

**AN UNOFFICIAL ROBLOX MYSTERY**

**THE**

# **WORLD KEEPERS**



**BOOK 9**

**TY THE HUNTER**

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## Chapter 1

“Jed, are you okay?”

“Is he okay? He’s not moving....”

“He’s fine. He said he would do it and he’ll do it, so just push the bag in!”

I can hear people talking to me. Their voices grate against my skull like nails being dragged slowly across a chalkboard, or the scrape of a fork against someone’s teeth as they eat. Ugh, I wish I hadn’t thought of those things, thinking of them somehow makes me feel worse than ever.

Gingerly, I attempt to sit up. It doesn’t work, not even a little bit. All I accomplish is a sort of wiggle on the ground, a fish out of water, caught up in its death throes.

My movement makes me aware of where I’ve landed in the game. I’m on the ground, that much is obvious. I can feel the gritty rub of blacktop on my arms where my short sleeved shirt ends. The heat (I have no idea why it’s hot in here) has made the dark, pebbly pieces sticky, causing my hair to pinch and pull at the tender skin of my scalp each time I move my head.

The clanging of metal cookware sings like a wind chime from a distance, faintly tinkling, and very, very annoying. I can smell pizza. The aroma of freshly baked bread, warm sauce, and mouth-watering spices mixes with whatever’s been chucked in the dumpster beside my head. It’s disconcerting, the feeling of wanting to eat and vomit all at the same moment.

It’s also annoying.

However, it’s not as annoying as the voices of my family and friends on the other side of their microphones. They’re chattering away, oblivious to my discomfort.

“Jed, Carina is pushing the bag in, we need you to put the beacons in the bag. Okay, Jed? Put the beacons in the bag.” Adrian interrupts the haze of my thoughts, trying to bring coherency where there is only muddle and fuddle. He’s speaking slowly, punctuating each word, as though I don’t share his grasp of the English language.

“Put.The.Beacons.In.The.Bag.”

“I’m hurt, I’m not deaf!”, I think to myself. I want to scream it at the top of my lungs. I want to rail at them for keeping me awake. I want to drop a bomb on the pizza place, so the people in there will stop banging metal around! Where is my “Everyone can die in a fire button?” I want to push that button, like right now.

I don’t do any of these things though. I just lay there, still and silent. In my defense, I do try to yell at them. I try to tell them. Sucking in a breath of delicious/foul air, I shudder with pain and only manage to produce a small creaky “hssssk” noise, so quiet that it’s more a puff of heat leaking from my

very chapped, slightly parted lips, not even a whisper.

Through the slits of my semi-open eyelids, I can see a plain beige grocery bag coming into the world as if by magic. It hovers in the sky above me, blotting out pixelated clouds as it moves until, finally, it drops down, free of the hand that pushed it in. Floating lazily in the nonexistent breeze, it makes a reasonably direct descent to the ground by my head, changing position only slightly as it rocks back and forth in the air.

Reaching out a hand, I scrape my wrist along the blacktop, crawling slowly toward the bag with my fingertips, like a bloated, blind, fleshy spider. My pinky touches the bag, and I feel such horrible relief. A thought enters and leaves my brain so quickly that I barely have time to register it. "If I get these beacons in the bag, they can do what they need to do, and I can be done."

It scares me, that thought, because I know what "done" means. I don't want to be done. I want to help them. I want to see this through so I can get back to my family. My mom and dad are waiting on the other side for me. My dogs too, they would never understand why I didn't come back home.

These thoughts push me, and I do what I came to do. Sliding my hand all the way into the sack, I let go of the beacons I'd been holding, keeping only the one I saved for myself, firmly grasped in my other fist. Even now I can feel its sticky texture reacting to my overload of body heat. My fever must be very high, not much time left.

"He did it; they're in the bag, get him."

I blink.

Did I move? Is it done? Did they get the beacons?

"Oh no, oh no, he's not eating it...."

Carina.

She's worried, about me?

"Jed, just eat it, come on dude, eat it!"

Adrian.

I can picture him, standing ramrod straight, issuing orders that he fully expects will be obeyed.

"YOU WILL BE GROUNDED FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE, YOUNG MAN! EAT THAT BEACON RIGHT NOW!"

"Mom...." I want to talk to her, I miss her already, but she's mad.

Why is she mad?

"Oh...snap, she told him."

Dirk.

That jerk.

The pain is intense, and I'm glad for a moment that I have my beacon in my right hand instead of my left. Moving my left hand on the ground was one thing, but I'm honestly not sure if I could pick it up and bring it to my face. The festering wound on my shoulder throbs and burns.

If I eat the beacon, it will go away, and I will be okay, that's what they said, right?

It's hard to focus, but I try. I move my right hand. The chatter over the microphones stops, as though everyone "out there" is holding their breath, waiting for my next move.

Lifting my arm, I bring my hand to my face and open my palm. The beacon is firmly stuck to my skin, it hangs by goopy strings, gravity doing only so much to make it fall into my mouth.

I can't wait, it's taking too long, I don't have the energy. Bringing my hand to my face, I scrape my palm along the straight edge of my bottom teeth.

The beacon plops into my mouth, sticky residue clings to the edge of my incisors, it's irritating. I want to push my tongue against the barrier, but even that ability eludes me. Instead, I slowly move my jaw, the slightest of motions, hoping it will be enough to dissolve the beacon so I can eat it. I concentrate on producing saliva, anything to make the process go faster, but I'm too dehydrated, it doesn't work.

Tipping my head back as far as I can, I hope and pray that gravity will do its work, and it does. Finally, FINALLY, I taste lemon. The smallest hint of citrus makes its way to the back of my throat, and I swallow, doing my best to urge it on.

The effect is immediate. One moment I am ready to give up and cling to the last moments of my life in a dirty, gritty parking lot. The next moment, my whole body begins to tingle, especially my left arm. I look over at my shoulder, surprised that the movement doesn't cause me any pain, and watch the red, raw, oozing wound knit together like something you'd see in a sci-fi movie. The poison leaks out of the wound, a greenish-black liquid that seeps slowly from the jagged edges. For all the damage it did to me, there's surprisingly little of it, and the liquid turns clear, only slightly tinged with blood, before I know it.

Even my shirt knits back together, no more gaping hole where a jagged bug jaw speared straight through my flesh. 10 seconds after I ate the beacon, you would never know anything bad had ever happened.

Sitting up slowly, I push myself off the asphalt with my palms. Bending my knees, I lean forward, not quite trusting my body yet. It doesn't fail me, though. My muscles obey my orders, and I stand, looking around the world I've landed in.

I hear cheering all around me, and realize it's my friends and family

exalting in the fact that I'm okay, that I'm not going to die, at least not right now. I look up, toward the place where the sound seems to be coming from, and step back quickly as I watch the sky in front of me change from clouds to....a screen.

My iPad, the place where I came in, that's what I'm seeing! I'm looking out of that screen at my family. Thomas is waving to me like a lunatic, a gigantic grin on his face.

At a loss of what to do next, I wave back.

It's weird, but then, I knew it would be.

## Chapter 2

Thomas turns his face away from the screen, but I can hear that he's talking to both my parents and the group at Adrian's house. It doesn't take long. He makes a funny remark about one of the others eating the cockroach, then turns back around and reaches his hand toward me, no hesitation at all.

I thought things were already as weird as they could get, but I was wrong.

Watching him enter the game is beyond anything I'd ever imagined. He's still outside, standing in his room, but his fingers are here, in the sky, a few stumpy pixels jutting out from the end of his flesh and blood arm. They wiggle as they enter the game, a robotic motion that makes me look down at my own hands. I can bend them where my fingers meet my palm, but that's it. It feels normal in here but looks really odd when you see it change from human to....whatever we are now.

He keeps pushing through, his body shrinking as it comes. At one point, when he's in up to his shoulder, I wish I could take a screenshot. His arm and hand are maybe an inch long, maybe, and they meet up at his computer with his normal-sized body. It goes fast after that, as though he's bent so far over his desk that he doesn't even have to try to come in. Momentum is on his side, tumbling him gracelessly to the asphalt in front of me.

I run a few feet toward him, but by the time I get there, he's already up and running toward me. It's cheesy and were this another time and place I might try to play it cool. The fact of the matter is that I've been in this game by myself for too long, and I'm so glad he's here! He picks me up in a giant hug, squeezing the air from my lungs. After a few seconds, the air around me begins to flash a hazy red, and Thomas drops me like a hot potato.

"Whoa, what just happened?" he asks, looking around.

Above me, I can see the world laid out just like what I see on my screen at home. My life bar hovers above my head, but it's no longer full and green. Instead, it's gone a sickly brownish orange, filling up only a third of my bar.

"Huh," I tell him, "I guess we'll have to be a little more careful with the touching. Apparently, the game thinks that hug was something that could hurt another player."

Thomas nods, staring at my life bar, watching it fill again until it turns green and indicates I'm back to 100% health.

"Good to know, sorry about that," he says. He walks around me, looking me up and down, no doubt checking for injuries from the Bloxburg bug.

"It's all healed up," I tell him, moving my shoulder in a big rotation so



he can see that everything is well and truly fine. “I don’t even have a tear in my shirt anymore. It’s like magic!”

Thomas steps toward me, and I automatically step back, not wanting any more life taken off my bar. He holds his hands up, realizing what he was about to do, then says “Can I see your shoulder? I think it would make Mom and Dad feel better to know that it’s really okay, like if they could see for themselves.”

He turns toward where we can still see them staring at us through the screen. I wave to them, they wave back, or at least my dad does. My mom just looks at us, her mouth quivering like she’s barely holding it together.

I quickly pull my shirt to the side, stretching the neck hole as far as it’ll go so she can see the smooth, healthy skin, or what passes for skin in the game. She puts her hand to her mouth, nodding, and then bursts into tears.

I look at Thomas, unsure of what to do. He opens his mouth to say something but stops when both of my parents go stock-still before turning their heads toward Thomas’s bedroom door. My dad picks up my headset and puts it on his head. “There’s someone at the door. I think it might be the courier. We have to give him the computer and iPad, okay?”

We don’t respond, not verbally. It feels like a death sentence. The last link I have with my family is about to be taken from me. I don’t know why I thought they could just log in and watch our progress as we went, but I was hoping they could.

It’s unrealistic, but it would be reassuring to be able to look up at any given moment and see them there on the other side of the screen.

Thomas nods, and his motion prompts me to nod as well. I also throw in “two thumbs up” for good measure. Something inside of me tells me that this is the moment I’ve really got to sell it. My mom is staring at the screen with a fierce look in her eye like she’s on the verge of grabbing the computer and running off, anything to keep her kids where she can see them.

“Go ahead and get it,” I tell my dad. “The sooner they’ve got our electronics, the sooner we can get out of here and come back home.”

Dad nods, then takes off the headset and walks out of Thomas’s room, toward the front door. My mom sits down at the desk in front of the computer and looks at us. I make a broad gesture, placing my cupped hands by my ears, trying to indicate to her that she should put on the headset. It takes her a minute, but she gets the idea.

She smooths back her frazzled looking hair and slides the headset over her scalp, making a sort of headband that keeps the bedraggled strands out of her face. “Uh, hello?” she says, hesitantly. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes, we can hear you,” Thomas says, nodding and smiling. He looks at me, no doubt wondering why I asked her to put the headphones on.

“Mom,” I say, louder than I need to, “can we have Whataburger when

we get back home?”

She seems a little taken aback by my rather mundane request, but it has the desired effect.

“Yes, for sure,” she says, without hesitation. “We can have Whataburger all week long if you want.”

I grin, and she smiles back, not a big smile, but at least it seems a little less strained than it did a few minutes ago. A thought comes to me, I don’t think she can really follow our progress in the game, but I think she might be able to join the same game as us if she creates her own account.

“Mom, I think if you create your own character and send us a friend request, we might be able to see you in the game. I don’t know how much that will help, but if you want to play with us before we leave the game again, it might be fun.”

Her face brightens immediately, and I’m so glad I made the suggestion.

“Yes!,” she says, almost maniacally, “I’ll go do that now, and I’ll get your father to do it, too!”

She yanks off the headset then runs out of the room and comes back in with her phone. Quickly, she takes a picture of the computer and then shuts her phone down, sticking it in her pocket. She moves toward the desk and reaches out for the headset again, but stops mid-motion as my dad walks into the room behind her. She says something to him, but we can’t hear what it is. He motions to the computer, then motions to the door, the message is clear.

It’s time for them to give up our electronics.

My mom looks at the computer, at us on the screen and starts to shake her head back and forth. I can’t hear her, but I can read her lips.

“No, no, no, no.”

She keeps repeating it, even as my dad wraps his arms around her, hugging her tightly as she buries her head in his shoulder and shakes with the force of her tears. He walks her from the room like that, backing her slowly out of the doorway. They disappear from view.

No more than 5 seconds later, a man in slacks and a polo shirt walks into the room. He looks around, a bit unsure before his eyes land on the computer and iPad. Walking with purpose, he picks up the iPad and clicks a button on top to turn it off. Then he walks over to the computer and proceeds to close the lid.

He turns his head toward Thomas’s door, drawn by whatever he hears in the hallway. My mom comes running back into the room, my dad right on her heels. She runs toward the man in the slacks, arms out, ready to snatch the electronics away from him. My father grasps her by the shoulders, turning her toward him once again, holding her tightly, not letting her get away.

The laptop closes, and we’re once again all alone.

### Chapter 3

I guess “alone” isn’t the best word to use, but that’s what it feels like, so that’s how I’m going to describe it.

The world around us continues with its hustle and bustle. Players move from the building to the vans that sit waiting in the parking lot. They pull out of their neat little rows, make their deliveries, then pull back in, like a smile continually losing and gaining teeth.

“Jed,” I ask as we stand there waiting for the others, “is this what it’s like for you when you’re in the game?”

He looks at me, then looks around at the world, like he’s trying to see it all for the first time. He nods, uncertainly. “Yeah, sort of. I mean, I don’t normally have a health bar, and I’ve never been hurt by someone touching me, but other than that, it feels pretty much the same.”

I fish around for something else to say, but everything seems unimportant. We need to get on with this and to do that we need the others to get in the game.

“What do you think is taking them so long?” Jed and I speak at the same time, then we laugh.

“Jinx”, he says, beating me to the punch.

We don’t laugh very long, and I’m sure we’re both thinking the same thing. What if they don’t show up, what do we do then?

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“I’ll eat the bug. It’s the least I can do”, I tell Adrian and Carina. Part of me even means it! If there’s one thing I’m sure of, it’s that I’ve given them more than their fair share of a hard time these past few weeks. Based on my previous actions, one could say I’m even getting off easily. Still, the thought of putting that cockroach in my mouth is almost more than I can bear.

I hold it loosely in my hand, more than aware that the longer I wait, the more time I’ll have to build it up in my mind, and the worse it’ll be.

“Could I get a glass of water?” I ask in their general direction. Surely that will help. I can just take a sip of water, pop the bug in, then swallow.

\*It’s just a pill, It’s just a pill, It’s just a pill\*, I repeat this little mantra over and over in my head. Maybe if I say it enough, I’ll actually start to believe it.

Carina comes back into the room, handing me a glass of water. She looks at me, almost like she wants to say something, but really, what can she say? Both of the other beacons are gone at this point. This is the only one left. I guess I could just not go into the game, but as soon as I think it, I realize it’s not an option. None of these guys know The Company as well as I do, even if I didn’t realize I knew them at all until a few hours ago. Plain and simple, I’m their best chance at doing whatever it is we’ll need to do once we get back

out, and that means I absolutely have to go in.

Tipping the glass of water to my lips, I take a large swallow, letting the water stay in my mouth, filling it about half full. Tilting my head back so that my mouth is parallel to the floor, I drop the bug in and WILL MYSELF to swallow quickly.

Nothing happens.

I can't do it. There's no way I can do it. It doesn't take long for the bug to start floating on the surface of the water. The legs tickle the roof of my mouth, then the back of my throat. I can feel myself wanting to cough, to expel this horrible thing from my body, but I keep it under control. At the very least, if I can't swallow it now, I will spit it CALMLY into my hand and try it again in a moment.

That's what I need, a moment. I just need to prepare. I didn't have enough time to do it the first go round.

I tip my head again, preparing to spit the entire contents of my mouth back into the cup. The movement of the water apparently causes one of the bug's legs to fall off, and I can feel it scraping along the back of my tongue, lodging itself firmly and DEEPLY down my throat, jabbing and poking as I make minuscule movements in my attempts to swallow it without swallowing the whole bug.

It's a losing battle. My stomach has officially joined the fight, the thought of a bug leg in my throat is more than I can bear, and nausea comes ROARING up on me. I gulp a breath of air in through my nose and start to retch the whole thing back up when I feel a large arm come around my front, locking me in place. The sudden movement takes my mind off the bug, and I prepare to whirl around, ready to give whomever it is a sound piece of my mind.

Unfortunately for me, the person behind me is one step ahead because, in the next moment, my mouth and nose are covered by a palm, thumb, and forefinger. The arm holding me moves quickly, pressing against my forehead and tipping my head back. My body goes into survival mode, air becoming the THING I need more than anything else right now, so I involuntarily swallow the bug and gasp for breath as the hand comes away from my nose and mouth.

I turn quickly while also backing away from my assailant. Adrian stands there, looking not even a bit apologetic, a wide grin on his smug face. "My dad used to do that to us when we wouldn't take our pills," he says by way of explanation. This earns his father a glare from his mother, but I don't care, the bug is down, and I'm just about as humiliated as a person could ever be.

Brushing my hands down my pants, I nod once, stick my hand into the screen, and enter the game, not even waiting to see if Adrian or Carina follow.

I'm not sure what I was expecting, but I was hoping it would be a bit more graceful than what actually ended up happening. As soon as I pushed my hand through the screen, momentum took care of the rest. It was almost like the game wanted me there. I know it sounds crazy, but I swear, as soon as it had me, it grabbed and pulled.

I landed on my butt on the asphalt with Jed and Thomas looking down at me with a mixture of shock and awe.

"Wow, is that what it looked like when I came in?" Thomas asked Jed.

"Yeah, pretty much exactly!" Jed replied, looking from me to Thomas.

That actually makes me feel a little better, so I don't bother trying to brush off their help when they come over to me and offer me a hand up off the pavement.

"Uh, did the game seem to 'pull' you in, Thomas?" I want to know if it was just me or not.

"Yeah, it was weird, like once I got in, there was no going back."

I nod, agreeing with his assessment before turning in a circle to get a look at the world. I heard Jed describing how it looked, and I have to agree. It's just like this when I enter the game, minus the health bar. Speaking of, mine is still recovering from my grand entrance. It's green, but just barely, more of a yellow-green, and only about 2/3rds of the way full.

"Huh," Thomas says, eyeing my bar, "I guess mine must have done that as well, but I didn't notice because I was too busy making sure my hug didn't kill Jed."

He nods, indicating that I should turn around and look at what's happening behind me.

Adrian and Carina are on the other side of the screen. They're talking about who will go into the game next. I snort, I mean come on, it's going to be Carina. Adrian is nothing if not Mr. Chivalry, and there's no way he'd go in before his sister.

"How can we hear them?" I cast a questioning glance around the group. "We're not wearing headsets, so how can we hear what's going on out there?"

"I'm not sure," Jed replies, "but as long as we were all in the same Discord channel, I was always able to hear you guys in the game."

Ah, okay. I'm assuming someone took care of that before we came in. No doubt it was Thomas or Adrian. Jed was too sick, and Carina just wouldn't think of something like that, or at least I don't believe she would.

"I handled it," Thomas says, nodding at me as though answering my unspoken question.

Back in the living room, the obvious decision has been made, and we watch the kids hug their parents. It's brief though, there's a lot less angst than what Jed and Thomas had to deal with, and I imagine it's because Adrian and Carina are older. I'm not sure, but I am glad for it, emotional baggage has

never been my strong suit.

We're all ready when Carina comes through, and it happens just as fast as it did with me. Her fingers break the screen barrier, and then she's falling rapidly into the world, landing beside us on the ground. She bounces up, completely unphased, and runs toward Jed to hug him.

"No! No, wait! Don't hug me!" he yells as he runs away from her.

It's comical, really. She looks like she's been sucker-punched. Jed makes sure she's no longer in pursuit before stopping himself and explaining to her the "no touching" rule of the game.

"I don't know if it's all touching, but let's just assume it is," he says, and she nods her understand.

"Good idea," she agrees, quickly. "Sorry, Jed, I didn't mean to scare you!" It literally looks like it's killing her not to be able to hug him, though.

Girls....

We pull our attention back to the scene happening at Adrian's house. There are some quick words about the logistics of us getting back out, then Adrian is beside me on the asphalt, and the laptop view closes as Andrew shuts it down and takes it away.

Speaking of Adrian and asphalt, I'm happy to tell you that he came in no more gracefully than the rest of us, and that really makes me smile. I'm about to point it out to him, just to rub it in a bit, when, out of nowhere, Jed announces "I don't feel right...." and takes off in the direction of the Pizza Place.

## Chapter 4

“Jed, wait up!” Adrian calls after my brother as Jed runs full-tilt toward the double glass doors that house the place where people work in the game.

He doesn’t stop. He doesn’t even give any indication that he’s heard us yelling for him. I’m ready to suggest that we follow him when Carina turns on her heels, says “Okay, well I have to make \$50 to pay my electric bill,” and runs off after Jed.

I look at Adrian. He’s gawping back at me like everyone’s just gone insane. We both look at Dirk, but he’s not paying any attention to us. Instead, he’s also booking it toward the building, muttering something about “never wanting to be a slacking freeloader who expects other people to support them.”

“What just happened?” I look to Adrian for answers. “What is going on?”

“Dude,” he responds, “I have no....”

And then he’s gone as well.

“Come on, Thomas! It’s time to work, quit screwing around!” He yells this at me as he walks backward in the direction everyone else went, then he turns on his heels and runs into the building.

The entire world has gone crazy! But you know what?? If I don’t get my job done, I’m going to get evicted. Heck, I haven’t even bought groceries for the week, how am I supposed to do that with just \$5.50 in my savings account. What time is it? I was supposed to start my shift a half hour ago. The boss is going to be so mad!

It’s my day to make pizzas, so I walk into the building, walk through the pass-through in the counter and make my way back to the kitchen. Carina smiles at me from her place at the till where she’s taking customer orders and passing them back to the guys in the kitchen.

“Hey **TheBestThomas**, long time no see! You’re late, I think.” she chirps in my direction. She’s always so happy. It’s just such a pleasure to work with her I tell ya!

“Awww, **MyCarina**, it’s nice to be missed! Yeah, I have no idea what happened, sorry about that! I’m headed back there right now though, and I’ll get those orders up!”

In the back of my head, I know this is weird. I know I’m talking to her like we’re players in the game instead of friends and fellow Jumpers, but I can’t control it! If I don’t get back in that kitchen right now, I might die. I’m not even kidding. I really do think I’ll start losing health off my bar if I don’t play this game!

“**MyNameIsJed**, are you making the dough or putting on the toppings and boxing them up?” I wash my hands and take my place in the assembly

line while I wait for his answer.

“I’m topping and boxing, and there are like a dozen orders waiting for the dough, so come on!” He gives me an exasperated look and points toward the backup of pizzas waiting to be made.

Hustling to the walk-in freezer, I remove a tray of pizza dough. They’re all pre-made balls, about the size of softballs, greased and lined up in neat 4 x 4 rows on the biggest baking pan you’ve ever seen. I carry it over to another machine that looks like something you’d get in a child’s PlayDoh factory. Placing one of the dough balls at the mouth of the machine, I flip a switch to turn it on and push the dough into the slit. The machine pulls it the rest of the way in and feeds it through a series of plates that ultimately bring out a perfectly flat and round pizza dough on the other end.

The whole thing takes less than 10 seconds. That’s science for ya!

I put each flattened pizza dough on a round pizza tray and slide it down the counter to Jed, who is standing in front of a bench containing small metal boxes of ingredients. He looks above his head where the orders are starting to stack up. Each order tells him what is supposed to go on the pizza, how long ago it was ordered, and how much time he has to fill the order before he no longer gets paid for it. There are several orders in the red, indicating that he needs to make those first if he wants to get a good tip.

Jed gets to work, topping the pizza and then shoving the entire thing into a long oven that has its own track to move the pizza down through the heating elements until it comes out on the other side, perfectly cooked.

Once he has a few cooking, he heads to the end of the oven, removes the cooked pizzas and slides them into boxes, which he puts on an eye-level counter that Carina can see. She grabs each box and hands it either to Adrian or Dirk. Dirk gets it if the customers are waiting at a table, Adrian gets it if the pizza needs to be delivered to a house in town. Both are busy as can be, and I can only assume their money ticker is clicking away, just like mine is. Like Carina, I also have a \$50 electric bill due, and my shift here won’t be over until that money is made.

Something happens once that money IS made, though. First off, I see an indicator letting me know I can now go pay my bill, and that I need to go to my mailbox to do that. Second, I see another bill come up, this one is my water bill, and it’s only \$25. Finally, I see a button on the screen letting me know my break will come up in 8 minutes.

The most important thing that happens is that I feel somewhat normal again. There is still a driving force to keep on working, but it doesn’t seem to take up my entire brain.

“Guys, what just happened?” I ask over the Discord channel, which thankfully seems to be working fine, even though none of us are outside the



game, and none of us actually have a computer open and logged into Discord. I'm not going to think too hard on that, nothing I can do about it anyway.

Carina is the first to respond, "I have no idea, but whatever it was, I didn't like it!"

"Carina, did you reach your \$50 goal?" None of the others are responding, and I wonder if it's because their compulsions won't let up before they make that initial money.

I'm proven right a second later when Jed's voice comes over the airwaves, "Thomas, how did you make your money faster? I started work before you!"

He sounds totally affronted, and that makes me laugh.

"I'm not really sure why," I tell him, "but I did have like \$5.00 in my account when I logged in, so maybe that's it?"

"Yeah, that makes sense, I guess," he replies, sounding a little appeased.

"Dirk, Adrian, are you guys alright?" They still haven't responded, but waiters don't make as much as kitchen staff unless they're getting good tips, and the same goes for delivery drivers.

We keep working, waiting for those two to let us know how things are going. I can see Dirk when I move around the kitchen. He's steadily delivering pizzas to the tables, refilling drinks, clearing trash, etc.

I only see Adrian twice more, and both times he heads toward a van with his arms full of pizza boxes in those bags that keep everything hot.

"Oh my gosh, talk about some tight-wad customers today!" Dirk finally yells over our channel. "These people wouldn't know a tip if it reached up and knocked them off their chair. Do they not understand how tipping works? It's TWENTY PERCENT people, TWENTY PERCENT! And don't you dare stiff me, cause I'm doing a fantastic job! I'm the best waiter you've ever had in your WHOLE LIFE!"

"Man, he's really going off," Jed says, "I hope he's not saying that to them...."

Knowing Dirk, he's probably saying it to them.

"I'm not one to normally agree with Dirk," Adrian chimes in, "but seriously, half the houses I delivered to tonight gave me a DOLLAR, I mean....what is this 1962? A dollar?!?!"

Through the little open area that separates the kitchen and front counter, I see Adrian walk in the door, frustration evident on his face. He sets the warming bags on the counter, and Carina lines up a few more for him to take when two guys come in from the back office.

A notification pops up on my screen, and based on the "Yes", "Awesome", "OMG Finally", and "They're late" comments from my friends, I'm assuming they all got the same notification on their screen.

Break time, please be back in 10 minutes.

## Chapter 5

“What do we do?” Carina looks around, nervously. “Do we go sit down, grab a soda or something? Can we leave?”

Dirk is the first to answer, testy as always. “Where would we go if we left? It’s not like we have any idea how long it’s going to take Andrew to get back to The Company, so being here is as good as being anywhere, I guess.”

He looks around, gesturing to the piping hot pizza being enjoyed by a group of players at the table next to us. “At least here we have food,” he says, “and drinks.” He points again, this time toward the soda fountain situated near the glass containers of flaked peppers, parmesan cheese, and dipping sauces.

“He’s got a point,” Jed says, nodding his head as he pulls a chair away from the table so he can sit down. “We’re players now, if we don’t eat, we’re definitely going to be feeling it. And if we don’t eat for long enough, we’ll die.”

We’ve all taken a seat by now, the cacophony of chairs scraping against tile melts effortlessly into the chatter of customers and the clang of pots and pans in the kitchen.

As Jed says these last words, we all turn and look at one another, the unasked question hanging in the air.

“What happens if we die?” Carina breaks the silence. “I know Andrew said we’d respawn, but how do we know? And if we do respawn, will we all be in the same place still, or will we start in a new area? What if we die when we’re supposed to be leaving the game, and we can’t find our way out?”

I’d never thought of half those questions, but now I’m feeling a little concerned. After all, Jed and I went into the game on our own devices, but Adrian, Dirk, and Carina all went in on Adrian’s computer. I turn the problem over in my head for a minute and come up with what I think is the right answer.

“I think,” I tell the group, “that it won’t matter where you are. As long as Andrew opens the device you came in on, you’ll see the screen, and you’ll be able to leave once he’s made that possible.”

I look around, seeing if everyone agrees with me. They all look uncertain, but based on their nods, I feel like it’s a pretty solid theory, and definitely not something any of us need to be concerned with.

“All we need to do is work here and stay alive until we see an opening. Let’s not freak out about anything else. We’ll just concentrate on doing our jobs. It’s what the game wants us to do anyway, so we may as well roll with it,” I finish.

“Speaking of doing what the game wants us to do,” Adrian points to the place on the screen where his money would normally add up if he were working, “was it just me or could you guys not communicate normally until

you'd made that \$50?"

"I think it was all of us," I reply, remembering how I couldn't even chat with them over Discord without saying their gamertag. I'd be alright if that never happened again, but I feel like it might be a recurring thing if we don't stay on top of the bills.

"Okay, well let's get some food and drinks," Adrian says, glancing above our heads at the glowing green bars. "None of us are too low, but we'd do well to keep them topped up as much as we can, just in case."

We all push our chairs away from the table and are in various stages of standing when we hear a couple of voices headed in our direction.

"No need to get up guys, we brought you some food!"

Two completely generic players are approaching our table. Both are dressed in managerial garb, black slacks, white long-sleeved shirt, and black tie. They've each got a plastic tray of food and drinks in their arms, and they're headed for our table.

Out of habit, we all sort of backup and scooch in to make room as they set the trays down and unload the food, placing a slice of pizza and a soda in front of each of us.

"Uh, thanks?" I say, unsure of what to make of this. I've played this game a long time, and I've never heard of managers bringing food out to staffers, never. Maybe these guys are just super nice, but it feels a little weird.

I glance at the others in my group, trying not to be obvious about it. Adrian catches my eye and shakes his head slightly in a negative gesture. Carina is staring at the guys like they've grown two heads. Dirk looks at me and makes a point of slightly pushing his food and drink away from him.

Jed looks like he's about to dig in, so I elbow him in the side, causing him to squawk. "What was that for?!"

"Oh, man, sorry!" I tell him, "I dropped my fork, I was trying to grab it."

He leans down, looking under the table, so I drop my head as well and take the time to whisper "don't eat the food" in his ear. He stiffens a bit and comes up to a sitting position much more slowly, but it's enough for me to know that he understands.

"You guys worked so hard today, and we just wanted to say thanks," the first guy says. His gamer-tag is "**JohnSmith112**". Really, John Smith, generic much?

"Yeah! You really...uh...cranked out those pizzas, well done," guy number two chimes in. His gamer-tag is just as lame and just as generic, "**MikeSmith778**".

I point above their heads at their tags, "So, you guys are brothers?"

They look at me like they don't understand, then glance at each other. It's a glance that tells me this is way more than a social visit. It's a glance that

says “We'd better get our story straight.”

“Oh, yeah,” the first guy says at the same time the second guy says “Oh, no, that’s just a coincidence.”

They look at each other again, and guy number one tries to cover the error. “I mean, we’re brothers, step-brothers though, not like both parents are the same and stuff.”

There’s an awkward silence. None of us know what to say, or what these guys want from us, but I know I’m not eating the food they just gave me. Only, I have no idea how to do that without making it terribly obvious.

A light flashes in front of me on the screen letting me know that my break time is up in 3 minutes. I look at the others, knowing they must have all just seen the same notification.

Okay, 3 minutes and we can get back to our work. Surely we can bluff our way through 180 seconds of whatever this is.

John Smith picks up his slice of pizza, taking a bite. “Man, this is really good, you guys dig in! I’m sure you don’t have much time left on your breaks.” He looks pointedly at the food in front of us.

“Yeah, get it while it’s hot!” Mike Smith says, just as enthusiastically.

Carina ends up saving us, for the moment. “Thanks so much, guys, we can’t wait, we were starving! I need to get some napkins though, and Adrian never eats pizza without parmesan, so let me just go grab those and I’ll be right back.”

“Oh, no, no, let me get that,” Mike Smith says, jumping up from the table and hustling toward the condiment counter.

He’s back in no time, and we’re still left with 2 minutes and 45 seconds before our break.

I’m just about to pick up my pizza and “accidentally” drop it on the ground when a customer near the soda fountain saves the day. Apparently, she’s having trouble getting the soda flow to stop because she’s got a cup under the nozzle and it’s spilling over. She’s pressing at the buttons, trying to make it quit, but it seems to somehow just be making things worse. In no time at all, she’s got all of the soda streams going, no cups under them, and the ice maker churning out enough ice to chill the arctic.

Astonishingly, “Mike” and “John” continue to sit at the table, staring between us and the food they brought like we’re going to calmly sit and eat while that poor woman has fast food Armageddon happening.

“I’ll just go and help her real quick,” Carina says, getting up out of her chair.

“Nah, it’s okay, we’ll take care of it,” John and Mike say in unison. “You guys stay here and finish that food. We can’t have you going hungry!” They nod and smile, standing by the table for a few seconds, no doubt waiting to see if we’ll just go ahead and eat already.

We don't.

The entire table, heck, the whole restaurant has made a point of turning to watch the absolute train wreck going on at the soda fountain. We do the same.

Mike and John leave us and start messing with the machine, trying to get it to turn off. The woman apologizes profusely, holding her hands up in an "I didn't mean to do this!" gesture, while slowly backing away from the scene. She gets about 15 feet from them, and then quickly turns on her heels, making a bee-line for our table.

She doesn't stop near us, not exactly, but she comes close, close enough for us to hear her, crystal clear when she says "Andrew wants you to follow me out. Do it now, or you're never getting away."

## Chapter 6

She doesn't wait for us to respond, not that we'd know what to say. Her message has been delivered, and apparently, anything else is up to us.

We look at each other across the table, but no one makes any move to get up.

"You did all just hear her, right?" Carina asks us in a harsh whisper. "I mean, I didn't just imagine that?"

"So what do we do?" Jed asks, looking over my shoulder at the two guys still fiddling with the soda fountain.

I turn my head slightly, wanting to see how much progress they've made, trying to gauge how much time we have before they come back.

Not much, as it turns out. Actually, when I glance at them, I see that they're not looking at the soda fountain at all anymore. Rather, their eyes alternate between our group at the table and the woman beating a hasty retreat from the restaurant. One of them leans toward the other, saying something that none of us can hear, but it's clear by the look on his face that they're getting ready to abandon their "let's be friends" plan.

Whatever it is they're trying to accomplish, that woman wasn't supposed to be a part of it.

"I think we need to go," I tell the group. "Something's going on, I don't know what it is, but I don't like it."

Adrian nods, and somehow that's all it takes to get the whole group moving. We stand almost as one, pushing our chairs away from the table and sliding out of our seats. The food Mike and John brought us sits untouched.

I suppose our plan was just to get up and leave, as any paying customer would do, but of course, that's not how things go down. As soon as it becomes clear that we're headed toward the door instead of back to the kitchen and our jobs, Mike and John head our way, cutting us off halfway between our table and the entry.

"Hey, guys, where ya going?" Mike asks, not nearly as nonchalant as he was a few minutes ago. "Are you going to finish your shifts?"

I look at the numbers flashing on my screen, 2 minutes to go until my shift officially starts again. I'm not actually sure I'll be able to avoid the compulsion once that timer is up, so whatever we're going to do, we need to do it quickly.

"Yeah, we sure are!" I tell him, brightly. "We just thought we'd go out and get some fresh air, walk around a bit, stretch our legs before we get back to the grind."

The others nod their agreement, beginning to edge around the two managers, intent on reaching the doorway.

"You didn't eat your food though, did you?" John asks, peering over

my shoulder toward the table that's clearly got as much food on it as it did when he left.

"Nah, we weren't super hungry, maybe we'll grab a bite after the next break, thanks though," Adrian says, placing his hand on Carina's wrist and pulling her behind him to the doors. Dirk, Jed, and I follow behind them, safety in numbers and all that. I figure there's not much these guys can do if we all decide to leave.

It doesn't take more than a second for me to realize I figured wrong.

Mike steps in front of Adrian, once again placing his body between us and the door. "Well, see, we really need you to stay. It's, uh...a new company policy that all employees have some type of refreshment before they go back on the clock, so make our jobs a little easier, okay?" He chuckles when he says this, like we're all buddies in on some big joke.

Unfortunately for him, none of us are in a joking mood, and Adrian is definitely not happy with this guy standing in his path, again.

"No," Adrian says, "I think we're just going to go outside like we said we were going to. We don't want your food, we don't want your drinks, and," he pauses here for a second, making sure to catch both Mike and John's eyes, "YOU don't want to keep standing in our way."

Well, I guess he told them.

Dirk chokes on a cough, no doubt trying to smother a laugh. I get it, it's sort of funny, but it's also not, so I shoot him a glare, which he ignores completely, smiling back at me like we're all having the time of our lives.

Mike's face turns a bright shade of red, anger and embarrassment vying for first place. He doesn't stand aside though, and he doesn't make any move to get out of the way at all. Instead, he looks over us at John.

"Go ahead then," he says, and we all turn toward John, trying to figure out what in the heck is going on.

John walks back toward our table, picking up one of the giant cups of soda they brought to us earlier. He runs his fingers around the lip of the cup, underneath the plastic lid, prying it up from its seat and exposing the contents inside.

My internal alarms are going nuts. I have NO idea what's going on here, but I know it's not good and I know we've got to get out of here now! I look around, trying to figure out what to do, where we can go that will get us out of range of that soda. There is no doubt in my mind that he's about to toss it all over us, and while I have no idea why he'd do such a thing, I'm starting to form a few theories, none of them good.

I get an opening a moment later, no thanks to anything I've done. A chair comes flying across my line of vision, sailing past my face and smacking Mike in the head dead on. I look around to see who threw it, and of course, it's my little brother! He doesn't seem at all sorry as he walks



purposely toward another chair, no doubt getting ready to toss that one as well.

It's like something out of western! One minute we're all standing there in shock, the next minute people are screaming, furniture is being upended all over the place, and Mike is on the floor in a heap, his health bar gone from green, to red, to empty. He bursts into sections, his arms and legs popping off his torso before blinking and disappearing altogether.

"Now you've done it," John yells from behind us! His voice is shrill, taking on an edge of panic as he flips the plastic lid from the cup and draws his hand back, getting ready to toss the contents in our direction.

"Get down!" Adrian yells, reaching out and dragging Carina with him as he ducks behind a table. I follow suit, snagging Jed's shirt in one hand and Dirk's pant leg in the other as I dart under a table that hasn't yet been turned on its side.

Soda EXPLODES all over the place. It drips off the table edges in torrents, getting all over the floor, and all over our shoes and clothes. John is headed back to the table, intent on grabbing another drink and repeating his effort. I'm not sure what the goal is, but since he brought us food and drinks, I'm guessing he wants us to ingest this stuff, so I yell to the group "Don't get it in your mouth! Whatever you do, do not get it in your mouth!"

Adrian looks over at us, as though coming to his own realizations, then he looks at Carina. She's sitting on the floor beside him. Her face is scrunched, eyes closed, mouth compressed in a tight line. There is soda splashed all over her skin, and it's obvious she's doing her best not to get any of it in her mouth. Adrian leaps toward the door, toward the bins that people toss their trash in on the way out, and toward the napkin holder that sits on top of those bins, perfect for last minute messes.

He grabs the entire napkin holder, rips the top off and shoves a wad of napkins into Carina's hands as he propels her out the door of the restaurant. I look at Jed and Dirk, they're both gaping at John, but a quick glance tells me their faces are free of soda, so I pull at them once again, and we all run pell-mell toward the exit.

John is screaming behind us, "I'll get you! It doesn't matter. I'll get you!" He grunts, and a second later all three of us are hit in the back with an ice-cold soda.

We don't stop, more now than ever, we know we've got to get the heck out of dodge. Carina is in front of us, stumbling along as she scrubs at her face with the napkins Adrian gave her. He's pulling her by the arm, running off toward a cluster of trees that opens into a field behind one of the neighborhoods. It's not much cover, but it's the most we can ask for right now.

He pulls Carina to a stop, hunching down beside her. "Let me see, let

me see,” he says, smacking her hands away from her face as she continues to scrub. “You got all of it, you got it, you’re okay,” he tells her, pulling her into a hug as he passes the used wad of napkins in our direction.

“Use what’s left, get it off your hands. Make sure you’ve removed it from any place on your body that could potentially touch your mouth.”

I hand the napkins to Jed and Dirk. They wipe at their hands, which are indeed soaked with soda. I examine my own hands and then feel my face. Aside from my shoes, sleeves and knees, I seem to be free from soda residue. It’s not ideal, but I’m also not in any danger of accidentally drinking it.

Dirk and Jed clean up as best they can, tossing the napkins to the side. I look around our hiding place, a little copse of trees that opens into a wide open space. Glancing behind me, I can see that Mike has respawned and that he and John are in hot pursuit.

We are hiding, but there are only a few places we could have gone, and it won’t be long before they find us. Based on the fact that both are carrying two large sodas, I’m guessing their plan is still to douse us and hope for the best.

“What do we do? Where are we supposed to go?”

“Well,” Dirk says, casually, “I’m no genius, but I feel like talking to that woman might be a good idea.”

We all turn, looking in the direction he’s facing, and there she is, the woman from the restaurant. She’s standing at the corner of the building we just left, looking anxious and gesturing for us to hurry up and get to where she is.

## Chapter 7

"If she doesn't knock it off, those guys are about to know exactly where we are," Adrian says, never taking his eyes off the woman across the street.

She's half-hidden from view, sort of standing behind the building, but she keeps poking her head around the side and waving her hands at us, frantic gestures that tell us to hurry up and get over there.

"Should we go? How do we know if we can trust her?" I ask. Just because she kept us from eating the food Mike and John brought to us doesn't necessarily mean she's on our side.

"What choice do we have?" Jed asks. "Clearly, The Company knows we're here, so the chances of us being able to hide until Andrew gets back to the campus with our computers is pretty slim." He nods in the direction of the building, "She said his name, guys. She knows who Andrew is. It's not much, but it's the best we've got."

He's right. We definitely can't stay here. We're barely hidden, and those two managers are making their way to us, slowly scanning up and down the street, but still coming in our general direction.

"How are we ever going to get there?" Carina asks. "It's a street. There's no cover. The second we leave these trees, they're going to see us."

"What we need is a diversion." I look around, searching for anything at all that might make these guys walk in the other direction, but there's nothing. It's broad daylight. It's not like we can toss a rock down an alley and get them to go investigate.

The others nod their agreement and silence falls over our small group. We're all grasping at straws, thinking of any way we can get those guys off our tail.

"How long is left on all of your breaks?" Dirk asks, looking at each of us.

"What does that have to do with the price of tea in China?" Jed retorts, getting frustrated.

"Well, nothing at all to do with China," Dirk says, "but, if we're all still on break, that means we can all technically still be customers, and if we're customers, that means we can call for a manager."

It's true. Since the game revolves around the food service industry, customers are absolutely allowed to call a manager if they aren't getting good service, if the food comes out cold, if their order is incorrect, etc. Basically, anything you'd call a manager for in real life, you can call a manager for in the game as well.

"So," Carina replies, "if we page a manager right now, those two will be forced back to the restaurant, and we can get to the woman behind the

building. Dirk, you're a genius!" She pats him on the back, grinning.

It is a great idea, and we all tell him so. Spoiled pain in the butt or not, he does have the ideas. If only he'd ALWAYS use his powers for good!

"Wait, how do we know they'll respond to it?" Adrian asks. "Clearly, you can avoid the compulsion, else that woman wouldn't be able to hang out and wait for us."

"What if she's on a break as well?" Carina says. "What if that's the reason she needs us to get to her? It makes sense! If she only has a limited amount of time to avoid the compulsion herself, then she'd definitely be in a hurry."

"We've got nothing to lose. We can't stay here for more than another 60 seconds. That's all I've got left on my break. After that, I'm going to have to go back to the Pizza Place. I'm not sure those guys can do anything to us if we don't eat that food, but I don't want to chance it, so I say we call for a manager. I don't see any other way." I look around the group, wanting to know if anyone has any objections. No one says anything, so I reach my hand up in front of my face and push my finger into the air, clicking on the glowing, blue "Request Managerial Assistance" button.

The effect is instantaneous. One second the guys are zig-zagging in our direction, the next second they stop dead in their tracks, a look of frustration crossing both of their faces. The button doesn't tell them who made the call, and it only requires they head back into the building to a designated blue circle on the floor. They have to stand in that circle, giving the customer a chance to interact with them once they get there.

As one, they turn back toward the building, looking back over their shoulders a few times, but never stopping. The compulsion must be too strong for them to overcome.

Once they're back in the building, we waste no time jumping up from our hiding spot. Our feet slap the pavement as we duck low and dart across the street. We don't walk super close to the building, but it's close enough that when I pass the mega huge front windows, I see Mike and John watching us.

"They've seen us," Jed says, panting for breath as he runs, "they're going to come after us the second that managerial requirement is met."

The managers have to stand in that circle for 15 seconds. If a customer is there, they have to stay until the problem is resolved. Since we're the ones who pushed the call button, we know there won't be a customer there. That means once that time is up, they're going to be out here with us, no doubt trying to throw soda at us again.

We round the building, almost running headlong into the woman we've been trying to reach.

"Come, quickly," she says, tugging at my sleeve as she yanks me in the

direction of the dumpster in the back corner of the lot.

I follow along, looking behind me to make sure the others have come as well. They're right on my heels.

The clock in front of me ticks down, the numbers turning from black to red as the 30-second mark comes and goes, indicating that I need to get back to work soon. I know from experience that the red numbers will start to flash at 15 seconds and that if I'm not back at my station when the numbers hit zero, my pay will start getting docked, sending me into a deficit if I'm starting with no money.

That's not the part I'm worried about, though. I'm concerned about being able to stay out here when the seconds hit zero. If I can't control it, I know I'll be back in that building, and things won't turn out well.

What all of that means is that she has about 20 seconds to come up with a great plan, or we're all going to be in a heap of trouble.

Someone behind me tugs at the back of my shirt, causing me to stop mid-stride. The woman turns to glance at me, a questioning look on her face. She stops suddenly when she looks over my shoulder. Her face goes as white as a sheet, and I wonder if the managers are back out here now, running after us. When I turn though, it's just Dirk. He's paying no attention to her at all.

"Thomas, are you sure this is a good idea?" He's nervous, sounding totally unlike his "devil-may-care" normal self. "What if she just knows Andrew because she's working with The Company? What if she's in on it with them and this is all a setup?"

I'm about to tell him that we just went through all of this, but the woman steps around me, coming to stand next to him.

"I'll answer your questions in a few minutes, but right now we have to get out of here. I don't know about you guys, but my time is almost up. I cannot withstand the compulsion anymore than you can, so if we're not out of here in," she looks up, and I'm sure she's checking her on-screen clock, "ten seconds, we won't have another chance. The Company knows you're in this world, and if you think for one minute that they're going to let you get out of here so you can shut down their operations, you've got another thing coming."

I look at Dirk, silently asking if he's ready to do this or if he wants to risk it back inside. He looks from her to me, then nods slightly and steps back among the rest of the group.

The woman takes our silence for agreement and changes her grip from my sleeve to my hand, so we're touching skin to skin. Looking past me, she addresses the group, "Hold hands; we've all got to be touching if this is going to work."

Jed pushes himself forward, past Dirk, reaching out to grip my fingers tightly in his own. Dirk looks down at him, a small smile on his face, some

odd cross between understanding and jealousy. I forget that he didn't grow up with the same type of bond Jed and I share. He's a 5th wheel here, and that makes me respect him a bit more. He's not here for anyone else's sake. His only goal is to help us, even though we don't mean any more to him than a stranger on the street.

I nod at Jed and look back at Dirk. Jed takes my meaning, reaching behind him and grasping Dirk's hand tightly in his own. Jed pulls him alongside the two of us, and Adrian walks up, holding the woman's other hand as Carina clings to his free arm.

"Okay," I say, looking toward the woman as she walks a few more feet to the dumpster sitting alone in the very back corner of the lot, "what do we do now?"

"You! Stop! Stop now!" The managers come running around the side of the building, sprinting toward our location. I look at the woman trying to see if she's doing anything useful that will get us out of here in the next 5 seconds.

She's not talking. Instead, she's kicking at various panels on the dumpster, a seemingly random act that looks more like she's irritated at the situation than anything else.

"What are you doing?" I whisper urgently in her direction, trying to get an answer. She doesn't respond, but she does smile broadly as her foot connects with the right place and the front of the dumpster tilts forward, opening with a BANG onto the asphalt. Garbage bags, rotten pizza, and globs of sticky soda syrup tumble to the ground at our feet.

"Jump!" She yells at us as she tromps over the piles of trash. "Into the dumpster, now!"

She surges forward, and I hold on even tighter to her hand, not wanting to lose her at the last second. I feel Jed clamp down harder on my other hand and yell back to the group "Hold on tight!"

Except for Carina, none of us hesitate. It might be a disgusting mess, but if this lady can get us out of the world, it's a small price to pay. In her defense, Carina doesn't hesitate much. It's more of a girly squeal as she squeezes her eyes shut and plows into the funky mound of trash.

My foot lands in something thick and wet, liquid splashes up my leg, but I keep going, digging deep for resolve as I push my other leg forward. Instead of encountering the slick slide of black garbage bags, my foot meets open air. I have a moment of panic and try to reel backward, but I'm pushed forward by the group behind me, and my path is set. One after another, in a blind human chain, we step into nothingness before falling headlong into the black.

## Chapter 8

I brace myself, squeezing my eyes shut and doing my best not to laugh hysterically as I remember Carina doing the same thing not ten seconds ago. Man, I'm glad I didn't make fun of her....out loud.

In my panic, I forget to think about holding hands, and I realize with a start that both of mine are empty, my brother nowhere in sight. I look around, trying to find the rest of the group, and that's when I realize that I'm not actually falling at all. Instead, I'm in a crouched position, hunched on the ground like the opening scene of "Terminator".

Slowly, I stand, patting my body to make sure every part of me is intact. Nothing hurts, nothing feels even a little weird. If it weren't for the fact that I was entirely surrounded by blackness, I might actually be relieved.

"Can you guys hear me?"

I nearly jump out of my skin when I hear a voice. It's the woman, and I realize I still don't know her name. Turning in slow circles, I reach my out, splaying my fingertips as I try to pinpoint the source, but I touch nothing. Her voice seems to be all around me, exactly as though I'm hearing things through headphones.

"I can hear you," Adrian replies, "I can't see any of you though. Are we all here?"

His question is met with a chorus of affirmative replies as we sound off one-by-one, letting everyone know we've made it to wherever this is. I am torn between wanting to walk around to try and find my friends and worrying that if I do walk around, I'll end up lost. I settle for standing still until she tells me to do otherwise.

"Where are we?" Dirk's voice is surprisingly close to me, he must be moving around.

"We're in Jailbreak," the woman says, "in a loading screen. It'll be a minute or so before the game loads up so let me explain a few things to you guys before we have to do this all over again."

"Do what all over again?" Carina's voice is thready, like she's been screaming, and I wonder if she yelled out when she fell through the dumpster. Clearly, she hasn't recovered from the last thing we did, and I don't blame her one bit.

"I suppose that's as good a place to start as any," the woman replies. "Let's begin with the most important part. The Company knows you're in the game."

Her statement is met with various cries of outrage, but she shushes us and keeps going.

"Once they realized Dirk was a Jumper, once he removed the beacon from Soro's, they added an obscure but high-tech bit of snoop software to his

character. From then on out, anytime he entered Roblox, they got a notification. They know where he is, they know how long he's been there, and since you are all currently residing in a Discord channel together, they also know who he's with," she finishes.

"And since those two managers just saw us at the Pizza Place, they know we're all together anyway," Carina adds.

"Yes, that too," the woman agrees, "and you've brought me to my next point. You were very smart not to eat or drink anything they'd given you. I'm not sure why you decided not to do it, but I am glad for your instincts. Had you ingested any of that food or drink, you'd be trapped here, in Roblox, permanently."

"What? How is that even possible?" I can't believe that sort of technology exists.

"It makes sense," Dirk says. "I mean, if The Company can make a beacon that influences kids enough to play a certain game, they can certainly turn in-game items into little bits of code that alter your player's abilities."

"That's exactly right," the woman agrees. "If you weren't physically in the game, it would just prevent you from logging out. You'd think it was a glitch. But, you are here now, all of you, and if you ate it, you'd be here until someone provided you with the code that would allow you to move freely among the game again."

"How do you know all of this?" Adrian sounds close as well, and that makes me feel a bit more relaxed, knowing we're all still in a group.

"I know because that's why I'm in here," she tells us. "Andrew and I helped you get off The Company campus all those years ago. Only we didn't know about the coding that could keep me here. He and I agreed not to speak once we'd pushed you through. It was too risky. We didn't want to take the chance that The Company would figure out we were in it together."

"Unfortunately, they figured out my part of things when I left and didn't come back. It didn't take them long to send their lackeys after me. Eventually, I got mixed up with the wrong people, people who were working with The Company and knew what I'd done. One day, my health bar got too low, I accepted some food, and that's all she wrote."

"So you can't leave?" I'm horrified for her. If she's been in here since she helped us escape, that means she's been in this game for more than ten years!

"No, I can't. I probably could have found a way at some point, but by the time The Company stopped chasing me, I'd been in here for so many years that I didn't feel comfortable trying to get ahold of anyone on the inside. Even if I could get ahold of them, I had no way to know if I could trust them. After all, many of the scientists I worked with ended up staying to look after their kids, and more than a few would have done whatever they needed to do



to keep those kids safe.”

“But, we’re here now, we can help you,” Carina says. “We know Andrew and Sarah. They can get the code to help you come back out of the game, right?”

She doesn’t answer the question; instead, she brings our attention to the world around us growing ever brighter.

“The game is almost done loading, so I need you to listen to me. You can only stay for a few hours in each spot. It does take time for The Company to get Jumpers in here once you enter a game, but if you give them enough time, they will come up with a way to trap you. Believe me when I say they will do anything to keep you off their campus.”

I can see the shadows of my friends as the gloom dissipates. I count and come up with five, not including myself.

“What else do we need to know?” I want to have as much information as I can before we head into a game that involves guns, tasers, and young children driving fast cars.

“You will not be able to fight the compulsion this time around. You don’t get a break in this game unless you die. Try not to die.”

We all laugh, thinking she’s making a joke, but she keeps on going, completely serious.

“If you die, you will not respawn with the rest of us. You will have to start at the loading screen again, and if that happens, you will have to find us in order for me to get you from this game to the next. The Easter Egg for this game is in the train tunnel. If all goes well, we’ll start in that tunnel, and I can bring us to another game that isn’t quite as deadly, so hang on tight to one another.”

I can see her clearly now as she gestures toward us. We move closer together, holding hands once again.

“I’ll guide you through the games as much as I can until Andrew is ready to bring you out, but you’ve got to use your wits. Do what I say, when I say it, and we’ll all live to see The Company go down in flames.” She grins wickedly as she says this, and I have to wonder what ten years in the game has done to her mental stability.

“Wait,” I ask, “if you already ate the code that keeps you in the game, then how are you able to move from world to world?”

She looks at me, nodding in approval at my question.

“The Easter Eggs,” Dirk says, answering for her, “that’s it, right? You can move around because you found spots in each game that you can manipulate to bring you other places.”

“That’s right. It took me years to find these thin spots in the coding, but I did it. I can use them to bring you from place to place, but I can’t choose the worlds we move to, so we just have to hope for the best.”

She walks over to Dirk, placing her hand in his, getting ready to Jump us all out as soon as we get in, hopefully.

“It was all worth it,” she says, pulling Dirk toward her while simultaneously reaching out to grab my hand, which brings Jed along with me.

The four of us stand there in a weird little circle, Dirk and I holding one of her hands each, and me holding Jed’s hand.

“What was worth it?” I’m not sure where she’s going with this, and I’m a little worried that we’ll enter the game in different places if we’re not all touching. Carina and Adrian stand off to the side, watching our little group, outsiders looking in, which feels odd.

“Giving you to my sister,” she says, nodding at Jed and I. “Sending you with Andrew,” this time she looks at Dirk and rubs a thumb across the top of his hand in an affectionate gesture.

“When he came up with a way to get our kids out, I wasn’t sure it would work. When we decided to split you up, I worried you’d never find each other again. I waited every day for you all to come back to me. Seeing you now though, all three of you here, safe,” her voice quavers, and I can tell she’s getting choked with emotion as she looks from me to Jed, to Dirk, “it was all worth it. I’d have done so much more to have all three of my boys together again.”

“You guys are brothers!?” Adrian’s voice booms through my brain.

“Oh, snap,” Carina says.

Oh, snap, indeed.

## Chapter 9

The woman continues on with her instructions like she didn't just drop an atomic bomb on my life. All around us, light filters into the Jailbreak world, and I remember to look down at myself, so I can figure out whether I'm a guard or a prisoner.

I'm a prisoner.

It's poetic justice, I think.

"Everyone, hold hands, we don't want to get separated when I make the next jump!" The woman turns and talks to all of us. She's a prisoner as well.

Again, poetic justice.

"He's our brother?" Jed finally finds his voice, but I don't respond. I don't even know what to say. We're about to enter a world where we could very easily get separated if we don't pay attention, so I do my best to ignore the sick thud of my heart, the sluggish pulse beating its way through my brain.

"We'll talk about it later, Jed," I tell him, squeezing his hand. "Keep your head in the game."

I look over at Dirk. He's not looking at Jed or me. He's looking up at the sky as it changes from blackness to the brilliant blue of Jailbreak in the daytime. He doesn't look upset, not really. It's more like...he's thinking really hard. I want to talk to him, to say something, to acknowledge our bond, but nothing comes, and the game is just about loaded.

Now is not the time, I remind myself. I'll deal with it later. When we're all safe, I'll deal with it then.

"Here we go!" The woman shouts again, and the world snaps into crisp focus. I hear the thud of our boots as we hit the ground running, literally. She's tugging our hands toward the Jailbreak tunnel that used to house a train that never moved. We run with her, not wanting to get left behind.

All around us, there are sounds of chaos. The \*pop pop pop\* of gunfire, the \*tsst\* of tasers going off, and the rapid staccato of hundreds of players chasing or being chased.

The tunnel looms up ahead. We're so close!

"I don't think we're going to make it, guys," I hear Carina behind me, and I turn my head a bit to dart a look at her. She's all dressed in blue, a prison guard.

"Oh no. Carina, don't think about it, just run, we're almost there!"

Adrian is a guard as well, and though he hasn't said anything, I can tell by the look on his face that it's taking every bit of concentration he has not to kill us.

It turns out he doesn't need to kill us. Dirk does it for him.

One second Dirk is running beside us dressed as a prisoner. He's holding hands with the woman, who is also a prisoner. The next second, he turns around, lets go of her hand, and shoves his elbow HARD into Adrian's side, knocking him to the ground.

Adrian lands on his back, stunned, which gives Dirk plenty of time to grab his gun and fire off a shot, hitting me square in the chest.

My screen goes black.

Game over.

-

"Dirk! What the heck, man?!" Carina is yelling at me, but I don't care.

"What the heck, indeed!?" I yell back, angrier than I've ever been in my whole life. "What the heck with him having a brother and a family!? What the heck with them growing up in a happy home with pets and a mom and dad!? What the heck did I do that I didn't get ANY OF THAT?!"

Carina is backing away from me now, cop or not, she's not about to take me on. I've got a gun with five more bullets, and I've just proven that I'm not afraid to use it.

"What does that have to do with Thomas!?" Jed gets up in my face, angrier than I've ever seen him. "You killed him! We can't leave now! We can't leave because you SHOT HIM!" He comes barrelling at me, heedless of the pistol in my hand, and honestly, I'm so shocked that I forget to shoot. He knocks me over, the gun flies from my hand, and he grabs it, midair.

BANG!

My screen goes black.

Game over.

-

I look down at the gun I just fired, kind of shocked that I was able to pull it off.

Stupid Dirk! It's not Thomas's fault he didn't grow up with us, it's not my fault Andrew and this woman decided to split us up. It's no wonder he has no friends when he's always doing things like this!

The air around me has gone silent, and I look up from the gun, glancing in a quick circle. The woman is staring at me, mouth open in shock. Carina is helping Adrian up off the ground, and Adrian is looking in my direction, murder in his eyes.

"Jed, I like you, but you'd better run," he growls out.

I move backward as he stands, the gold police badge glints in the sunlight, blinding me for a second. When he comes back into focus, he's got a taser gripped in one fist, the blue light arcing between the metal prongs set on either side.

Carina stands beside him, her face a mixture of anger and frustration as she pulls her gun.

“Run, Jed! Listen to him! Run before we kill you!” She cocks the hammer, but I’m frozen. These are my friends. They wouldn’t kill me, would they?

BANG!

She fires! It’s high and to the right, but she definitely fired at me, no doubt about it. Before I can thank my lucky stars that she’s a terrible shot, the woman grabs a handful of the front of my shirt and takes off. I run behind her, the sounds of Adrian and Carina yelling at us prodding me onward.

“They’ll kill you if they can, it’s the compulsion,” the woman says, puffing and panting for breath as we head up the hill of dirt that covers the train tunnel, before dropping down the other side into inky-blackness.

“If they’ll kill me, how are we all going to get together to get out of here?!” Stupid Dirk! This is all his fault!

“We’ll figure it out. I just need you all together in this spot for a few seconds so we can make the jump.”

“Guys, she said we need to meet at the tunnel, can you get back here so she can jump us?” I speak into the open air with the hope that the others can hear me over Discord. For whatever reason, we’re clearly able to talk to each other despite the compulsion to play the game this time around.

Asking questions while running is hard, but I’m doing my best to follow without getting left behind. “Why can we talk now, but we couldn’t in the last game?”

“In the last game, you were employees, and there were rules you had to follow. In this game, you’re a prisoner, and they’re a guard. There are no rules beyond that, it’s pretty much “anything goes”, as Dirk’s just proven by killing a fellow inmate.”

She rolls her eyes when she says this, but her tone of voice is definitely affectionate.

“Why did you give me up?” Dirk’s voice comes over the speakers in my head. “Why didn’t you send me with Jed and Thomas?”

“Dirk! Now is not the time!” Thomas is irritated, understandably. “You’ve already screwed it all up by killing me, so could we please just talk about this later?”

I don’t wait for either of them to reply, “Guys, we need to meet at the tunnel, come on!”

The rumble of a train prevents me from saying more. It’s headed our way. I can see the bright headlight glowing on the tracks ahead of us as it races toward the tunnel. There’s so much money on that train, and if I time it just right, it could all be mine.

The woman tightens her grip on my shirt, but I spin quickly away from her, dislodging her fingers as I run up the slight embankment in the tunnel. The higher I can get, the better chance I’ll have of making a clean jump into

one of the train cars when it passes. From there I just need to make my way to the bank car, grab the money and get gone.

“He’s robbing the train. I can’t stop him!” I hear the woman yelling, telling the others about my plans, but it doesn’t matter. I don’t want to share the money with her anyway. The train is coming too fast for her to make her way across the tracks to me, but I see her standing there, shouting at me to stop, telling me to fight the compulsion. I don’t want to fight it. This is what I was born to do!

The train breaks my eye contact with her, the engine roaring through the tunnel, cutting us off from one another until all the cars have made their way through. I see her in glimpses, running from side to side, still yelling at me to stop, but there’s nothing she can do, and I know it.

I hunch down, bending my knees, loading my muscles as I get ready. The cars come at a steady pace, and I feel the rhythm in my head, timing it just right.

“Yippee Kay Aye, let’s do this!” I yell at the top of my lungs as I propel myself into the air. My body floods with adrenaline. This is going to be EPIC!

“Jed, don’t jump!” I hear Thomas and Dirk yell to me at the same time, but it’s too late, I’m already gone.

## Chapter 10

“He’s gone, he jumped on the train,” I speak aloud, knowing the kids will hear me either way, though I don’t understand the dynamics of it.

“Why did you let him jump?!” Thomas is understandably frustrated.

I get it, I do. We all need to be together for me to be able to Jump us to another game, and Jed taking off adds another layer to how complicated this is turning out to be.

“I didn’t “let” him jump,” I respond, trying to keep my voice level, “he ran away from me and jumped. I’m a prisoner, too. There is nothing I could have done.”

“Why didn’t you jump as well?” Dirk doesn’t sound as frustrated. Rather, he sounds inquisitive, always wanting to know more.

“I didn’t jump because I didn’t follow that compulsion,” I tell him. “As long as you’re doing something in the game that qualifies as “gameplay”, you can avoid it, but if you fixate on one thing, you’re going to be drawn to it.”

I don’t know how to explain it better than that, but it’s very accurate.

“I knew the train was coming, I didn’t want to jump on it, so I thought about hiding from Adrian and Carina instead, and that let me stay in the tunnel. As long as we’re all doing things in line with Jailbreak, we’ll be okay and mostly free to move around. If you try to come over here and stay in one place, the compulsion will take over after a few seconds, and you’ll be forced into action.”

“Jed always did love that train, he’s been robbing it ever since the expansion came out,” Thomas laughs a bit, and it makes me smile, he has a nice laugh. I briefly wonder if he acts more like my sister or her husband.

“So what do we do? How do we get him back?” Adrian is all business, but I can hear him breathing heavy, and I know he’s chasing me. Since I just told him I was in the tunnel, that means I’ve got to get a move on while I talk.

“Jed, can you talk to us?” I wait a moment, staying silent, willing him to answer as I creep out of the tunnel and head across the tracks into some scrub brush about 20 feet away. I hunker down there, watching the tunnel from between the scraggly branches. It doesn’t take long for Adrian and Carina to show up. They round the embankment, guns at the ready. Adrian must have retrieved his pistol after Jed shot Dirk.

Once they enter the tunnel, I take off across the flat terrain, heading toward the old train station and hoping I can find an abandoned car to hop into before anyone spots me.

“I hear you! I got on the train, and I’m about to rob it!” Jed finally replies to our questions, the rumble of the train providing a fitting soundtrack in the background. He sounds so gleeful, and I know we’ve got to get him back under control before we lose him entirely.

If he doesn't keep this in check, we'll be in here long enough for The Company to find us, and there won't be a thing I can do about it.

"Great job, Jed!" I speak to him enthusiastically, like I'm proud of what he's done. "Stay on the train for a bit. I'm pretty sure you can rob more money if you look through all the cars."

"Really? I had no idea! I'll stay on and check. I'm going to be rich!" His voice trails off, and I know he's got to be hustling down the line of cars, looking for more cash.

Okay, that part is done. If I can keep him on the train for awhile, I can come up with a plan to bring everyone back together.

"Thomas and Dirk, are you two together now?"

"Yes, we're in the loading screen again," Dirk responds, angrily. "I guess Thomas could have told you that, though, since I'm clearly the son that isn't supposed to be here."

"Oh, get over yourself," Thomas is talking to Dirk, "how you were raised had nothing to do with Jed and me, so stop acting like we've kicked your puppy!"

"You just wait! I'm going to be a cop this time, and I'm going to shoot you again! Then I'm going to shoot you every single time you respawn!" Dirk is pretty angry, and it's understandable. I need to fix this, as much as I can in a few short minutes, anyway.

"Dirk, listen," I say to him, "first off, please do choose the police officer. Thomas, you do the same. I need you both to grab a helicopter so we can lure Jed out of the train."

I'm not going to explain anything else to them right now. I'm hoping that giving them some direction will be enough to get them going.

"Join in, go get the helicopter, then find the train and fly toward it, alright? If you do that, I'll explain a bit more about what happened when you boys were children, but if you keep fighting, I won't tell you a thing, ever." I wait a beat, letting that sink in. "It's your choice, just let me know."

I wait, listening for them to acknowledge that they heard me and that they will do as I asked. They're getting no explanations until I've got that reassurance.

"Fine," Dirk says, "but I want answers. If I don't like them, I'm tossing big brother here out of the chopper."

"Actually," I reply, "he's not the big brother, you are."

I get no response to that, and it makes me smile. If I can do anything to help these boys act more like family, it'll be that much easier to get things done. I'm not asking for miracles, but even a little feeling of responsibility would be good.

A few more seconds pass, and I imagine them standing in front of each other, glaring and posturing. They've only got 30 seconds to choose between



cop and criminal though, so I wait it out, letting the game do its thing.

“Alright, we’re in, we’re cops, and we’re heading toward the helicopter pad, so start talking.” I’ve definitely underestimated Thomas. I figured that type of statement would come from Dirk. But then, I’ve known them for all of 4 hours, so really, what do I know?

The walk toward the helicopter pad is almost unbearable for me. I alternate between worrying about Jed, wanting to get to the others, and trying not to stop mid-stride so I can shove Dirk so hard, he won’t wake up until the next update.

I don’t do it, of course. Not only because I know it would waste time, but also because he and I are about the same height. I smirk to myself at that thought. He might be a year older, but I’m definitely going to be taller.

“What are you smiling about,” he asks me, angrily. Everything in his posture says he’s holding himself on a tight thread, so I don’t mess with him.

“Nothing, I was thinking about how I’m going to hassle Jed once we get out of here. I can’t believe he jumped on that train.”

Dirk looks at me for a moment, probably trying to decide whether I’m telling the truth. I imagine he suspects that I’m not, but he lets it go. “Yeah, that was pretty funny. Yippee Kay Aye”, he mimics Jed’s war cry, and it makes me laugh.

“So what’s the deal,” he asks me, “what are we supposed to do with the helicopter?”

I don’t know, so I shrug and keep walking. “Maybe we can hover over him and snag him somehow? It would make sense. The helicopter would get us to the tunnel faster than any other vehicle.”

“True, but how would the game react to that? I mean would we just imagine that we’re snagging him to capture him and bring him to jail? Do we have to kill him?”

I think about this for awhile as well. We can’t kill him, if we do, he’ll respawn, and we’ll have to go through this all over again.

Once we reach the helipad, we have a moment of indecision. One of us is flying, one of us is going to have to be the passenger. We stop and stare at each other, both of us knowing we want to be in charge of the yoke.

“I’ll fly,” I say, “he’s my brother.”

No sooner are the words out of my mouth that I realize it’s a thin argument. Dirk knows it, too.

“He’s my brother, too, and I’m the oldest, so I’m flying,” he says as he starts toward the nearest chopper.

I run in front of him, cutting off his path, “You might be his brother, but you haven’t lived with him your whole life. You don’t care about him like I care about him.”

Dirk stands there, thinking about this, “You’re right. I don’t care about

him like you do, but that's not my fault, so stop being a jerk about it. Let me fly the helicopter, that way you can interact with Jed. If you care so much about him, you'll want to be the one capturing him or whatever, just to make sure he doesn't get hurt, right?"

He's got a point. I don't necessarily think Dirk would hurt Jed, but he also might not care about being gentle. The thought of Jed being anymore traumatized by all of this sends me veering toward the passenger side.

"Alright, you win this one, but you better be a fan-freaking-tastic pilot," I tell him, shooting him my best glare.

He laughs at me, not even the least bit intimidated.

"Don't worry, Thomas," he says, "I'm your big brother, so of course I'm going to be a better pilot than you are."

We buckle in. Dirk presses the button to start the rotors, and the helicopter begins to hover, rocking slowly back and forth, the landing gear dipping and rising as we leave the tarmac.

"Alright, boys," the woman says "time to get this show on the road, find the train, let's get your brother back."

"And, it's time for you to explain why you abandoned me," Dirk replies.

I can't help but nod, there's a story we all want to hear.

## Chapter 11

“The first thing you need to know,” she tells us, “is that I didn’t know about you, Dirk. It wasn’t until after Andrew and I had already come up with the plan that we realized there was a 3rd child.”

I turn my head to look at Dirk, trying to gauge how he’s taking this so far. He’s stoic, face forward as he maneuvers the helicopter through the air, following the spidery line of the railroad tracks through the mountains as we pursue the train that we cannot yet see.

“My part of things was already in motion,” she continues, “I’d talked to my sister and her husband about Jed and Thomas on a regular basis. I had to set things up that way. I needed them to know about you, to feel a connection to you so that when things started getting “bad” for me, they’d be willing to adopt you as their own.”

She takes a deep breath, it echoes all around us, like a gust of wind without the push of air. This must be hard for her, and yet, I don’t feel any sympathy. Maybe I should, but I find myself in an odd situation. Dirk is sitting beside me, my brother, the one who didn’t grow up with a loving family, a sibling, unbreakable connections. I can’t help but think of the randomness of that decision. What if I had been born first? What if I’d been the “last minute” addition to the plan? How would I have turned out if I’d grown up in a boarding school?

I’m sure this woman did what she thought was best, but it doesn’t erase the unfairness of it all, and it doesn’t change the sterile environment Dirk was raised inside of. I wonder if anyone has ever really cared about him. Was he nothing more than a paycheck? Did they treat him like a person, or a burden?

Bringing my attention back to her voice, I focus on what she’s saying.

“I told my sister that I couldn’t keep you, that my life wasn’t in a good place, and that I was considering putting you up for adoption. She was so kind about it, offering to let all of us come live with them so I could get back on my feet. It broke my heart to lie to her, but I had to do it.”

“Would you have given us up for adoption? If mom hadn’t taken us in, would you have done it?” I want to know, but at the same time, I don’t want to know.

She doesn’t even hesitate, “Yes, I would have, without a doubt. I would have talked to Andrew and put you someplace no one would ever find you, and I’d have done it without any guilt.”

I feel angry when she says this, but I know it doesn’t matter, so I try to let it go. It’s tough though, and if it’s tough for me, then it must be near impossible for Dirk.

“You don’t remember what The Company was like,” she says, “you don’t remember the tests, the medication, the constant poking, and prodding.

Oh, I remember though. Even though I wasn't supposed to know you were mine, I knew. I had to stand by and do NOTHING as they stuck you with needles, drew your blood, attached electrodes to your heads after they'd shaved you bald. It was horrible, and there was nothing I could do about it."

She emphasizes that last part, her voice full of anguish.

"I never got to know you, I never got to bond with you, but I loved you all the same, and I was more than willing to trade my own life for yours, so I did. I threw myself into our plan, played my part perfectly, and when the time came, we put you into the game and Andrew brought you out the other side."

"So what," I ask, "you just dropped us off at my parent's house, and that was that?"

"No, I didn't drop you off. Andrew arranged for someone else to do that. I couldn't risk seeing my sister. I know she'd have redoubled her efforts to keep me with you guys, and I didn't know if I was strong enough to resist. So I stayed in the game. I wasn't planning on being here for so long, but you already know what happened with that."

"What about me," Dirk demands, "enough about Thomas and Jed! It's clear they had a wonderful childhood, everything turned out just peachy keen. So what about me?!" He thunders this last part, his voice booming all over the game.

She's silent for a few moments, and I take the time to study the landscape, looking for the telltale sign of smoke billowing from the engine as it rockets down the tracks. I think I see it up ahead, so I point in that general direction, making sure Dirk has seen the gesture.

He gives me only the slightest of nods, but it's enough. We tip and veer toward the ground, gaining on the train with every second.

"Andrew found out about you when one of the scientists on board with getting the kids out hacked into the computer to erase the children's files. The Company had lists of every single child linked to the parents whose genetic material was used to create them. Only, instead of having just two boys linked to Andrew and I....there were three."

"Why wasn't I with the other kids? Why did they split us up?" Dirk asks.

"You were special," she tells him, haltingly, "even at your young age, they knew you had extraordinary abilities in the game. You were prone to disappearing, and when they finally figured out that you were porting yourself into the game, they had to take measures to stop you."

I can sense that what she's about to say next isn't going to be something either of us wants to hear. He was a baby. He couldn't have been more than three years old. What on earth would they do to a three-year-old to keep him from using the abilities they bred him to have? It makes me sick to think about it. I look at Dirk, fully ready to tell the woman to stop talking, but

he returns my glance and shakes his head “no”.

“I want to hear this,” he tells me, “I need to know.”

“They have a laboratory. It’s actually more like a containment room. The kids who had abilities that couldn’t be controlled were placed in tanks in that room. They ran an IV that would provide you with nutrients to keep you alive. They ran small tubes into your nose to supply you with oxygen. Electrodes were placed on your skin and periodic pulses of energy were released into your brain to keep you from linking up with the systems.”

I grimace, bile rising up in my throat as I imagine baby Dirk floating in a tank, just like Kat.

He scrubs one hand through his hair, evidence of the frustration he’s feeling. “How many kids did they do this to?”

“Many,” she finally replies, “more than I can count. The children they created were so much more than they bargained for. Even inside of the tanks, some of the kids figured out a way to interact with the game, a way to communicate with each other. The Company resorted to drastic measures to keep it from happening. They finally put you into a medically induced coma.”

We’re all silent, letting that sink in. I cannot even imagine. Thinking of Jed in a tank like that makes my blood absolutely BOIL! I want to take every person at The Company who thought doing things like that to children was a good idea and place them in their own special tank, without tubes for air. Or, even better, give them tubes for air and let them wither away, knowing there was nothing at all they could do to save themselves.

“By this time, I’d already come into the game, and I couldn’t get back out. Andrew didn’t have access to the holding room, so he had to find another scientist willing to go in and get you.”

She sighs, heavily.

“The worst part was that the scientist would only take you. There were so many other children in that room, but he couldn’t risk it, and he’d only take you.”

I’m about to ask how the scientist managed to cover it up, but she keeps talking, answering my unspoken question.

“He removed all of your tubes and left them floating in the tank, then removed you from the room on a gurney while you were still sedated. They questioned him, of course, but they had no proof of anything since the cameras had conveniently glitched out while he was in there. He told them he went in to check on the kids and that you were gone. The assumption was that you’d found a way to hook back into the game, and you ported yourself in.”

“So all this time, they thought I was still inside of Roblox?” Dirk looks incredulous, like he can’t believe he managed to stay under their radar for so long.

“Yes, all this time. The school Andrew sent you to was given strict

instructions on internet usage, so you didn't get back on until you'd been away from The Company for several years. Once you did get back on, we'd effectively erased the data on as many children as we could, so they couldn't track you, not until...."

She trails off, but Dirk finishes for her, "Not until I brought the beacon out of Soro's..."

"Yes, that's right," she agrees, sounding almost sorrowful, "don't blame yourself, Dirk. You would have had to come back no matter what. Getting you out was never a permanent thing. We knew almost right from the start that you were the only ones who could stop what The Company started. All we were doing was buying you time to grow into your abilities. It's not much, but it's the best we can do. We've just run out of time."

"Why didn't Andrew give me to his family or something? Why send me to a boarding school and never interact with me? Wasn't there anyone at all who would have taken me?" His voice chokes and I reach over and put my hand on his shoulder, fully expecting him to shake it off angrily, but he doesn't. He just sits there, steering the helicopter, focusing on what he has to do, but allowing me to offer him what tiny bit of comfort I can.

"There wasn't time," she says, "Andrew had no siblings, only an aging mother, and father who knew nothing about you. If he'd come home with a child for them to raise, it would have aroused suspicions. They would never have believed that he'd had you all this time and never mentioned you. He would never have had time to falsify all of the things we needed to falsify for you to get set up with another family. In the time we had, he did the best he could, bringing you someplace that would educate you, if not care for you. Money in exchange for silence, it was the best we could hope for."

Dirk takes all of this in, saying nothing, his face blank.

"Where are the other kids? The ones you couldn't get out?" He asks the question, and I'm glad, but I almost don't want to know.

"They're still inside," she says, "quite possibly still in those tanks, floating in nothingness, growing as science experiments. That's why we have to go back."

## Chapter 12

"I see the train," Dirk announces to anyone who's listening, "what do you want me to do?"

I don't answer, since I know he's talking to the woman and not to me. If I had any clue what was going on in her head, that'd be great, but so far, she hasn't decided to enlighten us.

"Great," she says, a second later. "We're going to need to lure him into the copter, so get as close as you can to the train and see if you can figure out which car he's in."

"Can't we just ask which car he's in?" I feel like I'm making a pretty valid point, but Dirk gives me a sidelong glance and sighs like "really, do you hear the words coming out of your face?"

"We can't ask him what car he's in," he says, over exaggerating his words as though he's explaining something to a small child, "we're cops, he's a prisoner, he's not going to talk to us."

"Well, why not? I mean, she's talking to us, and she's a prisoner, so why wouldn't Jed do the same?"

The woman answers for Dirk this time. "I'm talking to you because I know how to avoid the compulsion. Right now, I'm luring you to me so that I can kill you, simple as that. Jed doesn't have the same experience. He's so absorbed in the game right now that he's living it. He really is a prisoner. He wants nothing more than to rob that train and probably go buy some epic car or something."

"Well, then why can't you talk to him, since you're both prisoners?" Again I get the sidelong look from Dirk, and it takes every ounce of restraint I have not to smack him upside his smug, fat head.

"We're all in a channel together, genius," he says, looking back through the windshield, "he's not going to talk to her because he knows we'll hear, and in his head, that would blow his cover."

Ah, okay, well I guess that makes sense, sort of.

"Adrian and Carina, are you guys making your way to the tunnel?" We haven't heard from them in quite awhile, but we've been so busy that I hadn't thought much about that.

It takes a little bit for them to respond. Silence reigns in the cockpit, or at least as much silence as you get in a cockpit, anyway. The scenery flies by, the train inching closer and closer as we overtake it, having not only the advantage of speed but also the benefit of being able to go "as the bird flies".

"We're not on the way to the tunnel," Adrian finally responds, "we're chasing the woman, so hopefully she'll head back toward the tunnel at some point because, while we're trying to get this stupid compulsion under control, it's way easier said than done."

I look at Dirk, shrugging. I mean, it seems like we're doing okay, so I don't get why it's such a big deal for everyone else.

As though sensing my thoughts, Adrian chimes in again, "You guys aren't feeling it as much because you're currently pursuing a prisoner. I guarantee that if you tried to fly that thing in a different direction or land it and stay there, life would get harder in a hurry."

I look at Dirk again, sort of wanting to suggest that he try to fly someplace else or land, but he catches my eye and frowns at me, stopping short of saying "Don't be an idiot, man." Shrugging again, I face forward, looking for any sign of my brother.

"Hey, Jed," the woman says in a cajoling tone, "your brothers have some key cards for the prison. They're going to be flying over the train soon, and I'd bet that if you were hanging outside of one of the cars, or even on the roof of the train, they might drop one and you'll be able to grab it."

I snort. This is ridiculous, Jed would never fall for something like that.

"Man, it sure is windy up here," Dirk says, once again exaggerating the words. "I can barely hang on to my keycard. I really hope it doesn't fly out."

I'm about to ridicule both of them, letting them know what I think of this whole dumb charade, but a movement on the train catches my eye. Sure enough, it's the light brown hair of my apparently very gullible little brother.

I don't say anything, not wanting him to hear me over the channel, so I just punch Dirk on the shoulder and then point down in the direction of Jed's train car, mouthing "he's right there".

Dirk takes his hand off the yoke, punches me back, and then mouths "I see him, you suck."

His punch actually hurt, but I smile because I do rather enjoy tormenting him. He's such a stuffed shirt. Maybe my influence will help him loosen up and have some fun once in awhile. At the very least, I'll punch him more.

Brotherhood isn't complete unless you're harming the ones you love.

#truestory #momhatesit #shesnotaboy

"Oh man, my keycard fell out of the cockpit!" I yell this, making Dirk jump, which makes me smirk. I'm all into it now though, no going back! "Dirk, quick, bring the copter down, my keycard is falling right toward the train! I would HATE IT if a prisoner on board were to grab it. That would just be the worst!!"

Dirk is staring at me like I'm a moron, but whatever, I'm watching my brother. He's got his whole skinny body sticking out of the train car now, and I send up a silent prayer that he won't fall out and die. He keeps looking up at our helicopter, no doubt trying to see the fictitious card floating through the air.

"Okay, I'm bringing it down, I think I saw the card land on the roof, so



I'll get us close, and you lean out and grab it!"

He's getting into it now as well, and it's everything I can do to keep from laughing as I see Jed look up toward the roof and then scramble out the door and up the ladder, trying to beat the helicopter to his treasure.

Dirk dips the copter, bringing us within a few feet of the rooftop. I don't tell him this, but he really is a better pilot than me. He's got to keep us level with the roof and maintain the same speed as the train, all while being sure not to hit the ground. It's more than I could manage, that's for sure.

Reaching into my pocket, I take out my keycard and then lean as far as I dare toward the train roof, holding the card only by its very edge.

I can tell the moment Jed locks eyes with it. He goes still, darting glances from the card to my face. I do my best to look like an idiot cop who really might drop the card at any moment. I fumble the card slightly, leaning even more forward and yelling "Oh man, I almost lost it, quick, pull away, I don't want this prisoner to grab it."

That's all it takes. Jed leaps toward my outstretched hand, grabbing the keycard in a death grip as he attempts to yank it from my hold. Dirk anticipates his move, veering the copter toward the train roof enough that Jed practically falls into the cockpit as I grab his arm. Using his own momentum, I land him face first on the floor.

As soon as he's in, Dirk brings the chopper up and heads toward the tunnel, which luckily for us could also be construed as heading toward the prison.

Jed kicks and flails, screaming at me to let him go, and calling me names like "dirty pig", and "filthy copper".

"You kiss your mother with that mouth?" I chide him, laughing.

It only makes him angrier, and I sort of regret my words. Not enough to keep me from placing both of my feet on his back and pinning him down, though.

"We've got him!" Dirk yells this, even though he doesn't need to. "What do we do now?"

"I'm heading back toward the tunnel," the woman replies, "just in case any cops want to follow me there to arrest me!"

I know she adds that part to help with the compulsion, and I find that as soon as she says the words, a tightness in my chest loosens. It's as though the game is permitting me to go the tunnel. It's so weird. I don't like it at all.

"We're coming for you," Adrian booms over the channel, "we're right behind you! Get ready!"

It's a threat and a promise all in one statement. He's letting all of us know that they're on the way and that whatever she needs to do, she better be willing to do it quick.

I hope she's got a plan.

## Chapter 13

The second attempt to Jump us out of Jailbreak went comparatively better than the first. That's not to say it wasn't without its own issues, but we did manage to get out of the game, so I'm calling it a win.

Once we got Jed into the helicopter, Dirk wasted no time. He jerked the yoke, we shot up into the air, and he went full throttle toward the tunnel. We could see Adrian and Carina running, following a smaller figure in the not far off distance.

"She's almost there," I told him, pointing toward the people on the ground, "maybe another 30 seconds before she's in the tunnel."

Again, talking about her like this, with the knowledge that we were chasing her made me feel so much better. I knew I was in line with the game, and the game knew I was doing what I was supposed to be doing. Everything else would come easy, as long as I kept that thought at the forefront of my mind.

"We'll catch her, don't worry," Dirk replied, never taking his eyes off the small group of three. "I'm going to land us near the tunnel. You keep a grip on "the Cowboy" over there." He takes one of his hands off the yoke and gestures, indicating my brother (who is never going to live down his "yippee kay aye" comment. "I'll help you keep him in check once I get around to your side, then we'll head into the tunnel, collar the woman and take them both where they belong."

Nodding in agreement, I shift my legs, planting them more firmly on Jed's back, making him squeal like a little girl. "Oww, oww, oww! That's my shoulder blade, get off of me! You are so dead!"

He sounds pretty agitated, and while I am bigger than him, there's something to be said for determination, and he appears to have a lot of it. Re-thinking my plan, I reach into the thick, black leather pouch on my belt and extract a pair of handcuffs. Jed sees my motion and redoubles his effort to get away, heedless of the fact that if he does get away, it's going to involve a 100 foot plummet to the ground.

I move out of my seat very slowly, wary of the open hatch right next to me. Easing my knee onto Jed's back, I grab one wrist and then the other, dragging them tightly together.

\*click\* I secure one wrist.

\*click\* I secure the other.

Looking out, I decide to keep my place, leaving one hand on the chains between Jed's cuffs. We're landing now, and I know I'll need to hop out of the helicopter in just a few seconds.

Dirk sees what I've done and gives me a nod of approval. The copter noses forward, dipping and sending me leaning toward the cockpit dash. I

lean back to counterbalance my weight and place a hand down behind me when the tail catches up, leveling us out. We come to a full stop on the scrubby dirt near the railroad tracks.

Gripping Jed's chain tightly, I back out of the cockpit, pushing one foot out behind me so I can tell when I'm about to step off the lip. Once I feel open air, I give a gentle tug on the chain. "Come on, Jed, your fun is just about over."

He turns his head, looking at me, "You're not the boss of me!"

This time I yank the chain harder, pulling his arms almost straight down, causing what I am sure is some seriously uncomfortable pressure on his shoulders. He yelps, and rethinks his position, scooting back with me to alleviate the pain.

"Actually, for the rest of this game, I am the boss of you, so shut up, unless you want me to use my taser."

Not that I'd really tase my little brother. I wouldn't.

Well, I wouldn't unless I had NO other choice.

Probably.

Dirk hops out the pilot's side and makes his way around the front. He ducks and hunches in that way people do when they walk under a helicopter's slowly rotating blades. As though your head might get chopped off if you're just six inches taller.

When he reaches us, he puts his hand on Jed's arm and propels him toward the tunnel. "Come on, brother mine. It's time to get you back on the straight and narrow."

I frown a little at his statement. I don't really like him calling Jed "brother", even if it is true. I don't say anything though, trying to tell myself that the more people looking out for Jed, the better. It's a hard sell. I'll admit that.

The woman rounds the embankment, running headlong into the tunnel. As soon as I see her, my hand darts toward my gun, as does Dirk's. I look over at him, and he looks at me. The compulsion is getting strong, and her running isn't helping anything. It's almost like what your parents always tell you about stray dogs. "Don't run, stand still, make lots of noise, make yourself big."

If you run, they want to give chase. It's instinct. The same goes here. If you see a prisoner running and you're a cop, you want to give chase, and more than that, you want to shoot at them as you chase.

Carina and Adrian come over the embankment not more than a few seconds after the woman. They spare us a glance, slowing down when they see Jed in our grasp. I slow down as well, unsure of bringing him past them. Are they going to try to shoot him? Will they let us pass with him since he's in the custody of two police officers?

“I’ve got him, guys, you go ahead,” I tell them, indicating they should pursue the woman inside the tunnel.

Adrian nods back at me, breathing heavily from all the running they’ve been doing. “We’re good, go on in, Carina and I will follow behind to make sure the woman doesn’t get away.”

I get it, he wants to bring up the rear, he’s the oldest, so it makes sense that he’d want to see all of us and his sister in safely before going in himself.

Dirk, Jed, and I edge around them, the shadow of the tunnel looms ahead. As we step from the light into the dark, I suppress a shiver. I’m not sure if it’s just cold, or if it’s a sense of foreboding, but either way, I increase my grip on Jed’s chain. On the other side of him, I see Dirk do the same, digging his fingers into Jed’s shirt, making sure none of us get separated.

There’s a scrabbling of rocks behind us, and I turn to make sure Carina and Adrian are following. They are, but something about them together prickles at the back of my neck, right between my shoulder blades. My brain is screaming at me: “Be wary of this!!!”

“You guys good?” I call out behind me, wanting to hear them reassure me that they’ve got it under control.

My question is met with silence, so I look back once again, stumbling over the gravel as I push Jed forward while trying to figure out why my brain is shouting at me to drop and roll.

Carina is glaring at Jed, her hand resting on the butt of her gun. Adrian is at her side, whispering to her and pointing past our little group, no doubt trying to keep her compulsion at bay. Based on her facial expression, I’m going to say it’s not really working.

“Hurry up!” I shout this, hoping the woman will hear me. “Carina isn’t doing great with the compulsion. Where do you need us to be?”

I look around, searching the dark, squinting my eyes, trying to will ANY extra light into my eyeballs so I can see better. It doesn’t work, the dark remains black as pitch, and I’m torn between wanting to stand still and rush forward. Basically, this means I slow my roll to a creep, inching one toe in front of the other, pushing Jed along and hoping Dirk keeps his footing as we change our pace.

The silence is broken by Adrian’s frantically urgent voice ringing out only moments before a bullet whistles past my right ear. It zips between mine and Jed’s head, ricocheting off the curved rock wall and splattering shards of shrapnel past our faces. I lift my arm, trying to protect myself while pushing Jed to the ground. I feel Dirk’s hand wrap around the back of Jed’s neck, and I know he has the same intention.

We’re crouched, knees bent, the cold from the earth seeps up toward our faces. A gust of wind blows something, probably broken twigs and dried out leaves, up from the ground. They swirl momentarily around our heads

before continuing on their path, out of the tunnel.

“Carina, no!” Adrian yells out right before another \*POP\* sounds. The flash of muzzle light brings everything into brief, sharp focus before plunging us right back into blackness, like the shutter on a camera.

“She’s shooting at him!” I tell Dirk, unnecessarily. “She can’t fight the compulsion!”

“Hey! Where are you?” Dirk yells out, no doubt looking for the woman. “Where are you, what do we need to do!?”

We’re met with silence once again. I’m about to ditch the idea of waiting for her. Gathering all the power I can in my legs, I prepare to push off and run, fully ready to drag or push Jed along with me, whatever it takes.

A noise keeps me where I am. Rather, two sounds keep me where I am.

\*bzzzt\*

“What the....”

\*bzzzt\*

I look around, trying to figure out what happened. Behind us, a flashlight clicks to life, and the woman’s face is illuminated like a ghastly storyteller as she points the bulb under her chin before turning it on us.

“Help me move them,” she says, swinging the light to the ground.

Adrian and Carina lay prone, twitching and jerking as electricity from the taser courses through their bodies.

“You tased them?” Jed bursts out laughing. It’s a creepy little giggle, more “Five Nights At Freddy’s” and less “normal, happy child”. I cringe away from the sound but keep a tight grip.

Dirk leaves my side, heading toward our two electrified friends. He bends over, attempting to shift Adrian toward where I am, but he’s dead weight, heavier than Jed and I together. Moving him anywhere is not going to happen.

“It’s okay,” the woman says, walking toward the tunnel wall. I can jump all of us. We just need to be touching.

She stands about 12 inches from the wall, plenty of room for her to be able to place her hand on it when the time comes. She looks at me, nodding her chin in a “come here” motion. I push Jed toward her, and she grasps his wrist above the cuff.

Keeping a hand on his other wrist, I move as far from him as I can, reaching my fingers out to Dirk. He bends over, grabs Adrian’s hand, and then grabs mine.

Almost immediately, he lets go of me, runs over to Adrian’s body and pulls on his arm, splaying it across the ground toward where Carina lays. Ever so gently, he pulls her arm away from her body, placing it lightly over Adrian’s, ensuring we’re all touching once again.

“Good thinking,” I say as Dirk runs back and grabs my fingers.

“We’re ready!” Dirk yells, and I squeeze my eyes shut as we plunge, once more, into the open air.

## Chapter 14

I'm more prepared for things this time around. The feeling of falling stops almost as soon as it begins. Once we've loaded into the new game (I can only imagine that's what's happening as I go from thin air to solid mass), I reach down to pat my legs, torso, and arms. Just a quick check to make sure everything is where it should be.

*"Is everyone okay? We can't delay. Andrew should be at the campus today."*

I clap my hand quickly across my mouth. What just happened? I wanted to ask if everyone was alright, that much is true. But, I didn't want to ask them if they were okay while sounding like a cross between Snoop Dog and Old Mother Hubbard.

*"That was terrible, Thomas. Don't do it again, promise!"*

Dirk's voice is clear as a bell beside me, and I'd laugh if this weren't all so disconcerting.

I hear a grumble of displeasure. I'm guessing he didn't intend for his comment to come out that way, either.

The woman clears her throat, getting our attention without saying anything:

*"We'll soon be in, and we've got to win."*

*"If you've got the rapping clout, you'll find the way out."*

*"You've got to be first, or we'll face the worst."*

*"If you haven't got a rhyme, this game hasn't got the time."*

No one says anything. I think what we're doing right now could best be described as "stunned silence". I mean, if I'm interpreting all of this correctly, she's saying we can't talk in this game unless we're rhyming?

The screen starts to lighten, the game coming into focus. An enormous set of letters floats above our head, bouncing and thumping to a beat that seems to surround us:

### ***AUTO RAP BATTLE!***

Carina is the first to break the silence, but based on the way her words come out, I can tell she regrets it immediately.

*"Oh man, I hate this game! Uh, uh, um, I mean, my rapping is lame!"*

I cough to smother a laugh, but the others don't even bother. They're all chuckling, even Adrian, though he is at least patting Carina's shoulder, offering some silent support.

She glares at us, flinging her arms wide and shrugging her shoulders in a "You think you're so awesome, go ahead and do better!" gesture. She backs this up a second later with some more words, which surprises me because I figured she'd be done with the talking.

*"You heard her, boys, one of us has to win.  
I hate to dash your hopes, but it won't be this twin.  
You think you're the best, then go on and bring it.  
I'd hate for you to get on stage and just have to wing it."*

We all look at her, again with the stunned silence. That was actually really good, or at least, I think it was? Does the game help you rap, or do you have to do it yourself? I want to talk and figure it out, but at the same time, I don't dare. What happens if I can't make a rhyme? Will it kill me?

Looking over at Jed, I wish I could ask him. He's bugging his eyes out at me, no doubt trying to convey some message. It's hilarious! His face is all red. He's holding his breath, mouth pinched together, cheeks puffing out like a chipmunk. Jed LOVES TO TALK, this is going to be difficult for him, and it makes me smile.

Walking over to him, I push him lightly on the shoulder.

*"What's the matter bro, your rapping skills hit zero?"*

He rolls his eyes.

*"No, BRO, I'll be the winner.  
I'll take that trophy and get you home before dinner."*

I laugh, and I'm about to come back at him with a rap of my own when the woman clears her throat next to us.

*"There are rules, as you must know.  
Ignore them and the game you'll throw.  
The platform rises when you win,  
reach the top, and we all will grin.  
The golden trophy waits up there.  
It's your only way out of here."*

I don't even bother to ask any questions, and neither does anyone else. The less talking we have to do in here, the better. It sounds like we've got to play and win, in order to Jump. On to the next world or finally onto The Company campus, I don't know.



The woman continues, clarifying the rest of what we need to know, so I bring my mind back around. I'm a terrible rapper, so at the very least I can be the person who best understands the rules. #itsallivegot

*"Each of you will battle the other,  
the last of you will battle another.  
The previous champion is your goal.  
This is how you pay the toll.  
We cannot move on without success,  
your loss will cause a giant mess."*

So we've got to rap against each other, and the last man standing has to rap against the person who won before we entered the battle. That makes sense.

I look around, glancing from person to person, unsure of what to do next.

The screen comes entirely into focus with a crackle and pop. An invisible barrier drops from beneath the letters hanging over the main stage, and we are pushed forward among a small sea of other players.

Somehow, the woman manages to herd us to the front of the line. Another barrier surrounds the stage and the two platforms on it. A person is standing within the boundary, but just off the stage, she stares at our group as we move forward. Frankly, it sends a shiver down my spine. Her look isn't friendly or competitive, it's loathing, like a roach just crawled across her foot and she cannot wait to smash it until the gooey bits spurt out.

The woman turns around, looking at each of us before she speaks again.

*"The Company has many eyes,  
don't let her take you by surprise."*

She extends her hand, first finger and thumb pointed like a gun, indicating the champion near the stage.

Okay, point taken, there's more to that girl than just being good at this game.

**"ALRIGHT ALRIGHT ALRIGHT!"**

A voice booms out all around, us, some unseen announcer letting everyone know that the next battle is about to start.

**"WE'VE GOT A SPECIAL RAP BATTLE COMING UP TO ENTERTAIN YOU FINE FOLKS!"**

A blinding spotlight suddenly lights the area where our group is

standing. We're clearly the main attraction.

Everyone in the arena turns to look at us, falling silent as they examine each member in turn. Some laugh, some point, some wave as though we might know them, or vice versa, but it all lasts only a moment.

As quickly as it began, the lights in the arena blackout, leaving only the stage dimly lit. The two platforms (for the challengers) start to glow softly with a pulsing blue light. The barrier surrounding the stage lifts, and the tiles at our feet begin to blink in a pattern leading from where we are to where we need to be.

All that's left for us to do is follow.

## Chapter 15

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, PLEASE WELCOME TO THE STAGE, OUR FIRST TWO CONTESTANTS!”

I’m pulled forward as if being dragged by some unseen force. My feet move awkwardly, one in front of the other, entirely beyond my control. The path continues to blink, elongating across the stage as I reach the first platform, indicating that I will be on the second instead of the first.

Behind me, someone struggles with their own compulsion, and I dare a quick look over my shoulder to see who it is. Carina is being pulled along in the same manner. A robotic, jerky motion that tells anyone who’s watching that she isn’t the one pulling the strings right now.

I smile at her, trying to be reassuring, but she doesn’t smile back. Instead, she’s looking at the 1st platform, the one she’ll stand on to begin the game. Her face is bright red, whether because of anger or embarrassment, I can’t tell, but I’d be willing to bet it’s a little of both.

This isn’t a game I like to play. I’d say that I’m not sure why I don’t play it, but that would make me a “liar liar”. I don’t play it because I don’t like being humiliated. I know my weaknesses, and this is one of them. Sure, I could get better if I were to practice, but I find no enjoyment in rapping against other people, so why bother?

Jed, on the other hand, loves this game. I could pretty much quote the announcer word for word with as much time as he spends in this world.

My feet touch the blue platform. I’m practically pushed forward, waving my arms to keep my balance as my body becomes my own again. No sooner am I standing erect that a hazy blue barrier slams down around the circle I’m standing on. Goosebumps break out across my skin, and I begin to sweat as I remember almost an exact scenario happening in Bloxburg with Kat.

On the first platform, Carina has also been deposited and given command of her character. She stares across the stage at me, her mouth turned down in a frown, chin wobbling slightly. It pains me to realize that she’s trying not to cry. Looking back down the stage, I find Adrian standing at the front of our group, his focus solely on his sister. He looks like he’d turn green and shred his clothes if he could.

#HULKSMASH

As it is, there’s nothing he can do for her. She’s going to have to rap, and one of us is going to lose, that’s the way the game is played.

In the grand scheme of things, what happens to the loser isn’t terrible, but it is humiliating, and a part of me really wants to spare her this. I’m not going to hold back though, I’ll rap to win, and I hope she does the same. I have absolutely no illusions that I’ll be the victor in this game, but all the

same, I only know one way to compete, and that's "go big or go home".

"ON THE FIRST PLATFORM, MAKING HER AUTO RAP BATTLE DEBUT, GIVE IT UP FOR MYCARINA!"

Her platform glows brighter as the light beneath my own feet goes out, leaving her alone on the stage as people cheer or jeer.

"ON THE SECOND PLATFORM, HE'S NO NEWBIE, GIVE IT UP FOR THEBESTTHOMAS!"

Carina's platform goes dark, and I know mine lights brighter, but I can't see it happen. It's so bright that I'm blind to anything not more than 12 inches in front of me. I stand there, listening to the crowd as my heart picks up its pace, adrenaline flooding my body the same way it always does when I have to compete in anything. It doesn't matter that I know I'm not going to be running anywhere. I'm freaked out, I don't want to be here, and this is how my brain processes my emotions.

"YOU WILL EACH HAVE 30 SECOND TO RAP. THE CROWD DECIDES THE WINNER. THE VICTOR OF THE FINAL ROUND WILL BATTLE.THE.CHAMPION!"

The side of the stage lights up, showing the champion. She stands there, red hair like a flame, alabaster skin, and a face set with grim determination. She catches my eye, looks over at Carina and then throws both of her arms up in the air.

Her "bring it" gesture makes the crowd go wild, and she spins in a circle, giving all of them a chance to bask in her defiant stance.

She comes to a stop right where she started, hands at her side, feet shoulder-width apart, all humor wiped from her face.

This girl is out for blood.

"MYCARINA, ARE YOU READY?!  
THREE.....TWO....ONE.....IT'S YOUR RAP!"

A clock appears on my screen, analog, with the second and minute hands moving slowly across the face. The second hand is pointing at the 12 but starts to make a rapid descent down the curve as time counts down. Carina looks at me, imploringly, but there's nothing I can do. She has to rap, if she doesn't, she'll be killed, that's the rule. It's even worse than losing because at least if you lose, you only get booed off the stage.

I look back at her, circling my right hand in a "come on" gesture.

16....15....14....13

She shakes her head and looks down at her feet, the slump of her

shoulders doing everything to convince me that this is it. She's going to forfeit, die, and spawn who knows where. There is NO way for her to get back to where we are, surely she must know this.

12....11....10....9....8

I put my head in my hands, at a loss for what to do.

*"You thought that you could bring me here  
You thought that you would use my fear  
Pick us off one by one  
Well guess what girl, the game ain't done  
I'm stronger than you thought I'd be  
Because this is about more than me  
You've seen my face, you've seen me frown  
But it don't matter, you're going down."*

The crowd goes wild! I can't even believe it! I pick my head up out of my hands and look at Carina. She's not looking at me or anyone in our group. She's turned her body to face the Champion, letting the red-haired girl know that even if she loses, she wasn't about to go down without a fight.

Our whole group is screaming and yelling. Fist pumps, body bumps, and a whole chorus of "YEAH BOY! IN YOUR FACE! YOU DIDN'T SEE THAT COMING!" erupts from the few that remain.

I'm grinning from ear to ear as well, right up until my platform lights up and the announcer calls my name, telling me it's my rap!

Well heck, maybe I'll be the first to get booed after all.

I take a few seconds to collect my thoughts. The clock is already ticking down, I'm 5 seconds in and don't have a clue how to start. Breathing deep, I attempt to center myself. Why am I here, what do I want to say, what do I want the red-haired girl to know?

*"You can't stop us, though you've been tryin  
We'll still win, and you'll be cryin  
Did you think that we'd be running scared  
That you'd get us here and have us snared  
People, please, we're more than that  
No complaining like a whiny brat  
We've got the guts, we're here to win  
You'll see that when we meet again."*

If I had a mic, I'd drop it! That was great! Way to go me!

I look around, even though I can't see anything. The cheers are loud, almost overwhelming, growing ever louder as the vote bar pops up above our heads. My name is on one side, and Carina's is on the other. The needle swings wildly back and forth, hovering almost dead in the middle. I have a moment to think "Well, at least if I lose, it was close", before the needle pulls over to Carina's side and stays there.

Her platform lights up! We have a winner in the first round!

"MYCARINA IS THE WINNER OF ROUND 1! GET IT, GIRL!"

The announcer releases the barrier on my platform, and I am allowed to walk off the stage under my own steam. The crowd BOOOOO'S me all the way down the stairs.

I can honestly say, I didn't even care.

## Chapter 16

The next few battles go much more quickly, or maybe it just feels like they do since I'm not the one up there on the spot?

As I walk off the stage, I see Adrian take my place on the platform. He looks at Carina as he passes her, giving her a beaming smile and "two thumbs up".

She smiles back at him, her face flushing red all over again, right to the tips of her ears. There's a girl who does not enjoy the spotlight, that's for sure.

The woman catches my eye. She's made her way up an outlying set of stairs that attaches to a platform which runs the perimeter of the room. People can gather up here after they've battled to watch the rest of the competition and check out the trophy that will be given to the last person standing.

I stand by the woman and the trophy, running my hand just slightly above the barrier that prevents anyone from touching it. It's our way out, we have got to win, there's no other alternative.

"You did well," she says, moving closer so I can hear her above the crowd.

"Wait, why didn't you have to rhyme?" I ask the question and then give a little start. "Wait, why don't I have to rhyme?"

"You've already competed, Thomas. The game rules no longer bind you in that regard. In theory, if you were logged in on a computer, you could leave whenever you wanted."

I look around, and I do in fact see previous losers blinking out of existence, moving on to other games if they're not interested in staying here to see who wins.

I'm sure I'd be the same way. As a matter of fact, on the few occasions I have played this game, I don't recall ever winning OR ever staying around to see who did win. I just filed it under "stuff I don't care about".

There's a crackling sound as the announcer finishes with the new contestants. Adrian raps first because the winner is always given the option. Clearly, Carina isn't excited about going through that again.

**"ADRIANTHEFIRST, IT'S YOUR RAP!"**

He wastes no time, no nerves for that guy:

*"Did you see that girl, that's my sister  
She rapped so fast, you might have missed her  
Judge a book by its cover?  
Bad idea, you just discovered  
She might be little, she might be shy  
But she just raised the bar so high  
Get ready red, as you'll soon see*



*You're gonna get beat, but not by me."*

We all cheer and then wait again as the cheers die down. The crowd is pumped now, excited to hear the next thing that'll come out of Carina's mouth. Apparently, she's been hiding some talent under that mostly quiet personality.

**"MYCARINA IT'S YOUR RAP!"**

*"I hate rapping  
You should know  
If I could skip it  
Off I'd go  
But since I can't  
I hope you'll find  
That his rap  
Was better than mine."*

I laugh, that was pretty good. The voting bar pops up above their head, this time along with two buttons on either side of my screen. If I press the right one, I vote for Adrian. If I press the left one, I vote for Carina. I REALLY want to vote for Carina, if for no other reason than to bolster her confidence, but I get what's she's telling us. She's done up there, she wants to come down, and so I vote for Adrian.

It doesn't matter, the needle does hover briefly in the middle, but in short order, it falls over to Carina's side. She looks up at the bar, "are you kidding me!" written plainly on her face.

Adrian's barrier comes up, the BOOOO's start all over again, and he walks off the stage, making a show of pumping his fists in the air as he passes Carina's platform.

"SHE'S ON FIRE, PEOPLE! LET'S BRING IN OUR NEXT CONTENDER! MYNAMEISJED CAN YOU DO IT?!? HAVE YOU GOT WHAT IT TAKES??"

Jed takes the stage. He's moving so fast that I have no doubt there's no AI controlling his ascent to the stage. He wants to be here. He lives for this game! My brother is officially 100% in his element.

Jumping onto his platform, the barrier snaps down, and the whole process repeats. No really, almost exactly, we get to see it all again. This time, Carina opts to start out, maybe hoping her rap will seem lame after Jed raps, I'm not sure.

*“Really guys, are you insane?  
I don’t even like to play this game!  
I don’t want to be up here  
Send your vote on over there!  
That little kid is WAY better than me  
Just listen to him, and you’ll soon see!  
Hear me now and understand  
Vote for Jed, he’s your man!”*

I laugh, elbowing Adrian who has made his way up to us on the platform. “Who knew she could do that? I mean, really!”

He looks down at the stage. By the look on his face, I know he could not be more proud of her. “Yeah, she kept that from all of us. I guess I should vote for Jed this round so she can get off the stage.”

“Good luck with that,” I tell him, “I tried it last time, no dice. The crowd likes what they like.”

Our conversation is interrupted by the announcer:

“MYNAMEISJED, I THINK YOU’VE GOT YOUR WORK CUT OUT FOR YOU, BUT....IT’S YOUR RAP!”

*“I don’t even know what to say  
Quite honestly, I’m blown away  
Sure she’s good, but this is my game  
I’ll be the winner, I’ll have the fame  
Sorry, C, I mean no offense  
But if you win this time, the crowd is dense  
My rhymes are lit, hers are dead  
Do the right thing and vote for Jed.”*

Well, points for him getting right to it, but like I told you when I said we got to watch it all happen again.....

“MYCARINA WINS!” The announcer booms.

“Did you vote for her?” I look toward Adrian, he’s shaking his head.

“No, I didn’t,” he laughs, “I guess she’s got a fan base.”

Carina, for her part, looks hugely exasperated. Dirk walks by her platform, the last of our group to compete and she glares at him like he’s responsible for her still being up there somehow.

The announcer calls her name, letting everyone know she has decided to rap first:

*“I’ve got nothing, what do you want?  
This game is stupid, and that’s a taunt!  
You guys are dumb, stop voting for me*

*My raps are bad, can't you see?  
Whatever, it's fine, do what you will  
I'll be here, just acting chill  
If I win, I win, that's okay  
It's just about over, anyway"*

The crowd cheers, apparently they love it when people put them down, who knew? I have no doubt Jed will try that himself sometime soon.

We all turn toward Dirk's platform when the announcer brings him up as the final contestant. The stage goes dark, the platform lights up, and all we see is him, standing there, hands clasped behind his back.

*"There's no accounting for good taste  
Voting for her is such a waste  
She doesn't want to win, don't you see  
Do the right thing, vote for me  
This girl right here, the one in red  
She wants to kill us, she wants us dead  
We've got to beat her, no matter what  
So do your part and send me up."*

The crowd doesn't cheer after this, if anything, they seem confused. Is it a game, is it real, what's going on? Our buttons appear on the screen, I click on Dirk's name then look up, watching the arrow wiggle back and forth between their names.

It lands, it stops, he wins.  
It all comes down to Dirk.

## Chapter 17

Carina exits the stage. The booing doesn't even bother her. She puts her hand up, bending it at the elbow and giving the crowd a perfect princess wave.

I can just hear her saying "bye now, buh-bye, okay, buh-bye" as she saunters into the darkness.

The lights are down on the crowd again, so I can't see her path. I assume she'll be up here with us in a minute or two, so I bring my attention back to the stage.

The Champion stands where she's been the entire time, at the edge of the stage. She's situated almost perfectly between the two challenger platforms, but slightly above so that if you were to draw a line from each person, you'd make a triangle.

"YOU'VE SEEN HER FACE, YOU'VE HEARD HER RHYME, AND YOU KNOW THAT HER HAIR ISN'T THE ONLY THING THAT LETS YOU KNOW SHE'S ON FIRE! GIVE IT UP FOR THE CHAMPION, THE ONE TO BEAT, THE UNBEATABLE.....MAD.....MARY.....RED!!!"

The announcer's voice makes the crowd go wild! It's such a change from 30 seconds ago when Dirk was trying to tell them about the danger we face.

Either they don't believe it, they don't care, or they can't wait to see what happens if Dirk loses. It's probably a combination of all three things, sadists.

MadMaryRed steps off of her holding platform as the barrier pops and fizzles into non-existence. It's like soap bubbles disintegrating in the air when the pressure becomes too much for the filmy layer to bear.

She raises her arms, already victorious, palms up, fingers splayed, her mouth open on a scream of superiority that I can't hear over the crowd, but am still sure is happening.

"MA-RY! MA-RY! MA-RY!"

They cheer as one, undulating in a human wave as their shoulders pump and flex, pushing their arms into the air as high as possible before coming back down to cheer again.

She grins, waving and blowing kisses as she crosses the short distance to the first platform. Stepping up on to it, she gives one final wave before the barrier comes back down and the lights go out.

"Do you think he'll win?" Carina asks the question from somewhere behind me and off to the side. "How long has this girl been the Champion? Everyone here seems to know her pretty well."

"That doesn't mean anything," Jed chimes in, crowding in closer to the

group, “if you play this game, your name goes on a leaderboard. When you win, the game keeps track, same as if you lose. Her being up there doesn’t mean she’s better than any other contestant, it just means she’s had the most wins since she logged in. Don’t pay attention to the crowd. They can hit buttons and cheer. It doesn’t take much effort.”

I look back at the stage, seeing her in a new light, but still, I’m nervous. This is all or nothing for us. If Dirk doesn’t win, he’ll be the one walking off that platform and down the stairs.

As though triggered by my thoughts, the section of walkway directly in front of the trophy opens up, the handrails sliding back. What’s left is a three-foot-wide gap. Whoever wins this round will be elevated to the new entry where they will claim the trophy among tons of fanfare, confetti, and screaming fans.

Turning, I look at the woman, needing some reassurance.

“What happens if he doesn’t win?”

She shakes her head in a contrary motion. “If he doesn’t win, we can only hope Andrew gets to The Company before they find us in this game. And since that girl is already here,” she gestures down to MadMaryRed, “I’m going to say that they’ve already figured it out. They can’t touch us right now since the competition is going on, but once it’s over, once she’s off that stage, all bets are off.”

We all look down at Dirk, the fate of our world rests on his shoulders. I find myself worrying for him. He’ll be the closest to her when the competition ends. Will she go after him somehow? We all have to be touching for the woman to jump us to the next game, but what happens if “Mary” tries to prevent that? Does she even know what our plan is?

“There’s nothing we can do now,” Adrian says, looking down at me, “if Dirk doesn’t win, we’ll go from there, but right now, stop borrowing trouble. I can see you overthinking it.”

“He’ll do fine,” Carina says, “he had them eating out of his hand, or at least he had them paying attention. Remember, Dirk has been manipulating people for a long time.”

“If only he’d use his powers for good,” Jed says, laughing.

Well, I think this time he’s not going to have a choice.

The stage lights go dark. Behind us, the light and barrier surrounding the gleaming gold trophy glows ever brighter, so bright that I swear I can feel heat radiating against my back. Music starts in a pulsing beat, THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP, and once again, the crowd roars. Lights flash in a quick line above our heads creating a dazzling display that directs your eyes toward the challenger platforms.

THUMP!

Dirk’s platform lights up.

THUMP!

MadMary's platform lights up.

The final challenge is ready to begin.

"IT'S WINNER TAKES ALL, MY FRIENDS! THE TROPHY IS WAITING, BUT WHO IS GONNA TAKE IT HOME?!?!? MADMARYRED, IT'S YOUR RAP!"

Dirk's platform goes dark as MadMary's platform moves to center stage, bringing her right along with it as it hovers just a few inches above the floor. She stays still, face downturned, hands hanging loosely at her sides.

Above us, the clock appears, 30 seconds and counting down. She wastes no time. Her rhymes slip from her tongue like water off a duck's back.

*"You had your chance to do the right thing  
But you couldn't see the changes we'd bring  
You think you've got some grand plan  
Well let me give you a helping hand  
All your effort will be for not  
Nothing will turn out like you thought  
You're never leaving, you see that right?  
I hope you hugged your parents tight."*

She looks out at the crowd as she finishes, but I can tell by the way she smirks that she's not expecting anyone to cheer. Looking up, she finds my eyes, then looks past me to the woman. Cocking her thumb and forefinger like a gun, she makes a shooting motion, just like the woman did to her earlier.

"YOU HEARD THE LADY! THAT'S GONNA BE HARD TO BEAT!"

Dirk's platform moves to center stage. He looks much the same as MadMary did, only he's standing straight, looking out toward the crowd as though he can see them. His hands are once again clasped behind his back. The clock comes up, the red hand begins ticking down, and Dirk lets it run, waiting, it seems, but I don't know what he's waiting for.

"Come on, come on," Carina whispers behind me, "what's he doing?"

I shake my head. I'm the last person to ask about the inner workings of that dude's mind.

"Be ready," the woman says, "whether he wins or loses, they won't let him go without a fight."

"Who won't let him go? There's nothing she can do, right? If she loses, then he'll get the trophy, and we just have to be touching each other for you to Jump us. So if we just stay here, it'll be alright, right?"

I feel like I'm saying "right" a lot, but heck, I need some reassurance!

"Just be ready," she says, linking her fingers through mine. Reaching

over, I grab Carina's hand. She grabs Adrian's. With his free hand, he grabs Jed. We're standing there, a united front when Dirk starts to rap.



*"I see where you're going with this  
Tell me, is your ignorance bliss?  
I didn't get this far on looks alone  
It's time you toppled off that throne  
Whatever you've planned, it won't work  
I'm way more than a handsome jerk  
I've got your number, you don't got mine  
Look quick, you're bout to get left behind"*

On that last sentence, he turns and smacks a hand down on his preppy pants covered butt.

No lie, it's epic.

We don't even wait for the announcer to tell us to vote. As one we reach up, mashing the button on the side of the screen. The crowd looks confused, unsure of what to do.

"We're losing them, do something!" Jed is beside me, tugging at my arm and yelling in his still high pitched little kid voice. Taking a chance, I start chanting "DIRK, DIRK, DIRK, DIRK!", And, as crowds are wont to do, everyone around me picks up the cheer. The meter rises above the stage. The needle hardly sits in the middle at all before flattening out firmly on Dirk's side.

He takes no time at all to bask in his win. Instead, the moment his platform begins to rise toward the trophy, he steps as close as he can to the edge without touching the barrier. It seems to take forever to move toward where we are, and I keep a side eye on the now defeated Champion. She bolts off her platform as soon as the barrier comes up, racing toward the steps of the suspended catwalk.

"She's coming, she's coming," Carina is whispering to our group, frantic as she pulls us backward, as close to the trophy as we can get. Dirk's platform reaches the edge, his barrier vanishes, and he steps forward, immediately taking Jed's free hand in a tight grip. With his other hand, he reaches out toward the trophy, easily pushing past its barrier and wrapping his fingers around the curved, S-shaped handle.

MadMary pounds up the stairs, taking two steps at a time and leaping the last 3 to hit the catwalk running. People yell and point as she shoves them out of the way, throwing elbows, pushing them with both hands, and even, for one unlucky player, kicking him right in the back of the knees and then walking over his body.

"That girl is seriously scary," I murmur, and the others nod in assent.

"Give me the trophy," the woman says, holding her hand out. Dirk passes it toward her, and for one brief moment, we're a circle, each connected to the other, with the trophy completing our link.

"I know where you're going!" MadMary is yelling behind us. "I know where you're going! You won't get out of here. You'll never get away from

us! You can run, but I'm gonna find you!" She almost sings the last part, a creepy, haunting melody that I'll never scrub from my brain.

“I’mmmm gonnaaaa finnnndddd youoooooooo.....”

Then we're falling, and the singing stops.

## Chapter 18

“What is that awful music?” Dirk hasn’t said anything about winning in Auto Rap Battle, but he’s definitely in “Dirk Form” right now. He’s currently complaining about the odd, pipe organ sounding music we’re being subjected to as the screen loads.

“It’s a sea shanty,” Jed says, excited. “It’s my favorite game! I love this game! We’re going to build the best boat ever!”

“What’s he talking about?” Adrian looks from Jed to me, like I have the answers.

I do, but so does Jed, and he beats me to the punch. “It’s a shipbuilding game! We build a boat, the water rises, and we hope it floats. It’s so fun!”

Jed is way too excited about this. I mean, I get it, sort of, but how he thinks that us building a ship and hoping it floats in rising water is a good idea, I’m not entirely sure. I don’t want to burst his bubble though, so I just smile and nod my head. It doesn’t matter what I think anyway. We’re here, we’re in the game, we’re going to have to play the game, so there’s no point in getting bothered.

“Well, this is stupid!” Dirk clearly thinks there’s a point in getting bothered. It makes me smile.

“We have to play by the rules,” the woman reminds us, as though we’d forgotten, “but this is the last game, or at least it should be. Andrew should be getting very close to The Company campus. Just a couple more hours and we’ll be able to leave. You’ve never been closer.”

I can see the sun rising on a sandy horizon in the distance. It’s all beach, no water, and no end in sight, just packed sand as far as the eye can see. There are bits and pieces of shipwrecks all over the place. Players run around scavenging what they can, fighting with each other, and even tearing each other’s ships apart to get pieces they need.

“Is that what’s going to happen to us?” I indicate the group of players currently waging war on one another and look at Jed.

He looks to where I’m pointing, then starts vigorously nodding his head. “Yep, they can be pretty ruthless. They’re on a team though. If they weren’t on a team, they wouldn’t be able to do that.”

“They’re on a team??” Carina sounds incredulous, and I don’t blame her. “What kind of teamwork is that? Why aren’t they working together?”

“Well, if you don’t have a few players in a group, the game automatically puts you on teams so that you don’t run out of material. Most of the time, the team doesn’t agree on how the ship should be built, so stuff like that happens. It’s a flaw in the game, but still, I like it.”

“Okay, since we’re all together, the game isn’t going to give us any extra people, right?” I look around, trying to figure out how we know who all

is on our team, but I can't tell.

"Yeah, that's right, we're on a team, I'm the leader, so I can see the team name and everyone in it."

"Ooooooh," Carina squeals, "we have a team name? What is it? Can I change it?"

"No, you can't change it, I'm the team leader, I'm the only one who can change it, and I'm not going to."

I look around, trying to figure out the team name when my eyes land on some text floating above Jed's head.

MYNAMEISJED

<I Farted>

"Is that it? I ask, pointing at the words beneath his gamertag. I farted?"

"OMG Thomas, gross!" Carina walks away from me, hands over her face.

I stare at her, trying to figure out what she's going on about.

"Well, did you fart or did you not fart?" Dirk is looking at me like I'm disgusting, but that's nothing new.

"No, I didn't fart! Is it even possible to fart in Roblox? I was talking about Jed's team name, look under his gamertag!"

These people, seriously.

\*BRRRRAPPPPPP\*

The unmistakable sound of flatulence fills the air. It's so realistic. I want to shout out "Whoever did that needs to check his drawers!"

"To answer your question," Jed says, "yes, it is possible to fart in Roblox."

I should have known....

He starts to tell me how to do it, "Just type a backslash and then type in what you want to do, so type in...."

"I get it! I don't want to fart! Can we just get on with this!??!"

My head is going to explode. I don't even have to worry about getting out of this game because my head is literally going to explode.

The woman comes to my rescue. "Jed, please start the game, we need to get going if we're going to meet up with Andrew."

"We're meeting up with him? I thought he would just open our laptops and we'd come out of the screen wherever he was?" I look around, trying to figure out how we'll do that if we're in the middle of the ocean. Surely it's not like we can just walk over the side of the boat and go through the screen, not unless he was really zoomed in. Even then, if we were sloshing around on a boat, it might not work.

"Yes, we're building a ship and going to the other side of the map. Once we get there, Andrew will be waiting for us. He has some beacons he'll

have to toss in, one for each of you. Eat those, and you'll have the coding to leave the game, then out you go."

Jed clicks something on his screen and the music changes, a new, upbeat shanty about some guy named Johnny and how he should "leave her". Who he is or who he's leaving, I don't know, but within 30 seconds I'm singing that song, and I know it'll never leave my brain.

Building materials appear in front of us in a selectable box. Right away we start working, laying planks, securing posts, attaching sails and in general being really fantastic seafarers. A couple of times some people from the other teams come over to look at what we're doing, but they can't interact with us, so we just ignore them.

"Hurry up. It's almost time for the tide to rise!" Jed is running around the edge of the ship looking for spots that don't meet up, places that might let in water, etc. Apparently, he doesn't find any because he hops aboard the ship, gestures for us to follow him and then sits down in the captain's chair and waits.

Three loud horn blasts sound, BWAAAAAAA..... BWAAAAAAA..... BWAAAAAAA.

The boat starts to tip and tilt, only a little at first, so slight that I think I might be imagining it until I look down and see the water rising all around us. Clinging to the edge, I wonder if you can get seasick in Roblox. I don't want to find out. Usually, I'm fine on boats, but they're big boats, more like cruise ship type boats, okay cruise ships, I'm fine on cruise ships.

Little boats.....it can be hit or miss. Sometimes I fish, sometimes I provide the chum.

"Look at the horizon, Thomas," Jed yells from the captain's chair, making sure everyone knows my humiliation. "If you look at the horizon you're so much less likely to barf!"

Carina, true to form, gives me a sympathetic look and then moves away, far, far, away.

## Chapter 19

“Dirk, where did you learn to rap so well?”

It’s something I’ve been thinking about. He said he’d never played that particular game before, so I don’t think he’s been practicing in front of his bedroom mirror before bedtime. I can picture it, though. Dirk, with his scrawny legs encased in a pair of red plaid pajama pants, swinging his hips and thinking about how white his teeth are as he sings into his hairbrush microphone.

“Whatever you’re thinking about,” he says, glancing at me as he turns away from the side of the boat, “stop”.

“Well, tell us then,” Carina says, “are you a poet and we just didn’t know it?”

Jed laughs at her lame joke and they high-five each other across the deck.

“I suppose that’s as good an explanation as any,” he says, shrugging. “Let’s see. I’ve lived my entire memorable life in a boarding school. I don’t have a knack for making friends, and I spent a lot of time alone.”

He looks around the group, daring anyone to make a smarmy comment. None of us do.

I think the realization of how life must have been for him is finally setting in. It doesn’t excuse his actions, not at all, but it maybe makes me realize why he would have joined that stupid Roblox group. What would I give or do in order to feel like I fit in somewhere? I don’t like to think about it, but I imagine I’d do a lot.

“So, you made up rhymes in your free time?” Carina isn’t going to let it go. I’m glad she’s asking, so I just nod, like I was going to ask the same question.

“No, nothing like that. I spent a lot of time in my room reading, but I was limited to the books in the school library. Since I had absolutely no interest in the fiction the other kids seemed to love so much. I found myself checking out classics, much of which was poetry.”

He turns away from our inquisitive stares and looks out across the sea. “How long have we got? Will we see Andrew or will he just drop the beacons down to us?”

The woman steps forward and places her hand on his shoulder. It’s not much by way of maternal gestures, but after being in this game for so many years, I’m sure it’s the best she can do.

“He’ll drop the beacons in when he opens the laptop. We do need to be on dry land though; else you won’t be able to walk through the screen.”

The way she says “you” gives me pause. “Aren’t you coming with us? I mean, you’re coming out of the game, right? Now that we’re here and safe,

can't you come out and help us?"

She looks at me, shaking her head. "No, I'm not coming out. Not until it's all done and The Company has been destroyed. Until then, I'll be here, waiting for you, just in case."

For some reason, this makes me feel a little bit sad. She's my biological mother, but she's a complete stranger. I guess I was hoping that would change, that being with her in here would help me get to know her. We're almost out though, and I don't know anything more about her than the very little she's told us. Her actions aren't that of a mother. It makes sense that my feelings would not be that of a son. I have a mom, she's waiting for me back home, and that's that.

"What will happen to Dirk once we're done?" Jed is looking at me when he asks this, as though I have the answers. "Will he have to go back to that school? Will he go live with Andrew?"

Dirk scowls. He doesn't want us talking about this, talking about him as though he's something to be pitied. "We'll figure that out once we've done what we need to do. I've got more money than I could spend in a lifetime. If I throw enough at that stupid school, they'll take me back. I do not doubt it."

Jed is still staring at me. He wants me to solve this, to do something, but I don't know what to do, and even if I did, I'm only 12, it's not my decision to make. Still, I know for sure that if I told Mom and Dad that we had a brother, they'd take him in a heartbeat.

He could have a family.

Only, that family would be me.

Do I really want to sign up for that?

What kind of a terrible person am I if I don't sign up for it?

I look down at Jed, nodding. I'll take care of it, one way or another, Dirk won't be alone again, even if that means I have to share a bedroom with him for the next six years.

"Land! There's land!"

Adrian is yelling and pointing over the bow of the ship. We all rush forward, causing the deck to tip and sway under the shifting weight. Sure enough, barely visible and still quite far away, there's an island.

My stomach lurches, for a second I think I must be having anxiety over finally getting out of this game. It would make sense. After all, we're about to be back in the real world, with real bodies and real people who definitely do not want us doing what we're about to do.

"I'm gonna be sick," Jed says, darting toward the side. He doesn't make it. The ship gives a mighty heave, and we're all knocked about. Jed lands awkwardly on his butt, and I stumble over to him to make sure he's not hurt. His health bar is a nasty shade of yellow, almost the same color as his face. I'm not worried. I know that if we go without injury long enough, it'll

build back up.

“It’s a storm,” Carina says, pointing toward the sky with one hand as she hangs on tightly to one of the mast ropes with the other hand.

We look up. The sky has turned a ghastly shade of black. Bloated, mottled clouds blot out the sun entirely as the wind picks up. It begins whistling past our ears and adding a high pitched whine to the deep, rumbling roar of the waves beneath our feet.

“They’re here,” the woman says, keeping her eyes on the island. “MadMary must have seen the loading screen when we Jumped out. She must have told them where to find us.”

“What do we do?!” Adrian is looking at the water as though he’s ready to jump in and swim the rest of the way. We’d never make it! The waves are so high now that they’re cresting over the lip of our boat, spewing water onto the decks and making out footing even more precarious.

“Just hang on tight, do not fall over!” The woman issues orders in a crisp, no-nonsense voice, glaring at each of us, in turn, to make sure we all get the idea. “Understand me now! If you fall in, you will die!”

I nod and sit down on the deck, putting my arm around Jed’s shoulders. The ship heaves again, and we both start to slide toward the back where water is gushing in torrents over the stern. It’s like the world’s most horrific waterslide. No matter how much I dig my feet in, I can’t stop the momentum. Jed and I both flail out our arms, scrabbling for purchase on anything attached to the ship, but our fingers are wet, and it all just slips right through.

Suddenly, we lurch to a stop, just a few feet from where we surely would have been tossed into the raging waters. Looking behind me, I see Dirk holding Jed’s wrist, keeping him in place. Dirk has hold of the main wooden mast, but I can tell that it’s taking all of his effort to keep us with him.

“Don’t let go!” I scream it at him, trying to be heard above the wind and lashing rain. It stings my eyes, clogs my ears, and obliterates everything that’s not more than 3 feet in front of my face.

Scrambling, I let go of Jed and place my hands and knees on the deck. I grab Jed again and begin to haul him toward Dirk. The combined effort of us moving and Dirk pulling gets us to the mast. We stay seated with our backs to the massive wooden pole, and then link arms, forming a small, three-man circle.

I look around, trying to see Carina, Adrian, or the woman, but I can’t see anyone, and I can’t hear anything other than the wind, waves, and rain. Parts of the ship start to shatter and crack, the material not being able to handle the beating of the storm.

The more of the ship that pulls away, the more water comes over the sides. We don’t have much time, and I don’t know what to do.

Briefly, the sky seems to clear, a short reprieve in the storm. Looking



up, I can't believe my eyes.

"It's Andrew! He's opening our devices!" I shout as loud as I can, hoping everyone will hear me.

There is an opening in the sky now. I can see Andrew's face. He looks concerned. Actually, he looks more than concerned, he looks terrified. His gaze alternates between looking at us and glancing over his shoulder, as though he's expecting unwanted company at any moment.

I try to see past him, wanting to know where we'll be coming out, but I can't really tell where he is. I think I see giant test tubes, but it could just be that that's the only part of The Company I've seen. Maybe when Kat was showing us what happened to her.

Andrew is talking to us, but he's not in the channel, so we can't hear him. I squint my eyes, focusing on his mouth, trying to lip read as much as I can.

"Eat.The.Beacons!"

"He's telling us to eat the beacons!" I shout again, looking to see if anyone else realizes his intentions.

"What beacons? Where are they?!" Adrian yells back, and I'm so relieved to hear his voice, to know that they didn't fall overboard.

Andrew's points up, and we follow his gesture. Above our heads, a great, white bird flies into view. It's an enormous pelican. The bulging orange beak wobbles as it flies, swooping and dipping as it does its best to dodge the spraying water and buffeting winds.

Once over our ship, the pelican dives, opening its beak and dropping five tiny goldfish onto the deck. They flop and hop, little gills gasping for air as they do everything they can to get back into the water.

"The beacons! Get them!" The woman's voice brings us all back to the task at hand, and we begin scrambling toward the small pile of brightly colored fish.

"I can't eat one! I can't eat one!" Carina is yelling, over and over again, as though it'll make a difference.

"You can and you will!" Adrian reaches down, grabbing a goldfish and thrusting it toward his sister. "It's just a slice of orange, eat it!"

She looks at it, horror written all over her face as she contemplates what she must do.

I reach forward, scooping three fish into my hands. Turning back, I try to hand one each to Jed and Dirk, but the waves heave again, more forceful than ever before, and the ship begins to capsize. The sea rushes up toward us as we all slide to the side, narrowly catching ourselves on the lip of the deck.

Ahead of us, I hear Carina screaming, and my eyes bug out in helpless horror as I watch her slide off the deck, her trajectory taking her right to a part of the lip that has been cracked away by the pounding waves.

“No! Carina!” Adrian is yelling after her, hanging over his own small piece of the lip as he searches for her. He looks up at us, his eyes pleading for our understanding as he jumps from the lip into the water, trying to save his sister.

“No!” Dirk, Jed, and I all yell in unison. He’s gone! She’s gone! What are we going to do!?

I look over at the woman, somehow standing fairly solidly on the deck of the ship. As I watch her, the waves push us back to center for a moment, but I know that’s not the end of it.

“What do we do?!” Yelling in her direction, I wait for her to answer, but she doesn’t. She just looks at us, helpless.

“There’s nothing you can do. The beacons are here. It’s been set into motion. You’ve got to wake up now. Do you understand? You’ve got to wake up now.”

I look at Jed and Dirk, trying to figure out if they know what she means, but they just shake their heads at me as they adjust their positions, trying to get a better grip on what’s left of the ship.

“What do you mean? I am awake! We are awake!”

The woman raises her hand, a gesture that says “goodbye” and then she starts to pixelate and disappear, bit by bit until there’s nothing left of her.

Another brutal round of waves batters the ship, pushing the deck toward the water once again. I thrust my hands toward Dirk and Jed, offering them the goldfish. Dirk grabs one, the other gives a heroic flop and jumps from his hands, disappearing into the sea.

I’m stunned. It’s gone, the beacon is gone. I have one. Dirk has one, Jed has none.

It’s not even a choice, between my brother and I, I choose my brother.

Reaching out, I grab his wrist, opening his palm to put my fish in it. He jerks his hand away, the slippery ocean water letting him easily break my grasp.

“No! You eat it! You eat it!”

“Jed, so help me! If you don’t take this, I will...”

With a \*CRACK\* the main mast snaps at the base. I’m clinging to it, holding on with all my might, free arm extended toward my brother. Time seems to stop for a moment. I’m holding on, but the thing I’m holding on to isn’t holding on anymore. I look from Dirk to Jed and then I’m jerked, forcefully, off the deck, into the churning sea.

Water fills my lungs, and I kick my legs, propelling myself back to the surface. I can see the ship, still at that terrible angle. Dirk and Jed are yelling, looking at me, frantic. The waves push me further and further away, but there’s nothing I can do.

Dirk stares at me, his face a mix of anger, sadness, and determination.

I see him grab Jed by the shoulders and yell something at him. Jed stills, looks out toward me again, and then nods. I see Dirk hand him the goldfish, the only surviving beacon, and I see Jed put it in his mouth.

He disappears, the ship completes its capsize, Dirk vanishes into the black depths, and I die.

GAME OVER

## Epilogue Wake Up

I suck in a breath, but there's no air, only water.

My lungs burn as I kick and thrash, trying to propel myself to the surface. My arms and legs hit something, so I turn, trying again.

Again, my arms and legs meet resistance. I open my eyes, but the world around me is blurry, and I can't focus.

Splaying my hands in front of me, I feel for the resistance and push against it. It's smooth, cool, and I can tell that it's curved as I run my fingers from side to side. Once again, I squeeze my eyes shut and open them. This time, I see a little more, light filters in, the water is clear.

Beyond my watery cage, it's blurry. Nothing but splotches of colored, blinking spots, and indistinct shapes.

**\*WHOMP! WHOMP! WHOMP!\***

I turn my head, refocusing my gaze on a human-shaped shadow in front of me. Hands pound on the transparent, curved material. I can see them as they land, the peachy white skin flattens out against the glass with each hit.

**\*WHOMP! WHOMP! WHOMP!\***

There is yelling, very loud yelling, and it sounds familiar, like someone I should know.

"Wake up Jed. You have to wake up! Wake up Jed, wake up!"

With one last effort, I push my feet on the bottom of my cage, propelling myself above the surface. It's only a brief glimpse, but it's enough.

There are man-sized test tubes all around me, and it all comes rushing back.

I know where I am.

It's time to wake up.

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