

The Game of Life
Written By: Clara Hixson
-We are all pawns in the epic Game of Life-

Part 1: Introductions

Chapter 1
New York City
Nicole

It was another normal day at work for Nikki, suspicious stares from her coworkers, the neverending beep of the scanners at the checkout line, the occasional woman yelling in her face to talk to the manager. Nothing was ever different. Until the day that it had been.

10 Years Ago

Nicole was sitting at home eating breakfast that morning. She had slept in because her boss had given her the week off for Christmas. She was going to fly to Seattle to visit her family, who she hadn't seen in years. She couldn't wait to see the smile she had missed so much, appear on her sister Kitty's face again. She finished her oatmeal with a sigh placing her bowl in the sink amongst the other dirty dishes she had yet to do. *I'll get to it later.* She told herself. She walked into her apartment living room and sat down on the couch. She foraged through the velvety cushions to find the remote, and with the click of a button she turned on the news. Something was wrong. Something major. Images flashed across the screen. Someone was dead. Not just someone. **Kitty.** Her face paled as she watched the screen helplessly. Someone had murdered Kitty. Her sister, her best friend, her one and only confidant. She couldn't comprehend it. *No! Kitty couldn't be gone. She saw her just a month ago. No... she couldn't be dead.* All these thoughts ran through her head as days, months, even years went by. Nicole didn't see her family that Christmas or the next. She didn't see Kitty. There was no word of who the murderer was, and there never would be. At least that's what the officers had told her.

Back to the Present

After a long day of work, Nicole decided to grab food on the way and eat at home. However, when she pulled into her driveway and walked up the steps she was met with a surprise. A small cube-like package sat on her porch with her full name, *Nicole Aviana Calrissian*, in beautiful swan-like cursive. She stared at it for a moment. She hadn't ordered anything that week, and she had no idea who would've sent her anything. She gently picked it up and carried it inside, before placing it on her coffee table, sitting on the couch, and taking a good look at it. She opened the package carefully, wary of its contents. She reached

her hand inside and felt something smooth yet shaped, and almost cold, like a stone. She pulled the item from within the bag and was confused to see a small car with a figure in the driver seat. There were seven empty holes in the car where it seemed that more figures could be placed. It was made out of a beautiful ruby stone that glistened as the light hit it. But that wasn't all. On the bottom of the car was a date. And a time. And an address. It read, *Meet me at midnight, on the 5th day of the second week in October.* Nicole ran over that date in her mind. But that was next week! She hurriedly read the rest of the instructions and placed the address into her phone. *Huh. That's weird.* She thought to herself. All that appeared was an open field, blurred so heavily that she couldn't see its contents. She had no choice. It might lead her to answers about Kitty. And it wasn't like she had anything better to do.

Chapter 2
New York City
Robyn

As the curtains closed, Robyn was left with a feeling of loss. A feeling of grief that he hadn't felt in a while. This had been his father's favorite show and they would go and see it all the time before he died. He could almost hear the sound of his dad's coughing in another room, while his mom struggled to help him in all the ways that she could. It wasn't his fault. Of course not. He told himself that everyday. But there was always that ever present feeling of guilt, that his death had left on Robyn. He stood up. No, he wouldn't dwell on this. He would bury himself in the distractions of the world, just to find peace. He would call his friend Nikki, that's what he would do. He went to his car and as he turned the key, he thought about what he would tell her. Why would he even be calling? *Because you're struggling emotionally and you can't stop thinking about your dad.* A voice whispered in his head. But no, he knew better than to talk to her about that kind of thing. She knew better than he did the feelings of grief, and it would just make them both feel worse. He settled into his seat and called her. He didn't know what he would say. He would improvise, that might work, that's what all the best actors did. *Ring...Ring...Ring...*

"Hey this is Nicole! Sorry I can't come to the phone right now! If it's really important, make sure to leave me a message or call me ba-"

Robyn hung up. There was no point in trying to call her again. She was probably at work, doing normal work things, like he should've been. Instead he had chosen to take the day off and go to a show in town. He pulled into the parking garage and, feeling good about himself, jogged up the steps to his apartment. He opened the door and before he could put one foot inside, his eyes landed on a small paper-wrapped package. On it was written his full name, *Robyn Jacob Owen.* The font was so detailed, he was surprised he could even

read it. *But...wait.* He thought to himself. No one knew his middle name except for his family. *Not even Nicole.* With a burst of curiosity, he picked up the package, careful not to damage it. He grabbed a pair of scissors off the kitchenette counter, and made a small cut on the wrapping. He tore it open, carefully of course, and stuck his hand inside. *Weird. Almost like a stone, but more defined.* He thought to himself. He pulled it out and was shocked to see a small car with a figure in the passenger seat. All seven other spots were empty, and the car was made out of *gold.* He turned over the item to see if there was any information about the sender anywhere, and to his surprise, there was a date, a time, and an address. *Why not?* He thought to himself. The date was labeled for next week, and oddly enough, he had the same day off. It wasn't like he had anything better to do. He put the small car back in its packaging and locked it in a drawer. He had lost enough in his life, he didn't want to miss out on this chance for an adventure.

Chapter 3
Chicago
Sadie

Sadie watched as people rushed past her, on foot, wheelchairs, and stretchers. This steady stream would continue on for another three minutes, most likely, end and then return another hour later. It was her late shift, and the only thing keeping her at this hour was the promise of a bed when she got home. As she watched the people sitting in the waiting room, she turned to see a woman standing at the desk with tears streaming from her eyes, which were bloodshot and puffy. Her heart ached with empathy, and so she handed the woman a box of tissues and offered her a water bottle. The woman looked up at Sadie with gratitude in her eyes.

"Thank you s-so much, m-my daughter..." the woman faltered.

"Yes?" Sadie didn't want to press, but she had to know what was causing this woman distress.

"My d-daughter" the woman started again, "was hit b-by a c-car, and I-I d-don't k-know if sh-she's even a-alive!"

The woman collapsed into sobs, and Sadie walked around her desk to give her a comforting side-hug.

"Now, would you mind telling me your daughter's name?" Sadie questioned. She was hopeful that the doctors would be sympathetic enough to let this woman see her child, who was in such pain.

"M-Melanie A-Anderson" The woman stuttered as she blew her nose, quite loudly, into a tissue. *Melanie Anderson.* Sadie had heard that name before, but she didn't recall where. All she could think about now was helping this woman find her child before it was too late. She knew all too well what that

sense of panic felt like, when she had found out that her boyfriend had fallen, and was in critical condition at the hospital only five months ago. She had rushed to the hospital and made it there, just to find that she had made it there too late. She pushed those thoughts aside and searched the database for Melanie.

"Melanie, Melanie, Melanie...ah!" Sadie had found her. She was still alive, thank goodness, in room 314, and was eligible for visits. Sadie looked at the woman, now surrounded by a pile of used tissues, and spoke up. "Ma'am, your daughter is going to be okay and you will be able to visit her, as soon as you fill out this paperwork and give it to my coworker," Sadie informed her as she handed the woman a clipboard and pen. Sadie's shift had finished a minute ago, but she felt emotionally unable to abandon the woman. She walked back to her office, grabbed her bag and headed out the door. *Huh. That's weird.* Sadie thought to herself. Her bag was heavier than usual. She sat in the driver's seat of her car, turned on a light, and began digging through the items in her handbag. Her hand found a cube shaped box and pulled it out. Scrawled in the neatest handwriting Sadie had ever seen, was her full name, *Sarah Penelope Davis*. No one had called her Sarah in over two years. She pried open the box with her fingertips, careful not to damage its contents. Inside, she found a small toy car with an undefined figure in the second row to the left. There were four rows in total and two columns. All the other spots in the car were empty for a reason, one that Sadie was unsure of. But the strangest thing was, the car was made out of pure sapphire. She knew this of course because, when she and her previous boyfriend, Nathan, had started dating, he gave her raw sapphire earrings that complimented the blue in her blue-green eyes. Grief over Nathan filled her head as she started to tuck the box away, but it was quickly replaced by the new information on the underside of the car. A date, a time, and an address. *Who would want to give me an address?* She wondered. She looked at it more closely with curiosity, before tucking it away for good and driving homewards. It wasn't like she was *actually* going to go. *That could be dangerous!* She warned herself, but she couldn't shake the feeling that this was destiny, and that there was no other option.

Chapter 4
Chicago
Xander

Xander took a deep breath as he sat at his desk alone in an office. The light in the day was fading, and it was almost time to go home. Home. If that was even a real word for him anymore. It hadn't been home to him for a long time. 10 years to be exact. Today was the 13th anniversary of his mom's death, or whatever it really was, and his father still hadn't told him what had happened.

One day she was there. And the next... A loud banging on the door interrupted Xander's thoughts. He didn't even realize that he had been crying, he wiped away the tears and held his water bottle against his eyes in an attempt to remove any evidence that he had been...Again the door shook from the force of a hand ramming into it. "Hold on a second!" Xander yelled out. "Jeez..." he muttered to himself. He pushed back from his desk before walking towards and unlocking it. He opened the door to see his coworker, Rebecca, standing in the door frame. *Oh my gosh, not again.* He thought to himself. This was the third time this week that she had shown up at his door after work hours. This time she was twirling a piece of her strawberry blonde hair in between her fingertips, and blinking at him with her *heavily* mascara-covered eyelashes. "Hey Rebecca, what is it this time?" He asked her, already annoyed.

"Yeah," she started, "I was wondering if you wanted to come eat dinner with us."

Xander, wanting to be a respectable person, declined this offer as politely as he could.

"But *Xan!*"

Xander flinched inwardly at the nickname Rebecca had given him. *She is the most aggravating person in the world!* He complained to himself. "Sorry!" Xander apologized, "I have a lot of work I need to get done," not true "and I'm really busy these next couple nights," also not true. Xander had absolutely nothing scheduled, and he had absolutely no idea what he would even be doing the next couple of nights.

"FINE" with as much melodrama as one could, she let out a sigh, and huffed herself out of the doorway, and down the long, tiled hallway.

He closed the door and turned around to see a small box sitting on his desk. On it was inscribed his full name, *Alexander Ryan Torres*. That was weird. He didn't remember anyone putting a package on his desk, and it *definitely* hadn't been there earlier. He opened the lid of the box to find a small toy car inside. The car was made out of pearl and had seven empty spots in it. One spot, the one on the second row to the right, had a small figurine in it. He looked at it in confusion, before turning it around in curiosity. On the bottom of the car he could make out a date, a time, and an address. He popped the address into his phone to see that it was only a five minute drive from his house. *Perfect!* However, the satellite image showed a grassy field, unlit and empty. He decided that he might as well go, since there weren't any big sports events that he would be watching with his friends. He tucked the small trinket into his briefcase, before leaving the building and heading back ho...to his house.

Dallas
Gwen

Gwen stared at her computer screen in frustration. *Solving mysteries isn't supposed to be this hard!* She told herself. Gwen had spent the last three days stuck on one piece of a single crime. None of the evidence was fitting together. She took a deep breath and stood up from her chair. She pulled open her curtains and looked outside. It was a beautiful day. *Wasn't it always in Dallas?* She shook those thoughts aside and stepped into her kitchen. She was a detective, and had chosen that Wednesday as her work-from-home day of the week. She looked to her oven, reminding her of the cookies that she had yet to bake for her neighbors. Gwen stored the thought on a mental to-do list in her head and walked out the front door. Sure enough it felt amazing outside. She took a few careful steps down her walkway before turning onto the main sidewalk on her street. She could smell fall in the air, and could see the effect it had on the trees all around her. Piles of leaves in front yards were slowly invading the street, being blown around by bursts of wind, and blowing her dark chestnut hair directly into her face. "Ugh!" Gwen spat out strands of her hair in frustration, before securing the temperamental strands with a hair tie. As she walked, thoughts of the case filled her head. What made it worse was that "the case" was a cold case and had been for ten years. A woman had been murdered, shot actually, and they still hadn't found who did it or how. She ran through facts in her head; they were what grounded her. Truth. Truth was always the answer, well at least it was in her department. Her thoughts were interrupted by a painful shove to the shoulder that caused her to fumble. She turned around, annoyed to see a man of about twenty-six running down the street. He looked back at her and she glared at him, only to be met by sad, brown eyes. She quickly looked away, embarrassed and continued on her walk. *That was so stupid!* She reprimanded herself. She wondered how she had gotten so distracted, that she hadn't even seen a literal human walking, no running down the sidewalk towards her. She decided to turn back around and head home, in hopes of baking the cookies that she had been meaning to. That would help her solve the case, she knew it would. Keeping her eyes ahead, somehow Gwen made it to her porch without any more incidents. A small bag hung from her door handle. That was curious. She looked at it more closely. On the bag was written her full name, *Gwendolyn Amelia Jones*. No one had called her by her full name since, well since her best friend's death. *Stop yourself. Now is not the time to be thinking about that. There are more important things to do right now.* She reminded herself. She gently pulled the bag off of the door handle and went inside, placing the bag on the counter. She opened it to find a small car, made

of...diamond. The small car had seven empty cylinders carved into it, and inside one cylinder was a small diamond figure. It was seated on the third row to the left. She didn't understand. Who would've sent that to her? She didn't even like cars all that much. She rotated it in her hand, inspecting it, when she found an inscription along what would've been the undercarriage. It was a date, a time, and an address. She scribbled all three down on a notepad, before placing the figurine in her closet. She didn't know what to do with it. She thought for a minute. *Wait.* She hesitated, *it could have to do with my case.* She knew at that moment that she had to go. She had to know if it connected to that woman. *Kitty.*

Chapter 6
Dallas
Nicholas

Nick's day had been going fine, until he had decided to go on a run. After that, everything was...well different, that was one way to put it. He was proud of himself actually, he hadn't thought once about Marion. He had gotten his work done and finished the plans for his next big project. He'd even surprised himself by planning a bike trip with a couple of his friends. *Maybe things will finally be back to normal.* Is what he had thought to himself that very morning. Things did not go back to normal. At all. He had gotten home, and decided to go on a run, because after all, it was a beautiful day. He stepped outside and let the Dallas sun shine on his face for a second. Fall was here, which meant that swimming season was over, but it also meant winter was coming, and winter was a bit too emotional of a season for him. He shook those thoughts of and began on his run, enjoying the crisp autumn air as it rushed past him. His pleasant thoughts didn't last long. He began to think of Marion, his best friend, who had died roughly five years ago. It wasn't that he missed her necessarily, he just didn't ever know what to do with himself anymore. Ever. He often found himself sitting on his living room couch, just thinking about his life before she had been killed. Well he didn't ever really learn what had fully happened to her, but all he knew was that one day she was there, and the next she was found dead in White Rock Lake. Everyone had told Nicholas, it was probably an accident, she probably drove off of the road. But *no*, it couldn't have been, he refused to believe it all, because he knew Marion never would have left him to face the world alone. He was shaken from his thoughts by a sharp push by his side. It was an actual person, and he had almost knocked her into the street. He looked back to make sure that she hadn't, and he was met with a harsh glare. The glare came from a woman, who looked to be about...twenty-four or so. She was relatively short compared to Nicholas, and had medium-length, straight, brown hair. She looked almost shocked for a second when she saw him looking towards her, but she

quickly turned away, the tips of her ears red in embarrassment. He looked back ahead and continued to run, until he felt something fall out of his pocket. He stopped and bent to pick it up. It was a small parcel and on it, his full name was scrawled, in a loopy, cursive-like font. It read, *Nicholas Benjamin Williams*. He took the parcel in his hand, and made his way back home, curious to learn of its contents. When he *finally* made it back home, Nicholas took out a pair of scissors, and made quick concise cuts along the edge of the packaging. He deposited the item on the counter. It was a small toy car, but strangely it was made of an odd amber colored gem. *Topaz*. The topaz car had eight holes drilled into it, and only one of which held a small, topaz, undefined, figure. He looked at it carefully, inspecting its shape and definition. This led to his discovery of a date, a time, and an address engraved on the "undercarriage" of the car. He quickly realized that he was available that same day, because a few of his co-workers were going to be out that same day. Not that it mattered. The invitation told him to meet there at midnight. *This is the kind of adventure that Marion would encourage me to explore*, he told himself. That alone was enough to motivate him to mark it on his calendar.

Chapter 7
Los Angeles
Jess

Jess sighed as she wiped away the layer of sheer sweat on her forehead. She had just won a tennis tournament. *Barely*. It shouldn't have been that close. Jess knew that. She was distracted. At least that's what she told herself. She was supposed to be perfect at everything she did, which meant no room for loss. That's what her mother had taught her most of her life. Well, she wasn't even her real mother anyway. Jess had been abandoned by both of her parents, and raised by an *extremely* wealthy countess, who had made it her personal job to make sure Jess grew to become as successful as she was. Jess breathed in the fresh air, and walked towards her house. She was twenty-three, and she already had her own house. It wasn't *really* hers but the countess had given it to her when Jess turned twenty. She was met at the porch by the ever present countess.

"Jessica darling!" She called.

"Yes ma'am?" Jess responded hesitantly. The countess appeared a little exasperated.

"Jess, that performance I just witnessed..." she started, "*you almost lost!*" She exclaimed with frustration.

"I know I..."

she cut Jess off, "*I don't* want to hear any excuses. *Go practice.*" She pointed back towards the tennis courts.

Jess turned back to the very place that she had just left and began to walk.

"And Jessica!" Jess froze, "This better not be about your brother. Don't forget what I've taught you."

Jess let out a sigh, one that she had been holding in for a long time. How had she known?

"One last thing!" She called again.

"Yes ma'am?" Jess answered.

"Keep your chin up and for *goodness sake* stop slouching! You're going to end up looking like the *Hunchback of Notre Dame!* And you don't want that do you?" The countess said with a flourish.

"No ma'am, I don't." Jess continued to walk away, and was left in silence as the countess was content in sitting in her chair, like a lady of course. As Jess walked, she thought of her brother. No, she thought of her dead brother. *Stop.* She told herself. *Mother wouldn't approve. I have to stop thinking of him. He's in the past.* She flipped her hair off of her shoulder and cleared her mind as she walked into the locker room. She pulled a small silver key out of her pocket and pushed it into locker number 1. With a click, the door swung open, and Jess was met with a small white box. It had a pink ribbon tied around it with a tag. The tag had her name inscripted on it in gold. It swirled the letters of her full name, reading, *Jessica Angelina Lewis.* Jess' full name. Angelina had been her mother's name. She sighed, it was most likely from the countess, as a reminder of the game she had *almost* lost. She reluctantly pulled the ribbon, watching it unravel as it landed at her feet. The lid came off easily, and the contents surprised her. It was an odd-looking, *Game of Life* game piece. But...it was made out of amethyst. That couldn't be right. It had eight spots where characters could go within the car, as opposed to the usual six. Only one had a figure in it. The one in the backseat to the left. She tried to pry it out in an attempt to move it to the *front* of the car. It didn't budge. She gave up and began to put the piece back into the box when she felt an uneven surface on the bottom. She flipped the game piece over and read the information imprinted on the bottom. It encouraged Jess to join the sender at midnight, next week, at a mysterious location. Jess hadn't heard of the street it was on. She looked at the car in curiosity, before deciding to go. She would do *anything* and go *anywhere* to get away from the web of numbness that the countess had her trapped in.

Chapter 8
Los Angeles
Campbell

"CUT!" A loud shout pulled Campbell out of the world he had been in, and back into reality. The lights went up. His director pointed to him, "That was much better this time."

Campbell nodded his thanks in response, as the director addressed everyone.

"That's it for this week! Go home, sleep, run your lines, I don't care, just come prepared for the next time I see you."

He shooed them off, and as Campbell walked out of the dimly lit building he was hit with the blinding sun. He winced and paused for a moment, letting his eyes adjust. The parking lot was only partially full, and his bright red sports car was easily visible from where he was standing. He made his way towards the car and sat down inside. As he drove, he rolled his windows down, letting the crisp fall air blow across him. Suddenly, a small, withered blossom flew into the car, and stopped to rest on the seat next to him. *Riley*. Campbell had lost his younger sister just three years ago, and now that she was gone, everything that reminded him of her hit him hard. She had been his closest friend, but he also felt like he had a duty to protect her. All of this left with her when she died, and he constantly felt that he had failed her. *Why couldn't you have been there, why couldn't you have protected her when that bullet-* A loud horn honked behind him, making him realize that he was stopped in the middle of an intersection. *Shoot*, Campbell reprimanded himself as he put his foot on the gas and shot across the street. The moment he started to pull back into his garage, the blossom lifted, and was carried back out the window. Gone again, and he still couldn't save her. He got out of the car looking for the flower, the one that reminded him of Riley. It was nowhere in sight.

He walked to the front yard, *not there*, the street, *still not there*. He took one long look at the front of the modern house, *no blossom in sight*. He walked up the front steps, defeated. He opened the door to find a skinny box sitting on his porch. He gave it a cursory glance. *Probably fan mail*. He sighed as he picked it up. About to put it in his pocket, he gave it one last look, to see that his *full name* was written on it in golden calligraphy. *Campbell Alastair Jenkins*. Not fan mail. *Could it have been from a director?* No, he shook that thought aside, and carried the small package inside. Tossing his keys on the counter, Campbell tossed aside the lid of the box, and gazed at the contents. Inside sat a small, emerald, car. It looked almost familiar, with a small character sitting in one of the backseats, leaving seven spots open. *An easter egg from a possible future director?* He turned it over, in hopes of confirming his suspicions. On the bottom was written a date, time, and address. He checked his calendar to match the date. He had a charity event that night to attend, but he would be able to

make it. Barely. Thankfully, the location was only five minutes from the event, but he would still be in his formal attire. It would be fine. It was probably just a meeting with a possible director. *At midnight?* He shook the worries away. People did things for *all* sorts of reasons, who was he to judge them for those decisions?

Part 2: Ready, Set, Go

Chapter 9

?

Nicole • Robyn

It was getting closer to midnight, and Nicole was counting down the minutes. Fifteen, ten, five, two more minutes before she would leave her house. It was the only one on the block that was still illuminated, and it made Nicole feel self-conscious. She looked back at the clock and jumped. It was time. One minute past time to be exact. She grabbed her keys off the kitchen counter where they had been resting, and ran out the door, forgetting to lock it behind her. She dashed to the car, and backed out of the driveway, panting from exhaustion. Nicole was surrounded by silence, by peace, by a sense of...she couldn't quite place it, but it made her feel at ease. "In five-hundred feet, take a left. Your destination will be on the right." She glanced ahead, to see a large, lit field. She checked the time. It read 11:58. *Two minutes early, yes!* She silently congratulated herself, and pulled into an empty lot beside the field. Only one other car waited there, and it looked almost *familiar*. Nicole turned off her car, locked the doors, and began to walk towards the field.



"Nicole?" Robyn asked. He had been sitting in his car for about five minutes now, waiting for something to happen. Nothing had, until he saw her car pull into the parking lot. He hadn't believed it was really her, but his suspicions were confirmed when she stepped out of the car. *But, what was she doing here?* He wondered.

"Robyn? Is that you?" So it was her.

"Yeah, it's me. What are you doing here?" He asked. Robyn thought he was the only one invited. Then again, his character **was** in the passenger seat, but he still couldn't comprehend that Nicole might have actually been part of this.

"Well," she responded, "I found this package on my front porch," she pulled a small box out of her handbag, and continued. "It's some, weird, car, thing-a-majig. It also has a little figure in the front seat."

Robyn stared at her, gaping. It was the *exact same* model as his own, but it was made out of Ruby, not at all like his own, and he was right. Her character

sat in the seat next to his. He pulled his own package out of his car. And displayed the small toy. It gleamed gold, and he could see his face reflected in it.

"*Woah.*" Nicole looked at it mesmerized, but quickly shook herself. She looked back at Robyn. "Sooooo...do you have *any* idea why we're here? I thought it was for Kitty, but..." she stopped, looking dismayed.

Robyn felt bad for her. She had come here for answers, but all she had found was...well...him. "Nope, but I'm pretty sure we're not the only ones signed up for this," he said, as they both turned around, and a small white car pulled into the lot.

Chapter 10

?

Sadie • Xander

Sadie looked hesitantly out her front windshield. Two more people were there, talking, and holding...what looked to be *the same car figure that was in her bag*. She reached inside, checking to see if it was still there. Of course it was. The last week she had spent daydreaming over the possibilities of adventure that this little car could lead to. She stepped outside into the cool breeze, and was met with uncertain glances that matched hers. She had spent enough time with people, and she could tell that they were close. Almost like brother and sister...

"Hi I'm Nicole, you can call me Nikki, and this is Robyn." The woman pointed to herself, before gesturing to the man next to her. She was fairly tall, taller than Sadie, with dark thick hair that was pulled back in a tight ponytail, and piercing gray eyes. Robyn stood a good few inches taller than Nicole, had dark hair, like Nicoles, and green eyes.

She looked at them for a moment longer, assessing them, before speaking. "I'm Sadie. I'm assuming you both have figures like mine?" She pulled out a sapphire car with a character sitting in the second row.

"Yeah." Robyn and Nicole replied in unison, holding out their own cars: one ruby, one gold.

"So," Sadie started, "I'm guessing you are from Chicago too?"

They both looked at her in confusion. "No, we're from-"



Xander pressed lightly on his horn, accidentally scaring the people that had been standing there moments before. He scolded himself inwardly for not being prepared for other people. He was almost late, and he had come speeding into the lot, to see three **other** people already there. He wasn't surprised. He knew there must be other people, because of the seven other empty spots. He

was just glad he wasn't the last one. He grabbed his miniature car, and stepped out of his *real* car. A navy blue SUV.

"Sorry about that guys, I was just terrified of being late, and I forgot that there might be other people. Oh and by the way, I'm Xander." The others looked at him a little stunned. Nevertheless, he held up a small pearl car in his hand and showed them the figure displayed inside. "This is the invitation that I got, and I'm guessing you all live in Chicago. Oh, and lastly, I'm a doctor." He paused to take a breath, before the others introduced themselves. Nicole, Robyn, and Sadie. *Sadie*. She was familiar, like he had seen her before. He asked her, "I know this might sound odd, but do you work at a medical center in the heart of downtown Chicago?" She looked back at him, a little perplexed.

"I...do. I work at the front desk. How do you-"

He cut her off, "That's where I work as well." Sadie nodded, and as she did, her blonde curls bounced in the wind. She wasn't very tall but had the most striking blue, almost green, eyes that he had ever seen.

Nicole spoke up, pulling Xander's attention, "Ummm, I don't know about you guys, but Robyn and I aren't from Chicago. We're from New York City," she continued, "And I don't know why you would think that we're in Chicago, because...well...this is a five minute drive from my house." Sadie looked to Xander, her eyebrows scrunched in confusion.

"No," she started, "this is a five minute drive from my house." Robyn held his hands up, in an attempt to stop the noise.

"I have no idea what's really going on right now, but we should probably move to the grass so that we don't get hit by that Jeep."

Chapter 11

?

Gwen • Nicholas

As Gwen pulled into the gravel parking lot, she noted four people backing away from her car. She pulled into the corner, and jotted down in her notebook, the possible suspects. She wouldn't miss a single detail, no she couldn't miss a single detail. She would do anything, *anything*, to find out who did it. She tucked away the beloved notepad, and stepped out of her Jeep holding the small, diamond car. The suspects standing there, beckoned her towards them, and she approached cautiously, very aware of stranger danger. After quick introductions, Gwen made notes of everyone in her head: Nicole, Robyn, Sadie, Xander, all of them possible suspects. As she was doing this, one of them, Xander, spoke up.

"Hey um. So, where do *you* think we are?" Gwen stared at them confused. "Dallas. Unless someone put me on a plane while I was asleep," she said laughing at the thought. All of them looked at her, ultimately flabbergasted.

"What is going ON HERE?!" Nicole yelled, as she put her head in her hands and fell to the ground. "All I wanted," she sobbed, "All I wanted was to help Kitty, and then this happens. I don't know who thinks this is funny, but it's not. None of it is!" Gwen stood aghast.

"Kitty?" she asked, "Kitty Calrissian?" Nicole looked at her, tears running down her puffy red face.

"I suppose you think this is a joke too?" "No!" Gwen protested, "I would never. The police have given up, so now I'm trying to solve it." Robyn offered his hand to Nicole, pulling her back off the ground.

"Well," She said, "I wish you good luck, because I've about given up as well."

Suddenly a voice behind Gwen spoke, "I'm sorry, what are we giving up on?"



Nicholas watched as the crowd turned to face him. It wasn't much of a crowd, only five people. He had seen better. He was shocked to see that same woman, the woman he had almost knocked over, standing *directly* in front of him. She was tan, with straight brown hair, and warm chocolatey brown eyes. She pointed a finger directly into his face.

"You! You're the one who almost got me run over yesterday!" One of the guys chuckled to himself.

"Glad to know that some of us are already acquainted!" He laughed again before pointing to each of the members of the group, as well as himself. "That's Nicole, Robyn, Sadie, I'm Xander, and I see you've already met Gwen. Oh and none of us know where we are. Nicole and Robyn are from New York, Sadie and I are from Chicago, and I'm guessing you're probably from Dallas, and have a small toy car." Nicholas held up the silver figurine.

"Guilty as charged," he shrugged, and placed the item back in his pocket. "So," Nicholas started again, "what are we giving up?" Gwen looked back at him, lowering her pointed finger.

"Most of us came here for our own separate reason, but Nicole and I both came in hopes of finding out who killed her sister." At the sound of that, most everyone's eyes lowered, and an overall sadness came over the group.

Nicholas spoke up, "Well, I don't know about y'all, but I lost someone too, and it's probably just a coincidence, but..." His declaration was met with agreement from all around the group.

"Okay creepy!" Sadie exclaimed. "All of us lost a loved one, and we all got invited to this random field, through a toy car. Does that not freak anyone else out?"

Xander nodded, "Yeah it does seem a little bit unusual, oh but look two more cars are here. How delightful. That gives us...eight people. That's everyone. Okay who wants to do the explaining this time? I call not it!"

Chapter 12

?

Jess • Campbell

Jess felt overdressed. She had just come from a gala, hosted by her mother of course, and she was wearing a sparkly lavender dress. There had only been one other person her age there, and he had not seemed involved. But, it wasn't like she had been either. She couldn't stop thinking about the meeting place. She stepped out of her white sports car, and brushed off her dress, feeling the noticeable lump in her right pocket. Jess greeted the others before introducing herself, and apologizing for her "ridiculous" outfit. They all accepted her apology, before introducing themselves, as well as their situation. "New York, Chicago, and Dallas. So I'm guessing none of you are from Los Angeles, right?"

They stared at her, and Nicole groaned. "Los Angeles? What, are we gonna get someone from the Maldives next?"

"I'm sorry," Jess apologized, since these people seemed in obvious distress, "I just came here because I found this in my locker room." She held up her amethyst car to the moonlight, letting its light reflect onto the sequins covering her dress. Everyone else held up their own, displaying the invitation that had caused so much curiosity and so much false hope.

Robyn cleared his throat. "So now I guess the only person we are waiting on is..."



"Me." Campbell stood there, decked out in a full suit and tie, when some of the others were wearing jeans. He recognized one of them. Jess. Her mother had hosted the charity event that had occupied the earlier half of his evening. It looked like she hadn't gotten to change either.

"Hey Campbell." Jess said, in greeting.

He nodded his head at her in response before gesturing to the rest of the group. "And who might all these lovely folks be?" They introduced themselves one at a time, before Jess explained their situation. It kinda seemed like they had done this a billion times. And they probably had. He knew he was late, but at least he had been *fashionably late*, which made everything better. He looked out towards the field that covered most of the block. Campbell brought it up, "So, are we gonna go in the field, or..."

Gwen shook her head. "It's probably not safe, maybe we shouldn't, maybe we should just go home," the words came out like a waterfall. Worry after worry, deepening the creases in her forehead.

Sadie put a hand on her shoulder. "Look, I acknowledge that we have no idea what in the heck we're doing, but who doesn't love a surprise? You're the detective, don't you love a bit of mystery?"

Gwen looked *very* conflicted. "Well...I do but, I'm just not so sure about..."

"Look." Nicholas stepped in. "Me and the guys can go first, we'll test to make sure that it's safe and then-" Right as Robyn was about to argue, Jess looked defiant.

"Absolutely not! My gosh you are so stereotypical. Girls can do plenty of difficult things too. See?" She ran into the middle of the field, and just stood there for a second. "It's fine there's literally nothing to be worried about! Come on, you'll be okay." Jess turned towards us, and began making her way back to grab the others. After a few steps she stopped, her face as white as a ghost.

"Jess?" Campbell called out to her. "Are you okay?" His question was met with a scream, as Jess started sinking into the ground.

Chapter 13

?

Ready?

Gwen screamed, and as a reflex, began running towards Jess.

"Gwen stop!" Nicholas called after her.

She made it to Jess, just in time to realize her mistake as she too sunk into the ground.

"I mean, might as well, right?" Xander suggested.

"Are you crazy?!" Robyn yelled, "We could die! They could already be dead!"

"You only live once!" Xander smirked, and began running into the field. He was followed by Nicole, Sadie, and Nicholas, leaving only Campbell and Robyn behind.

"Sooooooo." Campbell started. "I'm probably just gonna go for it. I-" Robyn was one step ahead of him sprinting to catch up with the others. Campbell, mildly frustrated that *he* of all people, was the one left behind. He walked at a brisk pace, careful not to dirty his fancy attire, as the others sank into the ground.

"Hurry up Campbell! It's not like we can make whatever this is wait for you!" Nicole yelled at him.

He glared at her, not that she could see it, and began jogging towards the now sunken field. He made it just in time and felt the odd sensation of sinking into the ground. Gwen stood shaking as a grassy cover slid over their heads.

"Um guys." She whispered, "What's going on?"

"Well I don't know about you," Xander started, "But I'm pretty sure we have just sunken into the ground, and are now on our way to a *secret underground lair!*"

This comment was met with a swat on the shoulder from Sadie, as Gwen looked even more terrified than before. Nicholas spoke up,

"It'll be fine. We're a well equipped group. Nothing bad is going to happen to you, or any of us. Well maybe Xander but-"

"Hey!" Xander said, laughing. "That's not fair!"

"Oh it most definitely is," Nicholas retorted, chuckling to himself. Gwen even looked better at this comment, her face had lightened, and she was no longer shaking. *But this happy feeling didn't last long.* The odd room they were in stopped going down as it hit the ground with a thud. One side of the wall parted to show a huge black warehouse. The only light came from a giant blue beam in the center of the floor. The group made their way out of the box and into the echo-y room, stopping only to look back where they had come from. It looked like it was an elevator, but there was nothing holding it up, or pulling it down. They gathered around the blue light, looking around for any sign of life, to find none. Suddenly a figure appeared in the blue light. It was a woman. A huge, blue tinted woman that towered over them. A hologram. They stared at her eyes bulging, mouths wide open in shock.

"Welcome" she said passively. "Are you ready to start the game?"

Chapter 14

?

Set.

"I'll give you a moment to discuss among yourselves. Oh, and. This will be your only time that you may leave. Choose wisely." The woman disappeared, leaving the room silent, before it burst full of noise.

"What the heck is going on and who the heck was that?" Campbell asked.

"I have absolutely *no idea.*" Sadie responded, frustrated. They all went quiet for a second, waiting for the woman to reappear.

"Well it doesn't look like she's going to show up until we make a choice." Nicholas suggested, "I say that we play the game."

"But, what if we get hurt, what if we *DIE?!?*" Gwen asked.

"We won't," Nicholas told her, "this is probably just some sort of prank or something." He paused before raising his hand. "All in favor of playing the game, put up your hand." One by one every person's hand went up, including Gwen's. "Alright then, let's tell her then." Nicholas cleared his throat, waiting for the woman to appear. To his, and everyone else's, surprise, she did.

"I'm glad you've made a decision," she said passively. "Now for some instructions." As she said this, a list appeared to her right, displaying the words as she said them. "Number one, you have precisely four strikes. If any of you happen to lose even one more than three, the instructions will change, and one of you will end up stuck here. *Forever*. These strikes are displayed as lines on your neck and they're permanent. Do not try to wash them off. Please. Number two, you are unable to leave. If you *do* try to leave, you will fail, and gain a strike."

"*What?!*" Xander exclaimed. The woman shushed him.

"Ah ah ah! Please hold your comments til the end. Number three, if at any point you have a question, all you have to do is summon me. That's all. Good luck!" The woman disappeared.

"Wait, how do we summon you? I have so many questions! Come back!" Robyn called after her. His shoulders sank and he walked away.

"Robyn!" Nicole said, shocked.

"Yes?" Robyn looked at her.

"Your neck, it's...she was telling the truth!" Robyn reached for his neck. He could feel four small lines, streaking across the left side going up to his hairline. Soon everyone was checking their own neck, finding the four strike lines that lay there as warnings.

"The Game begins in five..." a loud overhead voice proclaimed, "four, three, two, one. Go!"

Chapter 15 The Warehouse Go!

The room blacked out, and the lights rose again, showing the group that they were in a garage.

"I don't know about you guys, but I'm pretty sure that we weren't in a garage earlier." Xander said matter-of-factly.

"Wow really? I had no idea Einstein!" Jess snapped back at him. Suddenly, a giant car appeared in the middle of the garage. It was the exact same model as the one they had all received, with eight empty spots. The same over head voice suddenly spoke again.

"You have one minute to complete this task. If you do not complete it in the given time, you will all be eliminated. The timer starts now."

"Okay everyone I know what to do. Just get in the same spot as the figure in your invitation is in. For example," Robyn instructed, "I'm sitting in the passenger seat, and Nicole is in the driver seat."

"Bossy much?" Jess mumbled under her breath. Robyn glared at her, and despite the comment, everyone slowly made their way to their spot.

"Twenty seconds left!" The voice reminded them from above. It was okay, all of them were in the car. Except Jess. Her dress had gotten caught on the floor, and she couldn't move.

"Guys! Don't just stand there! Help me!" She shrieked. Nicholas rolled his eyes and jumped out of the car. "And don't you *dare* lecture me about what I said earlier. I swear it was not my choice to wear this dress!" She argued. Xander soon unfastened her dress from the floor, and Jess ran over to the car, leaping over the side. Xander ran after her and jumped in. The second he made it in the voice rang out again.

"Time up! Congrats. All of you have made it in time, which means that all of you will continue to play the game."

The car started up and drove out of the garage. The second the door closed, the car disappeared, leaving them sitting on benches in a large wooden cabin.

"Your clothes are in your separate rooms, you may be returning to this room occasionally, so you may leave all personal belongings. Now go!" The hologram appeared quickly before shooing them off. They changed quickly and came out of their rooms. They all wore matching black suits, and they each had a small pin over their hearts. The woman reappeared for a second saying,

"These suits are built for every situation, water proof, fireproof, etc. The pin over your heart will be monitoring your heart rate. If at any point your heart rate exceeds a certain limit, you will receive a strike. Good luck!" The group looked at each other, each person suffering a tsunami of different emotions. And none of them were prepared for what was coming.

Part 3: Challenges

Chapter 16

Leaving

"Well what do we do now?" Nicole asked. No one really knew. Sadie was shaking so hard that it was very visible.

"Sadie, are you okay?" Xander asked.

"Yeah!" She started, "No. This is all too much, I can't stop thinking about the strikes and being stuck here forever and-and-"

"Woah," Xander put his hand on her shoulder. "No one's going to be stuck here. We're going to make it out. All of us."

"Hold up. Who are you and who kidnapped Xander?" Nicholas asked, laughing.

"Look, I'm just being helpful where I'm needed, and right now Sadie looks like she needs some help."

"Hey!" Sadie retorted, punching him in the shoulder.

"Look, she's not shaking anymore!" Xander looked at her and said, "Sorry, but it's true." Sadie huffed and walked towards Nicole, and Jess followed.

"I say we just head out that door and see what happens." Jess suggested.

"Absolutely not." Nicholas refused. "I for one don't think that is a good idea, or even a safe idea. I say we stay here for a while and just think about it. She never said we actually had to play the game."

"Yeah but something could still happen to this cabin, like...a tornado or something. What I think we should do is look in our cabins for any sign of what's to come." Gwen suggested.

"Of course the *detective* says that." Campbell mumbled sitting back in a rocking chair and judging everyone from afar.

"Where did that come from?" Robyn asked, perplexed.

"Oh I don't know, maybe it's been sitting here the entire time. It's not my fault that all of you have been too busy fretting, while I actually took my time to relax and store up some energy." Campbell said with a shrug.

Jess rolled her eyes "My gosh, you are so full of yourself. Let's just go already so that I don't have to listen to more of this." Jess gestured around her, motioning to everyone in the room, before turning around and heading toward the door. Robyn and Nicole followed her leading the group towards the door. Only Sadie remained. She stared at them with her big blue eyes wide, a look of utter fear on her face.

"I-I'd rather not. I-I can just stay here." She stuttered.

"No you can't," Xander protested, "You're coming with us." He walked behind her, grabbed her shoulders and practically shoved her out the door. As they stepped outside they were surrounded by a lush green forest. Everyone looked in wonder at the ripe fruit hanging from the trees and the dim sparkle of fireflies. It wasn't night time despite their late arrival. Suddenly someone started coughing. Nicole screamed.

"Robyn! Someone help!" Nicole was crouched over Robyn who was on the ground, looking pale as if he couldn't breathe.

Chapter 17

Poisoned

"What do we do?!" Nicole asked, frantic.

"Well if I were you, I would go look for an antidote in the woods that surround you." The holographic woman appeared out of nowhere.

"You!" Jess pointed a finger at her, "You did this to him!"

"Did I? You have five minutes before he...I would just start looking." She said, "Oh and Robin," she looked at him with faked pity, "Might want to keep your heart rate down." With that the woman disappeared. Nicholas took off running into the woods with Gwen and Xander on his heels. Campbell took his

time, walking into the woods at a slow casual pace, before Jess shoved him into the forest. She started running to catch up with the others. Sadie stared at Robyn in shock before kneeling down next to Nicole and putting a hand on her shoulder.

"Hey look at me," Sadie whispered. Nicole turned her head "He's gonna be okay. Trust me. The most you can do for him now is just keep your heart rate down and make sure nothing else happens to him." Nicole nodded in response and closed her eyes before taking a deep breath. "There you go. Just keep that up." Sadie assured her before following the others into the forest.



Everyone was scattered deep in the trees when they heard a scream. It sounded like Gwen.

"Gwen?" Nicholas called out. He ran towards the sound. *Had she found it?* He found Gwen in a clearing laying on her back, breathing hard. He looked at her neck. "No." He said out loud.

She looked at him. "What? Is the injury that bad?" Nicholas looked up at her to find that her face had a small bite mark just centimeters above her eyebrow. Nicholas shook his head.

"Gwen. You lost a strike." He said gloomily. "What happened?" She looked at him in shock before embarrassment flooded her cheeks.

"Well I thought I saw a vial in a tree. It turns out it was a snake." So that explained the bite mark. He helped her off the ground.

"Come on, let's get back to camp, I'm sure they've already found the potion and Robyn is probably already back to normal." He assured her, as they made their way back to camp.



As Sadie jogged into the forest, she ran face first into Xander's back.

"Watch where you're going!" He said sharply before he turned around to meet her gaze. "Oh. Sadie! Didn't see you there." He said with embarrassment.

"Yeah I got that message." She retorted briskly, before looking into the surrounding trees. Xander walked up beside her.

"Sorry about that" he apologized.

"You're fine," she brushed off casually.

"Are you okay?" He asked.

"I'm fine. Are you able to leave anyone alone for even a second?" Xander was silent. "That's what I thought." She jogged off into the forest, gazing around at the possible hiding spots for a vial. *What kind of game were they even in? A cruel one, that's for sure.* Sadie thought to herself. Suddenly she was back in the clearing. *How had she gotten there? She hadn't been going in circles...had she?*

"Sadie! Did you find it? The time's almost up!" Nicole said, breathing fast. Sadie shook her head. Nicole looked down at Robyn, panic spreading through her eyes. She couldn't tell whether or not he was breathing.

"Nicole! His neck!" Sadie pointed out. One of the lines on Robyn's neck was slowly disappearing. She kneeled down next to Nicole before placing two fingers on his wrist. "His pulse is extremely fast. We need to calm him down. Do you have any water, or anything cold?"

"No, of course I don't! What am I, a magician?" Nicole asked, breathing hard.

"Hey, hey! Stay calm! You can't waste any strikes!" Sadie reminded her. Suddenly, Gwen and Nicholas came out of the forest.

"Hey is Robyn oka-oh no he's not." Nicholas stopped at the edge of the clearing. "I thought you guys had found the antidote already!"

"Nope." Sadie said matter-of-factly "Wait...Gwen...*your* neck. Did you-"

Nicholas interrupted her. "She was bitten by a snake. Apparently injuries count as strikes. Holograph lady sure didn't tell us that."

"Yeah well she didn't tell us Robyn was gonna be poisoned either, so..." Nicole replied. They all looked down at Robyn fearfully, who was now turning blue at his fingertips. "Guys, I don't know if Robyn's gonna make it." Nicole whispered. Right as Sadie went to comfort her, Jess burst out of the woods, breathing hard, followed by Xander.

"I...found...the antidote" Jess said between breaths. She held out the red bottle to Nicole who grabbed it before rushing to Robyn's side with Xander.

"Come on Robyn..." Nicole muttered, "Hang on. Please." She handed the bottle to Xander, who poured it gently into Robyn's mouth, and closed her eyes. After what felt like forever, Robyn took a huge breath in and laid there with his eyes open.

"Nikki? Guys? I..." Robyn started. Nicole wrapped him in a hug and sat up with a smile on her face. "I-I'm confused. What happened?" Robyn asked.

"I'm kinda wondering the same thing." Campbell walked slowly out of the forest. "Robyn, good to see that you're back to...whatever it is you're back to, and Gwen. How did you already lose a strike?"

Nicholas shut him up and explained to the group what had happened. "...and now we're here." He finished. The holographic woman appeared quickly, as if waiting for the end of his sentence, before starting her own monologue.

"Well, I'm sure you've seen the dangers of this game, and I assure there are more to come." She started. "Thankfully, you saved Robyn in enough time, and he didn't...anyways! I'm sure you're all wondering what's next, and I'm sure at least one of you has noticed your dear friend Gwen is gone. No? Well let me point you in the right direction." The group looked panicked. Nicholas turned

around scanning the area. *She had been right behind him. Hadn't she? Where was Gwen?* He wondered. The forest scene around them faded to reveal a bright, modern furnished room, the floor covered in keys. In the middle of the room was a tank, and in that tank was Gwen. And that same tank was slowly filling with water that pooled around her ankles. Gwen pounded on the glass around her, but it didn't budge.

Chapter 18 Submerged

Marion. That was all Nicholas could think of, as he watched the water around Gwen start to rise. Commotion surrounded him, people picking up handfuls of keys and trying them in the lock to the tank, but he just stood still in the middle of it all. *Useless.* He chastised himself. *She's literally drowning and all you can do is stand there.* Nicholas shook himself and bent down to grab some keys. He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned around to see Campbell, of all people, looking at him with sadness in his eyes.

"Hey, um..." Campbell said, "I lost someone close to me, my little sister, to be exact, and this already hurts for me, alot. So...if you need anything, I'm willing to listen...cause I know what it's like to relive this kind of stuff." Nicholas nodded and went back to picking up keys alongside Campbell.

"None of them are working!" Jess called out, "We may have to find one that is hidden. Look *everywhere* for a key." She dug through couch cushions and plant leaves, looked under chairs and under tables, to no avail.

"Nick!" Nicholas looked up to see Gwen pounding on the glass, trying to get it to shatter. "It won't break, it won't..." she kept slamming her fist against the panes but they wouldn't give. Nicholas grabbed a key and attempted to use it to break the glass, but nothing happened.

"My gosh Nicholas, get over here and actually help her by looking for the key, the glass obviously isn't going to break." Jess said exasperated. Nicholas turned away from Gwen to continue looking for the key. The water was around her waist now and it was obvious her heart rate was rising. Sadie stood next to the tank, talking to Gwen in attempts to keep her heart rate down. By now, the pile of useless keys had grown to knee height, and was continuing to grow. They were frantic now, trying everything they had to get Gwen out of the tank, slamming key after key into the slot with little progress.

"Guys! Please!" Gwen pleaded. The water was up to her shoulders and was now rising faster and faster.

"Is it going to be like this *every time?*" Nicole shouted. "How many people have to almost die before this stupid holograph woman is satisfied?" The water had risen to Gwen's neck, and she was now trying to keep her head above the water, as she advanced towards the top of the capsule. Robyn threw his

shoulder into the glass, joined by Xander and Campbell, trying to break her out of the capsule, despite its sturdiness. Gwen let out one more scream before her head submerged and she started fighting to breathe.

"Hold on Gwen, hold on..." Sadie repeated, her fists clenched so hard that her knuckles had turned white. Suddenly Gwen froze and her body lay still, as the capsule disappeared.

"Where the *heck* did she go?!" Campbell shouted.

"I think what you *mean* to say is thank for not completely killing my dear friend Gwendolyn." The woman appeared from out of nowhere, holding a key made out of pure diamond. "And I believe you were looking for this." She held it up, letting the lights reflect off of it.

"You *witch!*" Nicole exclaimed, "you had the key the whole time? That whole search was fruitless and Gwen is gone because of you!"

"All you had to do..." the woman said with a shrug, "was ask."

"Wait." Xander interrupted. "You *also* said that Gwen was still alive. So, where is she?"

"I did say that didn't I?" the woman flicked her blue, translucent hair behind her. "You will see her after the next challenge. Well...at least some of you will." Jess stomped in anger.

"So you mean to tell me, that even more of us are going to just *die*. And all you have to say about that is," she gestured with air quotations, "*at least some of you will.*" Jess huffed and turned her back to the group.

"Well I don't mean to be rude but..." Xander started.

"What is it now?" Sadie asked sharply.

Xander rolled his eyes at Sadie before continuing. "Shouldn't we start the next challenge?" The group stared daggers at Xander while the holographic woman started smiling.

"Well isn't that a splendid idea?!" she exclaimed, "I'll get right to it." She disappeared, and with that, the scenery around them shifted to a large cliff overlooking a crystal clear ocean. The woman reappeared, this time wearing a fashionable wetsuit. "The instructions are simple. All you have to do is jump!" She said with a wicked smile, before leaping off of the cliff headfirst.

"Oh heck no." Campbell said, his eyes going wide at the thought.

Chapter 19

A Leap of Faith

Jess looked precariously over the cliff's edge to the sparkling waters below. "I don't know about you guys, but I don't see Gwen or the woman down there." she suggested.

"Oh well" Xander started "Maybe that's because the lady's a stupid hologram, and I'm pretty sure that Gwen just died in water, so no wonder we don't see anyone down there!" Jess slapped him across the face.

"Would you shut up?!" She retorted, and took a deep breath. "We could all just jump together so that if anything happens to one of us it happens to all of us."

"Well that's a splendid idea isn't it," Xander said sarcastically, "if one person dies then we all get to die. Yippee!" He said with mocked enthusiasm. Nicole gave him a pointed look before stepping forward, to face the group.

"I say we do it." she said confidently. The group nodded in agreement but Xander looked dumbfounded.

"Did none of you hear what I just said?" he spoke up.

"No we did," Jess said with a shrug, "we just didn't care." She motioned everyone together in a line facing the cliff edge. "Everyone joins hands and on the count of three we jump, okay?"

"Of course I'm on the end, of course I'm the one that's going to die first. Because everyone wants me to die. Thanks a lot guys." Campbell complained.

"Would you stop complaining and get ready to jump? Thank you." She raised her voice, "One, two, three." And with that they were off the cliff. At least most of them were.

"Sadie oh my gosh, what are you still doing here?" Xander asked.

"I could ask you the same exact thing and your answer wouldn't be any different." Sadie answered. Xander looked confused.

"So you're staying here because you don't want to give in to Jess' annoying, overpowering attitude?" He asked.

"Oh. I guess not." Sadie looked down. "It's just...my friend. Well my boyfriend I guess. He died from falling...and..."

"Oh." Xander looked a little stunned, "I'm sorry, I... didn't know." He looked over the cliff as the rest of the group became smaller and smaller in their approach to the water. "Um Sadie? I think someone's hurt. We better go down there." Xander gestured to the figure, limply falling with the others.

"Well shoot." Sadie said. "It's Campbell."



As Campbell fell, the others looked at him, nervous. He hadn't made it fully off the cliff in the jump, and had lost a strike because of it. Now the group was arguing about whose fault it was.

"I swear, I jumped with the rest of you." Nicole explained. Robyn nodded in agreement.

"Same here."

"Same."

"Me too." The others answered the same.

"It's probably Xander's fault." Jess started, "after all, he's the one who-wait. Where are Xander and Sadie?" They looked around, panicked. They weren't in sight.

"Guys look!" Nicholas pointed upwards. Two faces could be seen peeking over the edge of the cliff, so far away, that they had to squint to see them. "Uh-oh, if they're that far away, then that means..." Nicholas looked down. They were falling faster and faster, the water rushing up to meet them. "Everyone brace yourselves!" He shouted. "And someone grab Campbell!" Jess looked to her right, and seeing that she was the only one in arms reach of Campbell, she grabbed his arm, and wrapped her free arm around her knees.

"Um guys?" Robyn asked, "Where are we?" Only Jess, Nicole, Campbell, and Robyn, sat in a large, heavily padded room. "And where are the others?" Campbell suddenly woke up and looked around.

"What the *heck* just happened to me?" He asked, confused and frustrated. He reached for his neck to find only three remaining strikes, and groaned. "I knew it. You guys! Why did you have to put *me* on the end?" Jess shrugged with a sly smirk.

"Most efficient way to get rid of you." Robyn and Nicole laughed, and Campbell punched her in the shoulder.

"*Not cool.*" He said, fighting back a smile. He looked around. "But, where are the others?"



"Hello?" Nicholas sat in a large padded room by himself. "Guys?" He shouted, "Gwen? Robyn? Jess? Campbell? Anybody?"

"AaAaAaHhHhH!" Sadie and Xander appeared, falling from out of nowhere, and landing beside him.

"What the frickle-frackle just happened? I know that I jumped, and then Sadie. You just kinda...fell." Xander recalled.

"Apparently I didn't 'jump in time'" Sadie said with air quotes, "And I lost a stupid strike for it! Ugh!" She exhaled with frustration and looked around.

"Where's everyone else?"

"I don't know," Nicholas said, confused, "the group isn't here, and neither is Gwen."

"But she is," Xander pointed to the corner of the room, "That's her, right?" Gwen's body was asleep, curled up on a couch, hidden in the very farthest point in the room.

"I *swear*, she was not there a second ago." Nicholas assured them. Suddenly, Gwen opened her eyes and slowly sat up.

"Um...guys?" She asked hesitantly, "Did I die?"

"Gwen!" Sadie rushed over to her and gave her a big hug. "You didn't die, but...oh. You lost another strike." Gwen's eyes widened.

"No, no, I can't... that means I only have two left, and if I lose the last one I..." she stressed.

"No." Nicholas said, "It's not going to come to that. You're not going to lose anymore," he gestured to Xander and Sadie. "We'll make sure of it." Gwen nodded and sighed. Xander looked up with big eyes.

"So, um not to ruin the moment or anything, but what do we do now?" He asked. No one was able to answer, because suddenly, the floor dropped beneath them.

Part 4: Separate
Chapter 20
Melody

They landed in a large arena, everyone but Robyn and Nicole sitting on bleachers. A large stage rose up in front of them, and placed close to the front were two podiums. Robyn stood behind one, Nicole behind the other.

"What are we supposed to do?" Nicole asked him.

"Just be glad that our lives aren't in ultimate danger right now," Robyn said with a half-hearted smile, just as music started blasting into their ear drums. A loud overhead voice announced the beginning of the game.

"Welcome folks! Today, we're gonna play a little game called: Name...That...TUNE!" The voice sounded like a game show host, only slightly more menacing. A smile appeared on Nicole's face, right as Robyn's smile dropped. "You will be able to work as a team, until our special little teammate Nicole, will have to work by herself." The voice instructed. "Got it? Great." Xander looked to his right, where Jess was seated.

"Jess." He whispered. No reply. "Jess!" He said, this time more demanding.

"What?" She turned around, her hair flying over her shoulder.

"Were you guys in a big white room before you came here?" He asked.

"Uh yeah. Why?" She looked a little perplexed.

"No reason," Xander said casually, "Just trying to figure things out." Jess turned back to the stage in front of them, and so did Xander, watching as Robyn and Nicole named song after song correctly.

"Royals"

"Hello"

"Bird Song"

"Footloose"

"Hey There Delilah"

"Happy"

"Lovely"

"Umbrella"

It went on like that for about five minutes before the spotlight on Robyn went down, and Campbell heard a muffled oof next to him. Robyn sat, sprawled on the bleacher next to him.

"Bro, you good?" Campbell asked, casually.

"Yeah," Robyn responded, "gosh, that was stressful." He turned his eyes back to the stage where Nicole stood, continuing their previous streak. Suddenly, a sweet, almost melancholy song came on, and Nicole froze.

"No no no no no!" Robyn jumped out of his seat.

"What is happening?" Gwen asked, curious "Why isn't she answering?" Robyn looked at her, his eyes grim.

"This was Kitty's favorite song. She's not going to be able to name it, because she's frozen!" Robyn recounted. The bittersweet notes played carefully, told a story of their own, leaving behind traces of hope but also despair. A buzzer went off, loud above their heads. Nicole was shook herself out of her daze and reached for her neck. Three strikes remained. Sadie stood up and called out to her from the seats.

"Nicole!" She yelled, "You okay?" Nicole responded with a *very* half-hearted thumbs up, before the light went down on her podium. Another muffled oof landed next to Robyn. Nicole righted herself and sat quietly with her head in her hands.

"So um not to break up the moment or anything-" Xander started.

"You realize by saying that," Jess started laughing, "you actually *are* breaking up the moment?"

"Shut up." Xander countered, trying to hide his own laughter. "What I was *trying* to say was that we should probably try to leave this building and get out of whatever this is." He gestured around the stadium. Nicholas nodded.

"He's right, we should probably find a way out." He looked resolutely to his left and right, "I mean, we might be able to-" SPLASH!

Chapter 21

Stroke

"Where did Xander and Nicholas go?" Gwen asked. They were now in a swimming pool facility, sitting on metal stands amid the humid air. She was right, both Xander and Nicholas had disappeared from beside them, and were nowhere to be found.

"They are probably just trying to find a way out, but that wouldn't explain the swimming pool..." Jess said skeptically.

"I mean, was it just me, or did you guys hear that splash when the floor you know," Robyn pointed to their surroundings, "just kinda dropped." Suddenly

the holographic woman appeared, in the same "fashionable wetsuit" as she had before, but she seemed out of breath, and the holograph itself was...glitching.

"N-n-next ch-challenge i-is s-s-s-swimming!" She said, her voice cutting in and out. She looked almost scared, her prim and proper facade from before, gone. However, it was no longer a mystery where Xander and Nicholas had gone. They stood at one length of the pool, looking around with confusion.

"Guys look! They're down there!" Robyn pointed to the two figures standing on the pool tile.

"Yeah, we saw them." Campbell said, annoyed.

"O-on y-y-your m-mark," the holographic woman started up again, "g-get s-s-set *go!*" She managed, before disappearing completely. The two guys jumped into the water and swam through it with surprisingly concise and speedy strokes. They were making good progress when a dark, shadowy cloud appeared in the water behind them.

"Guys? *GUYS?*" Nicole asked nervous, "*what is that?*" The looked toward the cloud, that was now spreading within the pool.

"I mean, at least they can swim fast, maybe they'll make it?" Jess said hopefully. "Please make it..." she whispered under her breath.

"What did you say?" Sadie asked her.

"Oh, it's nothing." Jess said, and shook it off. The guys finally made it to the other side of the pool, and Nicholas quickly jumped out. Xander started to pull himself ashore, but his suit was stuck in the pool tile.

"Xander, come on." Nicholas said casually, and offered his hand to pull him up. Xander stood up and brushed himself off, before waving to the group and smiling wide.

"Oh my gosh," Gwen put her head to her palm, "He literally could've just lost a strike, or multiple, and now he's smiling. I mean do we expect anything different though?" She started laughing and Nicole laughed along with her. The two girls chatted with each other, all the while giggling, and doubling over with laughter. Suddenly the boys appeared behind them.

"Hey guys!" Xander practically yelled.

"Ah!" Gwen jumped.

"Woah, calm down. We have to keep our heart rates down. You especially." Nicholas put his hand on Gwen's shoulder, and she nodded.

"Oh my gosh guys. Literally chill. No one cares about your heart rate right now. Well maybe except Nicholas." Campbell said pointedly to Gwen, as Sadie worked to stifle a laugh.

"Campbell, would you be quiet? You're not the one who's already lost *two* strikes!" Gwen persisted, "You wouldn't underst-" A low rumble overtook her voice, as the pool sunk into the floor, and a large metal room appeared in its

place. Screens covered the walls, and displayed the inside. Targets of all shapes, sizes, and colors rotated around the room in circles, making their ways up the walls and around the center mark.

"Alright, who's gone this time?" Xander asked loudly.

Chapter 22

Targeted

Campbell had disappeared. And so had Gwen.

"Oh come on, not again!" Sadie complained, "She's already been through so much, and she's already lost *two* strikes!"

"She can do it though," Nicole reassured her, "Even though she may have lost those strikes, apparently she's *really* smart. She'll figure it out."

"I hope so..." Nicholas mumbled to himself. The group watched the screens as Campbell and Gwen appeared inside, with goggles over their eyes and small guns in their hands. A voice from overhead announced the beginning of the game, and told the players that if they happened to miss a target, a strike would be lost. Digital, 8-bit music started playing, as they each took turns, hitting target after target. Surprisingly, every shot either of them made went straight to the bullseye.

"Wow, they're really good." Xander said, in awe.

"Wow, Xander's actually complimenting people for once!" Jess said laughing.

"Would you quit it?" Xander replied.

"Um guys?" Robyn asked. He pointed to the corner of the room where the holographic woman stood. She was glitching even more strongly now, her entire figure disappearing for multiple seconds before reappearing. "Is she okay?" She looked almost...concerned about what was going on inside the arena.

"What do I care about how she's doing?" Nicholas asked, "She's the one responsible for half of our friends losing strikes, which could ultimately result in their imprisonment! Why do *you* feel bad for her?" Suddenly, the woman turned in their direction, and they could see fear in her eyes. She disappeared, longer this time, before appearing directly in front of Robyn.

"AH!" He jumped. "Um, hello?" he asked her, hesitantly.

"Please...please..." she forced out between glitches, "h-help me. Please!" A loud bang suddenly sounded and she disappeared. The group turned around to face the arena. Campbell was on the floor, and Gwen was kneeling at his side. The arena around them disappeared, but they stayed in the middle of the floor.

"Gwen!" Nicholas called out, "Is he okay?" She looked up and nodded.

"Yeah! I think he missed a target. Now he's at two strikes. That makes two of us!" She said half-heartedly. Xander made his way down the stands, followed by the rest of the group.

"Campbell, you good buddy?" He asked. No response. "Um. Should we be concerned?" All of a sudden, Campbell sat up breathing hard.

"Hey...are you okay?" Robyn asked, concerned. Robyn still looked worried from his encounter with the hologram, and his body movements showed it. He walked, uncertainty filling his stride.

"I should probably ask the same thing." Campbell said, "You look like you've seen a ghost!" He shook his head laughing. "You know what's weird? You know why I missed that shot? It's because I could've sworn I saw my sister, standing right next to me and Gwen." At this Gwen looked frightened.

"Um, I didn't see anyone else in that room. I mean except you obviously." she replied.

"Oh and speaking of weird things," Jess spoke up, "The hologram lady talked to Robyn."

"What?" Gwen asked.

"And you didn't even think to tell us that?" Campbell looked stunned.

"I mean, yeah" Robyn said cautiously, "She was necessarily talking to me, I just thought she needed help, and apparently she does. She was all like 'Please help. Help me please'" Robyn explained.

"Well that's not concerning at all!" Campbell said sarcastically.

"Hey look on the bright side," Xander commented, "At least none of our lives are currently being threatened!"

"Don't jinx it." Jess said under her breath.

"Looks like it's too late for that!" Nicole said, panicked. The floor had started sinking again, like it had when they went to the field. Jess cursed under her breath.

"Not again!" she said loudly.

"Hey, language!" Xander said, laughing. Jess responded to this comment with a death glare. "Okay, okay I'm sorry! Gosh." he apologized. Suddenly they all dropped, plummeting to the ground. It felt like the wind was pushing and pulling them in a million different directions, but no one could see each other. It wasn't dark, they just weren't in sight. They briskly hit the ground, and giant stone walls rose around them. They had each been separated. Into a maze.

Chapter 23

Lost

Jess

Jess looked around her starting spot and bolted as fast as she could out of there. The stone walls towered high above her, and there was no possible way to climb them, as they had been smoothed and polished into slippery, flat, granite blocks. "Hello?" she called out. No response. *They had to be around here somewhere.* She thought to herself. Jess led herself through passageway

after passageway, stopping only to make sure that she hadn't been walking in a circle. As she began to turn around a corner, she heard a sharp hissing noise. *Nope! Absolutely not. I am not going towards the hissing noise.* She took a hard turn and began walking back the way she came. As she took three steps the stone walls that had been on either side of her, came up five inches from her nose. She came to a screeching halt, before walking slowly backwards, and turning towards the corner from where the noise had come before. The second she stepped around it, she was overcome with a feeling of drowsiness, as she sunk into the soft material that lay around her.

Xander

"Hello?" Xander yelled in all directions. He had been placed at a fork in the path, and had no idea which way to turn. *What was that?* He had heard a noise, so soft, he was barely able to hear it. He decided to follow it and see what became of his decisions. As he turned corner after corner, the noise happened more and more frequently. "Guys?" No response. The sound was almost surrounding him now, and as he turned yet another corner, he saw Jess. She was asleep in a giant web. *A spider's web.* He looked around. *No sign of the spider. That was good.* He stuck his finger into the web and as he started to untangle her, a slight feeling of drowsiness started to creep into his mind. *No. No. No. Must stay awake. I don't want to be eaten by a giant spider.* He repeated to himself. The last web had been undone, and Jess fell straight to the floor. "Shoot!" She landed on her back but remained unconscious, *well now I don't know whether or not she's actually dead.* He checked for a pulse. *Okay, not dead. But sleeping.* He picked her up gently, and began to walk back the way he had come. BAM! A stone wall rose up directly in front of them, barely missing Jess. *Okay...stay calm.* Xander turned back around and walked towards where the spider web had previously been, and walking under it made his way swiftly around the corner. No wall interrupted him this time, as he walked the long corridors. Suddenly, the hissing returned, from above. Xander looked up, and wished he hadn't. A giant spider sat perched on the walls above him. Xander started running, followed by the spider. Jess still hadn't woken up. *Please, please, please wake up! But also...nevermind.* Xander thought to himself as he ran. Corner after corner, passageway after passageway, he ran until he felt as if he could run no longer. He looked up. The spider was nowhere in sight. He started to walk at a new, leisurely pace when he ran smack into Sadie.

Sadie

"S-s-spider!" She yelled and continued running. *Why had Xander been carrying Jess? What the heck was he doing?* She asked herself so many questions. She looked behind her, seeing only Xander standing in the distance,

Jess limp in his arms. *Was she okay?* She stopped in her tracks. The spider that had been chasing her earlier was no longer there. She walked at a more casual pace, wondering what Xander had done to Jess. *What if he had poisoned her, what if she was dead?* She didn't quite know what to do about it, so she kept walking forward. She just had to finish the game, that was all she had to do, then she would be able to forget about Nathan. Ever since she had entered the game, she hadn't been able to stop thinking about him. The grief that she thought she had buried had resurfaced, and the thoughts had turned her mood upside down. Suddenly, Nicholas appeared next to her.

"Oh! Hey Sadie, have you seen Gwen?" He asked.

"No, why?" She responded. "I'm just worried..." He responded.

"Why? She's gonna be fine." Nicholas looked down.

"I know I just..." Suddenly, Sadie disappeared from sight. Nicholas stood there by himself, as a small slot in the floor closed.

"AAAAAAAHAH!" Sadie reappeared directly next to him, dropped from the sky, or whatever it was.

"Noooo, not again." She groaned. Two lines stayed bold on her neck, the previous two faded. "That's why I'm worried about her." Nicholas explained, gesturing at the slot, closed in the floor.

"Okay, fair point." She nodded. Nicholas helped her to her feet, and they continued walking. As they made it to a cross way, Robyn ran across the two paths in front of them. "Robyn!" Sadie called after him. Robyn backed up slowly, looking back at Nicholas and Sadie. A huge red gash ran across his leg. "Oh my gosh. Are you okay?" He looked down at his leg.

"Oh this?" He laughed, sarcastically, "It doesn't hurt, it just cost a strike." He gestured to his neck, where two strikes matched Sadie's. "Looks like we're matching now." He shook his head. "Anyways follow me, I know the way out."



"Where are they?" Gwen, Campbell, and Nicole stood in the middle of a large warehouse. Gone was the maze that had trapped them. Suddenly, Nicholas and Sadie ran in, followed by Xander, who still carried Jess. "Thank God you're safe." Nicholas said to Gwen, relieved. "Ummm, anyone concerned about Jess?" Nicole asked. She still lay limp in Xander's arms. "I don't know what to do guys. I found her in a trap and she was asleep, and I tried to protect her but..." He rambled. Long, criss-cross scars ran up and down his arms, and it looked like he had lost a strike. "Well shoot." Campbell cursed as four giant houses rose up around them.

"Woah," Sadie looked up in wonder. Each house was a different style, each house emanating a different feeling. Almost as if they were drawn to them, everyone walked to a different house, in pairs. Xander, who still carried Jess, made his way towards a woodsy cabin, built like an average-sized log house. He walked up the porch, before opening and then closing the door behind him. It wasn't until he was about five steps inside of the house that he regained his full consciousness. And so did Jess.



Gwen and Nicholas had made their way to the small, homey-looking cottage, and realized their decision only after sitting on the large plush couch inside.

"Um. Are we okay?" Gwen asked, looking around at her surroundings. Nicholas shrugged.

"I have no idea. For all I know, we could already be dead." He laughed. Gwen was not amused by this, and started to shrink into herself. Nicholas noticed and scooted closer to her. "Hey...hey." He put his arm around her shoulder. "It's going to be okay, we're going to get out of this. I promise."

"How can you be sure?" She looked up at him, fear flooding her eyes.

"I...I'm not. He said, unsure. "But I do know that I will do everything I can to get us out of this." Gwen leaned into his side, right as the ground started shaking violently.



Nicole and Campbell stood there, trying to hold on to whatever they could. They had ended up in a small farmhouse that was most likely falling apart at the seams.

"WoAhHh!" Campbell's voice crescendoed as he was thrown to one side of the room. An earthquake had full grasp over the house, and full grasp over those inside of it. Campbell lay limp on the floor, making Nicole swear under her breath, before making her way through the rubble. "Ah!" Campbell woke up and felt for his neck, before hanging his head. One small line lay on his neck, abandoned by the other three, that had been lost in the challenges. Nicole helped him up and he brushed himself off.

"It's gonna be okay, surely there aren't too many challenges left." She assured him, before addressing the task at hand. "Since the earthquake has stopped we should go find the others." Campbell nodded as they headed out onto the porch. Robyn and Sadie stood across from them on the balcony of a sleek, white, modern house. They waved, and Nicole and Campbell did the same in return. Jess and Xander weren't in sight, but Nicholas was crouched over Gwen, who lay on the smooth concrete floor. Nicole rushed to her side.

"Is she okay? What happened?" She threw question after question at him, waiting for at least one response. He looked worried, and so Nicole ceased her interrogation for the time being. However, he looked up at her, and the same doubt she had seen in Gwen's eyes, now were reflected in his own.

"We were just...talking," he explained, "and then the ground started shaking, and well..." he gestured to the small cottage, that now lay in ruin. "It collapsed on us, and I was somehow able to get out unscathed. Gwen wasn't so lucky. Why does everything have to happen to her?" He asked, not directly to Nicole but to whoever may be listening. Robyn and Sadie had made their way to the group, and Sadie knelt close to Gwen, slowly waking her up. Robyn looked around confused.

"Um, does anyone know where Jess and Xander are?" he asked. As if in response, the door to the woodsy cabin opened, and Xander stumbled out, followed by Jess.

"Yes, Jess is now awake, and is everyone oka-" he cut himself off. "How come every time someone asks that, we are *not* okay?" Jess gathered with the girls, and helped Gwen to her feet.

"Jess! You're awake!" Gwen said, her voice light and airy, almost like she had just woken up.

"Yeah, thanks to Xander." She said gently, and then stopped. "Wow, that's something I thought I'd never say." At this they both laughed, and Xander looked at Jess with something in his eyes that she couldn't quite place. She smiled and turned around to find Campbell smirking at her. The smile was quickly gone.

"What are you looking at?" She asked accusingly.

"Oh," he laughed, "how the tables have turned..." Jess looked back to Xander confused, and was met with a knowing grin.

"What does tha- *oh.*" she stopped, and looked at Campbell. "No. Absolutely not. No." At this, Campbell's smirk returned, and he went back to watching the proceedings, while whistling casually. They all talked amongst each other, when Sadie suddenly spoke up.

"Guys! I just realized, everyone's been involved in a challenge *except* Jess and I." She sounded as if she had just made the revelation and everyone looked at her with very comprehensive looks. Xander looked annoyed.

"Well don't jinx it!" He said.

"Too late!" Jess laughed, right before the floor dropped out from underneath them all.

"Well where did Sadie and Jess get to go this time?" Campbell asked sarcastically. Xander looked offended.

"Hey, don't joke about this, they could get hurt!" He complained.

"Well that sure hasn't stopped you from joking about it before..." Nicholas muttered.

"You wouldn't understand." Xander explained.

"Uh-huh, sure I wouldn't." Nicholas smirked. "It's not like I've said this a million other times."

"Okay fine. Maybe you would." Xander said, defeated. Robyn looked at the court that had just formed directly in front of them. He could see, just barely, Sadie and Jess standing at the other side of the room.

"Guys, we've got a tennis match." He said, worried. Campbell snorted.

"Xander, you don't even need to think about worrying for Jess' sake, she was literally born with a tennis racket in her hand." Xander looked up.

"I never said anything about Jess..." At this Nicholas laughed.

"Mm-hm, no you did not." At this point the holographic woman had completely disappeared, and only the overhead voice now guided the game. It announced the beginning of the game, and Sadie and Jess lined up, facing two digital, holographic tennis players. However, neither of them resembled the woman they had seen before. They started playing, and Xander was able to see that yes, Jess was extremely talented at tennis, and so was Sadie. They scored point after point without failure. Point after point without even a single flaw, every arc of their arms, poised and practiced. Soon they had won, and disappeared from the court.

"Hey guys!" Sadie said cheerily. Nicole jumped in her seat and turned around to face them.

"Congrats guys! You did so good! Well, better than any of us have." She laughed.

"Hey I didn't mess one up!" Robyn complained. At this, Nicole just shook her head. Xander still looked a little stunned.

"Ummmm Xander, you okay?" Jess asked, concerned. He shook himself out of a daze.

"Yeah, yeah I am." He said, "That challenge just seemed a little too easy." Sadie put her hand to her chest, offended.

"So you're saying that we're supposed to be bad at it?" She asked, skeptically. Xander realized what he said, and his eyes widened.

"No! No! I swear, both of y'all are amazing." He explained profusely. To this, Nicholas smirked. "WHY ARE YOU SMIRKING?" Xander asked, overwhelmed by his surroundings.

"Nothing...nothing." He looked pointedly at Jess.

"Forget him," Xander shrugged it off, and Robyn turned to him.

"No, I think I understand." He started, "Every other challenge, it's been like they were trying extremely hard to get us to lose strikes, well except the swimming challenge, but there wasn't really any extreme threat to y'all's lives. No offense." Robyn stopped, out of breath from the long explanation.

"None taken." Jess smiled. Campbell looked back towards the court and his eyes widened to the size of saucers.

"Um...GUYS?!" He asked, freaking out. It looked as if the court was glitching, colors flashing back and forth, cutting to glimpses of the previous challenges. "What's going on?" He asked again. He couldn't hear any of them respond, and had to watch as his view switched between the one in front of him, and a dark, gloomy, warehouse. Suddenly, all the light faded, someone screamed, and they found themselves in the darkness.

cHaPtEr #8,587 (U+0036)

gLiTcH

"Hello?" Sadie asked, "Anyone there?" No response. The room was dark, and she could barely see her hand, directly in front of her face.

"We're here!" Nicole responded. Sadie couldn't see them, but she immediately felt that she wasn't alone anymore.

"Um, does anyone know where we can find a light switch?" Xander asked. "Oof!" He had run straight into Sadie, knocking them both to the floor.

"Found it!" The lights came back on, revealing Jess, with her hand on a small switch. "Well that worked. Um?" She looked at Xander and Sadie on the floor with an eyebrow raised.

"I ran into her when the lights went off!" Xander explained quickly, before getting up and brushing himself off with the same speed.

"He totally likes her." Robyn muttered to the others, Nicholas and Campbell nodded in agreement.

"Like who?" Xander asked. "Jess? No, absolutely not." He said, flustered. Nicole sat on the floor, laughing.

"Yeah sure." She elbowed Robyn in the kneecap, and after he complained about it for about a minute, he knelt down next to her. She whispered something in his ear and he snorted, before doubling over with laughter. She managed to pull herself together long enough to ask "so, what do we do now, and where are we? Oh and also who was the one that screamed? Because that hurt my ears."

"Not me"

"Me neither."

"It wasn't me" One by one, everyone in the room claimed innocence, and one by one, everyone became more suspicious.

"So if it wasn't any of us, who was it?" Nicole asked again.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" The scream sounded again, this time accompanied by the shattering of glass, making Nicole stand up quickly. Jess backed against the wall, her hands over her ears, as she accidentally turned off the lights, and plunged them all back into darkness. But it wasn't complete darkness. A light blue glow flickered, almost out of sight.

"So who wants to go over there?" Sadie asked, jokingly.

"I will!" Jess stepped forward without hesitation and began making her way towards the light.

"No!" Xander protested. "I mean, no we should probably turn the lights back on right?" He could hear the guys laughing at his outburst, but pushed it away. *What did they care? He could do whatever he wanted, so what if he liked Jess?* He followed after her and waited until he could hear her breathing next to him.

"You good?" She asked, whispering.

"I'm fine." He said before continuing to walk towards the light. Jess watched his silhouette walk away from her. *Why was he acting like this? He had been more light hearted earlier, why did he care so much now?* She followed him hesitantly, as the light came into view. "Um...Jess?" She heard his voice a few feet away. The blue glow came from a broken glass container, hidden in the wall. Illuminated on the floor was a body, a girl, about 20 lying unconscious in the glass shards. Parts of her body were illuminated, stained a glowing blue.

"GUYS COME HERE!!" Jess called out. She could hear feet pounding across the cold concrete floor in her direction. She looked to the side to see Campbell standing there, his eyes wide as if he had seen a ghost. "Campbell. Are you okay? What's wrong?"

"It's my sister. It-It's Riley..." he stared at her in shock, before fainting.

Chapter 27

Riley

Her ears were pounding, and it probably didn't help that there were voices coming at her from every angle. The glass had hurt more than she expected. It didn't look that painful in the movies. Her breath came out in long ragged strokes, was she dying? She couldn't be. She had to be fine, she had to. She hadn't come all this way for nothing. Being the holograph had really taken a toll on her

mental and physical health. She sat up, her vision blurring in and out, trying to adjust to the darkness. She was splashed in what looked to be blue, glow in the dark, ink. It covered her old game suit. *Her suit. How long had she been in the game? Ever since they had sabotaged...No. Now wasn't the time to think about those things.* She shook herself mentally and really took the chance to look around. Seven figures stood around her, the same exact people from the game. Her memory was splotchy at best, but she could remember that much. *Campbell. Campbell Campbell Campbell.* That name kept repeating over and over and over again in her head, but none of the people around her matched that name. No one around her matched her thoughts. *Wait.* There were only seven people standing around her. There had been eight earlier, *where was he?* She turned her head again, looking up to meet the terrified eyes of everyone around her. She looked back down, in fear, just to see another body lying parallel to her own. She got up and crawled to his side. *Campbell.* It was him. She didn't know why he mattered so much to her, she couldn't remember. She looked at him, taking in his tall frame and his dark brown hair, ruffled by his fall. *It matched her own.* She held it up to match his, and was shocked to see that the hair in her hand was glowing the same blue that covered her leggings. She reached for the other side of her hair, and looked at it to see that it matched Campbell's almost perfectly. *Campbell.* His eyelids fluttered open and he looked at Riley with something in his eyes that she couldn't quite place. *Brother. That's who he was. Before she had gotten that invitation...*

"Riley?" He asked, his voice soft with emotion. Her heart leapt. *It was him.*

"Campbell!" She hugged him and jumped to her feet, pulling him with her.

"You look...older." He said, looking at her. *"Also why do you look like that?"* She laughed.

"Nice to see you too!" She said sarcastically, "I'm 20 now, and it's probably because I was a hologram like 10 seconds ago." She looked at herself. She really had grown. It had been 3 years, but still. Campbell had changed too. He was older, more sophisticated.

"Well um I should probably introduce you to everyone, or do you already know who everyone is?" He asked, his old humor back in his voice. She blushed and laughed, before pointing at each person and calling them by name.

"Campbell, obviously, Jess, Xander, Nicole, Sadie, Nicholas, Gwen, and Robyn." She hesitated on Robyn's name, almost like she meant to say something else, but quickly shut it out of her head. He had been the one to realize something was wrong. He had been the one that had saved her. But he didn't realize that.

"Are you okay? Can we get you anything?" Nicole asked.

"Yeah, you don't look too good." Robyn said. "Oh-oh not in an offensive way or anything, it's just- you're kind of glowing blue and um."

"Robyn, literally no one thought you were trying to be offensive." Sadie said between bits of laughter.

"Oh. Well, is there anything we can do?" He asked again. They were all so kind. If only her teammates had been that kind to her...then again this group had literally just found her body on the floor. Why wouldn't they have been nice?

"I'm okay. Thank you all though." She said, politely.

"I have one question." Gwen spoke up. She had been completely silent the entire time everyone had been talking, fear causing her to tremble, even with Nicholas's arm draped over her shoulder.

"Okay, go ahead." Riley was ready for questions. She hadn't been able to control what she had been saying the whole time she was the hologram, every word and every syllable controlled by...him.

“Why are you wearing the same outfit we are?” Gwen asked, curious. Everyone looked closer at her outfit to see that it matched their own. Riley was confused. Why didn’t they know? Wasn’t it obvious? That was the whole reason she was here.

“Isn’t it obvious? Because I played the game.” They looked shocked. Nicholas looked confused.

“I get that part, but who else played with you, and why were you trapped as the hologram?” He asked, matter-of-factly. Riley looked up at him. He was much taller than her, but that wasn’t why she was there. This was an easy question. She remembered all of their faces, and what they had last said to her. We’re sorry. Well “sorry” didn’t make up for 3 years of lost time.

“Myself: Riley Campbell, Robert Owen, Nathan Stewart, Andrius Castillo, Marion Lloyd, Griffon Lewis, Alexandra Torres, and Kitty Calrissian.” After she said this, she regretted it. It was as if she had stabbed each of them in turn and they were slowly dying right in front of her. What did those names mean to them? It wasn’t like they had-oh no.

“I hate to ask,” Jess’ voice broke, and Xander put his hand on her shoulder, “but why did you become the hologram?” A tear ran down her face, and she leaned into Xander, as more and more tears fell. Riley looked at them, hesitant they would want to hear her answer.

“Because I lost.” She said, making everyone’s eyes fall back on her.

Chapter 27

Flashback

It had been a little over three years since she had first received that invitation, when that small, rose quartz car that had first appeared in her room. Riley had been only seventeen, but high school wasn't much fun. She took the idea of a new adventure, the kind that she and Campbell used to go on, and couldn't wait for that first peek. The day of the invitation, Riley drove her car, as fast as she could to the meeting spot. But she wasn't the first one, she was the last. She was met there by a group, made up of three guys that looked slightly older than her, two girls, and two adults. *Adults?* Adults were no fun; they were practically ruining her high school year. They all introduced themselves kindly enough, Nathan, Andrius, Kitty, Marion, Robert, and Alexandra all taking the time to say their name and where they were from. But Griffon, Griffon actually had taken the time to tell her about what was going on: about the invitation, the

location, and everything else she had needed to know. Which was a lot. They walked out into the field together, before it started to sink. They panicked of course, but obviously, there wasn't much they could do about it. They had landed in a warehouse, the same that another group would stand in three years later, and got the full run down from a piece of paper that had landed in Riley's hand.



"Wait, a piece of paper?" Jess asked, "We didn't get a piece of paper." Riley laughed.

"Nope, but you did have me!" She said sarcastically. Jess looked at her in realization.

"Got it, thanks." Jess said. Riley nodded in her response.

"Can we go back to the story now?" Xander asked impatiently.

"Yep!" Riley continued.



The group did their best to follow the rules, and completed challenge after challenge. An escape room, people choking on things, finding cures to illnesses, rock-climbing, a trivia quiz, giant chess, and all those fun things. As people did more and more challenges, the players started to lose more and more strikes., especially Riley. She had lost three and was on the brink of losing another. Griffon was the opposite. While everyone lost strikes, he stayed normal, passing every challenge with flying colors. Finally, they got to the final challenge, and they had gotten the option of whether or not to automatically give someone a strike. This terrified Riley. She knew she only had one strike left to lose, and let's just say, she hadn't been completely friendly to all the other players. The time came to vote, and to her utter shock, Riley found herself voted off. *What would happen to her now? Would she be alone? Would she die?* She was given a minute to talk to her group, a whole "final words" moment. She begged them, begged them, not to leave her alone, not to sacrifice her like this. To do something, anything! But...they wouldn't listen. None of them. Except Griffon. Griffon gave up everything, gave up his strikes, his success, his life outside the game, his budding relationship with Kitty, everything, to make sure Riley wasn't alone. When the time came for Riley to go, he went with her, and never left her side, until she was forced into that chamber. It had taken over her mind, her body, her feelings, her life. The blue glow covered her, and it made her feel tired, sleepy, and at ease. But she knew it was fake. The feelings didn't last long as she was forced to watch those people who she had considered friends complete the game, and congratulate each other, and bond with each other, and... she never saw Griffon again. After she first became unconscious in that tank, she wondered if all Griffon had done was for nothing. He had

promised her that she wouldn't be alone, but she was. And so was he. Three years passed in a blur, and it took her three years to realize something was wrong. She had become so associated with how the game worked, she had learned that her group was required to come back yearly. But they weren't. What had happened? It wasn't until later that she realized they had done something to the game. It had "skipped their group" when reanalyzing the game. *What did they do?* All Riley had ever been told after that day was that "their actions had been punished." Riley didn't know by who, or how, but it scared her.



"Riley," Nicole said gently, "they all died." Riley looked horrified, and the glowing blue that covered her, illuminated the shine of tears in her eyes.

"No, Griffon's still alive, he has to be, you said...you said..." Jess stuttered, worry clouding her face. Xander put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"We'll find him. I promise." He reassured her. *Promise.* Such a powerful, and often untrue word. Robyn watched the two interact, reminding himself of his dad. His dad had promised to always be there for him. But he hadn't been. He looked down at his shoes, watching as reflections of light danced across them.

"Robyn, are you okay?" Riley's voice asked through his daze. He looked up to see that everyone looked genuinely concerned. He didn't feel okay, but he knew that wouldn't go over well with the group, so he settled for a nod. Riley didn't look reassured, but continued on. "So, do we just want to pick a direction, or what?"

"I mean we could split up like last time." Gwen suggested.

"No." Nicholas argued, "We have to stay together, we have to protect one another." He tightened his arm around Gwen, as if protecting her, would protect everyone else. "I say we do Riley's plan. After all, she has been here the longest," he said resolutely. Everyone nodded in agreement, and formed into little groups as they walked in a general direction *away* from the hologram tank. As the group continued to walk, the room started to brighten, and the darkened warehouse that they had left, started to fade away.

"Guys?" Sadie asked hesitantly, "Where are we *this time?*" A loud thud sounded as a wall shut behind them, trapping them in a small boxed room.

"No, no, no, no, no." Riley said, fear rising in her veins.

"What is it?" Robyn asked with curiosity.

"I was hoping we wouldn't have to do this same challenge." She said again, her face going blank. "It's an escape room. But it's basically a death trap." Everyone looked at her in panic. "Unless you are all really smart." She reassured them.

"Well what does everyone do for a living? I mean we have two health care workers, I'm an actor, Riley's played this game before, a golf player, and I have

no idea what you four do." Campbell said, pointing at everyone before gesturing to Robyn, Nicole, Gwen, and Nicholas.

"Robyn and I work at a department store in New York." Nicole explained.

"I'm an engineer." Nicholas offered, before turning towards Gwen.

"And I'm a detective." She said resolutely. The group stared at her in a bit of surprise. "What?" She asked, offended.

"Well glad to know we have a well-rounded bunch here, Riley is that enough for us to pass?" Campbell asked his sister, who stood, fidgeting with her hands from stress.

"I think so. *I hope so.*" Riley muttered the last part to herself, right as all the lights shut off and they were drenched in darkness. "Oh, I hate this part." Riley said in frustration.

Chapter 28

Escape

The lights flickered on in a vintage-looking room, with a pool table in the center. Low hanging lights hung from the ceiling, and in the background 1920's era music could be heard. The walls were lined with bookcases, and ladders ran up and down beside them, to aid anyone in search of a book. Nicole looked around at this, to see that everyone was wearing outfits, as if they were in the 1920s.

"Um guys?" She spoke up, "Why do you all look like that?" She gestured to the girls standing around her in their fancy, shimmering, feathered, flapper-like outfits. Xander, wearing a suit and tie, chuckled and looked at her.

"Nicole, you look like us too, you know." Nicole looked down at her dress to find silver sequins strung across a cream dress, ending in white tassels hanging at her knees.

"Oh, oops." She said, embarrassed. "Riley, what are you doing?" Riley stood, perched on a ladder, wearing a shimmering green jumpsuit, with a v-neck, and flared ankles. She was shuffling through the books, a pile of at least four already in her hand.

"Me?" She asked curiously. She attempted to turn around on the ladder, but ended up on the floor, surrounded by a pile of books. Robyn offered her his hand, and pulled her up, back on her feet. Robyn looked at her for a moment, and then shook himself and walked away. *What was that about?* Campbell thought to himself, suspicious. "I was just looking for clues."

"Clues on books?" Nicole looked perplexed.

"Yeah," Jess piped in, "Have you ever done an escape room before?" Jess was covered in strands of sequins, a feathered boa draped over her arms. Every little movement she made was accompanied by a soft, *swish swish*, of her dress. Nicole shook her head in response.

"Not really my sort of thing." She said matter-of-factly. Riley continued her search as they talked amongst themselves. Suddenly a click in the wall indicated that Riley had indeed found something. The pool table that had once sat in the middle of the room, began sinking into the ground, as the grass had when they had first started the game. But the table wasn't the only thing sinking into the ground. Xander and Nicholas, who had been sitting on the side of it, were beginning their descent into the ground as well. Nicholas was able to quickly jump off, with the help of Gwen to keep him steady, but Xander's suit had gotten pinned under the edge of the table.

"Guys..." He said, panic rising in his voice.

"This is literally a repeat of last time!" Campbell realized as Jess helped Xander up. Campbell, leaning against the bookshelf, saw Sadie's eyes widen just in time to back away from it. The walls fell back and the table in the middle of the floor rose up to reveal an old-timey looking chess board, with pieces resembling themselves. The walls came back up to reveal beams that stretched across the ceiling, and windows that led to nowhere. "Or not." Campbell looked at the place where he had been reclining only moments before, with vague distaste. Robyn hurried to the game board and sat in one of the surrounding chairs, his suspenders and cap making him look like a mail boy. Riley sat across from him, her long green sleeves brushing against the chair.

"Do you know how to play?" Riley asked him, curious. Robyn looked up at her confused.

"What? Oh, chess? No. Do you?" He looked curiously at her as she nodded. "Oh...can you teach me?" He asked, uncertain. Riley looked up at him, a genuine smile on her face.

"I'd love to." She said cheerfully. She moved her chair closer to his, before introducing him to the rules and strategies of the game, and beginning to play.

"So what do we do next?" Gwen asked, confused.

"Look for clues? I have no idea how this works, but we might as well." Nicholas suggested. They looked around, taking in the window seats, stacked with piles of books, the greenery, and the lights themselves.

"Nick, I think I found something!" Gwen called out. Everyone, except Robyn and Riley, rushed over to where she was standing. She pointed up at the light fixture and they looked to see that the lightbulb wasn't fully screwed in. Campbell, being the tallest one there, reached to unscrew the light. He twisted it a few times before it fell into his other hand. He inspected it, before tossing it down to Xander.

"I don't see anything unusual, it was probably just an error." Campbell said, nonchalantly. Jess, looking over Xander's shoulder, posed an interesting question.

"What if it's something *inside* the lightbulb?" She asked, curious. All of a sudden, Sadie hit the lightbulb out of Xander's hand, watching it shatter against the velvet flooring.

"Sadie what the heck?!" Xander asked, frustrated. Sadie knelt down next to the shards, before returning to her feet, a slip of paper in her hand.

"I was looking for this, and you two" she pointed at Xander and Jess, "were taking too long." Nicholas pulled the paper out of her hands, gently but quickly, not giving her a chance to snatch it back.

"And you were taking too long to actually read it." He retorted, chuckling to himself. Gwen's smile twitched, attempting to hold back laughter. "It says," he began, "*To play the game, and win the prize, you must do the same, and break my eyes.* Well that's not terrifying at all!" Nicholas said sarcastically. Gwen took a seat in one of the nearby chairs, looking around the room, and trying to solve the clue.

"Well I think it's pretty obvious," Xander said abruptly. Nicole looked at him with her eyebrow raised skeptically.

"Care to share?" she asked, that same tone of skepticism in her voice.

"Yes, actually I would." He began, "The riddle works in pairs, so the first and third rhyme, and the second fourth rhyme, correct?" Xander didn't wait for an answer and continued. "So that indicates :To play the game...you must do the same. Which *also* indicates that we have to play some sort of smaller game within this room. See? Obvious." He finished with a flourish and crossed his arms across his chest, unwilling to move.

"But that's not all." Jess said, standing next to Xander. "The second pair, the whole 'break my eyes' bit. Do you know what is often said to resemble eyes?" Jess didn't wait for an answer either. "Glass, obviously. So *now* we have to play a game and break something that's glass. Easy enough."

"Well it looks like Robyn and Riley have already found the game." Sadie said, before walking to the table where they sat. The rest of the group followed suit, leaving the shattered lightbulb behind. The two players were already halfway through the game, and it wasn't obvious who was winning.

"Can you speed it up so we can get out of here?" Campbell asked, bored.

"We're trying our best okay? Geez..." Riley snapped back. Her brother was the same as she remembered. He was moody, impatient, pessimistic, but he had another side that he often hid from everyone. He was funny and kind, but that was before she had left, and she had know way to connect with him now. Suddenly, Robyn pushed back from the table, triumphant.

"I did it! I won!" He said, enthusiasm filling his voice. He gave himself a moment to be excited, before realizing that *if he won, something had to happen to Riley*. "Riley, are you okay?" He asked her, his concern rising. Riley didn't

respond. She sat frozen in her chair, unable to move, unable to respond. "Shoot. Riley? Riley, come on." He got out of his chair and shook her gently, to no avail. "Sadie, Xander. You guys are doctors, do something." He looked up to see that everyone was frozen. Everyone. He was the only person able to move, and he had no idea what to do. "Guys? Please. Someone? What am I supposed to do?" Suddenly he saw a small piece of paper in Nicholas' hand. He stood up and grabbed it, careful to keep it from ripping. He looked at it and read it before sitting back down in the chair. "What on earth does this mean? I already won the game...what are the eyes?" He looked around at the room taking in the giant, floor to ceiling windows. *Glass. It must be glass.* He took off his shoe, carefully inspecting it, before chucking it as hard as he could at the window. The window shattered, and his shoe flew out the window, but nothing happened. No one moved. There were *two windows! He had only broken one!* He looked at his feet, only one shoe remaining. It took it off of his foot with caution, before throwing it in the same manner as he did the first time, watching the glass shatter and fall away.

"Robyn? What happened? And why aren't you wearing shoes?" Riley asked from her chair. *She was moving!* Robyn hadn't realized that he had been holding his breath the whole time and let it out in a big sigh.

"Um, where did the clue go?" Nicholas asked, looking at his hands with confusion.

"Oh, sorry about that." Robyn apologized. He held up the small slip of paper before letting it drop to the ground. "I had to solve it, and I had to sacrifice both of my shoes for you guys."

"Oh, sorry about that." Sadie didn't sound like she was sorry, as she started walking around the room. "So what happens now? Are we done with the game yet?"

"No. We're not." Xander said, stubbornly. Jess looked at him with confusion.

"But we are...what haven't we done yet?" She asked, trying to think of what it could be.

"We haven't saved your brother yet. He could still be alive." He explained, putting his arm around her shoulder. Jess looked up at him, her eyes brimming with tears.

"You remembered?" She asked, quietly.

"Of course." He paused, before looking at Riley. "Do you have any ideas of where he could be?" He asked. She nodded quickly before standing up.

"One."

Riley led them to yet another dark room, with another glass tank. Unlike her previous chambers, the glass was not broken, and inside sat a young man of about 20 years old.

"Griffon!" Jess called out and tried to run towards the tank. Xander grabbed her by the shoulders and held her back as she fought to reach her brother.

"Jess, you can't," he insisted, "it could be dangerous!" she glared at him, daggers in her eyes, but it didn't matter. Because Riley had already reached the tank.

"Riley!" Campbell called out to her, "come back! Please!" Riley didn't answer and bent down to take off one of her shoes. She lifted the shoe and flung it against the glass tank. The glass gave way, bathing her in green light. *Thud.* Riley was on the ground, unconscious like she had been when they first found her. Robyn walked over to her and knelt by her side, shaking her gently.

"Riley. Riley, you have to get up." He said gently.

"I hate to say, but I don't think that's gonna happen very soon." A sharp voice cut through the silence. The same man from the glass was now walking towards them, his blonde hair turning green from the light, his eyes actually *glowing* green. "I'm sorry, who are you all?"

"*Griffon*" Jess said underneath her breath, Xander's arm tightening around her.

"Yes, I know my own name, but who are you all?" Griffon asked again.

"Griffon, it's me!" Jess said, her voice growing desperate. "It's Jess, Jess-your sister!" Something close to recognition flashed through Griffon's eyes, and he froze.

"Jess?" He asked quietly, "Is that really you?" Xander released his grip on Jess as she ran towards him, and wrapped Griffon in a hug.

"Griff!" She mumbled through sobs, "We-I thought-I thought you were dead!" He looked at her with confusion, and backed away from her.

"Jess, how long was I in here for?" He looked frightened, like one word could change his future completely, at any moment. Jess, unable to look him in the eye, backed away, turning to stand next to Xander, and Campbell stood up in her place.

"I believe you know my sister, Riley?" He asked as more of a statement than a question, before Griffon nodded in response, his face blank of emotion.

"Well, she's been here for the last three years, and I mean, if you were put in that," he pointed to the tank "at the same time as she was, then you've been in there for three years as well.

"No." Griffon shook his head, his hands going to his forehead. "No. No, that means I left Jess alone for-for three years, and I promised that I'd stay with

Riley, but now she's not okay, she's actually unconscious, and it's all-it's all-it's...my fault." He rushed out, emotions and realization in every word.

"Griff?" Riley was standing now, with the support of Robyn, as she limped her way towards the group. Griffon stood facing her, terror drawing creases in his forehead.

"Riley. I-" He started.

"Look, it's fine, we just need to get out of here. I don't know about you, but three years is long enough." She said resolutely, turning around to leave.

"Riley, please you don't understa-" Griffon's voice cut off, and everyone looked to see that he had faded, and a small piece of paper was in his place. Nicholas looked at the piece of paper and cursed under his breath.

"You could say that again!" Xander said, the sarcasm strong in his voice. And so Nicholas did.

Chapter 30

The End

Gwen walked forward and picked up the paper very reluctantly, careful not to set off any more situations that could result from their current one.

"I am a path that moves and shakes, a challenge for the brave and the fakes, to find your friend you must cross me, but beware a wrong step, and you'll soon see. Navigate with wit and speed, with the help of your team you'll find what you need." She read it aloud, each syllable illustrating their challenge. The second she finished reading, the floor sank beneath them for the *third time*.

"Here we go again." Sadie said with a tired sigh.

"Yep, and there's nothing we can do about it." Campbell said, the same exhausted tone in his voice. As they came into the light, they looked to see that they were all standing on a very large platform, further away from each other than they had remembered being. Before they could move, the platform started breaking into pieces, leaving each teammate by themselves. One by one, each podium *clicked* into place, collectively facing a sea of empty, moving, podiums. Not even seconds later, a loud buzzer sounded for them to start their course. Nicholas scrambled across the blocks easily, but at a steady rate, always checking to make sure that Gwen hadn't slipped or fallen. Nicole however, kept finding herself getting punched in the gut by blocks that seemed to come out of nowhere.

"What-*thud*-the-*thud*-heck-*thud*-is this stupid torture machine?!" She yelled out, before getting tossed in the air by a raising platform. Robyn had made his way over to Riley, who still hadn't fully recovered. Despite her injury, they made quick work of the obstacles and found their way to the opposite side before the rest. Xander somehow, had yet again, found himself caught on a block, but had managed to unfasten himself before, what could've been, his

decapitation. Sadie had made it across with relative ease, her mind distant, and worn out by the previous challenges. She had almost made it to the end of the course when she stumbled, just in time to be caught by Robyn. He pulled her up before returning to Riley's side. Campbell's mindset throughout the course happened to be very different from everyone else's. He was neck and neck with Xander on the obstacles, determined to beat him in the unofficial race that they had started. They continued to be neck and neck until the very last block, when it looked like Xander would win for sure, Campbell made a stunning leap over top of it, sticking the landing on the other side. At this Riley chuckled.

"Nice leap," She laughed, "Maybe you should've become a professional ballerina instead of an actor." At this final comment, she doubled over laughing, as Robyn's smile wavered, threatening to let out the laugh trapped inside. Jess was absolutely insane, jumping over block after block, without stumbling. Her smile was wide, enjoying the challenge, as easy as it looked to her. Almost done with the course, she slowed down, climbing at a more normal pace, and right as she jumped to reach the next platform, her footing slipped and she tumbled down, down, down.

"Shoot. JESS?!" Xander called out leaning over the edge of the balcony where the rest of the finalists sat. "Jess, I swear to God, if you don't make it, I'll-" He cut off when he saw two hands holding the edge of a block about ten feet away from them. He crossed his fingers as slowly but surely, Jess pulled herself back onto the block, and finished crossing the chasm. She sat down next to Xander, out of breath and staring at her feet. "That was pretty incredible." He said quietly, so only she could hear. She didn't respond and continued looking at her shoes, crossing and uncrossing her legs.

"You never finished." She explained quickly.

"What?" Xander asked, confused. *Never finished what? What was she talking about?*

"You never finished your sentence. You never said what you would've done if I hadn't," she paused to look up at him, curiosity in her eyes, "you know, made it out myself."

"Oh. That." Now it was Xander's turn to look down at his shoes, thoughts flooding his head. *How the heck did she hear that? And what was he supposed to say? The truth?* "Well what I was gonna say was..." He paused. Truth. Truth was better than lying. Plus, he assumed she would probably be able to tell if it was a lie anyways, she was just that kind of person. Jess nodded, reminding him that he had yet to finish his sentence. "I was gonna go down there myself looking for you." Jess was silent for a second, before she looked out towards the blocks, and in return, so did Xander. As he watched Gwen and Nicholas finally make it

to their side of the room, he felt a warmth over his hand. He looked down to see Jess' hand on top of his, her eyes still trained on the far wall.

"Thank you." She said, barely audible, but it was enough. She squeezed hand and smiled at him, before they heard Sadie directing their new course of action.

"So we're done?" Sadie asked, hope rising in her voice. They had been so busy talking, that Xander and Jess hadn't even noticed that Griffon had reappeared along with the elevator that they had arrived in. Apparently, Griffon had explained to Riley why they had been separated, which somehow had to do with the people behind the game who actually weren't Griffon and Riley...to sum it up, it was complicated.

"I sure hope so." Gwen said, walking steadily towards the elevator.

"Me too." Nicholas walked in stride with her, the two of them making it to the elevator before turning around. "Are you guys coming with us, or do you want to stay a little longer?" Nicholas asked sarcastically, his voice now free from the worry and stress caused by the game. He was answered with a resounding no, and the group huddled into the elevator, as it rose back to the grassy field. They were no longer wearing their black suits, instead wearing what they had been before they had gotten to the game. They had almost forgotten about the field, the invitation, all of it. Every part of their beings had been focused on the game.

"I don't know about you guys, but I wanna stay in touch, so should we make a group chat or what?" Xander asked, eliciting a few laughs. They pulled out their phones making the chat and talking lightly among themselves. In pulling out their phones, they had also realized that the time hadn't changed since they had been in the game. It was still midnight, and it hadn't even been a day. It was like it had never happened at all. So maybe it hadn't. As Gwen and Nicholas walked towards the parking lot, they were glad to recognize that this wasn't goodbye. They lived down the street from each other for goodness sake! As they stopped in front of their cars, Nicholas wrapped Gwen in a tight hug, kissing her lightly on the top of the head. She looked up at him, the street lights reflecting in her chocolate colored eyes.

"See you soon," she said quietly, before turning around and heading back to her car. Nicholas waited until she had closed the door and driven away before he got into his own car.

↔

"Hey!" Jess called after Xander, who was walking towards the gravel parking lot. "Wait up!" She ran towards him, careful not to trip on her dress. Right as he turned around, she knocked into him, sending them stumbling their way towards the cars. He laughed freely, tumbling into the grass and looking up

at the stars. "I'm gonna miss you, you know." She said still recovering from laughter.

"Really?" Xander rolled over to look at her, a smirk on his face. "You, of all people, are going to miss me? I had a bet going for Campbell, but I never expected it from you." This sent them into another fit of laughter that lasted for a little while before fading. "I'll miss you too." He said, a serious tone in his voice that Jess hadn't heard before. He stood from his place in the grass, and offered his hand to help her up. They stood looking at each other for a second before Jess leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. He blushed, and she turned around, running to her car, while yelling back to him.

"You better come to L. A. and visit!" she called out. Xander just shook his head and laughed.

"Not until you come to Chicago!" He yelled back. She turned towards him, a smile stretching across her face.

"You first!" And with that she jumped into her car where Griffon had been waiting, and closed the door, beginning to drive away. Xander waved at her, before getting into his own car, and driving back to his home.

↔

"Are you sure you're going to be alright?" Robyn asked Riley for a third time as he helped her towards Campbell's car.

"Nope, but if I'm not, I'll call you okay? Why are you even so concerned?" She asked, curious.

"Oh I don't know," Robyn said sarcastically, "maybe because we found you unconscious on the floor next to a tank that you had been stuck in for about three years, that made you part hologram, and you're still not fully back to normal. Oh, and also, when you broke Griffon out of the glass, the shock knocked you back, you twisted your leg, and you were unconscious again." Riley rolled her eyes and laughed. Campbell, who was sitting in the front seat of the car, was not as amused.

"Would you two quit it?" He asked, irritation audible in his voice. Riley turned back to the front of the car, waved to Robyn and shut the door behind him. As Robyn was walking away, he heard a small *thud thud thud* and turned around to see that Riley was knocking on the window trying to get his attention as Campbell drove away. She was saying something, but Robyn couldn't tell quite what. He shook his head, cleared his thoughts and tried again, but he still couldn't understand her. As the car drove down the street away from Robyn, he wondered what it could've been that she so desperately wanted to tell him. Nicole and Sadie were standing on the edge of the parking lot looking up at the stars. As Robyn walked towards them on the gravel Nicole turned to look at him.

"Did you ever wonder if any of this was actually real?" She asked him, her voice almost like she was in a dream. He looked at her, confusion showing in his eyes.

"No, it was real. Griffon and Riley are with us now, so it's real." He assured her.

"But what about the strikes, the time, the injuries?" Sadie suggested. She was right. The strikes were gone, the time hadn't changed, and all of the injuries that they had obtained throughout the challenges were also gone.

"I guess we'll never know." Robyn said, resolutely. "See you soon Nicole, hope to see you again Sadie." He waved and walked away towards his car, leaving behind the game and everything with it. All of them did.



When everyone had gotten home, they had realized that in the back of their car was a white box, tied with a black bow. Inside the black box was their suit from the game, and a note. On the note were just a few words, nothing more, nothing less. It read: You must return after 2 years, for the next round. Congrats.

And they would return. It wasn't like they had a choice.

Epilogue:

"Hey guys!" Xander walked through the door, his arms full of snacks and drinks. The group was together again, celebrating a year after the original game. Xander was followed by Jess who carried handfuls of bags that held even more snacks.

"Oh my gosh, why did y'all bring so much? It's not like we're staying here for a week!" Nicholas laughed from the couch, where he sat next to Gwen. Across the room, Robyn, Nicole, Riley and Campbell were sitting at the kitchen island on bar stools.

"Cause why not?" Jess asked, laughing.

"Sounds like someone's spent a little too much time around Xander." Gwen muttered to Nicholas and he laughed. Jess playfully punched her in the shoulder, and went to set the food on the counter. The doorbell rang and Campbell went to get it.

"It's probably Sadie." He said casually. He opened the door to find Sadie standing there, blood running from her forehead, her arms and her legs. "Oh my God, Sadie, are you okay?" He asked, panic rising. The others came into the entryway just as Sadie shook her head, and right before she collapsed over the threshold. They closed the door behind her, pulling her to sit on the couch, Xander rushing to get medical supplies.

"What the heck are we supposed to do?" Riley paced around Sadie, looking out the windows by the door. No one was out there. Suddenly Sadie inhaled really sharply. "Sadie, who did this to you?" She asked, freezing in her journey from the door to the couch. Sadie only got one sentence out before she went unconscious again.

"The game is starting again, and it's early this time." She said.

The End.

Book 2 Will Begin Fall 2023