your wits' end on how to deal with him."

A crowd had started to gather to see the confrontation, and several of them laughed at what I had said.

Terence's face turned red with anger and he yelled, "Shut up, runt!"

"Careful, Terence." I said coldly. "I'm bigger than Neon, and there are only three of you. You don't want to go back to the hospital, do you?"

"I'll show you!" he growled and shoved me against a wall, raising his fist.

But before he could strike, my foot snapped upwards to hit his groin, and he groaned with pain before falling to the ground, clutching his groin.

A number of people cheered, and I grinned evilly at Terence, feeling a sense of pride that I had finally got the upper hand when dealing with him.

I walked around him and stood near his head. "Wanted to pay me back, did you?" I said with a cruel grin.

Then my smile disappeared as I growled, "Here's your payback!" and kicked him in the gut, causing him to give another groan.

Finally satisfied that I had done enough, I looked up. Some of the crowd looked shocked, but most of them were cheering, or jeering at Terence. Strangely, this included Terence's two lackeys.

I even saw some animorphers in the crowd. I caught sight of Riley at the far corner of the crowd, her face betraying her shock at seeing what I had done. Beside her, Neon was nodding at me, a huge grin on his face.

*What's he doing in school out of morph?* I wondered, but before I could pursue the thought further, a sharp voice cut through the air.

"Daniel Torson!" exclaimed Ms. Tangeman. The crowd parted to allow her to pass. She marched until she stood right in front of me, scowling.

"I did not expect a student of your caliber to behave so...atrociously! You will accompany me to the Principal's office immediately." she said heatedly, and then glared at the crowd around me. "Don't you all have classes to get to?" she snapped, and everyone quickly started moving.

Then she narrowed her eyes at me before walking off, glancing back now and then to make sure that I was following her.

*Aw crap.* I thought to myself. *This is bad.*



The alarm clock on my night stand, now dented by a certain drunk monkey, goes off on a tangent of obnoxious beeps like it does every morning. The daily battle of the alarm v.s. my self-control to not throw it into a wall, starts all over again.

Turned away from it, I reach my arm behind me and slap my hand over the snooze button a couple times until it turns off. After a few seconds of peace, it goes off again. Probably some loose screws from the damage.

Groaning in agitation, I roll over to the other side and hit it again, which sends the clock falling off the nightstand onto the floor instead, still beeping.

This is the day the battle with the alarm clock shall end.

I throw the covers aside, sit up, grab the damn clock off the ground, and hurl it against the wall. It breaks into a dozen pieces, followed by the sweet sound of silence.

Waking me up at 6:30AM after the weekend I just had, it had it coming. Seriously.

~ ~ ~

The school activity sign up board looms over me as I stand in front of it, looking at all the various papers pinned to the cork and trying to find one that sounds somewhat tolerable. Kids pass by behind me, walking down one of the long hallways of Silver Creek High, going to and from classes. After-school activities really aren't my thing, but Jinx had suggested that we sign up for more things to keep us busy and help us blend in as normal teens. Somehow, the solution to being turned into a super soldier science experiment, then targeted by Japanese assassins, doesn't seem like it should be joining an after-school activity. It seems ridiculous at best. At worst? It's stupid. But, given we know close to nothing about just about everything... It's the best we can do for now.

I scan the sheets of paper, all different colors and sizes with just about everything you could imagine a school offering in after-school programs.

*'Get synchronized with your after-school activities and join the Synchronized Swimming Team!'*

*'Make a new student's day! Join the Welcoming Committee!'*

Bleh...

"Hey, looking at after-school activities?" Riley says, coming up behind me.

"If you can call them that. Could they make them any more lame?"

"Yeah, I've been having trouble finding any, either. I'm already a part of Stint with Fiction. Isn't that enough?"

I shrug. "I'm part of the track team and I'm not off the hook... So I guess not."

We look at the board, silent for a few moments. "That one doesn't look too bad," she says, pointing to a flyer that says, 'Music Club.'

"Ahem..." I push aside a paper that's hanging in front of half of it to reveal the whole title, 'History of Classical Music Club.' *'Learn about how classic music began, and how it has changed through the eras. New classical composer featured every week!'*

Riley scrunches her nose up. "Well, that's kinda boring."

"Hey, guys!" Charlotte comes up behind us with her arms wrapped around the books she holds. "Have you found anything interesting?"

"Not really," I say, letting the paper flop back over the music flier. "Have you?"

"Actually... I have. I signed up for the cheer team."

I give her a look. "The cheer team? Seriously?"

Charlotte shrugs. "I thought it might be fun. That's all."

"I thought we agreed to sign up for things in pairs," Riley says. "You know, so that no one is ever alone."

"I know," Charlotte says. "And that's why... I signed you two up with me."

Riley and I exchange a glance, then look back at Charlotte and simultaneously say, "You *what?*"

"What? You act like I enlisted you in the military or something."

"I would have rather you enlisted me in the military than signed me up for the cheer team," I say.

"Layla, don't be silly..." Charlotte says. "It'll be fun. There's nothing more ordinary in high school than being a cheerleader. That's the point, right? Blending in? You know..." She looks around us for a moment, then lowers her voice. "...to keep the Japanese assassins off our tails."



“I would rather be chased by Japanese assassins than join the cheer team,” I tell her flatly.

“Charlotte, I have zero interest in joining the cheer team,” Riley says sincerely.

Charlotte shrugs. “Well, it’s too late now. Practice is this afternoon.” She turns to me.

“You might end up liking it, Layla. Will you just give it a try?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“For me?”

“No!”

“Please?” Charlotte gives me hopeful, innocent look.

I cross my arms over my chest. “You can’t make me go to that practice.”

The look remains.

*“No!”*

~ ~ ~

“I hate you.”

“No you don’t. Now get out here before we’re late to practice.”

“Gee, that would be just terrible,” I say.

*“Laylaaaaa...”* she whines.

I look down at the mini-skirt and half-top I wear, along with white tennis shoes and pompoms that cover my feet and hands. “I can’t believe you talked me into this.”

“Will you come out of the stall and let me see?”

I sigh, then undo the latch on the bathroom door and swing it open. Charlotte stands on the other side, also in full uniform. She smiles at me.

“So, what do you think?” I ask hesitantly, picking uncomfortably at the fabric on my skirt.

“You look cute!”

I groan and start to close the door again, but she steps forward and blocks it with her body. “Normally, people would take that as a compliment,” she points out.

“Well, I’m not normal people. In fact, I spend a lot of time trying not to be like normal people. Even avoiding normal people. Like cheerleaders.”

“You’re such a grouch.” Charlotte takes my hand and pulls me into the main locker room area, where Riley lays on her back on one of the metal benches, leaning her head over the edge.

“Riley, are you ready to do? Practice starts in five minutes.”

*“Wuaaaaaaugh...”*

Charlotte sighs. “It’s not the end of the world. It’s just cheer practice. Will you just try it and see if you like it? If you don’t, you don’t have to go back.”

Riley sighs and sits up, swinging her white tennis shoes back onto the ground.

*“Fineee...”*

“Thank you.” Charlotte turns to me expectantly.

I cross my arms over my chest. “I put on the uniform like you asked me to, but I’m not going out there. *Ever.*”

Charlotte just stares at me with puppy dog eyes.

“No.”

Big blue eyes staring up at me.

“Not going to happen.”

Long eyelashes blinking.

“*No!*”

~ ~ ~

I did not know what true humiliation felt like until this moment, standing in the middle of a football field in a cheerleader’s uniform, surrounded by *other* cheerleaders.

I recall having to put on this uniform once before, and hoping I wouldn’t get caught dead wearing it. Little did I know that this was actually going to be the death of me.

“I hate you.”

“Stop being so dramatic,” Charlotte says, handing me my pompom. “Practice is half over and you’ve survived this long, haven’t you?”

I groan and take it from her hand. “Why is this so important to you?”

“No reason,” she says, looking off into the distance. “I thought it would be fun. *Normal*. We need more normal back in our lives.”

I follow her gaze to see the football players warming up on the other end of the field. They’re doing push ups, and Charlotte is watching Michael.

*Ahhh. Of course.*

“No reason, huh?” Why don’t you tell that to Michael?”

“If the point of this is to keep an eye on each other, then this makes the most sense. We can keep an eye on Michael and Jinx, and they can keep an eye on us,” she says as if it’s only logical. And I would almost believe her... if her cheeks hadn’t flushed completely red.

My eyes wander over to Jinx, who is doing pushups a few guys over from Michael, the bright sun gleaming off of his dark skin. I tilt my head a little and sigh. *Maybe this isn’t so bad.*

“Okay, girls! Break time is over!” The head cheerleader, Britt, says, strutting back through the group. Wouldn’t that make her the *cheerleader* and us the *cheerfollowers*? Actually, I’m good with cheerleader. No need to make it any more demeaning than it already is.

“Get into formation and I’m going to watch this time to see where our weak points are,” she says, beaming a bright smile, but her gaze lingers on me for a second in an accusing fashion. Then she flips her hair and walks to the front.

*Well then.* I get into my position in a “V” and look over at Riley, who’s uncomfortably pulling down on her skirt, if you can call it that. If a skort is a cross between a skirt and shorts, then what is a cross between a skirt and underwear?

“Remember! Smile’s everyone!” Britt beams. I don’t smile. “Five, six, seven, eight!”

The formation moves, various cheerleaders crossing through each other to turn the “V” into a “W”.

“Give me a ‘G’! *G!* Give me an ‘O’. *O!* What does that spell? *Go!*”

How do you spell, *shoot me now?*

The routine finishes and Britt walks right up to me. She gives me a big fake smile.

“Layla, I don’t feel like you’re trying very hard. I need you to give me everything you’ve got.”

“I’m already giving you my morality,” I say seriously.

She just laughs, then places her hand on my shoulder. I shrug it off. “I like you, Layla. You’re funny.”

“I wasn’t joking.”

Britt just gives me a little snooty shake of her head. “Anyway, just try a little harder, okay? And remember, sweetie!” She taps her fingers against my cheek a couple times. “Turn that frown, upside down!” She flashes me a big cheery smile.

That’s it.

I give her a mock smile back, then turn and start walking away towards the locker rooms without another word.

Charlotte runs up behind me, grabs my hand, and turns me back around. “Layla, where are you going?”

“I’m done! I can’t put of with that girl!”

“Layla, come on. She’s not that bad. Are you forgetting that we’re trying to blend in so our lives aren’t in danger?”

“If she tells me to turn that frown upside one more time, it’s *her* life that’s going to be in danger.”

Charlotte sighs. “Look... The real reason I wanted you to join with me was because... I was too afraid to try it on my own,” she admits. “I really need to feel like *something* in my life is normal, and I’d also really like to keep an eye on Michael. But I wouldn’t have been able to work up the courage to join the squad, if you weren’t here with me...”

I stare at her for a moment, then sigh. “Ugghhh... *Fineee*. I’ll stick it out.”

“You. Are. The best.” She throws her arms around me in a hug.

“Under one condition,” I add. “You tell the head barbie to stop telling me to smile. It’s not going to happen.”

Charlotte steps away and smiles. “Deal.”



Michael sat with me at lunch the next day. I was hardly accustomed to school yet - none of us were - but spending my free time with the other animorphers kept me calm. If there was only one good thing that this experience has given me, it's what unity and fellowship feels like. And if I have to join some after school activity to keep that up, so be it.

"I still think basketball would suit me better," I said between bites of greasy cafeteria pizza.

Michael shook his head. "Now, Jinx, if you were a giraffe, I'd understand. But look at you - you're a *tiger*."

I shrugged him off. "Our animals don't matter. We're not going to morph in the middle of a game or anything."

"Hey, you never know. And being a tiger on a basketball court would help you a lot less than a tiger on a football field would."

"How?"

“Think about it! Remember how the first symptoms arrived just after the field trip, and only parts of us would morph? What if we could control that, and just the front paws came out? Those talons could be pretty useful for tackling.”

“Like the ref wouldn’t call a penalty when a player on the other team starts gushing blood from his shoulder blades.”

A cliché football player chose that moment to slide in next to Michael and break into our conversation. “What are you guys *talking* about?”

I winced. “Y’know, football regulations.”

The football player - Chase Redlands was his name - puffed out his chest like Superman and tugged at the collar of his Letterman jacket. I shot Michael a glare that I hoped effectively translated to “and *this* is why I’m not too thrilled about trying football.”

“You’re the new guy, aren’t you?” Chase asked.

I nodded.

He lost interest in me, and picked up his pizza. “Hey, Mike,” he mumbled, his mouth full. “There’s that chick you like.”

Sure enough, the four animorpher girls were making their way towards our table, their own lunch trays in hand.

Mike laughed. “It’s more than just *like*.” Charlotte sat on the other side of him, of course, and the rest sat on my side of the table. Chase brightened up and tugged at his collar with more vigor. I noticed him pause in between each bite of pizza to clean his tomato-pasted teeth with his tongue.



Shortly after, Dan, Cole, and Neon arrived. “Look at that, we’re all here,” Cole said, slapping his tray down.

Chase started looking less comfortable. “*Who’s* all here?”

“Period Six Biology!” Neon cried, jutting his hand into the middle of the table. One by one, each animorpher, laughing, piled their hands on top of his. We released with a cheer. With that, Chase promptly excused himself.

*That’s* what fellowship feels like.

“The Battle of the Bands is tomorrow,” Riley announced once we had quieted down. “You all better be there.”

“I hope my Potato Club won’t mess up with my schedule,” Neon said, in a totally serious voice.

“Potato Club,” Layla said. “Is that your after school activity? How’d you find a *potato club*?”

“Finding one would have been impossible. Our generation doesn’t seem to appreciate the *Solanum tuberosum* as much as it should, I’m afraid. I had to make the club myself.” He popped a French fry into his mouth.

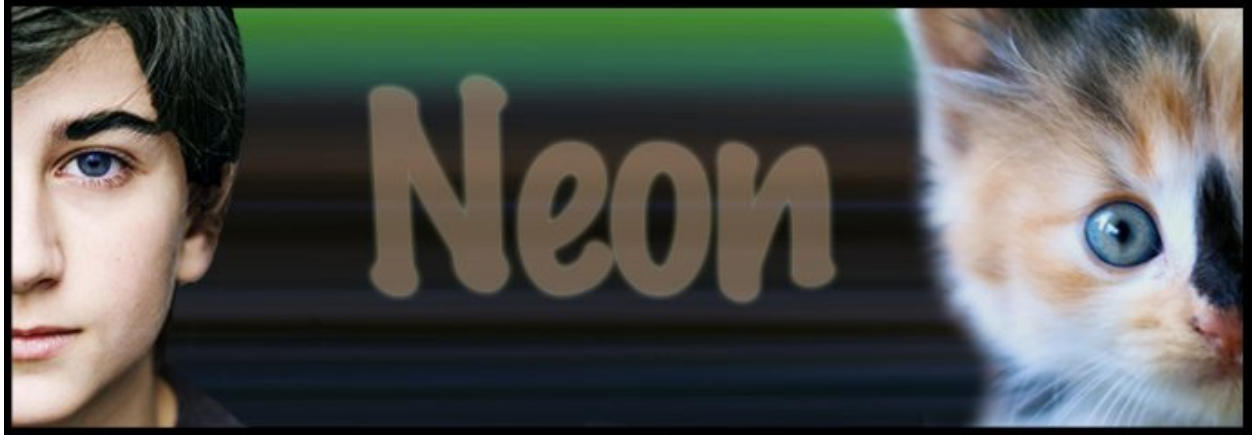
I glanced at Layla, who giggled.

“I saw you with the cheerleaders yesterday,” I told her. “What made you decide to sign up for that?”

She shot a death glare across the table at Charlotte. “It wasn’t my decision.”

I laughed. “Well, I like it. More of us will be able to practice together.”

“My point exactly!” Charlotte said, gesticulating with a piece of pizza crust.



The nurse and security guard rushed down the hall. Dispersing the crowd of astonished students, they lifted Terence Matthews onto a stretcher and carried him off. The boy was groaning in pain, wincing with every jostle as the two adults raced away like cartoon paramedics. All they needed were sirens on their heads to complete the insane picture.

Neon began to sweat as the crowd broke apart. If he was alone, he would be spotted in no time. Not to mention the morph suit wasn't exactly the most subtle clothing in the world.

But apparently Riley was thinking faster than him, because she grabbed him by the collar and shoved him into the nearby boy's bathroom. "Stay out of sight," she hissed through the metal door. "I'll come get you when the next period ends."

And that was how Neon came to be sitting alone in a bathroom stall as the bell rang for the next class. His fingers drummed against the porcelain as he became increasingly agitated. Did Riley really expect him to just wait here for her? She'd met him, right? Neon Kingsley waited for no one.

He hunched over, hollowing himself out with a sigh. “She just needs some space,” he said. “I thought I could help by staying with her, but now I’m worried that she doesn’t need me...”

With a bitter chuckle, he shook his head. “No. Who am I kidding? She never needed me. Maybe she never will.” He let the breath trail out of him, his normally puffed chest deflating until Neon Kingsley was just a pathetic, scrawny little boy sitting on a toilet lid. “I’m useless.” The words seemed to echo in his head, reverberating and harmonizing with deeper memories, filling his skull.

Terror seized his body, and he ripped himself out of his thoughts. “No,” he muttered. “I’m not useless. I’m not useless. I’m me. *I’m freaking Neon!*”

With that, he let out an uncharacteristically loud roar, standing up and barging out of the bathroom stall. Aggressively lathering his hands under the faucet, he looked up and growled at his reflection. There was still work to be done today, and he wouldn’t rest until he’d completed his goal.

“I won’t just sit around anymore,” he declared, slamming the paper towel over his hands. “Today, the world’s going to know the wrath of me! Neon Kingsley!” He made a triumphant pose, cackling madly as his evil aura swept around him menacingly.

He was still holding that pose when the toilet flushed in the other stall, and a senior walked out. Giving Neon a weird look, he turned on the faucet and began to wash his hands nonchalantly.

Neon dropped the pose and slunk out of the bathroom, embarrassment prickling down his spine. Still, his resolve was firm. Today, he would save a comrade from falling to the same

deadly fate as he. But Neon alone could not save Daniel Torson. It was time to call upon an old persona...one that just so happened to be stored inside his locker.

Trying not to squeal with excitement, Neon dashed down the hall towards his old locker.

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Dan sat in the chair like a prisoner, his jaw locked and fists clenched. Mrs. Tangeman was standing over him, giving the principal a vivid report of what he'd done, complete with hand motions. All of it looked like she was flapping her arms and squawking, flipping out like a bird. Meanwhile, Principal Jacoby was sighing into her coffee, reconsidering her life choices as a principal.

Mrs. Tangeman's accusations pierced through the air, destroying the ears of all within a ten-meter radius. The words "school grounds" and "violence" were screamed to their breaking point as the pent-up rage of the teacher's life spilled out in one unsightly rant.

Eventually, she broke off her tirade, her shoulders heaving in silence. Once the ringing in his ears had subsided, Dan glanced up caustically, slowly opening his mouth to speak.

Instantly, the school went pitch-black, darkness filling the office as the generators powered down. "What's going on here?" Mrs. Tangeman asked.

"I don't even know anymore," Jacoby murmured.

Suddenly, smoke hissed into the room, illuminated by the pale light from the windows. Mrs. Tangeman yelped as a voice boomed over the PA. "In the black of night, let screams of terror peel into the sky, so that the stars may turn crimson, and the thousand eyes stare back!"

Dan whipped his head around in bewilderment, but Mrs. Tangeman was staring upwards at the speakers. “That voice....” Her eyes widened, and she trembled. “I know that voice!”

“When the chips are down, he eliminates his foes with one crisp blow! To know him is to know true fear! The god of darkness shall now descend!” The lights flared on, blood-red and sinister. “Tremble beneath the wrath of *Lord Nightshade!*”

The last words were spoken from behind Dan, and the boy whirled around in his seat. Standing at the back of the principal’s office, was a man clad in a black mantle, holding a microphone up to his mask. The bizarre visor hid his face completely beneath a brown mass covered with glaring crimson eyes. Tossing the microphone aside, he turned to them.

Dan immediately jumped out of his seat, backing against the desk. Mrs. Tangeman was recoiling beside him, horror written across her face. Principal Jacoby looked ready to cry.

“Your fear is justified, mortals,” the man said, his voice rumbling across the room. “Returned from my exile, I have come to deliver dark justice! I stand before you now, the invincible, reborn Lord Nightshade!”

“It can’t be!” Mrs. Tangeman shrieked, pointing a purple-nailed finger at the lord. “You’re not supposed to be here!”

Dan glanced at her in confusion. “You know him?”

The teacher shook her head in despair. “Only heard of him. He’s the infamous prankster that cursed his school with mayhem! The mastermind of the Mascot Massacre! The terror of Bronzewater Junior High!”

“I am all of those things, and more!” Lord Nightshade cackled madly. Swinging his arm around, he pointed at Dan with sharp intent. “But today I vouch for Daniel Alexander Torson! In the name of darkness, release him immediately!”

Principal Jacoby leaned over her desk, trying feebly to maintain some shred of professional air. “I’m afraid that would be impossible, Mr.-”

“Lord!”

“- Mr. Lord Nightshade. Dan Torson has engaged in a fight against another student, leaving him incapacitated both physically and socially.”

“Regardless!” Lord Nightshade flung his arm out. “Daniel Torson was fighting for the sake of justice! Even a demon such as I can attest to this fact!”

“N-no!” Mrs. Tangeman retorted, fury shooting back into her voice. “You’re wrong! Daniel had Terence on the ground, and was kicking him brutally!”

“But did it ever occur to you that Daniel had not started the fight?” Nightshade’s head tilted inquisitively. “He was merely acting self-defensively towards the violent Terence Matthews. Ask any who were gathered there, and they too will say the same!”

Recognition broke upon Dan’s face, though it wasn’t really too hard to guess who was beneath the iconic mask in the first place.

Lord Nightshade’s hand went to his thousand-eyed mask, readjusting it confidently. “That is all I can say. Daniel!” he shouted, thrusting his hand out. “You must continue this fight, without assistance or surrender! In the name of darkness, I entrust to you this mission! Now fear me, mortals, as I vanish into the night! Whoosh!” Lord Nightshade sprinted to the window, his scheme to open it and escape.

His hand slid over a smooth, latchless windowsill. Beneath the mask, Neon Kingsley slowly broke into a sweat.

Dan sighed. “Neon, the windows don’t open here.”

Lord Nightshade stiffened. “Sh...Shocking!!!” he announced, making a break for the door. Unfortunately, Mrs. Tangeman’s hand shot out and grabbed the back of his cape, pulling him back in.

“Neon Kingsley...” she snarled, a demonic blaze igniting in her eyes.

“A-ah...!” Neon gulped, shrinking in her shadow until Lord Nightshade was just a scrawny little kid in a mask.

Principal Jacoby cradled her head in her hands as Mrs. Tangeman dragged Neon away, who was screaming desperately, “Suspend me! Arrest me! Anything! Please, save me!” So ended the dark legend of Lord Nightshade; his legacy was Dan Torson standing in front of the principal in her empty office.

The fierce red lighting just seemed awkward now. “So,” Dan began, “what-”

“A week of detention. Room 224, after school.” Principal Jacoby didn’t look up. “Please, get out now.”

Dan swallowed, nodded, and walked out of the principal’s office in silence. In the distance, shouts could be heard as the rest of the school dealt with the blood-red terror-lights.

Principal Jacoby took one last look at her coffee, then dumped it in the trash can. She sighed. Reaching under her desk, she pulled out a bottle and took a long drink. “Five more months,” she mumbled forlornly.



It was the beginning of the school year with Mr. Daniel's math class. A morning that was sheepishly getting through but barely passing. Michael was in the back, balancing a pencil on his top lip while looking towards the ceiling at a bug that was slowly making it's way across the vast, white plain. Everyone in the class was either a.) dozing and suddenly jolted up or b.) paying full attention towards the board. There were a few cases of c.) which was, bored and not really caring (the group that Michael is in). It was not that he cared for the subject but the timing of school were bouncing off his thoughts inside his head.

He had come back from camp to have a clear mind and a new self. Everyone in the group went and tried out their own separate things. Luckily, the activity to get his mind off of the camp, was football. His blood and soul. As it turned out, Jinx has the same thought. Michael didn't know Jinx nor did he ever want to until now. He was always the quiet one in the back, silently judging everyone. If Michael was honest with himself, he would've found him a bit intimidating. But it was Jinx that came up to him, during one of his breaks in the library, and asked if he was joining the football team. The original answer was going to be "I have no idea" but upon seeing the desperation in Jinx's eye, he had to change his answer to "I am."



It was within the first week that Michael felt out of place and far away from his classmates. It could be for the fact that the camp had changed him. Most of his friends had forgotten about him (which was fine, he supposed, but having the constant popularity to boot him up was also nice).

When the bell was ringing for math class to be over, even when Mr. Daniel was saying "please wait until I pass out your homework" (only a few people stayed behind), Michael trotted over to the library. Charlotte was inside, reading a book by a far side table. *I could say hi*, he had thought to himself. It was before he could set foot in the library that he felt a big, meaty hand on his shoulder. He blinked, turned around, and came face-to-face with none other than Hank Jigsawman or famously known as Big Ham.

"You're thinking about joining the football team again, Mikey?" Big Ham asked thickly, hand still on Michael's shoulder.

Michael sighed. *It was too early for this.*

"Yes, Hank. I am," was the airy response. This only made Hank's hand dig into Michael's shoulder.

"You dropped out ahead-"

"Yes, that was because I had a school field trip the same day as the last football game. Don't think I'm a little upset about that still. Also, knowing me, I would've come back sooner or later." He paused, smirking. "You know that?"

Hank's frowned deepened. "I hate people like you."

"Everyone hates people like me. I can't control that. Now, if you excuse me," Michael twisted around. Hank's hand dispatched off of his shoulder as he sped towards his locker. All he received was a grunt.

-----

The fall air outside was getting colder and colder while the leaves on the nearby oak trees were turning different colors. Michael took a deep inhale of outside and let it evaporate into a small cloud of vapor when he exhaled. Walking home was a new addition to his life after camp. Also, Charlotte always walked home after school so it was a win-win situation that he couldn't pass up.

"Michael!" Charlotte called, loud and clear. He turned around slowly to see the strawberry blonde running towards him, with books in her arms.

"Hey, Charlie." He smiled while Charlotte caught up with him.

"I told you to stop calling me that."

"And I told you it was cute."

Halfway through the walk, Charlotte asked, "What was with Big Ham?"

Michael sourly frowned. "He wanted to know why I was coming back to the football team. Why do you ask?"

Charlotte shrugged. "I saw you being caught with him so I thought'd I'd ask."

"Oh. Well, you don't need to worry about anything", Michael said simply. Charlotte only knitted her eyebrows.

-----

They said their farewells (Michael was more dramatic with a strain in his voice and hollering his goodbyes while Charlotte's was more 'you're scaring the neighbors and I need to get inside').

When he stepped into his house, the smell of his dinner made his stomach turn pleasantly.

Michael quickly ran upstairs to his room and dropped off his bookbag. Then hightailing it down towards the kitchen. When he got there, his mother wasn't there but left of a nearby counter was a note. Picking it up, Michael read it aloud.

*Dear Michael,*

*I'm out of town for a while because of work and I don't think I'll be back before dinner is started. I just wanted to tell you I love you and I'll be home tomorrow morning, before you leave for school.*

*Love, Mom*

Michael raised an eyebrow before throwing the paper aside. *Since when did my mom have a job?* It wasn't since he was five, working at the school's cafeteria (she quit due to the unsanitary workplace she was in; his mother was a clean freak). He walked briskly towards the fridge, opening it to find a Dr. Pepper, but instead found another note but this time on a Post-it note.

Sighing, Michael grabbed it, thinking it was the shopping list for last week. Upon reading it, Michael froze, gripping at reality's crumbling down. He blinked a few times before re-reading the note and throwing it on the ground.

The note read:

*Michael. You're a smart boy. Come and find your mother. Oh, and bring your animal friends too.*

*Signed, Jackson*

*At least he was courteous to signing it,* Michael thought. The last time he had seen Jackson was at the closed off research facility. *What does he want now?* While he was in his thoughts, a phone rang. He shook his head and walked towards the phone, answering it.

"Hello?"

"Ah, good. You picked up. It took you long enough," the voice on the other end calmly said.

Michael gritted his teeth. "Jackson."

"The one and only," Jackson crackled before coughing.

"What do you want?"

"I want your animal friends, Mikey, can't you read? I think you guys have something wonderful in store and instead of just holding back on your powers, I want to use them for myself."

"You can't use animorphers as toys, Jackson."

"I never said toys, Mikey." Michael could hear the smile in his voice. "I was thinking more of pawns for my chessboard."

Michael sighed, bringing his index finger and thumb over the bridge of his nose.

"And I'm thinking that if you don't show up," Jackson paused. There was a shifting noise in the background when a small voice cracked over the phone.

“Michael!” His mother cried before a small pause until Jackson came onto the phone again. “You see, I was thinking about using your mom for something until you came to me.”

“Don't you dare!”

Jackson let out a cackle before getting back onto the phone. “Your vigorous attempt are useless! You think I’m going to give up! You're stupidly wrong!”

Michael hung up on the baffoon and raced out of the door, towards Charlotte’s house. He wondered if the same thing had happened to her and if so, what were they going to do.



As the bell rings through the halls of Silver Creek High, putting an end to another day of school, I'm one of the first to push my way out the doors and head home.

The January air is bitter cold today. It's overcast, so the sun isn't giving off much heat, and the wind isn't helping anything. I pull my jacket tighter around me as I head on my way, but it does little good. The cold has already seeped into my bones.

"Hey," a voice says from behind me. I look over my shoulder to see that it's Jackson.

"H-hey..." *Why is he talking to me?*

"I want to know what happened at the bomb site," he says abruptly.

"I'm sure Michael would love to tell you all about it."

"I want you to tell me."

"Why?" I ask. "Why are you even talking to me?"

"So you can turn into a fox, right?" he asks, suddenly changing the subject.

I readjust the strap of my backpack on my shoulder. "That's the verdict."

"Did you have any plans tonight?" Another change in subject. I look over at him to see him scratching the back of his neck. He seems fidgety. More than usual.

"I've got a very busy day of closing myself in my room, putting on music and ignoring the world, ahead of me." I sigh. "Why do you ask?"

"I need to take you somewhere."

*Need?* "Uhh... Thanks, but I'm not interested."

"It's important," he urges.

"Why?"

"It just is!" Jackson spats. Then he sighs with irritation, recognizing that he lost his temper, and goes back to scratching at the back of his neck.

"Maybe another time. I really need to be getting home." I quicken my pace. Something weird is going on with him. Weird even for him.

He quickens his pace to catch up to me and grabs my arm. "What are you--" I start, but before I can react, Jackson stabs a syringe into the side of my neck and injects me with something. "--trying to..."

My whole body goes weak and numb at the same time. My legs come out from under me and I collapse.

Above me, Jackson, sneering. Below me, the icy sidewalk. The world swims out of focus.

Then, blackness.

~ ~ ~

My eyes slowly flutter open. They feel heavy, and I'm barely able to keep them open at first. The room around me spins, and I close my eyes again until it subsides. When I open my eyes again, everything around me is a blur, lapsing in time. *Where am I?*

Slowly coming to, my vision comes back into focus and the world levels back out, no longer lagging.

I'm in a room. It's huge. Concrete makes up the floors, three of the walls are made of brick while the fourth wall--the one I'm facing--is made entirely of windows, though most of them are broken or completely smudged over with dirt. A concrete pillar holds up the ceiling every twenty feet or so.

I look down at myself to find that I'm sitting in a plastic chair. My arms are tied behind my back, my body tied to the chair, and my feet have been tied together, all with rope.

A jolt of panic shoots through me. *I've been kidnapped.*

I look to the left of me to see another woman tied to a chair, about a dozen feet away. "Mrs..." The dryness of my throat makes it difficult to speak, and my voice sounds a mile away. I cough. "Mrs. Anthony?"

Her head whirls around at the sound of my voice. Her mouth is gagged and her cheeks are wet with tears, but a look of recognition crosses her face when she sees that it's me. *Why is Michael's mom here? What the hell is happening?*

"Don't worry. I'm going to get us out of here," I tell her weakly. If I can morph, then I'll slip right out of these ropes and we can escape before our captor even knows we're gone.

I close my eyes and concentrate on morphing into a fox, but it doesn't work. Just as I attempt to try again, a voice rises up behind me.



"Don't even bother. The sedative I gave you will keep you from morphing for at least twelve hours." It's Jackson's voice. His shoes click against the concrete as he comes to stand in front of me.

"What the hell is this?" The more I come to, the angrier I get. I fight against the restraints. "What are you *doing*, Jackson?"

"Why do you think I'm doing this? I want you and your friends."

My eyes widen a little with recognition. "Who are you working with?" He just laughs. I peer over at Michael's mom, then back to him. "Let her go, Jackson. She has nothing to do with this."

"No, no, no. I'm not letting her go. She's my leverage."

"If she's your leverage, then what am I?"

He smiles and turns toward the windows. Scratches at the back of his neck again. "You're my mission." When he pulls his hand away from his neck, I notice a lump under the skin, the size of a quarter.

My stomach sinks. *He's been chipped.*

After a moment of silence, Jackson's phone rings. He pulls it out of his pocket and holds it up to his ear. A moment later, he turns to me and says, "I've got to take this. Don't go anywhere." He laughs, then leaves through a metal door at the back of the room.

I fight against the ropes, trying to stretch them out and free myself, but it's no use. Whatever ropes he used were a good ones. *All right. Plan B. Or, rather... C?*

I look around the room and my eyes fall on a folding table against the right wall, about twenty feet away. Mrs. Anthony and my's bags sit on it, and in front of the bags, whatever had been in our pockets. For me, that includes my cell phone.

I glance back at the door Jackson left through, then I start scooting my chair towards the table. Inch by inch, the legs of my chair screeching against the concrete, I make it closer to my phone.

After what feels like an eternity, my chair hits the table. I turn my chair to face away from it and reach up behind me. My fingers brush against the phone. *Come on. Come on.* After a couple of tries, I manage to pull it into my hands behind my back. I turn it on, swipe the bar to unlock it, then hold down the home button until it enters into help mode.

"Hello, Layla. What can I help you with today?" the phone says.

*Thank god.* I push the phone back up onto the table with shaking hands, then scoot my chair around to face it. "Call Michael."

"Calling Michael."

My phone rings a couple times, then the line connects and I hear a, "Hello?"

I sigh with relief. "Michael, it's Layla."

"Where are you?" He seems panicked.

"Jackson," I say, trying to keep a sudden feeling of desperation at bay. "He drugged me on my way home from school and took me somewhere. He tied me to a chair and... Michael, he has your mom."

"I know. Layla, is Charlotte with you?"

"No, she isn't."

Michael sighs. "Thank god. Where are you?" he asks again.

I look around the room. "I'm not sure. It's an abandoned building. One wall is completely windows, but most of them are broken. I think I'm on the second or third story." I take in a deep breath, trying to stay calm. "Out the windows, I can see warehouses. And..." I squint out the windows. "And there's water... A lake? The sun is shining through the windows, so they're facing the west. That's all I've got. I have no idea where he took me."

"All right, we're going to come and find you."

"Michael, wait. Jackson said that he was using your mom for leverage, but that he wanted me because I was a part of his plan. I think we all are. If you come and find me, you'll be walking into a trap," I warn him.

"I know. Jackson told me he wants to use the Animorphers for his own intentions. We'll be careful."

"Michael..."

"Just hang in there--"

"Michael, listen to me! Jackson has something in his neck. He was chipped. But it's... it's bigger than a tracker. I think he might be--"

Suddenly, the phone is ripped out of my hand. I look over my shoulder to see Jackson standing over me. "Hmm... Even more resourceful than I'd anticipated. Well, that's all right. If Michael is coming to us, then that's one less Animorpher I have to deal with. Makes my job a whole lot easier." He gives me a wry smile, then he lifts my phone up and hurls it into the wall. It shatters into a dozen pieces, all over the concrete floor.

Then he grabs onto the back of my chair and drags it all the way back to where it had been originally, the back legs screeching once again against the cement. Only this time, he drags it a little further and shoves my chair into a concrete pillar.

He grabs another rope off of the ground and ties me to the pillar. "Can't be taking any risks now, can we?"

"You're insane," I tell him flatly. "You have no idea what you've gotten yourself into. Jackson, you are *way* in over your head."

He looks up for a moment, pondering my words, but then he just shrugs. "You know what you and Michael's mom have in common?" Jackson pulls a white cloth out of his back pocket. "Neither of you know when to shut up." Then he shoves it between my teeth and ties it around the back of my neck, keeping me from speaking.

I fight against the restraints, try to get the cloth out of my mouth. "You're feisty," he says. I just glare back at him defiantly. "Well, I should get going. Got a lot of stuff to do. You know, take a shower... capture more Animorphers. It's a big day." He gives me a look that sends an icy chill down my spine, then he turns and leaves once again through the metal door.

*Dammit. Dammit. Dammit,* I say over and over again in my head. *This is really bad.*

*Michael, whatever you do, do it fast,* I think, continuing to fight against the ropes. *There's more happening here than we understand.* A part of me wants to know what's going on, and the other part is afraid to find out.

But whatever happens... one thing's for sure. This is going to be a big day for us Animorphers.



Juggling human normalcy with uniquely animalistic tendencies is no fun.

I poked around at the bowl of chili my mom prepared, searching for more shreds of carrots. The chunks of turkey almost made me gag. I couldn't stomach the red beans and their distinctly meaty texture, either. But I was hungry and couldn't find any more carrots, so I blindly took a spoonful and emptied it into my mouth.

*You're a omnivorous human, Charlotte - act like one!*

Nope.

The chili carrots I had spent so long searching for said farewell to my stomach and hello to the trashcan (as did the beans and chunks of turkey, but they had only been introduced to my tongue).

Still hungry but in no mood to eat anything, I pulled out my math homework and stuck my earbuds in. Tapping my pencil eraser impatiently against the paper, I realized that I couldn't concentrate on a single polynomial. Immediately defeated, I yawned and allowed the music to wash over my weary mind.

Afterward deciding to be a somewhat responsible math student, I texted Layla for help.

> *Charlotte: Mrs. Tangeman wants to torture us with this homework. I don't even know how to do #1. Do you?*

*Not delivered.*

I cocked an eyebrow. Not delivered? That's odd.

My stomach, annoyed that it had been cheated of its orange vegetables, growled. I ignored it. I folded my arms onto the table and dropped my forehead onto my math homework, that which had nothing written on it but my name. The gentle and slow song that was on must have lulled me to sleep; next thing I knew, I was being jolted awake by a sudden, alarming voice.

*Charlotte! Where are you?*

I sat up abruptly and my arms shot out like gangly gazelle legs trying to gain purchase on the slippery kitchen table. A glass half full of water was knocked onto the floor and shattered to pieces.

*Michael?* I thought, my heart beating faster than was humanly possible.

*Yes! Where are you?*

*I'm in the kitchen. Where are you?* I checked to make sure my arms were still arms and not gazelle legs; they were still the same, but riddled with anxious, gazelle-esque nerves. *You scared me!*

*Sorry. I'm outside your front door. You weren't answering.*

*Oh.* I stood up and picked my way around the shards of glass. *I think I must've fallen asleep. I'll be right there.*

*Hurry. We have to get the others.*

A cold feeling arrests my chest. *The others? What happened?*

*Um... I'll tell you when you get out here. I'm not much of a fan of this thoughtspeak stuff.*

I put my shoes on and grabbed a small backpack to keep my morphing suit in, just in case we needed it. I glanced disdainfully at the kitchen floor, a mess of littered glass and puddles of water, and decided to let it be. My dad would be home soon, and he'd wonder what happened.

*I'll play dumb and blame the cat.*

*What?* Michael said.

*Sorry. Nothing.*

I sent a quick text to my dad explaining that I was doing homework with Michael and might not be home when he got back. Then I slipped outside and greeted said study buddy, whose brows were knit in anxious worry but who put his arm around me and smiled nevertheless.

"What happened?" I asked again. We started walking down the steps.

"Remember Jackson? Well, the sonofagun just kidnapped two people - my mother and Layla - and he's holding them hostage. We don't know where, but Layla was able to call me about ten minutes ago and give me some information about the building where they're kept."

"Oh God," I whispered. "What are we going to do?"

"No idea. Layla said that my mom's there for leverage and that by trying to rescue them we'll be walking into a trap. I don't know. It's all a big mess."

"Can we call the police?"

Michael shrugged. "We should talk to the others first." He pulled me closer. "I'm glad you're okay."

I didn't say anything. I felt sick.

- - -

One hour later, the whole crew (minus Layla, of course) was gathered in Michael's living room. Neon, Dan, and Riley were researching on their laptops and phones for the possible position of the building Layla had described.

"There must be a lot about Jackson that we don't know about," Emma said. "Layla said that he's chipped - does that mean he's an animorpher too?"

"Probably," Cole said. "If so, I hope he's an animal that would be helpless and easy to defeat."

"Like a kitten?" Riley said, glancing up from her phone.

Cole laughed. "Precisely."

"The kitten of darkness is no common kitten," Neon muttered.

I was worried about Layla. What was Jackson doing to her? Had she been punished when he caught her on the phone talking to Michael?

"Layla didn't give us much to work off of," Dan said, peering intently at his laptop and scrolling through different pages.

"It was the best she could do," Jinx said, rubbing his hands together nervously. "How many lakes are in this area, anyway? I can't imagine it'd be too hard to narrow it down to the right one."

Then, at the same exact time, both Neon and Riley gasped. They looked at each other, mouths hung open. "The lake..." Riley whispered.

Neon's face spread into a triumphant grin. "By your dance studio..."



“Where you can see the abandoned warehouses across the water...”

“With the broken windows!”

They finally broke eye contact and Riley laughed joyously. Neon's face was flushed red, and his bright blue eyes were shining.

“Now, wait a minute...” Cole said, rising from his chair.

“No!” Neon exclaimed, leaping from the couch and tossing one end of his red scarf behind his shoulder. “No waiting. We have no time to waste. Riley and I know exactly where Mrs. Anthony and Layla are being held hostage, and the sooner we get there the better. Let’s go!”

- - -

Riley’s dance studio was only a few blocks from her house. We suited up and were at the banks of the lake Layla had described in less than half an hour. The water was filthy, and a thin layer of a mossy green substance coated its surface. There didn’t seem to be any fish. It smelled gross, too.

“Eutrophication at its finest,” Dan said, knowing that I’d know what he was talking about. I nodded in agreement. The industry from the nearby warehouses must have poisoned the water.

“How do we get across?” Michael asked, pacing at the edge.

“Dan and I could fly across,” Emma said. “The rest of you might have to find a way around, or else get a boat. I’m guessing that no one’s going to swim in that stuff.”

Cole was in a sulky mood, but he stepped forward. “I’ll morph and then climb a tree, and see where we can get around.”

“Good idea,” Riley said, smiling sweetly. Cole seemed to relieve a bit of his tension and smiled back before turning around and slipping into the forest.

I stuck next to Michael. The sun was steadily fading, and as usual I was getting anxious. I was also fairly hungry, having barely eaten all day. The grass at my feet was looking tasty.

Soon after, Cole returned from the forest, still in his monkey form. *We’ll need to move quickly*, he said to all of us, *but there is a way around the lake through the forest. After that we’ll have to weave between a few warehouses in order to reach the right building.* He gestured behind him. *The terrain is tough, so if you think you’d be better off in your animal form, morph.* He flicked his tail, gave a curt nod, then disappeared back into the forest.

I looked at Michael, unsure of whether or not I should morph. Unlike some of the others, I hadn’t really practiced turning into my animal. I was too scared.

“Only do what you’re comfortable with,” Michael said.

When everyone except Neon appeared to be morphing, I consented and morphed too. The change felt considerably more natural than last time, but when I tried to stand, I couldn’t. I could barely even keep my head up. The tiny horns sprouting from my skull felt terribly heavy.

*What’s the matter?* Michael asked.

*I don’t know. I’m too weak.*

Dan the eagle gestured at the grass with a wing. *Morphing takes a lot of energy. Eat something.*

*Alright, thanks. You guys go on ahead. I'll catch up.* I was embarrassed, because this same thing had happened last time at the bomb site when I was too scared to go on.

*I'll wait with you,* Michael said, and sat next to me. The rest of the animorphs went on ahead - Dan and Emma flying over the lake and everyone else going around.

I nibbled on the grass as quickly as I could, hoping desperately to get my energy back. Michael was waiting with me instead of going with the others to find his mom. He seemed miraculously patient and calm, and sat beneath the trees, pawing idly at his paintbrush tail.

The grass did wonders, and in two minutes I was on my hooves. My stomach stopped hurting, and I was able to lift my head.

*Ready?* Michael asked, rising to his paws.

*I think so.* I snatched one more mouthful of grass, feeling, in fact, quite energetic. *I'll race you!*

Without waiting for an answer, I leaped past him and bounded into the depths of the forest. Immediately I saw why Cole had warned about the terrain - the undergrowth was thick with roots and vegetation - but my body was tiny and I could weave around everything swiftly. The sound of a lion crashing loudly through the forest behind me only fueled my instinctive adrenaline. I stuck to the gradual bend of the lake, leaping and bounding this way and that, up and around the bushes and trees.



The math homework on my desk nagged at me as I ignored it, looking out at the frost collecting on my window. It was *cold* today. Even the chill inside the house was enough to make me grab a third sweater; I'd been on the edge of shivering all day.

I let out a breath and looked back down at the papers in front of me. "What is the square root of 2 to the negative 9 plus 3 power?" I stared at it. It stared back at me. "Who really needs to know math anyway?" I closed the textbook, then groaned. *Can't ignore it forever.*

I flipped the book back open and took a look at the next question. *If  $x^2 + 2x - 35 = 0$  then  $x = ?$*  My eye twitched. I was going to be here all day, and the headache lingering in the back of my skull didn't help anything.

Finally, I sighed, picked up my phone and called Emma. She was practically a math genius.

"Gwen? What's up?"

"Hey, Emma. Are you busy? I could really use some help on this math homework. Mrs. Tangeman is kicking my butt this semester."

"Sorry, I can't come over tonight," she said, a bit rushed.

"Oh. Are you studying with Dan again?"

"Not exactly... Something happened."

I sat up a little straighter in my chair. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Jackson kidnapped Layla and Michael's mom and we're going to try and get them back."

"He what?" I blurted out. "Why didn't you tell me? I can help."

Emma hesitated. "I... didn't know if you would want to know. Since, you know, you're not like us."

Her words took me by surprise. When I didn't say anything for several seconds, she added: "I didn't mean it like that. I just... I didn't know if you wanted to be a part of this or not. We weren't really given a choice, but you were. I didn't know where you stood."

A sharp pain shot through my head and I squeezed my eyes shut. Eventually, it subsided. "It sounds like you could use all the help you can get," I said, pushing her words aside. "Do you know where they are?"

"I'll text you the address. Come as soon as you can."

◆◆◆◆

The engine of my grandmother's old Saab rattled as I drove through the abandoned warehouse yard, following the pin on my phone's map that drew ever closer. The car had never liked the cold, even when it was new. I just hoped it would hold out until I found the others. Getting

stranded in an abandoned industrial complex in twenty degree weather wasn't exactly what I had in mind for my Tuesday night.

Finally, I rolled past a row of outdoor storage units and spotted them. Everyone but Layla. *Everyone but me.*

I pulled in next to them. Michael and Jinx's eyes flashed catlike until they realized it was me, and they faded back to their normal colors.

"Hey," I said, closing the car door as quietly as I could.

"Are you okay?" Emma asked me. "You look pale."

"I'm fine," I said. I tried to sound upbeat, but despite the three sweaters and winter jacket I wore, I was still on the edge of shivering. I hadn't been sure until then, but I definitely had a fever. "What's the plan?"

"We don't know a lot," Michael said. "Just that Jackson has them on the second or third floor and that he has some kind of weird chip in his neck. Jackson apparently wants all of us, so if we go waltzing in there, we're gonna be walking into a trap. We need to be fast and quiet."

"I can fly around the building and try to pinpoint exactly where they are," Emma suggested.

We all agreed that it was a good idea, and within moments, she had taken flight, soaring high into the winter air. I had seen a few of them morph by then, but it still never ceased to amaze me.

We waited five minutes, then ten, then fifteen... and there was no sign of her anywhere.

I let out a worried breath, the cold causing it to come out in a white plume. "Something's wrong. She should be back by now."

"I'll go in," Neon suggested. "They won't even see me."

"I'm not so sure that's the best idea," I said.

He scoffed at me. "You think I was asking permission? Pssh... I thought you minions would have known me well enough by now to know that I don't take orders from anyone but me." Before anyone could say anything else, he morphed into his tiny kitten form and took off into the warehouse.

We waited another twenty minutes. No sign of Neon or Emma. The sun was setting, the air was growing colder, and we were running out of time.

Riley rubbed her hands up and down her arms to warm herself. Her nose and cheeks were a bright shade of pink and at this point, I wasn't the only one shivering. "What do we do now?"

"I say we go in. All of us," Jinx said.

"Are you crazy?" Dan looked at him with disbelief. "Michael said we'd be walking into a trap. Jackson already got Emma and Neon. What happens if he gets all of us?"

"Every time Jackson has gotten one of us, we were alone. If we go in as a group, we'll overpower him."

"Assuming he's alone," I pointed out. "We don't know how many people are working with him."

Michael crossed his arms over his chest. "Layla didn't say anything about anyone being there but him."

"The fact is, we don't *know* anything for sure," I said.

"And we never will." Jinx was growing agitated. "Unless we go in there! We can't sit out here forever. We'll freeze to death. We have to do *something*."

"I agree. I'm tired of waiting around," Cole said, stepping up next to Jinx.

"But what if they capture all of us?" Charlotte asked. It was clear the idea made her nervous, but I guess that wasn't saying much.

"They can try." There was determination in Cole's voice. He and Jinx had made up their minds, and there was no changing them now. And the truth was, if anyone was going to go in, then we all needed to.

"Okay." Michael reached into his duffle bag and pulled out a walkie talkie. He started tossing them, one by one, to each of us. "We go in. We each get a walkie talkie. We'll split into three groups of two and have someone stand guard. The second one of us sees someone, *anyone* we let the others know. Got it?"

I catch the walkie talkie in my hand and give him a nod. "Got it."



We slipped as quietly as we could through the metal back door. The second we got inside, we were forced to make a decision: left or right? Michael, Charlotte, Dan and Riley took the right. Cole stood guard outside, which meant Jinx and I had to take the left.

The bottom level was a maze of hallways and empty rooms. It was dark and dusty, with little in the way of furniture. And no signs of anyone. We found the stairwell and headed up to the second level.

"You seem tense," I told him, noticing how rigid he held himself. Step by step, we made the incline upwards.



"Yeah, we're in a building with a psychopath who is out to get us and has already taken three of us. Aren't you a little tense?"

"Of course I am. But that's not what I meant. You were unusually on edge before Emma even took off. You weren't even this tense at the lake house."

"What is your point?" Jinx asked, growing agitated.

"You care about her, don't you? Like, a lot."

"Who?"

I rolled my eyes at him. Guys could be really dense sometimes when it came to girls. Finally, we made it onto the second story landing. "I'm talking about Lay--"

The instant Jinx stepped through the door, something sparked and he doubled over in pain. *A taser*. He collapsed on the ground, his body twitching with electricity, to reveal Jackson standing behind him.

"You guys aren't very smart, are you?" he said, a taunting smile widening on his face. He held up a list and made a couple checkmarks on the paper. "With you and Jinx, that makes five. You guys are making this too easy."

On the other side of the room, Michael and Riley stumbled in through a doorway. I quickly turned my eyes away from them. Couldn't let Jackson know they were here, too. So, I played along.

"What do you want, Jackson? Who are you working for?"

"Well, isn't that just the popular question." Michael and Riley began creeping up behind him. I focused my eyes harder on Jackson. "You'll find that out any minute now. You're too late

to save your friends. You have two choices. The easy way, where you let me tie you up without struggle, or the hard way, where I have to taser you just like your friend Jinx, here."

"You don't want me. *Trust me*. I'm not like them."

"Oh, is that so? Well, you know what I just heard? *That you want it the hard way*."

Just as Jackson lunged for me, the taser sparking in his hand, Michael grabbed him from behind and yanked him backwards. He stumbled and lost his balance, falling back onto the concrete floor. The taser clattered from his hand.

Michael yanked Jackson onto his stomach and dived on top of him. "Now! Do it now!"

Riley pulled a pocket knife out of her boot and brought the blade to hover above the lump in the back of Jackson's neck. She hesitated, turning the blade this way and that, trying to figure out how best to do it.

"Riley!" Michael yelled.

She gritted her teeth and dragged the blade against the back of Jackson's neck. He yelled at her to stop, but she ignored him and teased the chip out from under his skin. It was at least twice the size of our trackers. *What the hell is that?*

Riley flung the chip on the ground and stomped on it, breaking it into pieces.

Michael and Riley stepped away from Jackson, both breathing hard. I circled around to stand beside them. Jackson flew up off the ground and brought his hand around to the back of his neck. "What have you done?!"

At first he was angry. He staggered towards Michael, then lost his balance and fell onto his knees. Suddenly weak and emotional, he looked up at us, completely hopeless. "What have you done?" A tear streamed down his cheek.

Another moment, then his face twisted into something outraged and he started slamming his fist into the ground, over and over again. The three of us took a step back. Finally he stopped, though his fist was now bloody. He just stared down at the ground, swaying a little on his knees.

"Jackson..?" Michael tried carefully. He continued to stare down at the ground for a moment, then he looked up at us and laughed. His laughs turned into cries, then his cries turned back into laughs. I'd thought that Jackson wasn't entirely sane before all this happened, but now I was certain that he'd lost his mind.

Suddenly, all of our walkie talkies came to life. "Guys, you need to get out of there!" Cole yelled at us. "Japanese soldiers coming in after you. There's dozens of 'em, pouring in through the back door. They have guns!"

"Shit." Michael pulled his walkie talkie off of his hip, but before he could respond, Jackson leaped for him and slammed him into the concrete wall behind us. The walkie talkie flew out of his hand.

"It's all your fault!" he yelled. "You've ruined everything!"

*CRASH!* The windows on the far wall exploded toward us. Men on ropes in US Military uniforms. "EVERYONE DOWN ON THE GROUND!"

We all put our hands up. Then the Japanese soldiers crashed into the room from the stairwell and opened fire. We all scattered, heading for whichever door was closest, whichever direction was safest.

The gunfire was deafening. I fled into an empty adjoining room and before I knew it, we were all separated. I looked around the room to find that it was a dead end. The only way to leave was the way I came in. *Dammit!*

I looked all around until I spotted an air duct in the ceiling. I pulled a table away from the wall and positioned it directly under the vent, then pulled myself on top and undid the screws holding the vent in place.

The duct was big enough, so I hoisted myself inside and picked a direction. It was tight and dusty, but if my choices were this or going into a war zone between US and Japanese military, I would have chosen this any day.

Finally, I hit another opening: the stairwell. I peered out to see that it was now void of Japanese militia and shoved the vent open with my feet. I jumped down, my shoes hitting the concrete hard. The door flew open and I jumped. Jinx stumbled through it and slammed it closed behind him, falling against the door a bit.

"Dammit Jinx, you scared me half to death!" I yelled at him.

"Sorry," he said weakly.

"Are you okay?"

He looked down at his twitching hands, then sandwiched them under his arms. "I'll be fine. What the hell is going on?"

"I don't know. But for now, the most important thing is rescuing our friends. We'll have time to figure everything out later."

He nodded, and together we darted up the stairs to the third level. I flung the door open and took in the room around me. Unlike the first two stories, this one was a giant open room. No hallways, no rooms. Just one completely empty level.

I took a few steps into the room, looked to my left and sighed with utter relief. Layla, Emma, Neon and Michael's mom. All tied to chairs and accounted for.

"Gwen!" Emma yelled.

I didn't hesitate for a second. One by one, I untied them.

"What's going on down there?" Layla asked weakly, pulling her arms back into her lap once Jinx had untied them.

"Japanese... Americans... Just about everyone." I pulled my walkie talkie off my hip.

"Cole, what's your twenty?"

The walkie talkie crackled to life. "I'm at the front of the building. There's another door, and I think I have a way for us to get the hell out of here."

"Okay, keep an eye out for us." I velcro'd the walkie talkie back onto my hip and turned to Emma. "The safest way out for you is to fly out the way you came in. Cole is at the--"

"I can't," she said, shaking. "Jackson injected us with something. We can't morph for at least twelve hours."

"The only way down it through the stairwell then. We need to get going."

Just as we all turned to head for the door, a Japanese soldier came through and hoisted a gun at us. He yelled something in Japanese. Before we could react, Lion Michael tackled him to the ground from behind. The soldier hit his head on the ground and went out cold. Then Lion Michael looked up at us and morphed into his human self, the tight morphing suit clinging to his athletic build. *God, he's so hot.*

Mrs. Anthony stared at him, speechless. He stared back at her, his lips quivering with unspoken words.

"M-Michael..?" she said.

"I'll explain everything. But for right now, we need to go," he told her sincerely. She continued to stare at him.

Cole came through on the radio and said, "I've got Riley. More cars are pulling up. Reinforcements I think. Where the hell are you guys?"

I pulled on Mrs. Anthony's arm, prompting her forward. "Michael and Jinx, get them down to Cole at the front entrance. I'll look for Dan and Charlotte."

They nodded and everyone started down the stairs. I turned and headed up to the forth level. Military soldiers ran past me, down the stairs, not even noticing I was there. We may have been the reason the US and Japanese military came in the first place, but now there was so much chaos that they barely noticed we were there.

My headache spiked again and I stumbled into the railing. I took my head in my hands and gritted my teeth until it subsided. Finally it did, but then I started shivering again. *What is going on with me?*

I heard a crash from above, reminding me of my mission. Putting my uneasiness aside, I stumbled up the rest of the way and flung the door open just in time to see Jackson grab Dan and slam him down on a table. The wooden legs gave out and he crashed to the ground on a pile of splintering wood.

Jackson spun around when he heard the door creak open. Something wild flashed in his eyes when he saw me. "You! This is all your fault!" He charged for me and shoved his hands into my shoulders. It took me off my feet and I tumbled back down the flight of stairs.

I slammed into the wall at the bottom. Everything hurt. My pulse spiked, my heart pounded. Suddenly, my headache exploded. I shivered uncontrollably while my skin felt like it

was on fire. I looked down at my arm only to find grey fur spreading down my skin. The nails on my fingers turned black and I felt some of my teeth start to lengthen. Then the world swam out of focus.



*The concrete was cold against its paws, the layout of the building confusing to its wild, nature-born instincts. But for some reason, it had a sense of urgency. And somehow, without being told, without seeing its own reflection, it knew it was a wolf.*

*Step by step, the wolf made its way up the stairwell. When it made it to the top, the scene in front of it was both confusing and familiar. A human with pale skin and black hair holding another, slightly younger human against the wall, his nimble fingers wrapped around the other's throat.*

*The wolf wasn't sure why, but it felt the intense need to attack the human who pinned the other against the wall. The impulse was too strong. This human had to be stopped.*

*The wolf bared its teeth, letting a growl rise up from deep within its throat. The human turned around. "This just keeps getting better!" he yelled, pulling a switchblade out of his pocket and flipping it open.*

*The knife did not scare the wolf. It only made its desire to attack this human more intense. Now, this human was a threat.*

*The wolf charged for the man. Sprung off of its muscular haunches and hit the man full force. A sharp pain dug deep into the wolf's shoulder. The knife. But it hardly cared... Hardly*

*noticed. The man fell backwards onto the concrete, hard. He laughed in the wolf's face. The wolf stood on his chest and without a second of hesitation, went for his throat. Its strong jaws were no match for the man, and within seconds, his laughter died with him.*

*By now, the other human had slumped against the wall, exhausted. His face was bloody, which only made it harder for the wolf to resist attacking him, too. "Gwen...?" he said hesitantly.*

*The wolf growled. Took a step closer to the boy. For some reason, the wolf felt conflicted about this human. Like something deep in the back of its mind was telling it not to attack him.*

*Someone flew up the stairs behind them and stopped when they got to the top. The wolf spun around to see another human. A girl, with blonde hair and glasses.*

*"Charlotte, it's Gwen," the boy said quickly.*

*Her eyes widened. "Gwen?"*

*The wolf didn't know what these humans were talking about, or who 'Gwen' was. But it did know that there were now humans on either side of it. It was cornered. These humans were most definitely a threat.*

*So the wolf ignored the little voice in the back of its mind that said these humans could be trusted, and it stalked towards the girl, baring its teeth.*

*The girl put her hands out and took a step back. "Gwen, it's Charlotte."*

*The wolf continued on.*

*The girl took another step back, bumping into the metal railing behind her. "Gwen, please..." she pleaded.*

*These words meant nothing. Each step brought the wolf closer and closer.*



*Finally, the girl yelled, "Gwen! Stop!" The sudden sternness and volume in the girl's voice reached something deep in the wolf's mind, a part the wolf hardly knew was there. It was as if it could hear the girl's voice both inside and outside of its head.*

*The wolf stopped, its face softening to no longer bare teeth. It felt like it was waking from a dream, like it was breaking the surface of what had seemed like a bottomless ocean only moments ago. It felt weak on its paws. Its mind slipped as it stumbled into a wall. The girl took a step closer, a look of worry drawing upon her face, but the wolf could only acknowledge it for a moment before the world fell into blackness.*



The world swam back into focus, and with it, Charlotte and Dan standing over me. Everything felt hazy and the pain in my shoulder was agonizing. Though, oddly, the headache I'd been battling all day was completely gone.

I looked down at myself to find that I was curled into the corner of the room with Charlotte's coat thrown over me. A deep wound in my shoulder made sense of the pain. And beneath the coat, nothing.

"W--what happened?" I asked.

Charlotte and Dan both looked at me with wide eyes. "You morphed, Gwen," she said.

At first, the words didn't compute. *That's not possible. The experiment didn't work on me.*

Then I remembered seeing the fur spreading over my skin, and now not wearing any clothes. *Oh my god. The experiment did work on me.*

"What happened to Jackson?" I asked. A weight seemed to settle on their shoulders the moment I asked. "Is he dead?"

"Yes," Charlotte said carefully.

"How..?"

Dan hesitated, his eyes filled with concern. "You... killed him, Gwen."

Dan looked over his shoulder and I followed his gaze to see Jackson's lifeless body sprawled out on the concrete floor. Blood stained his shirt and pooled on the ground beneath his neck and throat. The blade of a knife glinted in his hand.

I felt like I couldn't breath. "I attacked him..." I said quietly.

"No. The wolf attacked him," Charlotte tried to tell me. "It wasn't *you* you Gwen. Michael tried to attack me the first time he morphed. It wasn't his fault, and this wasn't your fault, either."

*The wolf attacked him.*

"I turned into a... wolf?" Suddenly, my breaths came in rapid gasps. I was having a full blown panic attack.

Shouting rose up from the lower levels. The sound of glass breaking echoed from a nearby room. More troops were coming through the fourth-story windows, but I hardly noticed.

Charlotte bent down in front of me. "Gwen. We have to go. We're going to figure this out, but not now. Take a deep breath. You have to pull yourself together."

I focused all of my energy on calming my heart rate. On taking slow, deep breaths. And somehow, I managed to pull myself back together, if only a little. I gave Charlotte a nod, then she and Dan helped me up.

I shook all over, but it wasn't from the fever anymore. I put Charlotte's coat on and zipped up the front. Fortunately, it was a long coat and nearly went down to my knees.

I took one last look at Jackson, then we headed down the stairs. I felt sick, and my legs were barely sturdy enough to carry me down the stairs just as the troops burst into the room. *I turned into a wolf. I turned into a wolf and I killed someone.*

*I killed someone.*

By the time we made it down to the second level, gunfire rang out all around us. American and Japanese military ran up and down the stairs, guns hoisted and yelling at one another. We kept our heads down and tried not to bring attention to ourselves, and fortunately, the soldiers were so distracted by their immediate threats that we managed to slip through the cracks.

We found the front door and Charlotte held it open for us. Cole whistled at us from nearby and we spotted him crouched behind some dumpsters.

"It's about time," he said. "I was starting to think something happened to you guys in there."

He stood up and led us around the dumpsters to an open manhole in the ground. One by one, we climbed down and landed in the shallow sewer water. Everyone was there waiting for us. Layla leaned against the wall, shivering despite the fact that Jinx had given her his jacket. Mrs. Anthony stood a few feet away from the others, but her eyes never left Michael.

Emma looked at me when I made it down. "Gwen, are you okay?"

I nodded, but honestly, everything felt like a blur.

"Did you guys see Jackson anywhere?" Michael asked.

"He's dead, Michael," I told him sadly. He looked taken aback, and his eyes filled with sorrow. Jackson may have caused all this, but it wasn't his fault, and he was Michael's friend.

"I'm so sorry."

He took a couple steps away, then nodded and started down the tunnel. "We should get moving," he said. "It's not safe here."

Everyone picked themselves up and followed after him. Layla looked weak, probably from whatever Jackson drugged her with, and Dan was slower than usual, sore from the beating he took from Jackson. But no one but me had the guilt weighing on them of taking a life. And it wasn't some Japanese soldier either. It was a kid, and it was Michael's friend.

And once Michael finds out it was me who killed him, he'll probably never speak to me again. How can we go back to school after something like this? How can we go back to normal?

Step by step, we splashed through the icky water of the sewer. Away from the guns and the Japanese assassins, away from the abandoned warehouse, away from the memories that will haunt us and scar us for a long time to come. The important thing is that we got Layla back. And as we headed down the sewer tunnels, we were all together. *All ten of us*. The Animorphers. No matter what happens in the future, as long as we're all together, we'll make it through.

One step at a time.



"All right guys. This is you." The stage manager looks down at his clipboard, then slaps a sign on the dressing room door that says *Stint With Fiction*. "You're going on at 5:30pm."

The manager hurries away as I, Riley, and the rest of Stint With Fiction heads through the door into the dressing room. It's surprisingly large, with an eclectic mix of couches and chairs. One side of the room has a long counter attached to the wall with mirrors bordered with lightbulbs hanging on the wall. Band posters of all shapes, sizes, and colors are plastered to the other three walls, and surround sound speakers have been set up, allowing us to hear what's happening on stage.

The floor is black and sticky, the couches are stained and ripped, and the parts of the walls that haven't been covered in posters are full of sharpie scribbles and lipstick lip-prints.

It's better than I ever could have expected.

The drummer, bass player and pianist start setting down their instrument cases and making themselves comfortable on the various couches. Riley looks around the room with stars in her eyes, then she turns to me, grabs onto my shoulders, and shakes them. "This is so *exciting!*"

"So you're not nervous?" I ask.

"Nope, cool as a cucumber," she says proudly. Then she gives me a look. "You know your part for the song, right?"

"Yep. We're doing Battle Scars, right?"

Riley's eyes widen. "No... We're doing Long Live. Please tell me you learned the right song."

I smile. "I know we're doing Long Live. I was just testing your nerves."

Riley sighs. "You can be really annoying. You know that, right?"

I just shrug.

Riley starts walking around the room, looking at all the posters and stops when she finds a wall that is covered with band names written in sharpie from all the bands that have performed here over the years. "No way..." She takes a step closer to the wall. "Steel Burn. Below Friction. Tsunami Of The Stolen. They've all played here." Riley looks over her shoulder at me. "They probably all got their start here. Just like we are." She turns back to the wall and brushes her hand over the words. "You can just smell the dreams that have come true here."

I scrunch up my nose. "I'm pretty sure that's not what that smell is."

"Oh, stop being so cynical," Riley says, turning back to me. "This is the first day of the rest of our *lives*. And one day, Stint With Fiction is going to be on that wall."

I've got to admit... That would be pretty cool.

Suddenly, the door opens and Emma and Gwen come inside. "Emmy!" Riley hurries over and gives her a big hug.

"I was afraid for a minute there that I wouldn't find you guys. There's like, a million doors back here," Emma says. "So, are you guys ready? Do you have everything you need? Because I've got extra guitar picks and make up and ear plugs..." Emma starts going through her bag.

"Emma..." Riley says, but Emma ignores her.

"Snacks in case someone's blood sugar drops, an extra pair of clothes, the music for the song in case anyone forgets it..."

"Emma?"

"Extra guitar strings..." Emma looks up at me. "You brought your guitar, right? Because Riley can't sing Long Live with an electric guitar backing her up."

"As the electric guitar player, I swear I didn't forget my electric guitar," I assure her.

"Emma..." Riley whines.

Emma looks over at her. "What?"

"Calm down. You're not even going up on stage," she says. "Just, remember to breathe, all right?"

Emma lets out a long breath. "Right. Sorry..."

Just then, the stage manager pokes his head in. "Five minute warning, guys."

I press my eyebrows down as I look at the watch on my wrist. "It's only five to five. You said we weren't going on until 5:30pm?"

"Change of plans. You guys are the first act now. Will you be ready in time?"

I give him a quick nod. "Yeah, we'll be there."

"Awesome. Thanks guys." The manager ducks his head back out and the rest of the band starts collecting their instruments.

"Good luck!" Gwen says. "Emma and I will be in the wings cheering you on."

Gwen whisks Emma back out the door before the change can make her any more anxious than she already is. I turn to Riley. "Are you good?"

Riley stares at the door, unblinking. Her breathing is quicker than it was before. "We're going on first?"

"Yep. Isn't that a good thing? We'll be the first impression the judges have."

"We'll also be the band that's least fresh in the judges minds. And besides that, *we'll be the first impression.*"

"So?" I ask.

"So... My voice will be the first voice anyone hears. It's a lot of pressure. What if I sing badly?"

"Riley..." I walk up to her and put my hands on her shoulders. "In couple weeks I've known you, I've never heard you sing badly. Even when you fainted off the stage, it was a really graceful fall."

"That's not helpful," she says. The rest of the band starts heading out the door.

"You guys coming?" the drummer asks.

"Yeah, right behind you," I say, then turn back to Riley. "You are a born performer. You belong up there. You're going to do great."

I put my hand on Riley's back and guide her toward the door. She starts walking, but then she groans and stumbles into the wall.

"Riley?" I ask, concerned.



"Yeah, I'm good. I'm good. I just got dizzy for a second." She pushes away from the wall and starts towards the door again, then she lets out a cry and grabs her head. She falls against the wall and slides down to the floor.

I slide down onto my knees next to her, my heart starting to pound. "Riley, are you okay?"

She puts her head back against the wall and groans. "Something's wrong."

"Okay, okay. Here, let's get you some help." I take her hand and my eyes widen when I notice the tan fur spreading across her skin. "Riley, you're morphing. You have to stop yourself."

She grits her teeth, which now have long Lynx canines, and squeezes her eyes shut.

Just then, the speakers in the wall crackle to life. "Welcome everyone to the 2056 Battle of the Bands competition! Eight bands are competing today for the grand prize. First, let's introduce the judges!"

I look back down at Riley to see the fur continuing to spread down her arms. She opens her eyes and gasps, "I can't. I can't stop it."

*Oh boy. My breathing quickens. This is the worst possible time for this to happen. What are we supposed to do now?*

"Okay, okay. Ah... I will be right back," I assure her. I jump to my feet and put my hands out. "Don't go anywhere."

She gives me a look, then an uncontrollable spasm causes her to double over.

I run down the backstage hallway as fast as I can and slide to a halt as soon as I see Emma and Gwen standing in the wings.

"Where have you guys been! You're going on any minute!" Gwen says.

I shake my head, trying to catch my breath. "Riley's morphing."

Emma's eyes widen. "What?"

"She's morphing. She can't go on. Emma, you have to take her place."

Emma's mouth falls open, horror flooding her face. "Wha-- I.. I can't!"

I grab Emma by the shoulders. "Emma, there's no time! You have to go on for Riley.

We'll try to be here for the second song. But for now, you have to go on." The announcer finishes introducing the judges and the crowd cheers. I let go of Emma and head back for the dressing room. "Good luck!"

"What about the electric guitar?" Gwen yells after me.

"Sing another song!" I yell back, then sprint back down the hall.

Hesitantly, I slowly open the dressing room door. I peek around to see that Riley is no longer where she'd been sitting, though the clothes she'd worn over her jumpsuit now lay in a shredded pile of fabric. "Riley...?"

Cautiously, I open the door further and slip inside... and that's when I hear the growling from behind me.

I slowly turn around to find myself staring into the eyes of a Lynx... a *Riley* Lynx.

"Riley?" I say again, but this time, Lynx Riley swipes at me, roaring in warning. Right now, it's not Riley. It's an angry Lynx that wants to know why it's trapped in a Battle of the Bands dressing room.

Have you ever heard an angry Lynx roar? It's horrifying.

"Riley... Riley, it's me. Cole," I say calmly. Maybe I can bring her back, just like Layla did when I turned into a monkey in the principal's office. "I'm not going to hurt you. I want to help you."

The lynx seems to calm down a little. She sets her paw back down, and takes a curious step towards me.

"From Silver Creek High, everyone put your hands together for... Stint. With. Fictionnnnn!" The announcer blares over the speaker.

Bad timing.

Lynx Riley roars and lunges for me. It knocks me off my feet and a second before she can go for my face, I grab a drumstick off of the counter and shove it against her neck, distancing her face from mine.

Soft piano and cello music starts playing through the speakers. *She did it. Emma went on.*

I force Lynx Riley off of me and I scramble back to my feet. "Riley, listen to me! This isn't you. Try to remember who you are."

Finally, Emma starts singing.

*You should've been there.*

*Should've burst through the door with that 'baby I'm right here' smile.*

*And it would've felt like, a million little shining stars had just aligned.*

*And I would've been so happy.*

Lynx Riley charges for me and I run towards the bathroom. I burst through the door just before she gets there, and manage to close it behind me.

The door rattles with Lynx Riley on the other side. *What do I do now?* "Listen to me! Remember, you're Riley! We're at Battle of the Bands."

*And it was like slow motion, standing there in my party dress.*

The rattling stops, and for a few terrifying seconds, everything is completely silent except for Emma's voice coming over the speakers.

Slowly, I creek the door back open. Trying to get her to remember isn't working. *Why did she turn?* My eyes widen. She started morphing right after our time slot was changed. Her breathing had quicken, her pulse had raised... I need to calm her down.

*And the hours pass by.*

*Now I just wanna be alone, but your close friends always seem to know when there's something really wrong.*

I step back out into the dressing room, and for a moment, I don't see her. I slowly move further into the room and find her sniffing around the edge of the furniture.

*And they're all laughing and asking me about you, but there was one thing missing.*

*And that was the moment I knew.*

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a heavy black folded up curtain sitting on one of the tables. Slowly, I grab it and unfold it, then take quiet steps towards her. Just as she turns her head to look at me, I toss the curtain on top of her. Then I slide down onto the ground and wrap my arms around her to keep her still.

*What do you say when tears are streaming down your face in front of everyone you know?*

At first, Lynx Riley lashes around, trying to escape. Eventually, she starts to calm down. We stay like this for a good fifteen seconds before I feel the Lynx start to change shape. *Thank god.* Finally, I see a hand reach out from under the curtain.

"Cole?"

I sigh, completely exhausted.

Riley grabs the curtain and pulls it away from her head. "What happened?"

I quickly stand up, getting off of her, and wipe my hands on my jeans. "You morphed into a Lynx."

Riley looks down at her jumpsuit, then back up at me. "What about Battle of the Bands? Did we give up our slot?"

I shake my head. "Not exactly." Then I nod towards the speakers.

*And they're all standing around me singing "Happy Birthday To You."*

*But there was one thing missing, and that was the moment I knew.*

Riley's eyes widen as she pulls herself up from the floor. "Emma?"

I nod. "If you're up for it, Stint With Fiction has another song and Emma's song is almost over."

"Yeah, let's go." We both hurry for the door and jog down the back hallway to come into the wings again.

Gwen sighs when she sees us. "Thank god."

We walk into the wings, watching Emma finish her song onstage. She's actually pretty good. She has a nice voice.

*You called me later and said, "I'm sorry, I didn't make it."*

*And I said, "I'm sorry too."*

*And that was the moment I knew.*

Emma plays the last chord on the piano. The crowd cheers for her, and she looks out at them, amazed.

"Go, Emma!" Riley shouts next to me. Emma whirls around to look at us, and she lets out such a relieved breath that she looks like she's going to collapse.

I look over at Riley. "Ready?"

She nods. "Ready."



It's finally here. The Battle of the Bands. I don't think I've ever seen Riley so excited, and it's crazy to think that this is her chance. It took so much hard work for her to get here, and it's truly gonna pay off.

With everything going on, I almost didn't come. Mr. Neil has not approached me yet since that night in the woods, but it could be coming any day now. Just the memory of our conversation that night sends goosebumps across my arms.

*If you do not comply, I will kill those you love... We will be watching you miss Tanner*

But not even threats could keep me away today. I stand with Gwen backstage releasing my nerves by biting at my fingernails.

"Hey Em... You okay?" Gwen asks out of nowhere.

"Oh uh yeah. Just nervous for the band." I smile excitedly.

"No, I meant because of the past few days... You seem off."

"Oh that. Well I-" My voice is cut off by the loud voice of the announcer echoing through the venue. "Later." I mouth to Gwen. She stares me down with her "this isn't over" glare.

"Welcome everyone to the 2056 Battle of the Bands competition! Eight bands are competing today for the grand prize. First, let's introduce the judges!" I watch the stage intently avoiding Gwen's gaze when Cole quickly runs up out of breath.

"Where have you guys been! You're going on any minute!" Gwen says.

"Riley's morphing." He gasps. My eyes go wide.

"What?" I ask quickly.

"She's morphing. She can't go on. Emma, you have to take her place."

*What!?*

"Wha-- I.. I can't!" I say as my stomach drops. Suddenly Cole grabs me by the shoulders with a firm grip.

"Emma, there's no time! You have to go on for Riley. We'll try to be here for the second song. But for now, you have to go on." I try to contradict him but the clapping of the audience muffles any noise I try to make. Cole starts off back towards the dressing rooms. "Good luck!" He yells.

"What about the electric guitar?" Gwen yells after him.

"Sing another song!" He yells back. I quickly turn to Gwen my eyes filling up with tears.

"Gwen...Gwen I can't." My hands are now shaking uncontrollably. She grabs them tight.

"Emma. You've got this. Just play that song you showed me the other day. You have to do it for Riley." I close my eyes tight. "Em. You've got support here. You have me back here, and you have friends in the audience like Layla, Jinx, Dan, and even Neon. You're not gonna be alone up there."

"That's the problem. There's s-so many people. I c-cant."



“Yes you can!” She says grabbing my face. “Just imagine that you’re flying. No one is in the audience. You’re alone, and it’s just you and that piano. You’ve got this. You’ve got more musical talent in your fingers than I have in my whole body Em. Just breathe and go... For Riley.”

“For Riley.” I whisper.

"From Silver Creek High, everyone put your hands together for... Stint. With. Fictionnnnn!" The air leaves my chest, and Gwen squeezes my hand tightly. I take a deep breath, and walk onto the stage. The lights are bright and the audience is clapping. When I take my place at the piano the audience becomes silent except for the few whispers of audience members who did not expect me. I shut my eyes tightly cutting out any distractions.

*You are alone. You are flying.*

I place my fingers gently on the keys, and begin playing the soft melody. With one last deep breath I take the terrifying plunge into my deepest fear. The lyrics are mine, and they flow easily.

*You should've been there.*

*Should've burst through the door with that 'baby I'm right here' smile.*

*And it would've felt like, a million little shining stars had just aligned.*

*And I would've been so happy.*

*You are alone. You are flying.*

*And it was like slow motion, standing there in my party dress.*

Almost like a movie images begin to appear in my mind. All of them relating to everything that has happened these past couple of weeks. I see the experiments, and my friends etched in fear.

*And the hours pass by.*

*Now I just wanna be alone, but your close friends always seem to know when there's something really wrong.*

I see Ryker's body still in a hospital bed. I see my mom not sleeping to provide for me. I see pill bottles stacked on my bedside table.

*And they're all laughing and asking me about you, but there was one thing missing.*

*And that was the moment I knew.*

I see Mr. Neil's face that night in the woods. The barrel of a gun pointed at my head. I see us running for our lives from gunshots.

*What do you say when tears are streaming down your face in front of everyone you know?*

I see Riley and everyone's expressions the night my secret was revealed. I see the hurt and confusion.

*And they're all standing around me singing "Happy Birthday To You."*

*But there was one thing missing, and that was the moment I knew.*

And then suddenly, I see Riley smiling and hanging out in the auditorium before school. I see Gwen laughing so hard tears stream down her face while watching rom coms. I see Dan's warm face the night he found me, and the way it felt to almost kiss him. I see my friends and the happiness we bring each other.

*You called me later and said, "I'm sorry, I didn't make it."*

*And I said, "I'm sorry too."*

*And that was the moment I knew.*

I smile as the last chord seems to drip from my fingers. Then before I can even open my eyes, people have already started clapping. It's like a dream, and for once I don't want to wake up.

"Go, Emma!" I smile brightly when I hear Riley's voice offstage. I turn to look at her, tears streaming down my face. I wipe them away quickly, and turn back to the audience. After a moment or so, I run to my friends off stage, and grabbed them in a group hug.

"I knew you could do it." Gwen whispers in my ear.

"I'm so proud of you Emmy!" Riley says smiling.

"That was kind of...amazing." I say with a gasp. We all laugh.

"Ready?" Cole asks pulling from the hug and turning to Riley.

"Ready." She says determined. They run onto the stage with the rest of Stint With Fiction's members. Riley takes her place at the microphone.

"Sorry about our little...delay guys, but can I get another hand for our lovely opening act?" The crowd begins clapping again. "Thanks Emma Tanner!" Riley smiles quickly at me in the wings, and then looks to the band. The members nod, and the drummer lifts his sticks.

"1..2...1. 2. 3." The music suddenly blasts from the speakers sending the audience into a frenzy. This is so different from our school auditorium. Its real, and exciting. I watch Riley in admiration. She seriously knows how to entertain a crowd.

When the song ends the crowd goes wild. They cheer "Stint With Fiction" so loud that walls shake. The band runs off the stage in excitement. Almost immediately Cole rushes to pick up Riley and spins her in the air. He sets her down, and I swear he's gonna kiss her when one of the other band members clears their throat. They quickly pull apart both of their faces going red, and I go to hug Riley.

"That was amazing!" I yell.

"Right!?" She yells back.

"The audience loved you guys! There is no way you couldn't win!" I say excitedly.

"Although, that is a nice thought. The night is far from over Em." She smiles brightly.



The others had already gone home. Cole and I were loading the equipment onto the van. Even though there wasn't a single other person there besides us, but I could've sworn there was someone else there.

"Where's the trophy?" Cole asked, heaving an amp into the back of the van.

"I gave it to Emma." I smiled, mentally shaking the thought away. "She deserves it."

Cole nodded. "Couldn't have done it without her."

I lifted the microphone stand and set it beside the amp. "Looks like that's the last of it."

"Great." Cole pulled the keys out of the pocket of his jacket. He unlocked the car, and slid into the driver's seat. He fiddled with the ignition, trying to get the old motor to start, and I clambered into the passenger seat, turning my attention to the window. Something moved across the lot and then disappeared. A prickling sensation entered the pit of my stomach.

The car finally rumbled to life and we pulled out of the parking lot. I kept my eyes on the window. A car flicked in and out of sight in the rear-view mirror. I felt myself tense and forced myself to relax. It was a road. Cars drove on roads. Nothing out of the ordinary.

"What's got you so jumpy?"

I brought my eyes away from the window. Cole was looking at me out of the corners of his eyes, eyebrows raised. Another car pulled up beside us. I shook my head.

"Nothing. I think. Just...does something seem off to you?"

Another car, exactly the same as the other one, pulled up on our other side. He inched forward a bit. The two cars followed until we were once again matching speed. Cole glanced to both sides, then at me. He slammed his foot down on the gas and we lurched forward. The cars chased after us. The needle on the van crept up slowly. Too slowly. The other cars were barely scraping the back bumper. Cole glanced into the rear-view mirror and cursed under his breath, jerking the steering wheel. We whipped around, the tires giving an ear grating screech and sped off again, headed for a narrow sidestreet.

"Are you completely crazy?" I held up a hand before Cole could answer my question.

"That was *rhetorical*. You're going to get us both killed!"

"I know what I'm doing."

"I'm not too convinced you do, seeing as you're *driving us into an alleyway!*"

As we shot into the narrow path, the mirrors were torn from the side of the doors. Cole kept his foot on the gas. A flash of sleek metal flicked on the other end of the alley, closely followed by another flash just like it.

"Cole..."

He leaned forward, intent on the road ahead. The sides of the van sparked against the walls. Engines were roaring behind us. I twisted in my seat. One of the cars had managed to follow us through. "Cole!"

We shot out on the other side just as two other cars skidded to a stop in front of us. Cole slammed on the brakes. We lurched to a stop so fast I felt the seat belt dig a red line into my skin. Two other identical vans rolled out from the roads on either side and the one behind us stopped in front of the alley. I watched them. No one got out, and the windows were tinted. The cars themselves were small. They could probably only seat four people, but there were five of them, and if all of them had four inside, we'd still be hopelessly outnumbered. Cole and I exchanged a look.

"Were you going to say something?" He raised an eyebrow.

I nodded. "We're screwed."



The cars surround us in every direction, staring us down. Although the windows are tinted, I can just *feel* dozens of eyes locked on us.

Riley and I stare unblinking out the windshield, breathing hard. For a few agonizing seconds, nothing happens. Then, one by one, men in black suits and sunglasses start exiting their vehicles. Some of them draw handguns from a side holster.

"Out of the car with your hands up!" One of them yells, muffled through a ski mask. We stay completely still. I can barely hear him over the pounding in my ears. Finally, he hoists his gun and yells, "Now!"

Slowly, Riley and I open our doors and slip out of the car. Slam the doors closed. Put our hands up.

Four men approach us. One of them grabs my arms and starts to pull them behind my back. The second man grabs Riley. "Hey! Don't touch her!" I yell. I break free of my captors grasp, whirl around and deck him in the face. He stumbles away, but before I can make a run for Riley, two more men grab my arms and slam me down on the hood of the car.



"Cole!" she yells. I look up just in time to see them cover her mouth with a white cloth. In seconds, her legs buckle and her eyes drift closed.

I fight against the men harder, desperately trying to get out of the grasp. I hear the familiar click of handcuffs being tightened around my wrists. Then they yank me up and shove a white cloth against my own face.

The last thing I see is two men dragging Riley, unconscious, towards the back of one of their vans. Then everything goes black.

+ + +

"Cole...? Cole?" a voice echoes from a mile away.

Slowly, a fuzzy bright light pierces the blackness. I blink. The light fades and silver metal bars come back into focus, followed by the rest of the room.

Four large metal cages line the back wall in a row, each about four feet by four feet wide. On the other side of the room is a single door and a metal table, with random papers and supplies scattered around it. The ground is concrete and the lights are long and fluorescent. *Where the hell are we?*

Someone shakes my foot. I lift my head to see who it is only to have pain bounce around my skull. I lay it back down and put a hand against my forehead. "Ahh... My head."

"I was the same way when I first woke up." I realize now that it's Riley's voice.

Once the pain subsides, I slowly sit up. Everything feels like it's in a haze. I see now that Riley is in the cage directly next to mine. "Where are we?"

"I don't know," she says.

"How long have you been awake?"

"Just a couple of minutes."

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Yeah. You?"

"Never better." I crawl to the front of the cage and give the door a good shove, but it's locked with a padlock. "A padlock? Really? What do they think we are? Animals?"

Riley crawls a little closer to sit just on the other side of the bars. She gives me a serious look. "Maybe they do."

"Well, I don't think it's the Japanese. The people who took us were American," I say, plopping back down on my back.

"So now we've got two organizations after us? Fantastic..."

Suddenly, the door squeaks open and two men walk into the room. They're wearing camouflage pants, black undershirts and steel-toed boots. Hair buzzed close to their heads.

I sit up just as they make their way over to my cage and unlock it. They cuff my hands behind my back again and yank me to my feet. They lead me towards the door.

"Where are you taking me?" I ask defiantly. They don't say a word. "Where are you taking me, man?!"

I try to break free of their grasp, but one of the men shove their fist into my gut. Pain explodes from my side. I gasp for breath.

"Cole!" Riley yells. I turn to look over my shoulder. She watches me with wide eyes. "Be careful, okay?"

"I'm gonna be fine," I gasp out. "I'll be right back. I promise."

Riley nods, then the guards throw a bag over my head and force me out of the room.

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A small white room. Bright florescent lights overhead. A single metal table in the middle with two metal chairs on either side. My hands are cuffed to a bar welded into the table, forcing me to sit in a way that makes my back ache.

After what feels like an eternity, the white door opens. A man in a suit walks in with a file and a glass of water in hand. He sits down across the table from me, and slides the glass of water into my reach.

"Hello, Cole. You should drink some water. It will help the aftereffects of the chloroform wear off."

Defiantly, I slide it off the edge of the table with the back of my hand. It shatters on the pristine white floor. The water splashes the man's polished shoes. "How do you know my name?"

"I know a lot about you," the man says, "but still not as much as I would like to."

I lean forward and narrow my eyes at the man. "Who are you? FBI? CIA?"

"We're not with any government. But we're not here to talk about us. We're here to talk about you."

"Why? Why me?" I ask.

The man flips the file open and slides it across the table to me. Inside are pictures of all of us. Me, Riley, Layla, Neon, Charlotte... the whole gang. Some from school, some from home... though most from the bomb site and the lake house.

A chill runs down my spine. "You've been following us? Why?"

"Because you are very important to us."

I start to grow agitated. "*Why?*"

"You're special," the man says simply. "You and all of your friends. You can do something that no one else in the world can do. You can turn into animals."

My stomach lurches at his words. *You can turn into animals*. So, he does know.

I swallow hard and hope my surprise didn't show. Finally, in a calm voice, I say, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Something like anger flickers behind the man's eyes. He's getting frustrated with me. *Good*.

He leans forward and slaps his hand down on the metal surface. "Stop playing games. I know you know *exactly* what I'm talking about."

I lean back in my chair and cross my arms over my chest.

Agitated, the man flips the file back towards himself and looks at a paper under the pictures. "Michael Anthony, lion. Charlotte Penn, Thompson's gazelle..." As the list continues, the tighter the knots in my stomach become. "...Layla Woods, cape fox. We know this because they all morphed at Silver Creek High at one time or another. Daniel Torson, martial eagle. Emma Tanner, barn owl. We learned this at the lake house."

"Congratulations. You've acquired expert stalker status," I say. "Am I supposed to give you a little trophy now? Maybe a shiny new set of binoculars?"

The man sighs and closes the file, then brings his eyes up to meet mine. "But we still don't know what you, Gwen Sanders, Neon Kingsley, Riley West or Jinx Gray can morph into."

"Oh, well... Maybe intermediate stalker status, then."

"Let's start with you," he says, clearly ignoring me.

"I'm not like them. You've got the wrong person," I lie.

The man narrows his eyes at me. "All right, then let's start with Riley. What can she morph into?"

"I'm not going to tell you guys *anything* until you tell me who the hell you are," I growl.

"All right. Let's start over. My name is James Harrison. I work for an organization whose biggest concern right now is to keep you and the other Animorphers safe. We have been since the night you visited the bomb site," he says.

I shake my head at him. "Why? Why do you care? How do you even know about us?"

"We'd been monitoring the laboratory for some time," Harrison tells me. "When we saw you and the others go inside, we started watching you closely. There are a lot of people out there for your heads. We want to try and prevent that."

"I don't believe you. Why should I? You chase us down, chloroform us, stick us in cages like we're animals. That's not exactly a good way to earn our trust," I spit back.

"The safest way to get you here was to knock you out, and do it in a secluded area. We brought you here to get information that will help us protect you better. And believe it or not, but

you are equally as dangerous as you are valuable, and we had to bring you in in the safest way possible for everyone involved."

"I still don't believe you." I shake my head defiantly. "And I'm not going to tell you a damn thing."

+ + +

They shove me back in my cage and lock door before I can even get back my footing. I look over at Riley's cage to see that it's empty. They must be interrogating her, too. *I hope*. All the other scenarios that run through my head of where they could have taken her are much worse than what I just went through.

But I'm not going to wait around to find out what round two is, and Riley will have an easier chance of escaping while she's out. Especially since I now know that they don't know what either of us can turn into. We can use that.

I listen for a moment to make sure I can't hear anyone coming, then I close my eyes and slowly feel my clothes engulf my body, my arms become covered with fur... and the very odd feeling I will never get used to of growing twenty-inch long tail.

Finally, I crawl out of my band teeshirt and slip my tiny monkey body right through the silver bars of the cage. I hurry over to the door and jump up, my little hands just barely reaching the door handle. The door unlatches, and with all the strength in my little monkey arms, I pull the door open enough to slip through.

Next step, find a way to cause a distraction. We'll have an easier time escaping if everything is chaotic.

I look down the hall one way, then the other. The coast is clear, so I pick right and follow the maze of hallways until I come across a door that says "Control Room". Just then, someone opens the door and steps out, not even noticing I'm there. I slip into the room just before the door latches behind him.

Control panels everywhere. Lots of shiny buttons, levers and toggle switches. *This'll be fun.*

The room is empty, so I take the opportunity to jump up onto a chair, then onto one of the control panels.

One section on the panel says "Lights". One by one, I flip them all off. For a moment, everything goes pitch black, then the floodlights come on.

Near the lights is a dial that says "Electricity Wattage" and it's turned down real low. *Well, that sounds important.* I crank it all the way up.

Sparks fly from control boxes on the walls. *That can't be good.*

Finally, I find a big red button that says "Code Red". *Well, if that's not chaotic enough, I don't know what is.* With both monkey hands, I shove down the big button. Red lights start flashing, a siren starts blaring and the words "Code Red" come up on all the monitors.

*That should do it,* I think. And that's when I turn around to see two men burst through the doors, headed straight for me.



I huddled in a dark ledge just below a high window, pressing my small lynx body close to the glass. I could hear cautious footsteps creeping around the corner.

"Be careful," A voice muttered. "you know what these kids are capable of."

And that was when the lights went out. My eyes adjusted quickly to the change, but judging from the confused stumbling and shouting of "I think I got something!" and "No you don't that's me you idiot!" My pursuers weren't doing so hot.

I jumped lightly from the ledge, my paws barely making a sound on the floor, and scrambled around the next few bends in the hall before the lights came back on. After both the sound and the scent of my guards had faded, I slowed my pace and took a moment to sniff the air again. A particularly sharp scent entered my nose. It wasn't strong, but it was fresh. Cole. But the scent was different somehow, though I couldn't quite put my finger--or paw, I guess. --on what. A loud siren wailed suddenly, hitting my ears with stinging force. I flattened them against my head and kept moving, now running at top speed down the hall, following Cole's scent. The lights started flickering off and on. The only consistent source of illumination is the throbbing red lights on the ceiling that were pulsing along with the sirens. Troops came flooding into the hall, but none of them seemed to notice me. I kept bolting down the hall, belly brushing the



ground as I narrowly dodged tramping feet and weaved between legs. New scents were filtering through the air, but I kept them all at the back of my mind. Cole's scent was becoming stronger. I turned towards a door that stood ajar. A tiny monkey was sitting in a swivel chair, banging on buttons and pulling levers like a madman. It looked down at the control panel and nodded to itself, as if satisfied with its work. Probably not normal monkey behavior. A few soldiers rushed past me towards the door. They flung it open just as the monkey leapt down from the chair. The two soldiers paused for just a second, exchanged a surprised glance, and started advancing on Cole. I pounced. The first out yelped as all four of my paws hit his shoulder blades and he went tumbling to the ground. The other one yanked his gun out of its holster. I jumped out of the way the same instant he squeezed the trigger. His partner cried out as the projectile entered his shoulder. A small silver dart.

*Tranquilizers? Why wouldn't they just shoot normal bullets?*

The remaining gunman shot again. I scrabbled out of the way and behind the chair. I opened my mouth a little, tasting the air. His scent was coming from the roof now. I looked up. Cole was hanging from one of the metal rafters above the gunman. I shook my head vigorously. Cole nodded with the same energy. I reached out to him mentally.

*Cole, if you move an inch from that spot I swear I will eat you.*

He stayed.

The gunman was creeping closer, gun held rigidly in front of him. I backed up, and jumped onto the back of the chair. It shot forward, and I dug my claws in, holding on for dear life. It rammed into the gunman with enough force to bowl him over. The gun flew from his

hands and he lay there for a few moments, dazed. I could almost see the cartoon birds flapping around his head. Cole's voice rang in my head.

*Does this mean I can come down from the ceiling?*

*Yeah. We better get out of here before he gets back up.* I pointed with my nose at a small window. *Think you can fit through that?*

*Look at me. I'm twelve inches tall. I'm pretty sure I can fit through a window.*

*Great. Because I can't open the thing.*

He hurried along the rafters, and dropped onto the window sill. Behind me, I heard the gunman groaned. I flicked my tail anxiously. *Hurry!*

*Almost got it, calm down.*

I left him to fiddle with the lock and crept quickly over to where the gun lay. I heard a quiet creak behind me as Cole threw the window open. *Got it!*

I snatched the gun up in my mouth. The gunman was stirring a little now. I bolted to the window and leapt up beside Cole. We jumped. It was a short fall, but the impact still made my paws sting. We tore down the street for a couple of blocks, until the sounds of sirens and confusion faded into silence. I skidded to a stop beside Cole, and we let ourselves return to our normal forms. The moment I turned back, my heart gave a violent spasm and my chest seemed to contract painfully. I doubled over, clutching my knees tightly.

"You alright?" I could feel Cole's eyes on me, but I didn't dare move my head until my heart started beating normally again.

"Peachy." I replied weakly. Gradually, the tightness in my chest subsided and I straightened. "See?" I grinned "I'm fine."

Whoever it was, he must have had his silencer on. I didn't hear the gunshot. I only felt the bullet tear into my stomach. The copper taste of blood flooding my mouth. My vision flashed briefly to pure white and when it returned I was on the ground. Cole was kneeling next to me. He was speaking. I could see his lips moving, but I couldn't make out any words. The only thing that seemed to really exist was the pain. A sort of black mist started to crowd my vision. Cole leaned over me suddenly, holding onto me tightly. I felt him jerk forward slightly and he squeezed his eyes shut. Something wet was soaking through his shirt. I felt it against my cheek. The dark surged in until all I could see was a tiny pinprick of white light. His voice was echoing in my mind again.

*I'm going to have to move you, Riley. It might hurt a bit...just hang on, okay?*

White hot pain raced through my body again, and the pinprick of light went out.



By the time we run far enough to no longer hear the sirens, my lungs burn so bad I start to wonder if they're literally on fire. I put my hands on my knees, feeling the tight-stretchy material of the morphing suit under my fingertips, gasping for air. Riley completely doubles over the moment we stop. "You all right?" I ask, still out of breath.

Riley doesn't respond. I'm about to ask her again when finally, she responds with, "Peachy." She stays down for another couple seconds, then straightens back up and gives me a smile. "See? I'm fine."

I give her a nod and turn around to take in the scenery around us. We're still in the city, but I can tell we're on the outer edge of it. Prairie lands stretch out behind us as far as the eye can see, and ahead of us, rundown city streets. I have no idea where we are.

I turn back to Riley just as she takes a step back, taken off balance by something. Her breath catches and she looks down. Blood seeps through the black morphing suit material over her stomach, spreading more and more by the second from the tiny hole that has ripped through the suit and beyond. In one horrifying second, I realize, *She's been shot.*

Her legs give out and she falls to her knees, then onto her back on the concrete of the sidewalk. My blood runs cold. "Riley!" I yell. I rush to her side and kneel over her. Her head lolls to the side. I put my hand on her cheek to try and keep her conscious, but her head just falls to the side again. "Riley, stay with me!"

I start to pull her towards me when another bullet whizzes at us from behind. It tears through the fabric on my arm, the bullet grazing me and tearing an eighth of an inch through my bicep. The bullet sparks on the cement in front of us. I fall forward and squeeze my eyes closed. The pain is blinding for a moment, but there's so much adrenaline pumping through me already that I barely notice it after a couple of seconds. *We have to get out of here.*

I open my eyes again just as a drop of my blood falls onto Riley's cheek. *I'm going to have to move you, Riley. It might hurt a bit...just hang on, okay?* I say to her in my mind. I don't think she's conscious enough to hear me normally, but maybe I can reach her in the depths of her mind.

I pull her up into my arms, gritting my teeth as pain shoots down my arm. I turn the corner just as a third bullet explodes into the brick wall behind us. I don't see anyone on the street, so it must be a sniper positioned in one of the windows of the abandoned building across the street.

A car drives by us halfway down the block, then slams on their breaks and goes backwards until it reaches us again. The driver flies out of the car and meets me on the sidewalk. "Jesus Christ. What happened?"

"Do you know where the closest hospital is?" I ask quickly.

"Yeah, Porter is just a couple minutes from here. Get in."

The man yanks the back door of his truck open, then flies back into the drivers seat. I lie Riley down in the back seat and sit next to her, her head resting on my lap. The man speeds away, running a red light and getting a symphony of honks in the process. I find a jacket on the floor and I grab it. Press it into her stomach to stanch the blood flow. She's probably already lost two quarts by now. She squirms in pain from the pressure. Her eyes open a little, glossy and unfocused. They start to close again.

"Riley... Riley you've got to stay with me. We're on our way to the hospital, okay? You've got to try to stay awake." She nods weakly and tries hard to focus on me. "That's it. Just keep your eyes on me." I look up at the man driving the car. "Hey, you got a phone?"

He pulls a cellphone out of his pocket and tosses it back to me. I text Layla, "This is Cole. Get to the Porter Hospital. It's an emergency." Then I toss the phone back up into the passenger seat. I look back down at Riley to see that her eyes have started to close again. Her lips are red with blood. I stroke her head softly with my hand. "Stay with me, Riley."

*Stay with me.*

The man slams on the breaks in front of the E.R. entrance. I tie the jacket around her middle, which is almost entirely soaked through. Then I hug her tightly against my chest and rush her through the entrance.

"Somebody, help! She's been shot."

Riley's on a gurney in seconds, the doctors and nurses rushing her towards a pair of double doors at the end of the hall. "We've got a fifteen-year-old female with a bullet wound to the stomach," a doctor says quickly. "Contact the blood bank and order three units of B positive, STAT."

One of the doctors nods and heads away. A nurse looks down at her with worried eyes.

"Hang in there, kiddo."

I hurry after them as they rush her through the double doors at the end of the hall. Just as I put my hand on the door to push it back open and follow them, a doctor grabs my shoulder.

"Woah, where do you think you're going?"

"Let go of me, Man. I'm not leaving her."

"Only medical staff is allowed back there. You'll have to wait in the lobby," he tells me.

I nod, pretending to understand and go along with his demands. I start to turn away, but then I spin back around and burst through the door behind him. I turn the corner and see her through a window, being hooked up to monitors in the surgery room. I put my hands on the glass, my hands and arms covered in her blood, watching helplessly.

The doctor comes around the corner and grabs my shoulder, pulling my hands from the window. "You're not allowed back here!" I ignore him. "The doctors are doing everything they can. The best thing you can do for her is to wait in the lobby and leave the doctors to do their jobs."

I continue to ignore him, pressing my hands up to the window once again. Like hell I'm gonna let some stranger that doesn't know anything about anything tell me I can't stay with her.

"You need leave!" He grabs my shoulder again, more forcefully this time. I turn and punch the doctor in the face. He stumbles away, blood running from his nose. He looks furious, and unluckily for me, two guards had just turned the corner behind me to see it all happen. The doctor sees them and yells, "Security!"

I'm thrown back out the double doors, the guards watching me sternly. I walk back down the hall and turn down into another corridor with chairs and vending machines. My hands are shaking, feeling furious and terrified and helpless all at the same time. I start pacing, on the verge of losing it.

Just then, Layla turns the corner at the other end of the hall and spots me. She runs towards me.

"Cole, what happened?" she asks quickly.

My voice shakes. "It's Riley."

"What's Riley?"

"She was--she was--she was shot."

"Who shot her?"

"I don't know!" I yell, my eyes filling with tears.

"Cole, you need to calm down," she says sincerely.

"She's dying. She's dying and they won't let me see her!"

"Cole, breathe."

"God dammit!" I grab one of the vending machines and yank it over. The glass shatters on the floor. I stumble back, running a hand through my hair. My back hits the wall and I slide down to the floor, tears finally breaking and rolling down my cheeks.

Layla kneels down in front of me, taking me in with worried eyes. "Cole, talk to me."

I'm silent for a long while. All of the energy and adrenaline drains out of me, leaving me completely exhausted. My arm throbs, but I don't care. Finally, I manage four words. "It's all my



fault." Layla doesn't say anything. She just leans forward and wraps her arms around me. Just this once, I don't pull away. Just this once, I return it and burry my head in her shoulder.

Just this once, I need it more than anything in the world.



**Thursday, Jan 20th - 16 Days After Field Trip - 1 Day before Battle of the Bands**

Late afternoon light filtered through the barren branches of the trees, casting long twisted shadows across the park. Beyond the shadows was a bench, and on that bench, sat Mr. Neil.

He read a book, trying to pass the time as he waited impatiently for his comrade to meet him. It had been days since Mr. Neil had had any contact with Hiro, and he was becoming worried that something had happened to him.

At 2 o'clock sharp, Hiro sat down on the bench next to him, just like he said he would. Mr. Neil let out a sigh of relief, but didn't look up from his book. Hiro peered down at a newspaper, pretending to read it. It was important that no one connected the two as allies. Hiro's superiors could be watching, or if the government saw Neil with someone from the Japanese, they could suspect him as a traitor.

"Where have you been?" Neil asked. "I haven't seen you since that night at the lake house."

"Sorry. That night, we got too close. My ex-superiors almost caught on. I had to lay low for a few days," he explained, casually flipping to the next page of his paper.

"I understand. But that invasion at the lake house never should have happened. Those kids need better protection. It was lucky they all made it out alive."

Hiro nodded. "I completely agree."

The two men were silent for a moment, then Neil slipped a piece of paper out of his pocket and nonchalantly handed it to Hiro.

"There's a music competition going on tomorrow that some of the Animorphers are involved in," Neil told him. "Most, if not all of them, will be there. If someone was going to try and harm them, it would be then. We need to be there, watching, to make sure they're safe."

Hiro unfolded the piece of paper. It was a flyer for *Battle of the Bands*, complete with a time, date, and address. "You have nothing to worry about." He smiled to himself. "We'll be there."

### **Friday, Jan 21th - 17 Days After Field Trip - Day of Battle of the Bands**

When Riley West sang the last verse of her song, the crowd went wild. A born performer, clearly. Neil had known this for a while. It was one of the reasons he had chosen her--she was brave.

In the very back of the audience, he sat in the shadows, watching her carefully as she smiled at the crowd. He stood, and as soon as the stage went dark, he turned and silently slipped out the back doors of the auditorium.

He walked through the empty lobby and pushed his way through the front doors, his face being met with a gust of icy January wind. Outside, Hiro stood, drinking his coffee as he waited.

"They finished performing. No one caused them any trouble," Neil said with a relieved sigh. There had been far too many movies and historical events where an enemy had tried to kill their target while they were on stage. Luckily, Battle of the Bands wouldn't be added to that list. "Have you seen any signs of your ex-superiors?"

"No signs yet. But those kids aren't out of the woods yet. Once they start leaving with the crowds, my ex-superiors could get an opportunity," Hiro said.

"What do you suggest?"

"Anyone driving home probably won't be targeted, because it will be too hard to track them once they're in their cars. They'll go for the kids on foot." Hiro took a drink of his coffee as he thought. "Cole and Riley will probably be here late, packing up. I'll stay with them while I send one of my comrades with you to make sure the others get home safely."

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Michael and Jinx were the first to leave, jumping up into his jeep and driving safely away from the theater. Next, Layla left, giving Neon a ride home. Third, Gwen and Charlotte got in Gwen's old Saab. And lastly, Dan and Emma headed out on foot.

Neil sat inside a black CRV with Hiro's partner, Toshi. They watched as Dan and Emma walked out of the building and headed down the street, towards Emma's house.

Neil leaned forward in his seat and pointed. "There. Follow them."

Toshi put the car into drive. They trailed them, careful not to get too close. Finally, Dan and Emma stopped outside her house. They stood there for several minutes, talking.

"Before we head back to the theater, we should make sure that Dan makes it home, too," Neil suggested.

Toshi nodded and pulled over into a spot behind a line of parked cars. He then reached into the back seat and grabbed a black case, then pulled it into his lap. He opened it to reveal a pistol inside.

"What are you going to do with that?" Neil asked curiously.

Toshi ignored him and continued to screw a silence onto the end of the muzzle.

Neil's heart sank. "You're not on my side, are you? Neither of you are."

"What gave us away?" Toshi asked. "This? Or the lake house invasion that took place hours after you showed Hiro the location?"

Neil, in panic, tried to unbuckle from his seat, but it wouldn't budge. Toshi had altered the seatbelt. But Neil acted fast, pulling a knife with a seatbelt cutter out of a sheath on his ankle. Toshi loaded a full magazine into the pistol.

Neil sliced through the seatbelt just as Toshi pointed the gun at him. He grabbed it, the silenced bullet going through the roof of the car. Neil wasn't only fighting for his own life--he was fighting for Dan and Emma's as well.

They struggled for control of the gun. Neil forced it toward's Toshi's chest. A bullet discharged, and Toshi fell limp. Neil fell back into his seat, exhausted. He looked through the windshield at Dan and Emma up ahead, who were still chatting happily--they hadn't seen or heard any of it.

Neil worked through all the details in his head, trying hard to stay calm. He thought back to his conversation with Hiro earlier in the day. How Hiro had volunteered to stay with Cole and Riley while suggesting that Neil leave the theater.

Neil's breathing quickened. How could he be so stupid? He flew out of the car and pulled Toshi's lifeless body from the drivers seat, dragging him into the backseat. He then scrambled into the drivers seat, turned the car around, and headed back to the theater.

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Neil sped down the street. He knew he was running out of time, if he wasn't too late already. He pulled a hard right to turn into the theater parking lot, his wheels squeaking on the pavement and leaving tread marks in his wake. Finally, he pulled into a parking spot and went the rest of the way on foot.

He turned the corner of where the white van had been only an hour ago, but all that were left in its place were tire marks. Whenever Cole and Riley left, they were in a hurry.

Neil followed the marks until he found the van at the end of one of the alleyways. It had been abandoned with all of their equipment still inside, and the side mirrors had been snapped off. Cole and Riley were no where to be found.

He cursed under his breath. Everything had flipped upside down. All he wanted was to keep them safe, but he had been too trusting, and in the end, put them in more danger than they'd ever been in before.

Neil started back to his car. He turned a corner only to spot Hiro at the other end, walking towards him. Hiro stopped, giving him a look of surprise, then he lifted his gun and started firing.

Neil dropped behind some trashcans, then took off towards his car. Jumped into the drivers seat and sped away from the theater. He didn't know if Cole and Riley were still alive, but now he was certain that Hiro wasn't on his side.

And if Hiro wasn't on his side, then no one was.



I sit in the waiting room with my elbows on my knees, looking down at my shoes. The skin on my wrists is still slightly purple from the ropes Jackson had tied around them. I try to push the memory from my mind. Being drugged and kidnapped is one of the last things I want to think about right now.

Geez, what a week for us Animorphers, huh? The field trip was just over two weeks ago and yet I can hardly remember a time when we weren't being chased, shot at, or dealing with the fact that we can turn into animals. Last year was such a simpler time.

Mrs. West and Janey sit on the other end of the waiting room, worriedly trying to pass the time until we get word of Riley's condition.

Another fifteen minutes pass, then Emma rushes through the front doors, followed closely by Michael and Gwen. I stand when I see them.

"We came as soon as we got your text--" Michael starts.

Emma cuts in with, "How is she?"

"I don't know. They haven't told us anything yet. She's still in surgery," I tell her.

Emma nods, swallowing hard.



"Where are the others? Where's Charlotte?" Michael asks.

"Neon and Dan are on their way," I say. "I left messages for Jinx and Char--"

Suddenly, Neon bursts through the doors of the E.R.. "Where is she!?" he yells.

I sigh. "Neon, calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down!" Neon looks at something over my shoulder and widens his eyes. "*You!*" he growls. I turn to see Cole coming around the corner behind us.

Neon takes off in a sprint for him. "It's all your fault!" Neon tackles Cole to the ground and sucker punches him in the face. Cole struggles under him as we all rush towards them. Michael lifts Neon off him in a fury of flying fists.

Cole scrambles up off the ground, wiping blood from his nose. "What the hell is wrong with you!"

Michael sets Neon down on the ground, still holding him back. Neon hisses. "Neon!" Michael yells. "I know this is a really bad situation, but fighting isn't going to help anyone. I need you to hold it together for a couple of hours until we know what's going on. Can you do that?"

Neon gives Cole a hard stare. A long, tense silence passes, then he breaks free of Michael's grasp. He flips the tails of his scarf over his shoulder, then pushes through me, Emma and Gwen without another word.

Cole shakes his head, then turns and disappears back around the corner, wanting to be alone.

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An hour later, I find Cole sitting on a bench in one of the hospital corridors, talking to a police officer. "I already told you, I never saw who the shooter was," I hear him say.

"Do you have any idea of who the shooter could have been?" the officer asks him.

"I have no idea," Cole says exhaustedly. "Officer, I've already told you everything I know."

The Policeman nods and heads on his way. Cole looks down at the ground. I wait for the officer to pass by me, then I make my way over to Cole and sit down beside him.

"Hey. How's the arm?" I ask, nodding to the bandage wrapped around it. He's back in his normal teeshirt and jeans, thanks to the change of clothes Michael brought for him.

"Fine." He's silent for a long moment. "Neon was right, you know. It's my fault."

"No, it's not," I say. "You can't blame yourself for this."

"I was driving the van. Riley told me not to go the way I did. She said I was going to get us both killed. I didn't listen, and we were taken. The only reason we ran into the sniper to begin with was because I messed up. Layla, it is *all* my fault."

"Cole, you *saved* her life. Riley wouldn't be alive right now if you hadn't done what you did."

"Or, if I had listened to her, Riley's life never would have been in danger to begin with," he says quietly, never looking up from his shoes.

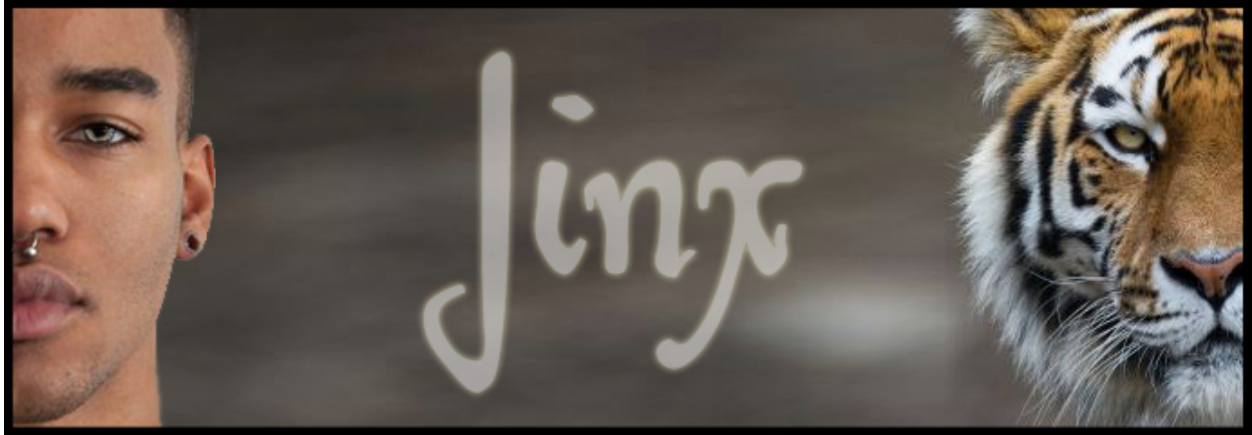
"Cole, you were being chased by five vans with armed men inside. No matter where you went, they would have cut you off. Riley being in danger wasn't your fault. You were in just as much danger as she was. *You* did everything you could, and because of that, Riley has a chance," I tell him sincerely.

He nods, then looks up at me. "Thanks, Layla."

"Just hang in there 'til the doctor gives us an update, all right? Can you do that?"

"Yeah. Just keep Neon away from me."

I smirk. "Will do."



“Leaving again?”

I wince and slowly turn around to face my dad in the hallway. “Yeah Dad, I’m sorry.” I decide to be honest. “My friend’s in the hospital.”

He arches his eyebrows. Crosses his arms. “Are you hiding something from me, Jinx?”

“No, no.” *For once I’m telling the truth!* “I don’t know what happened, Dad, but I have to get there quickly.” I look down and fidget with my keys. “I’m sorry about dinner. I’ll try to make it back in time.”

I look up. He nods. “Hope your friend’s okay,” he says.

“Thanks.”

I know it’s not really my fault, but I feel guilty anyway. For the billionth time in my life, I feel like I’m letting him down. I put on my Converse again and climb into the car, shoulders slumped.

I recognize a handful of my friends’ cars in the hospital parking lot. Everyone seems to be here already.

Layla greets me immediately. “Oh God, Jinx,” she says, “they’re taking blood tests.”

“Blood tests?”

“Yeah, on Riley,” Cole says.

“How is she?”

“I’m not sure,” Layla answers, “but we can’t let them take her blood!”

I frown, confused. Then I suddenly realize why it’s such a big deal. “Oh, yeah. Shoot. What do we do?”

Layla paces. “I don’t know. We have to replace the blood samples. We need someone else’s blood.”

“And none of ours would work.”

“Exactly. We’d have to get Janey in on this or get it somehow from Michael’s mom.”

“Hmm.” I cross my arms. “Isn’t there another way? Aren’t there other blood samples somewhere in the hospital that we can switch out?”

Neon comes over. “Absolutely. Listen to this - I’ll change into a kitten, hide in a doctor’s pocket, and do a quick switch when no one’s looking.”

“Don’t you think the doctor would notice?” Cole asks.

Neon shrugs.

“It’s too big of a risk,” Layla says. “We’ll need someone else to dress up as a doctor.”

Everyone looks at me, and my heart drops. “Me? That’s smart. Choose the tallest, most awkward guy, why don’t you?”

“That’s exactly it,” Layla says. “You’re the tallest so you look the oldest.” She begins ushering me outside of the hospital. “Besides, no one’s really seen you yet. They won’t recognize you, like they would with Cole.”

“Where would I get a costume?”

“Costume Castle. It’s right across the street. I’ll come with you.”

“Oh God. Is this illegal?”

“Absolutely.”

We weave through the irritatingly bustling parking lot, jaywalk across the street, and dash to the Costume Castle door.

I’ve never been inside before. When I was younger, I’d make a costume during Halloween with things around the house. My dad said buying something you’d wear only once was stupid. He had a point, and as Layla and I skim over the outrageous selection of costumes, I can only agree more. Fifty dollars for a vampire suit? Yeah, no.

I find myself watching Layla as she browses the costumes more than doing what I should be - helping her find a doctor costume. She’s so passion to help me, and as she jogs around from aisle to aisle and I stumble to follow after her, her energy seems to know no bounds. And uh, her legs are also nice. Must be because of track and field.

“Aha!” she cries, unhooking a white doctor suit from the rack. It’s wrapped in a plastic body bag and comes with a plastic stethoscope. I suppose it looks authentic enough.

“Perfect!” I say, even though that’s a partial lie; from what I can remember, the doctors in the hospital were wearing blue. But when I look at her and see that she’s smiling, I can’t say anything else. She’s... she’s beautiful. I feel blood rush to my face. “Layla? I want to tell you something.”

“Yes?”

I want to thank her for being so kind. I want to tell her that she's the nicest person I've ever had the pleasure to meet. I want to acknowledge everything she's done for the animorphers. I want to tell her that from the beginning, she's been the rock, and the pillar, of the group.

"Are you guys finding everything okay?" someone asks behind us.

I turn around, my mouth still open in preparation to spill my thanks out to Layla. I probably look stupid. Or, if you pair the gaping mouth with the annoyed tinge of the angle of my eyebrows, offended.

The acne-ridden face of a Costume Courier backs away, sorry to have said anything. He smiles a bit confusedly when Layla ensures him that we've found just the thing we need.

"You were saying?" she asks once he disappears behind another aisle.

"Um." I glance again at the suit. "Wish it were blue."

"Oh." Her face falls. I mentally slap myself. Typical Jinx, turning a compliment into an insult. "I suppose you're right. All the doctors were wearing blue, weren't they?"

"Yeah. It should be fine, shouldn't it?"

"No. It has to be blue."

A few minutes later, we fortunately find a blue nurse suit. And with that, I'm downgraded from a doctor to a nurse. Serves me right.

We set off to the hospital, the suit draped over my arm. When we reach the parking lot, she leaves me to change in my car. The nurse scrubs are a bit tight and the pants are a good inch or two too short, but I don't think anyone will notice. They might frown at the Converse, though.



When Layla and Jinx run off on their costume escapade to save Riley, I stand anxiously needing something to distract myself with. I walk away from our group towards the bathroom when I spot Cole sitting against the wall next to a creaky vending machine. He walked off earlier. I assumed he wanted to be alone earlier, but now I realize how in a time like this no one can be alone. I slowly walked over, and slid down the wall to sit next to him.

“This may be stupid to ask, because I already know the answer but...are you doing okay?”

“I honestly don’t even know anymore.” He sighs. “Why did this happen? Not just the shooting, but everything. Why did this have to happen to us?”

“I really don’t know, but...I just can’t shake the feeling that it’s for some reason bigger than all of us. And what happened tonight was not-”

“If one more person says that it wasn’t my fault I think I’m going to scream.” He snaps at me, and I feel myself shrink a little. “I’m sorry...I’m just so freaking angry and confused.”

“Look, I know you’re struggling. And you’re allowed to ok? So don’t beat yourself up about it. You don’t have to justify why you feel the way you do. You care about her, and you’re



upset I get it. I am to.” I feel tears prick my eyes. “She’s my best friend. You think I like the thought of her dying?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Ever since I got the news about the shooting I’ve been scared. Suddenly, everything that has happened seems so much more real. There are so many more stakes now, and I’m terrified. Not just for myself but my friends, and my family.”

“I get it. It’s like our lives are no longer our own.” He says.

“Exactly, and that’s the exact reason why we all need each other now more than ever. I used to think separating myself from those I love would protect them, but only now do I realize the we’re weaker apart than when we are together.” I sigh. “I want to be braver, and Riley inspires me to do that every single day of my life. And it’s moments like these when I realize she’s the glue that keeps this screwed up family together.” He slightly smiles.

“Yeah. When things happened, she always seemed to be the first person I wanted to call. Because I knew we could just talk for hours nonstop, about everything. And it didn’t matter how I felt, she always manages to put a smile on my face.”

“You’re in love with her aren’t you?” I ask. Cole’s face suddenly goes bright red, and I laugh. “Don’t worry I won’t tell her, but it’s been there for awhile. At least from my perspective.”

“Is it that obvious?” He asks. I nod with a small smile.

“Even though life is kind of crazy right now, I think you should tell her the truth. It’s now more than ever that we should be brave, and we should live like there’s no tomorrow. I now realize after facing my fear on that stage tonight that fear shouldn’t be something that controls us, but instead fuels us to finish this.”

“What are you saying?”

“I feel like we need to fight back. Answer the unanswered questions. I'm tired of walking home from school and being afraid that I'm being watched. I'm tired of feeling weak, and useless. But most of all I'm tired of knowing nothing. We were given these powers for a reason, and I think it's time we started using them instead of fearing them.”

“All this because of conquering your stage fright?”

“No. All this because they shot down one of the few people who make me brave, and for the first time I realize I owe it to them to be brave to. And I'm gonna start now. There are some things I need to tell everyone.”

“Like what happened the night I disappeared in the woods.” He looks at me confused. “I captured, and tied up. Mr. Neil was there and they threatened me. They put a gun to my head, and shoved a new tracker into my arm. One that couldn't be removed by us. I thought that if I pushed everyone away then it wouldn't be my fault. That no one would get hurt. But I see now that I was wrong, and I owe it to everyone to not only share this, but to accept what comes with it.”

“Why didn't you tell anyone. Why didn't you tell Dan? He found you right?”

“He did, and I blew it off like I do with most things, and know now that I shouldn't have.”

“I don't blame you ya know? I feel like I might've done the same thing if I was in your shoes.” He says.

“If you knew this was going to happen, that you’d find yourself in this situation, would you have not gone to school that day?” He breathes deep contemplating the question for a long moment.

“I still would.”

“I would too.” After a moment I stand. “I’ll see you later okay? I know she’ll be okay.”

“I do too.” He slightly smiles, and walk off heading towards the waiting room. As I approach the area where my friends are I notice a familiar face heading towards the glass doors, and I walk outside to greet him.

“Hey is Riley okay? I came as soon as I heard. Traffic was terrible.” Dan says running up.

“She’ll be okay. We’re actually currently trying to avoid the inevitable blood tests.”

“Anyway I can help?” He asks.

“Layla and Jinx have it covered.” I explain. He nods, and we stand there a moment in silence.

“Look Emma.” He breaks the silence. “I know this isn’t the best time to bring this up, but I just wanted to tell you that-”

“I like you too.” I say taking a step towards him. He stares at me.

“Wait-what?” He asks confused. “Wait Really?”

“Yeah. I like you a lot.” I give him a small smile, as his eyes travel across my face.

“Well that’s a relief. I thought I was going to come here and ruin everything, or freak you out. Because the other night when we almost kissed, and you pulled away I assumed that you would never want to be with me. But then when I heard the news about Riley I knew I had to say something just to be sure that I didn’t have to give up completely. And-” Suddenly, I cut off his

rapid rambling by quickly kissing him. I pulled away and he stared at me for a long moment before he leaned in and kissed me again.

Suddenly at that moment, it didn't matter who I was were before the experiments or who all of us were; jock, nerd, cheerleader, or artist. It didn't matter. Ever since those experiments, we were all each other had. We were all that we understood. At that moment we were put in the chairs, we became a family. And now I know that no one, messes with my family and those that I love. No one



School seemed foggy and unclear. Wherever Michael walked, it felt like he was in a dream. Students wouldn't look at him but instead at whoever they were talking to. Teachers wouldn't notice him when they handed out papers. He was just another student there. His popularity level had dropped to ground level (not like it matter, anyway). He had spent most of his time thinking why he was chosen to be an Animorpher, along with some other people he didn't stand a chance to *actually* knowing. Maybe because he was so full of himself that he bother looking at those around him. He remembers living the normal lifestyle with his mother cooking dinner and pesting about homework. He wishes that he had the time to tell her how much she meant to him before she actually saw what was going on. His secret about being the mighty lion. Sure, as a child, he had looked up to the lions and their mighty strengths but he never truly thought of being one. It was pure coincidence to actually get this chance and it was costly.

Now, sitting in the waiting room of the hospital, Michael Anthony was surrounded by the rest of the Animorphers. He didn't expect one of them members to be hurt by the Japanese government nor did he expect them to interact with the plan. Their teacher, Mr. Neil, was still on

the loose somewhere but everyone hated him. They were tricked by a simple field trip, without knowing. Maybe they weren't tricked but Michael likes to think so.

The waiting room was grey and sad. A potted plant was next to Michael, containing a fake tree that looked like it was dying. Brown tints were at the edge of the green leaves. He knew this because as a child, he had noticed how the texture of the leaves were different from that of real leaves. They also looked faked, cloth strings would hang from some of the leaves.

People were whispering in the hallways of the hospital. Doors leading to different rooms. Small shouts could be heard from somewhere. Michael had the fear of hospital; not for their eerie vibe dealing with death but more of what happens here. Sitting there, in the waiting room with other people, he felt small. Unsure. Everyone in the room, probably felt that.

Next to him, sat Charlotte. She had her hair tied into a ponytail with her eyes down at the ground. Wearing only a grey t-shirt and blue jeans along with grey converses, it seemed to be a drop down from her normal self. Charlotte usually, to Michael anyway, was cheerful and looking for the best possible option. She was always behind him on everything and he had grown to like her because of that. The irony of it all, she was the small, fragile gazelle that lions commonly ate. That didn't stop Michael from liking her. And for a second, he knew she liked him.

Raising a hand, he patted Charlotte's back as she looked back with solemn brown eyes. Michael could feel the pain in his chest, spreading over his heart. He wished he could say something to make her feel better but all the same, he felt the same. He remembered when his little sister, Danni, dog had died. The pity in her eyes were clear as the dark clouds that thundered above when they buried it out back. She locked herself in the room for the rest of the

day. His brother, Alex, didn't do anything about it. He was in his room, playing video games. Michael was left with the guilt. The pain of everyone in the house.

Charlotte looked back at the ground as Michael, still with his hand on her back, looked across the room from where he was sitting. There was an mom with a small boy, gripping tightly onto her hand. The mother looked concerned, blonde highlights that showed in the dying light above. The boy appeared to be shaking. He was trying his hardest not to cry. A doctor came out from one of the doors and there was a wave of relief that pushed through. He paused, looking down at a clipboard. And frowned deeper. The doctor then walked over to the mother, placing a sturdy hand on her knee and muttered something. Her facial expressed changed from confusion to sadness, in a matter of seconds. She was whispering, "it can't be true" over and over again. The little boy looked up in panic and started bawling. He whimpered, "big brother is dead!" over and over again.

Michael gulped, trying his best not to look but the noises were echoing into his brain. Staining his memories. It was awkward in the room as the doctor and some nurses crowded around, telling her it was okay.

After a while, mom and her son had left, Michael along with everyone else waited in patience. The room seemed to be a ticking bomb. Each passing doctor seemed to be holding a different report or nurses would just stop by with other news. At one point, Michael thought they had been here for an entire day until a doctor walked through the door and smiled.

"Animorphers, I'm pleased to say she is alright. You can visit her but one at a time, please." And slipped away as everyone filed into the small hallway. A lighter feeling was washed over everyone. Michael stepped away from the crowd and looked through a window. He saw a

boy wearing a blue smock and holding a teddy bear. His family was around him, smiling.

Michael, for some reason, was reminded of Jackson. Gwen had killed him. He didn't why or how but he just remembered hearing about it from Charlotte, offhandedly explaining what had happened.

"Michael, come say hello to Riley," Charlotte called out. He waved to tell her, he'll be right there. Getting off the wall, he headed towards the room, with a strong feeling bursting through the thick egoistically personality he held. The Animorphers had changed him, he knew that much. Stepping into the hospital room, passing Charlotte who smiled back at him brightly, Michael had a feeling he'd probably be stuck with them for the time being. And he didn't mind that at all.





I killed someone.

Not just anyone... someone I knew. Not that he was a friend, but I'd *known* him since junior high. He was my age. And worst of all, he was Michael's friend. He still hadn't talked to me since.

I stared at myself in the mirror of the hospital bathroom, recognizing the face I've always known, wondering if what was behind it was still the same. I'd felt sick since that day at the warehouse, and I wasn't sure if it was because I had blood on my hands, or if it was because I could turn into a wolf--the one thing I'd always feared more than anything.

I was a monster.

Tears welled up in my eyes. I knew people would have a hard time convincing me otherwise. I had become the very thing that tried to tear my arm off when I was six years old. I killed Michael's friend. I almost killed *Charlotte*. Who knew when I'd morph again without intending to, or how many more people I'd hurt. I didn't know how to control it.

I scrubbed my hands with a paper towel, vigorously trying to clean off the invisible mark of what I had done. But no amount of soap would clear me of that weight. I was stuck with that burden forever.

The more I drowned in these thoughts, the more I lost it. My heart pounded too fast, the blood rushing in my ears so loudly I could barely hear anything else. My face turned as red as my hands, sweat prickled at my forehead. Finally, I yelled and threw the paper towel against the mirror. It slid down, leaving streaks on the glass that warped my face into something it wasn't. Longer, thinner... like a wolf's. In that moment, I wondered if that was a more accurate representation of what I should look like. I wasn't human. I wasn't wolf. But in some twisted way, I was both. And if there wasn't already enough for me to be scared of in that moment, I now had to deal with being afraid of myself.

Suddenly, I heard someone banging on the bathroom door. "Gwen?" they called. It was Charlotte.

"What is it?" I called back.

"The doctor is letting us in to see Riley," she said.

"Okay, I'll be right out."

I took in a deep breath, splashed my face with cold water, then dried it and my hands with a paper towel. With one last look at my reflection, I headed out the door.

Charlotte started heading down the hall as soon as I came out. Michael was with her, but he avoided me. I fell into step with them as she gave me the details.

"She's not awake yet, but the doctor said she was stable and could have visitors," Charlotte explains. "They said it was a miracle she pulled through. I guess it came pretty close."

We stepped through the door into Riley's room. Cole, Emma and Neon were there, and some flowers and balloons had already begun to collect on one of the tables at the back. And there was Riley in the hospital bed. Pale, unconscious, but alive. She was on a respirator and IV's and tubes seemed to come from everywhere. I realized that could have been any of us, and that we were probably all in a lot more danger than we even imagined.

Seeing Riley that way was a hard sight to take in. Not only did she look awful, but it reminded me of the way my mom looked the last time I saw her. Riley was going to pull through... my mom wasn't so lucky.

God, I hate hospitals.

Suddenly I felt like I was suffocating. "I'm gonna get some fresh air," I blurted out. And before anyone could respond, I was back out the door.

As soon as I was out of the ICU, I could breathe again. I winded through some hallways until I found one that was a little less busy, then let out a sigh and leaned against one of the walls. I watched the people as they passed by me. Nurses, doctors, kids, a young man in a plaid shirt, a middle-aged woman in purple dress... Then two Japanese men wearing sharp cut suits and polished black shoes. They stuck out like a sore thumb.

I watched them closer and noticed a bulge on each of their sides, under their coat jackets. With the way the fabric brushed over it, I knew instantly what it was--a concealed gun.

With a jolt, I realized that the Japanese must have learned that Riley pulled through and were here to finish the job... and maybe get in a few bonus targets while they were at it. My heart began to pound.

One of the men looked up at me when they passed. It felt like it was in slow motion, the way his head slowly lifted, his hair brushed across his brown eyes, reflecting off the florescent lights above. I tried to look away before our eyes met, but they locked for just a moment. I felt like I couldn't breathe.

They continued on past, and I let out a breath. *They didn't recognize me*, I thought. Then almost if on cue, they stopped. One of them pulled a piece of paper out of their jacket pocket, looked at it for a moment, then put it back in their pocket.

In one swift motion, they turned, drawing their silenced guns from beneath their jackets and fired. I ducked and the bullets went into the white wall a couple inches above my head.

The wolf didn't like that very much, and in an instant, the world drained of color and became sharper as my eyes flashed golden, and my canines elongated into daggers. I growled while struggling to keep control. What happened at the warehouse couldn't happen again, especially not in a hospital.

So I handled it the human way and bolted down the hall away from them. A couple more shots went off, blowing holes in the tile right under my heels. I skidded around the corner and stopped short when I ran right into two more men. I inched back, my hands flying up to my ears.

I looked behind me, in front of me... I was surrounded. No where to run, no way out, four muzzles pointed at my head. My whole body trembled. This was it, I was sure of it.

I stopped half way between the two sets of men and closed my eyes. Three seconds ticked by that felt like an hour, then four silenced shots were fired. My body flinched--then nothing.

I opened my eyes just as all four Japanese assassins fell to the ground, revealing the four men standing behind them, holding their own silenced guns. They all wore unmarked army-green jackets and grey baseball caps. They each lowered their weapons.

My eyes faded back to normal. I stared at them, frozen. They stared at me. Then finally one of them said, "What is your name?"

"Why do you want to know?" I asked.

"Does Project Miles Eximius mean anything to you?"

My eyes widened a little. Just then, Emma came around the corner.

"Gwen, there you a--" She stopped cold. Looked down at the men on the floor, then up at the four men surrounding me. "What is--"

"Your name is Gwen?" one of the men said to me.

I looked back at him. "Who are you?"

"We're agents of F.U.S.E.. Does *that* mean anything to you?"

I shook my head a little. "What is F.U.S.E.?"

"Federal Unit of Scientific Experimentation. We green lit Project Miles Eximius. You were involved, weren't you? Both of you?"

I didn't know who these men were, or if they could be trusted. But they saved my life and seemed to have answers. So I gave them a small nod.

"My name is Jay," the man said. "It's not safe to talk here. Come with me."

Jay led us down the hall, leaving his comrades to clean up the mess. It was just him, me and Emma, which made me feel a little better. There was more of us than there was of him, and

based on what he said, he should know what we're capable of. If he was planning to kill us or capture us, he would have done it by now.

He led us up to the roof of the hospital. It was a bitter cold day. A light wind tossed my hair around, made a chill run down my spine.

Finally he turned to face us. Took us in for a moment. "God, you're just kids."

"If you green lit the experiment, why don't you know who we are?" I asked.

"F.U.S.E. provided the funding for the project, but everything involved was done at M.E.L.. All of the data and records were stored in their computers. Once the lab was bombed, we lost everything having to do with the experiment, including the identity profiles of the test subjects."

"You mean of *us*," Emma butted in. "*We* were the test subjects."

"Yes, I'm sorry," Jay said. "There was a lot Dr. Liam and Dr. Neil kept from us, including the ages of who would be involved and whether they would be willing or not. The project didn't go how we intended. It was a failure and now we're trying to clean up our mess... our mistakes."

"That sounds a lot like what the Japanese are trying to do, only they want to kill us," Emma said.

"Our intentions are quite the contrary. We want to protect you from the Japanese until we can find a way to stop them. We've completely shut down the experiment. No more trials or tests. Now we just want to make things right," he explained.

"Why now?" I asked.

"Like I said, after the lab was bombed, we didn't know who you were. We've been spending every waking hour of the last three weeks trying to find you guys. We kept hitting dead

ends or missing you by a couple of hours... but when Riley West was brought into the hospital, it put you guys on the map," he said. "It allowed us to find you, but that also means it's going to make it easier for others to find you as well, which is why you're going to need our protection."

"Why should we trust you?" Emma asked.

Jay ponders her question for a moment. "Like I said, we just want to make things right. Enough lives have ended because of this. We don't want yours to be added to that list. And after everything you guys have been through, you could probably use someone you can trust, and above all else, someone who understands. You don't have to keep your secret from us. We probably know more about it than you do."

I crossed my arms over my chest, bracing myself from the cold that was starting to seep into my clothes. "So, what do you want from us?"

"Because the lab was bombed, the project was interrupted. We never got to run tests on you after the initial experiment. You kids underwent something that no one else has ever gone through before. We'd just like to do a check up to make sure you're all okay. On top of that, we'd like to give you a safe place to come to, and allies in times of need. You kids have been carrying this burden for a long time. Let us take some of it off your shoulders."

Emma and I looked at each other for a long moment, then looked back at him. Neither of us were sure what to say.

Finally, Jay gave us a smile. "I know it's a lot to take in. Take my card, and call me once you've had time to process and tell your friends." He handed me his card, then looked sincerely into my eyes and said. "I promise you, you can trust us. Make the right decision before more of your friends are almost killed."

Then he looked over at Emma and said, "It was a pleasure meeting both of you. I hope to see you again soon." Then he stuffed his hands in the pockets of his green jacket and headed for the door to the stairwell.

And just like that, our world had been flipped upside down all over again.





Dan looked from Emma to Gwen then back to Emma. "So, let me get this straight...some strangers showed up and shot your would-be assassins right in front of you, then claimed to be part of the organization that greenly the Miles Eximius Project, yet did not know that we were kids, and told us to trust them as allies. Is that right?"

They both nodded. Dan sighed. "That's crazy. They can't seriously believe we'd accept this after all that we know now, right?"

Gwen looked hesitantly at Dan. "Well..."

Dan gaped. "Wait, don't tell me you're actually *considering* this?" They were standing in front of the hospital. A couple going on looked at him quizzically at his raised voice and he stopped talking.

Emma looked up at him. "But we do need help, Dan." she pointed out. "We're being hunted, and we could use some allies on our side.

"But this whole thing doesn't add up!" he protested. "Think about it. How could they have green-lit the experiment without knowing one it's most basic details? They would probably at least have known that the test subjects were involuntary. And even if they only knew the

experiment's most basic details, they were actively participating to turn humans into living weapons of war. An organization that does that, in the level of secrecy that they did, cannot be trusted."

"I get what you're saying," said Emma in a soothing voice. "It's a risk. But it's also a risk to go it alone."

"If we accept this, then they will use us for their own ends. I don't believe the guardian angel act they're putting on," he warned. "And you shouldn't either. I sincerely doubt their concern is strictly for our personal wellbeing."

"We'll think this over," said Emma firmly. "And you should give it some more thought too."

Dan reluctantly agreed and Emma and Gwen went in to tell the others. He strolled down the road, considering what he had been told.

He was walking through a crowd near a bus stand, whistling, when he realized someone was saying his name.

"Hey, Dan," someone whispered, and Dan turned to see a middle-aged clean shaven man with tanned skin and a salt-and-pepper beard and glasses strolling beside him.

"I'm a friend. Join me on the bus. I'll pay, don't worry," and he stepped on to a passing bus. Dan stood, considering for a moment, before, on an impulse, running and jumping onto the bus. The man paid and sat down in the back seat and gestured across from him. Dan looked at him curiously but sat down.

Already, Dan's mind was racing. What if he was Japanese and was going to suicide bomb them all? Or maybe he was F.U.S.E and the people in the bus were agents who were going to hijack it and kidnap him.

But the bus' inhabitants, though few, had all kinds of people, including a mother with an infant. Still, Dan was still very suspicious of the man he was sitting across from.

Watching him, the man chuckled. "Suspicious, yes? Well, given all you've been through, I don't blame you."

Dan muttered, "Alright, cough up everything."

The man smiled. "I heard what you just said, you know. To your friends? We have listening devices outside the hospital to keep tabs on you kids."

Dan started. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"Keep your voice down, please." uttered the man softly. "Let's just say that my compatriots and I are no friends of your government and its cronies. Nor the Japanese, who are no better. We constitute the middle path. The path of global peace."

"Stop distracting from the point of my question. I asked one simple thing; Who are you?"

The man dipped his head slightly in acknowledgement. "You're right, I apologize. we are a multi-faceted organization designated with one purpose: to stop the growing problem of global tensions and prevent another world war. Our members are many and diverse, high and low alike. And we have been watching you. Following you. Even protecting you."

"Protecting us?" protested Dan. "How did you do that? We were just attacked in the hospital, and Riley was shot before that! You did nothing then."

The man adjusted his glasses. "My agents were there too. But when we noticed the F.U.S.E agents coming in, we held back. No good alerting the enemy to where we were. As to the latter...that was accident by one of our people. I apologize. He has been disciplined. He won't be making the mistake again. And not to mention it will be a while before he reaches the rank required to be in a position to make that mistake again."

Dan stared at him slack-jawed. "You shot Riley. You bloody buggers shot Riley." and he got up abruptly, his fists clenching."

"And I told you." he said calmly. "Which means I'm not going to lie. We also protected you in the cabin. That was our operative who took out the Japanese assassins, you know. And that's not mentioning who took care of things whenever the Japanese tracked you down. They have substantial resources, you realize. I don't even remember how many times we had to...ah...end things before they got too dangerous for you. It kept us on our toes. And who do you think took out that assassin who was going to shoot you that night in the forest? My man again."

Dan's mind shot back to the man who had saved him, shooting down his attacker. He had only told his friends. But even if that had not been the case, Dan realized that it all made sense. It seemed that this man and his shadowy organization had in fact been protecting them from the beginning.

"Why?" he snapped.

The man seemed unperturbed at his tone, calm replying, "The government turned you into biological weapons. They ruined your lives on purpose for their own ends. They create distance by delegating it to special branches like F.U.S.E. But they are always moving pieces behind the scenes. They are willing to cut as many corners as it takes to gain their goal of world

dominance. And they don't care how many people they step on on the way. You were victims. It was our duty as the Protectors of peace to save you. Or else the government would begin a war with you on the front lines. ."

Then he smiled. "But I'm not going to be F.U.S.E, trying to convince you that we were entirely altruistic. Some of us believed that you might be persuaded to help us out, perhaps even join us. We do need all the help we can get after all."

Dan's mind was in a whirl. What the man was saying was incredible. But he was agreeing with I'm. Everything the man had said about the government, Dan had been thinking about for a while.

"I was reluctant." he admitted. "But I eventually agreed to talk t you."

"Me?" asked Dan bewildered. "Why me?"

"Because I think you an we agree on this. You are less trusting than the others. Perhaps in the case, it's a good thing. You're not going to be easily taken in. But you think like us, I can tell. But I should warn you, once you join us, there's no going back. We have resources, but both your government and the Japanese will be hunting us. It won't be easy."

The gears turned in Dan's mind. "I'm not sure I can trust you, yet. You haven't even told me your name."

"Ah, apologies." said the man with a wryful grin. "You can call me Cooper, Secretary General of the Protectorate."

Dan shook his head. "Still, I've just met you and I have no real idea you're all you claim to be. But you do seem more...honest than what I've heard about the F.U.S.E agent. So I will give it some thought."

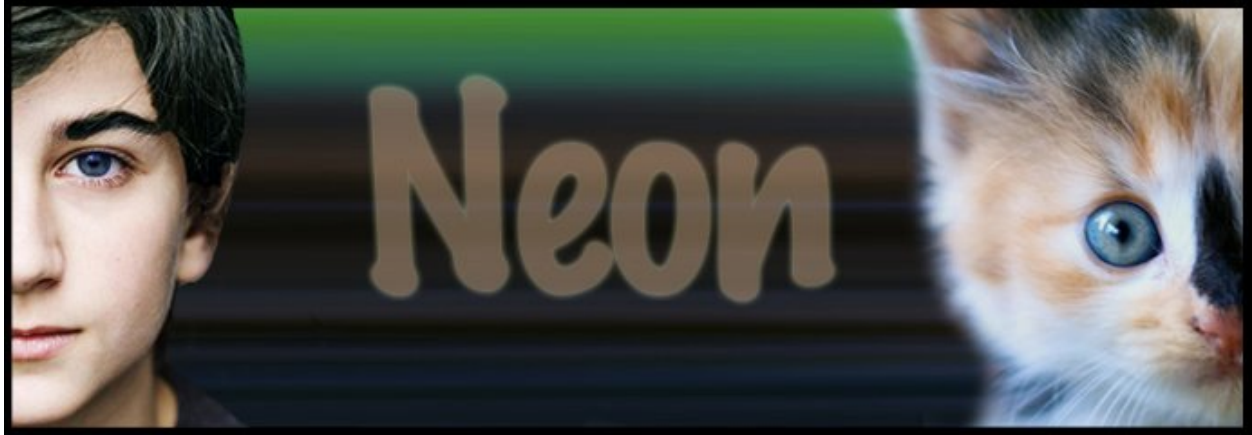
Cooper nodded. "I understand. It's a big decision and I am a stranger on bus. But take this." and he handed him a pad of red sticky notes.

Dan looked down at them then up at Cooper.

Cooper chuckled gain. "If you ever need to talk to us or need our help, put one of these on your window. We will send agents to stop by from time to time to check. Oh, and do me a favor please...don't speak about us to your friends until you've made your decision. I want to know what you think first. And take your time. This is a lot to be getting in to."

Dan nodded. The bus stopped as he got up and he walked out the door. He stood motionless at the bus stop, before his recent experience really hit him and he let out a tortured sigh. He had much to think on.

*Two new sides. Two new forces to add to the equation. And us still in the center. And they still all want us.* But he took a deep breath and stood. They would not be cowed They would survive this, just like they had survived what had come already. *Whatever, happens, the Animorphers will live through it...I just hope we make it in one piece.*



“So if Miles Eximius exists for the purpose of creating super-soldiers, it doesn’t make sense to put it inside of teenagers,” Neon said. He was sitting in the comfortable chair of the lobby, running his mouth off as the others pretended not to listen. “Unless they were counting on the DNA bonding with our own. If we aren’t done developing, that means that there’s a period where the transformation is adapting. if we’re in that period, it also means that our animal genes haven’t reached their full potential. And if it turns out to be too strong - who knows what’ll happen to our actual DNA?”

Gwen flinched as he said this, and Michael intervened, shaking his head. “That’s enough, Neon.”

Neon glanced at him. “What? I’m not saying we should trust F.U.S.E. - of course not. But it’s going to be dangerous if we don’t even know what using our powers means.

“Look,” he said, leaning close, “our DNA could be affecting us, changing our behavior, and we don’t even know it. Who knows what could happen, who would get hurt, who could *die*—”

“Neon!” Michael shouted, shattering the sterile quiet of the hospital. “I said that’s enough!”

Neon shrank back for a second, but then surged angrily from his seat. “Enough? Enough of what? Were you going to say enough acting like we’re clueless and unsafe, because that’s exactly what’s happening now. That’s the reason we’re here - it’s the reason you couldn’t protect her!”

Cole stiffened and stared harder at the coffee table. Layla crumpled her magazine while Charlotte sipped on an empty cup of tea.

“You want to just courage your problems away, well that’s not going to work! All of you!” Neon’s voice became truly menacing. “How much longer do you want to pretend we’re superheroes?”

Cole rose to his feet, glaring at him. “How long did you?”

Neon glared at him, opening his mouth to retort; but he couldn’t make a sound. His mind had gone chalk-white, the color draining into the ground, leaving him light as a ghost. Slowly, his mind began to tremor, synapses bursting inside of him before he grabbed his arm to stop himself. He didn’t look back up.

“I’m going home.” Without another word, he swung his legs from the chair and walked to the door. Neon wasn’t sure of it, but he felt something collapse as he walked away. Whether it was his or theirs, he’d never know.

The automatic sensor registered his small stature, and the double doors opened as if by his own wielded power. Neon smiled momentarily before glancing to his right.

Emma had taken the seat closest to the door. She looked desperately at Neon, who stared back into her shining eyes. He, the genius, could see it then: her love stories and dreams, tears and grins, all with Riley by her side. Now she was cast adrift within a maelstrom, shaken up and



rolled into a die that would land on a nation's fate. By far, the one who had suffered the most emotional trauma in these fleeting weeks. Oh, how terrible.

Neon's smile turned cruel in that one moment, and he gave Emma a single, devastating shrug. Pain never warranted pity, especially from the beasts. And he was Neon, kitten of darkness.

"Looks like it's up to you now, Emma," he cackled, then turned away so he didn't have to watch her reaction.

"Weren't you leaving?" shouted Cole, but he hadn't even finished the sentence before Neon had waved the doors open again, and the lord of darkness had disappeared into the evening light.

It took Neon a long time to get home. He walked.

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The sun was sinking into the horizon by the time Neon reached his house. He looked behind him, watching his shadow grow longer until it disappeared.

"Oh man," he muttered, stretching his shoulders, "I've been away for way too long - this place is going to be an absolute wreck."

Turning down the street, he could see the lights on in Gwen's house. He supposed her family was having dinner, and tried to make humor out of the image of her scarfing down meat like a wolf, to the amusement of her entire pack.

He pulled his scarf closer around his face, turning back to his own home. The bright red paint job used to be distinct, but had withered away to a raw pink color. It felt appropriate, so Neon had never fixed it.

He never locked the door, either, and as his hand gently turned the knob, he felt a breeze slice through, clipping the leaves from trees. Not waiting any longer, Neon pushed the door open and was greeted with blackness.

He sighed, groping in the dark until he found a wire, jamming it into a potato. The circuits rejuvenated, and light burst up into the room. The living room had retained its chaotic look, with old experiments lying about, charred potato skins, and the TV dissected like a Frankenstein's monster. It was exactly how he had left it.

Neon walked across the room, king over a domain of knee-high wastepaper and destroyed wires. Nobody had told Neon not to draw on the walls, and calculations looped across the decaying plaster. The lines of arithmetic ran into the kitchen, where five plates sat unwashed in the sink. Neon bent over them and looked out the window, relieved to see that his garden was still surviving. It would be baked potatoes again tonight.

But dinnertime was past, and he could always eat later. Neon turned on his heel and marched up the stairs. Right now, there was something far more important.

The house had two bedrooms, one of them immaculately kept, dusted and polished to a sheen. The other one was Neon's. Stumbling across mounds of undone laundry, he found his desk and computer with a thin coat of dust. He wiped off the monitor, pushing the button to boot up the ancient device. It was the only machine in his house that didn't run on potatoes; the calls he made were too important to entrust, even to his potato power.

Beside the computer was an old potato clock, bronze and silver wires running through the vegetables and into the screen, which read 8:4-. Some of the lights had come unconnected, and Neon fiddled with them as he pulled up his chair. Despite the technical difficulties, it ran well for a six-year-old clock. Neon gingerly put it back on the desk, turning back to the computer.

He opened up his messaging program, and typed in the dial code. Even if it was nighttime in Silver Creek, it was still wearing into morning hours where he was calling. Neon sat back in his computer chair as his screen opened up into a camera call to China.

He was looking at an office, filled with monitors that cycled communication lines through the company. An operator wheeled himself into view, squinting at the Neon's poorly lit face. "Hello, sir, how may I help you?" he said in an over-cadenced accent.

Neon gave him a wave. "It's Kingsley. Could you patch this call to your supervisor, please?"

The operator's eyes widened, and he nodded, scrambling at his keyboard. "Of course, sir. Just a moment."

Neon wondered if he should have a drink in hand when talking to the director, just to appear sophisticated. He decided against it, since the only drink he could make was elephant-dose vodka. Also, it wasn't as if she could ever view him as sophisticated.

Neon ground his teeth as his mother appeared on the screen.

Seeing her made him recoil, only half out of surprise. Mrs. Kingsley was dressed in forceful black attire, as if she were in mourning. Her cheekbones were high-set, rimming eyes that glinted like crushed glass. Though aging, she remained as stylish as ever, her mature fashion marked by the purple scarf around her neck. Neon forced a smile onto his face.

His mother spoke, tugging at her hair to make herself appear more casual. “Director Flora Kingsley. How can I help you, son?”

She’d always had a gravitas to her personality too; though, this one was hard as stone. Neon had inherited her dramatic flair, and he used it to lean forward and counterattack as pleasantly as he could.

“Hello there, Mother,” Neon said, wiring the circuit to light up his face. “Just wondering how you’re doing?”

“Well, I’m happy to say that Chinese food is better in its place of birth. I’ll miss it once I leave.” Flora smirked. “That will be soon, since I’m almost done with the manufacturing deal. Just a few more agreements, and then I’ll be able to move on.”

“So you sold them on CrownTech technology?”

Flora crossed her arms. “Not completely. They’ve got the same reservations as everyone else: battery costs, not that I’m surprised. I’ve faced it for a while now, so I won’t lose easily.”

Neon nodded. It was like this every time he called; Mother was always working hard to make her family’s dreams come true. She’d gained a few wrinkles over the years, her voice growing wearier in speech. Neon knew that while CrownTech used such overambitious inventions, she wouldn’t be winning anytime soon.

“Hey, wanna see something cool?” He reached into his desk and pulled out a plastic circuitboard. “Check this out: I modified this frame so it can contain larger amounts of electricity. It even sorts them with thirteen percent more efficiency!”

He held it up, a proud glint in his eye. “This could be a resistor powerful enough to build the Launch-Box. I’ve even got a scale prototype somewhere- I might have left it at Michael’s house, but it works and I’ve shot at least six potatoes-”

“I thought I told you to focus on your studies.” Mrs. Kingsley’s features grew impossibly sharp.

“CrownTech is my study, Mom,” Neon insisted. “Look, if I got an internship, I could show you just what I can do when I apply myself.”

She shook her head, frowning. Neon saw her hesitating, almost deliberating for a second; then her hard expression returned. Changing the topic, she studied him for a moment. “You seem well, Neon.”

The boy genius shrugged. “I’m a teenager whose parents aren’t home. Why wouldn’t I be ecstatic?”

“Well, it’s just that I received this a week ago.” Mrs. Kingsley held up a paper. Neon read the words at the top; Notice of Expulsion, they said.

His brain paled as his mother continued. “I can’t say I’m surprised. Just three people in the hospital, though? Seems like you weren’t applying yourself enough.”

Her gaze turned stony. “Neon. There’s nothing that you or I can say that will make this better. The fact of it is, you failed.”

The corner of Neon’s mouth twitched. “Failed?”

Flora didn’t hear him. “For all your smarts, they didn’t mean a thing once you’d decided you were better than everyone else, didn’t they? Then, you used your inventions, which I’d already told you to stop making, to beat them, and for what? For justice?”

Flora's glare burned through Neon, beyond him and to his core. "You're a genius, but you have never, once in your life, been a hero."

She didn't stop, even as Neon visibly shook, his fingers rattling on his desk. "There's a school here in China that's willing to take you. I know you learned Chinese a month ago, so you're coming here for your junior year."

"Don't argue with me, Neon." Flora stalled his protests with a hand. "You threw away the right to think for yourself the moment you threw that punch."

Neon shuddered in disbelief. "Threw it away...?" He grabbed the computer, shoving his face into the camera. "Are you kidding me? I didn't throw away anything you didn't take from me to begin with!"

Neon's rage surged up, collapsing on itself and issuing forth. "I've had straight A's for my entire life, credits for classes a decade above my age. If you just signed off on my papers, I could skip junior year. I could skip college!"

"Look," he said, his voice breaking, "You need me at CrownTech. And if you'd just let me apply, I could give the company actually new inventions!"

"We don't need new inventions," she snapped. "We're still trying to manufacture the old ones."

"I could do that!" Neon shouted, slamming his fist on the desk. "I could finish Dad's machines! I can make them work!"

"I thought I made myself clear, Neon." Flora Kingsley was absolute. "I'm not going to make sacrifices for a genius."

"Ever again."

Her eyes narrowed. “Goodbye, Neon.”

“You’re not going to sacrifice for a genius ever again!”

“Goodbye.”

The connection cut out, returning Neon to his home screen.

Neon screamed in frustration, storming out of the room. He burned into the empty bedroom, stomping on the floor, striking the wall, throwing himself on the bed; all of it had been empty for six years.

He lay face-down on the covers, breathing in rigid gasps, gritting his teeth and driving himself further into the darkness. It was her fault, all her fault, that he couldn’t take over the world. His father’s too, for disappearing, his last words to his family that they weren’t enough to suffice his genius. Neon roiled on the bed like the sea, lost and weeping.

“What the hell?” he murmured bleakly, letting the tears roll together in his eyes. “I told you to trust me! What kind of excuse-” He was suddenly gripped by a fit of sniffing, and the world soaked into a darkening blur. Neon felt his body collapsing, the stress of seven weeks piling into his flesh to slumber.

“Dad,” he whispered, letting his eyes dry shut. “I’m not enough...”

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Neon awoke at sunrise, pushing off of the bed to stare at the window blinds. His scarf lay on the bed beside him, a twisted river of scarlet.

He sat on the edge of the bed for a while, mired in twilight. At the moment, it didn't matter what his mother thought of him, or where his father was, and why he had left. He was a bum with nowhere to go, but everything to lose. All Neon had were his friends. And he'd be damned if they were to be cast adrift any longer.

He stumbled a little as he made his way into the hall, wrapping his scarf around him. He walked downstairs, grabbing a potato off of the counter and eating it absentmindedly. He walked into the garage, a place of empty tables and burn marks. This had been the laboratory of his father - not his father anymore, the divorce had made sure of that. Neon strode in, determined to be enough to power his own freedom.

He walked over to the printer, which was already spitting out pages by his command. After his expulsion, Neon had stolen a record from the school, one that had been erased and scattered in the teacher's database. On the front, a smiling, bearded man posed with a class on a field trip to the zoo, each one posing like an animal. Ryker Mauze had his arms thrown up in a comical bird pose, while Riley gave Emma bunny-ears. But it was the man at the front, roaring at the camera like a lion, that made Neon narrow his eyes, casting the file across the table.

He propped himself on his arms, leaning over the pages. "Alright, then," he said, perusing the data spread before him. "Let's see if I've been paying enough attention to you, Mr. Neil."





The first thing I was aware of was myself. The heaviness in my eyelids and limbs and the pain throbbing through me, keeping to the rhythm of my heart. My muscles ached, protesting against my stillness. I blinked my eyes open. The lights were still off in the room, pale rays of early sunlight pushed through the window. I sat up, groaning a little at the pain that lanced through my body, and looked around. My mother sat in a chair at my bedside, head resting on her arm, fast asleep. I reached out to tap her on the shoulder. A soft snore rose from the floor. I paused. My mom never snored. The room seemed to shrink a little. I tried to ignore the creeping sensation in my chest, and glanced around the room. Me, my mom, the and I.V. and heart monitor on the other side of my bed. Other than my mom, it looked like I was alone. The snore rose again. I turned my head. The sound seemed to be coming from behind the chair. I craned my neck to peer over. There, lying on the floor against the wall was Cole. He was sprawled there awkwardly, as if someone had just thrown him there. I shook my head. How anyone could get comfortable on a linoleum floor was beyond me. I reached behind me, grabbed my pillow, and taking careful aim, tossed it. It sailed with perfect trajectory over my mother's head and hit Cole with a soft but

satisfying thump. He jerked awake as soon as it hit him and bolted up. The pillow was launched off his forehead and halfway across the room. His head swiveled around, eyes wide.

I whispered, “psst.” He turned toward the noise and froze, staring at me like I’d just come back from the dead, which all things considered might not be too far from the truth. I put a finger to my lips, nodding to my mother, still asleep in the chair. He gave her a fleeting glance, then slowly and silently picked himself up off the floor and crept over to sit on the side of my bed. He still didn’t say anything. I smiled awkwardly. What are you supposed to say to someone who’s watched you almost die? *Good to be back?*

“So...” I shrugged a little “I’m not dead...”

His response was a hug. My breath caught a little. My heart pounded in my ears. Blood rushed to my cheeks. The pain in my abdomen spiked from ten to twenty. I tapped his shoulder, and manages to wheeze “Stitch...es...”

He quickly pulled away, his arms still loosely around his shoulders. “Sorry.” The word came out an odd sort of half sigh. “I was just...” He smiled, but his eyes looked like they were about to cry. One of his hands began nervously fingering the ends of my hair. “You almost died.”

I swallowed. The pain had subsided to a hard pulse again, but my heart still pounded in my chest. “I’ll be fine. For now I’m just glad to be alive.” His hands slid from my shoulders and he clasped them in his lap. I picked at the sheets. “Thanks, by the way.” The feeling of his eyes on me made the dormant butterflies in my stomach rustle to life. “If you hadn’t been there...”

Cole nodded slowly. “I guess we should both remember this the next time I need money.” Suddenly I regretted no longer having access to anything throwable. I was saved from having to come up with a retort by a familiar voice gasping “Riley!”

I smiled. My mom had woken up. Cole stood back up and retreated back to the doorway. My mom was out of the chair and on the edge of the bed in less than two seconds. She swept me into her arms and clutched me to her. I could hear her racing heart racing where my head rested on her chest. “My baby girl...”

A selfish part of my mind reminded me that Cole was still standing there and had heard her call me that. The rest of me decided not to care. I hugged her back. Melted into her. Let my heartbeat merge with hers. “Mom...”

I wanted to say more. I wanted to introduce her to Cole. I wanted to tell her how many other bullets had been fired at me. I wanted to let her know every terrifying, every weird, every wonderful thing that had happened. I ached to pour it out in front of her.

But for now, that one word was all that seemed to matter.



*Three years ago...*

Neil stared at himself in the rearview mirror, fixing his tie, adjusting his glasses. He licked his thumb and ran it across his eyebrows to smooth them down. Everything had to be perfect. He'd never been called in on an interview this big... this important.

Finally, he took a deep breath and got out of his Maserati. Well, not his exactly. A rental. But they didn't need to know that. He walked up to the glass doors of a shiny new laboratory, his polished shoes clicking against the freshly set pavement.

Inside, a man waited for him. Tall. Thin. Moussed brown hair slicked back, not a hair out of place. "You must be Neil Terek," he said. "My name is Liam Bishop. Welcome to my laboratory." He shook Neil's hand. A firm handshake, he noted. Then he was led into a small office.

"So, what kind of work are you doing currently?" he was asked as Liam sat down behind his desk.

"Actually, I'm between jobs at the moment," Neil told him honestly. "But I have been contracted by the government before and I have more than enough certifications and degrees to be qualified to work in your laboratory."

Liam smiled. "I have no doubt you're qualified. If I did, you wouldn't be sitting in my office. I have a special project in mind for you, but before I go into it any further, I just have one question for you. Have you ever considered teaching high school science?"

Neil was taken aback. Was this a joke? Was he trying to spite him? He couldn't remember the last time someone said something so insulting.

Neil sat up a little straighter in his chair. "Excuse me?" Liam started to speak, but was cut off. "If teaching kids how to make baking soda volcanos and potato clocks is all you think I'm capable of, then you're wasting your time, and mine."

Liam stared at him for a long moment. "Let's take a walk."

Neil was led through various labs and corridors as Liam explaining everything they had been working towards. Nanotech, DNA research, cancer studies, robotics. It all made Neil's head spin, but he kept a straight face. Liam couldn't know that he was impressed, not until Neil knew what was up his sleeve.

Finally, Liam led him into a laboratory at the very back of the building, secured by a keycard of the highest clearance level. He led him into a hallway with twelve doors along it, six to a wall. Liam turned the knob on the closest one and swung it open it reveal a small, empty room.

"What is this?" Neil asked. "What are you planning?"

Liam smiled. "Something that will change the world, and I need your help to do it. I will be acquiring some new technology, a diamond in the rough, but with your skills, I know you can bring it to its full potential. And if you agree, you will have more power and money than you ever thought possible."

A shiver ran down Neil's spine. *More power and money than you ever thought possible..*

"But before I acquire this technology, I would have another task for you. A simpler task," Liam told him. "I need you to find me test subjects. But not just anyone. I need you to find me subjects with a very specific set of criteria. I need you to study them, get to know them and choose carefully. The success of the experiment relies on it."

Neil swallowed hard. It was starting to make sense now. "You want me to teach at a high school. Pull the subjects from there."

Liam nodded. "You're smart, Neil. But don't think of it as being a teacher. Think of it as a cover. Think of it as becoming a spy to infiltrate and uncover untapped potential."

He stared at Liam, trying to take in everything he'd said. His head spun. Liam hadn't given him the details of the experiment yet, but that wasn't uncommon. Until someone is officially signed onto a project, they usually keep the details locked away. But he could already tell this was going to be big. Bigger than all of them. It was terrifying and exciting.

"So, I just have one thing to ask you," Liam said, clasping his hands behind his back. "Are you in?"

Neil smiled. "I'm in."

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Neil compiled a list of students. At first it was general, writing down any student he noticed to be physically strong or particularly smart. For the first year that he taught at Silver Creek High, he still was given little details on the experiment, so knowing exactly what kind of test subjects they were looking for was impossible.

A couple hundred kids made the list at first. But the more he learned about the experiment and the kids themselves, the more that list shrunk. Hundreds became a hundred. A hundred became seventy-five. Then fifty. Then thirty.

He watched two blonde sophomores sprint down the track, two of the fastest on their team.

He watched the redheaded quarterback win the biggest game of the year with a touchdown worthy of a pro.

A girl with braces and wavy brown hair, starting her own band with zero hesitation when most weren't even brave enough to preform in the annual talent show.

A boy with black hair and a crimson scarf so young he shouldn't have even stepped foot in a high school for another year, and yet had already become a junior as he scribbled equations across the board, a combination of calculus, trigonometry and latin. Too smart for his own good. Too smart for *anyones* good.

A tall kid with dark skin and a nose ring who was so strong the sharpness of his muscles cut through the thick material of the hoodies he always wore...

Most kids blurred into the crowd. In a school of over six hundred students, it was hard to stand out. But one by one, Neil found them. And by the time the chairs were in their final stages of development, he had his list narrowed down to just twelve. Stage 1: Complete.

Stage 2: Earn their trust, and make certain that he chose wisely.

An invitation-only A.P. Science Class. They all accepted.

Oliver Pascal didn't live up to his potential and dropped out.

Hannah Washington left Silver Creek High just before the second semester when her family moved away.

Ashton Cole took her place. Neil didn't have much time to assess him, but given he was related to Layla, he made an exception.

Everything was going according to plan, but over those three years at Silver Creek High, there was one thing Neil never anticipated.

He grew to care for his students.

### **Friday, Jan 21th - 17 Days After Field Trip - Night of Battle of the Bands**

Neil sat in a booth, the same booth he had come to the night M.E.L. went up in flames. But this time, there was no ally going to walk through those glass doors. His students were not at home, sleeping soundly in their beds. It was all wrong, and it was all his fault.

The neon sign of the old diner glowed red light down on Neil's old Subaru hatchback. The car he had owned for the last ten years. The car he was now living out of. It wasn't safe to go back to his apartment. It wasn't safe for him anywhere.

The events played through his mind over and over again as he tried to figure out how everything went so wrong. He lost his job at Silver Creek High. His position at M.E.L. was obliterated along with the lab itself. He lost his students trust. His only ally turned out to be



nothing but the enemy in disguise, and if he went to the organization behind the experiment, it could put himself in jeopardy. The fact he'd been in hiding for over a week could come across as suspicious, and if they found out he knew about the bombing before it happened, he could be charged as an accomplice.

But for now, only one thing mattered. Finding Cole and Riley.

His tired eyes scanned across a map of the city and various others papers around the table in which he had scribbled notes of anything and everything that could be relevant.

The Japanese had to be involved, right? Hiro was there. Even tricked Neil into leaving him alone with them. Why would he have bothered if he wasn't going to try something?

Neil rested his forehead on the palms of his hands, slowly drowning in a pool of hopelessness. They could be anywhere. Hell, they could be dead.

He sat in that booth for hours, having gotten there just after sunset, still there when it returned to the sky once again. So many cups of coffee to keep him awake that the waitress cut him off somewhere around five. Neil heard the 6am news come on, droning quietly in the background, but he didn't bother looking up.

"Good morning. I'm Dianna Winters and we're going to start the news this morning with the developing story of what is said to involve a drive-by shooting and a local girl by the name of Riley West--"

Neil's head shot up. "Hey, turn that up!" The waitress begrudgingly obliged.

"Around 6PM last night at the cross-streets of Dunkirk and Jewell, the fifteen-year-old student of Silver Creek High was rushed to the Porter Hospital after receiving a gunshot wound

to the stomach," the newscaster continued. "The seriousness of the injury is still unknown, and the shooter has not been identified."

Neil gritted his teeth. "*Hiro*." He knew it. He slapped a twenty down on the table and fled out of the dinner.

When he got to the hospital, he sat in the parking lot and waited. He noted whenever he saw one of his students go in or out of the entrance. By noon, all nine of them, excluding Riley, had been seen. Alive.

With that knowledge, Neil knew what he had to do. Those kids needed to be protected, and he couldn't do it on his own. And the day everything fell apart was when the experiment fell apart. F.U.S.E. didn't know about the threat Dr. Liam had bestowed upon him, nor did they know he was there when M.E.L. was bombed. He wasn't ready to give up on the experiment, and if he could get F.U.S.E.'s support, he would be back on top, and the power he'd craved for the last three years would once again be in reach.

**Saturday, Jan 22nd - 18 Days After Field Trip - 20 Hours After Riley Was Admitted To The Hospital**

The cold January sun gleamed off of the shiny white quartz. Big glass windows, rich dark woods, the building constructed in a boxy, modern style. The big F.U.S.E. logo lit up on the building's exterior. It had been a while since Neil had been there, and he couldn't be certain if walking through the front doors would be a mistake or not. But he knew the alternative would be giving up, and that wasn't something he was prepared to do.

The receptionist bugged her eyes out the moment she saw him. Her face drained of color, as if she'd seen a ghost. Around there, it probably *was* like seeing a ghost.

The director of F.U.S.E. was alerted immediately and Neil was in his penthouse office within minutes. When he saw Neil, he smiled. "Well, I'll be damned. The rumors were true. You're alive."

Neil nodded. "It's good to see you again Mr. Sterling."

"Please, call me Jay." The director took him in for a moment. "Where have you been all this time, Neil?"

"I had to lay low for a little while. Those who bombed the lab knew I worked there. They were after me." Neil's voice quieted. "I'm free of them now."

"Well, please. Have a seat." Jay presented his hand to the empty white chair in front of his desk, then poured water into a crystal glass from a stainless steel pitcher and set it in front of Neil. "What made you decide to come back now?"

Neil sat in the chair before him. "Three reasons. I have information, I have a request, and I have a proposition. First, I know you've been looking for the subjects ever since the bombing. I can tell you all of their names, where they live, and where they are at this exact moment. Secondly, those who bombed the lab are out for their heads and those kids are in need of protection. My request is that you make it a priority to protect them."

Jay pondered his words for a moment. "And what's your proposition?"

"No one knows the experiment better than I do. I believe it would have been a success if the Japanese hadn't interfered." Neil looked Jay dead in the eye. "I want to recreate the experiment with me as the head scientist. I have everything we need to recreate the chairs and the

serum. I know how badly you need the information on the first subjects, but it will stay with me unless you agree to both of my terms. So, I just have one thing to ask you." Neil leaned forward in his chair. "Are you in?"

Jay smiled. "I'm in."