

Failure Is Not An Option



By
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***This book is dedicated to the
Wonderful hamsters
Coconut, Timmy, Katie, DJ, Cupcake, and Prince
Who selflessly put others first***

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Chapter 1: Eluding

The sword sliced through the air towards me. I quickly dodged out of the way and brought my arm up in a quick motion, catching my opponent off guard. However, he quickly recovered and jabbed both of his swords forward in a quick, violent motion. I could almost feel the cold steel as it flashed under my nose. *Whew, those swords were way too close. Time to take some more aggressive action.* I did a scissor-spin with a type of upper-tornado to confuse him as I executed a perfect calf-snap to knock his legs out from under him - just as his swords flashed over my head. I had to quickly duck to get out of the way, which caught *me* off balance and landed me on the ground, *hard*. With a menacing sneer, my opponent raised his sword over his head to finish me off.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

You may wonder how in the world I got myself into this kind of trouble. I mean, what normal kid gets attacked by a crazed assassin? Not a normal one, that's for sure. Then again, I have never been a *normal* kid. Now that I think about it, neither have my parents (been normal parents, I mean).

My mother, Tanya Decotu Hwang, is half Japanese - half American and grew up as an orphan in Japan while my father, Tokero Viro Hwang, grew up in a large family in China. I knew a lot more of Dad's past. I guess his father was a missionary from America and met his mother in Beijing. They hit it off and married, living in Beijing for all their lives. When my father was 20, he got a job working for a weapons company in China but was unfortunately fired when he discovered major military misuse by the Chinese government. He escaped to America, where he started his own small weapons company. Using his knowledge of high-tech weapons and his new wife's marketing skills, Tokero has launched a massive weapons company.

After establishing their company in California, my parents moved up to Troutdale, Oregon to establish a new headquarters and research center. That is where I was born and raised. It was now the last day of school, and I was veritably itching to get outside and have my summer begin - for three reasons! Number one: what kid doesn't want the school year to be over? Number two: I have a serious deficiency in social interaction, so I wanted to do something fun for once. I saw all the other kids at my school laughing and hanging out in the front lawn or getting on the bus, but the only person I ever talked to was myself, and you can see how fun that was! Number three: Some relatives on my dad's side were coming to visit us, and I had never met a single relative in person. I quickly exited the main lobby of my school and walked over to the crowded parking lot. The school didn't have any motorcycle parking lots yet, so I had just parked my custom-Ninja on the sidewalk near a parking space. I'll probably talk more about my motorcycle later, but basically, I always ride a really sleek, customized one to school every day, which is virtually the only fun thing I get to do on a normal school day. I'm sure all the rest of the kids at my school think it is pretty awesome too, but they never come up and tell

me so. Oh well, at least I can impress myself. As I jumped onto my motorcycle and warmed up the engine, I thought back to what I knew about my visiting relatives, or at least what little I did know. It was a huge deal for them to come over, because they lived all the way in China. They have the only cousin I know of: Xen (pronounced "Zhen"). I think he is a tad older than me, but I really don't remember, and my dad hasn't kept amazing contact with his siblings so we really don't know how they got a hold of our phone number. Whatever the case, one day the phone rang, and my uncle was on it telling us they were all coming over for a visit today, and that they wanted to know where we lived. A little sudden perhaps, but cool nonetheless.

I roared down the street towards home, a little faster than is probably legal, but I was excited in more than one way. The one thing I did know about my relatives was that Xen is a sword-fighting master. He learned his skills in an elite training center in Beijing. After my dad heard about his sword-fighting-prowess, I read a few Chinese articles on him. I was hoping that he would show me some of his techniques, and I could show him some of my martial arts moves. When I drove up to my house, I noticed the blue Honda sitting there. *Oh no! They're already here, and my school didn't let me out in time!* I eased my motorcycle into the garage next to my parents' vehicles and barged through the backdoor. I could see everyone out on the back patio, so I tore up the stairs to my house's second floor and dumped my backpack on the floor of my bedroom. Then, just as quickly, I flew back down and halted behind the patio door. Checking my appearance in the shiny reflection of the nearby fridge, I patted down my hair and adjusted my leather motorcycle jacket. Then, I smoothly opened the patio door and made my grand entrance, trying my best to look cool and calculating (and not the least bit out of breath or socially awkward or nervous like I was feeling). I strutted out and leaned my arm on the top of a patio chair.

"Hello, Kai!" my aunt said, "How are you?"

"Good thank you," I replied. My dad introduced me to my aunt, a shorter lady; my uncle, a more muscular man; and my cousin, a well-built 20ish kid with fiery eyes and a buzz cut as his hairstyle. We did some small talk for awhile before Dad announced that my parents and Xen's were going out to eat together and that Xen and I should stay home and get to know each other. I nodded politely and waved goodbye as they drove out in the blue Honda. When they disappeared around the corner, I looked at Xen, and he looked at me.

"Hey, uh, I heard you are good with swordplay. Could you show me some moves?" I began. Xen shrugged and yanked his two swords out of the scabbard on his back (which I thought was kind of weird. Who keeps their swords with them ALL THE TIME?!) I watched carefully as he "danced" his swords through the air. Though I have never done much swordplay, I have always enjoyed watching sword fights on television.

"Can I hold one of your swords?" I finally asked when he finished demonstrating a block and parry.

"Depends on what you are going to do with it," replied Xen.

“Well, let’s see. I am going to summon my extraordinary and largely unknown sword skills, attack you, and throw you off this back patio deck,” I laughed. “Of course not! I just want to know what it feels like to wield one of those things. I have always wanted to be as good as the pirates you see in movies all the time.”

Xen shrugged again and tossed me one. “Sure, but remember - when it comes to swords, I’m your man!”

I carefully studied how the blade was inserted into the handle. It appeared to be a relatively new blade - very strong and sharp, but the handle was what intrigued me. It appeared to be a polished kind of petrified wood, with a swirly kind of symbol inscribed on one side and well-worn figure indentations all around it.

“What does this symbol mean?” I asked, pointing to the swirly figure.

“That?” Xen asked. He suddenly became *very* fidgety. “Oh, um, I don’t know. I have no idea!”

“Oh. I mean, I thought that since you *are* the sword guy after all, you would know, but hey, no prob. I didn’t mean to get you upset.”

“Just shut up!”

“Okay, okay, calm down.”

“I’m calm, you’re not!”

“Well pardon me, but it certainly would appear that you are the one who is all worked up,” I finally edged in.

Suddenly, Xen lunged at me with his sword. My instincts kicked in, and I dived out of the way, the sword in my hand clanging to the ground. As soon as it hit the patio, Xen scooped it up with a lunging swoop. I had no idea what had gotten into him.

“Whoa! What’s the problem?” I said. Xen didn’t reply - unless you count a generous dual-sword swing in my direction. I could hear the air throb as the swords flashed by. When that happened, I struck out with a wind-smash and a fake-die that ended with a wipe-spin.

See, my mom is a black belt in karate; she started teaching it to me when I was very young, and I became a black belt when I was 13. I also mastered judo and a dozen or so other forms of martial arts by the time I was 15. At this point, I stopped attending all but the largest contests because I easily whipped all of my opponents, and my room was becoming rather crowded with medals and trophies. Anyway, I decided to invent my own form of martial arts. I call it slice-whip. Using a combination of moves from all of the martial arts I have mastered, I have created an extremely effective and personally tailored form that has proven very satisfactory, even enabling me to beat armed assassins, which I would count Xen as at the moment. I had to be very careful though as many of the moves (if not properly executed) could seriously harm my opponent. Additionally, I doubt my uncle and aunt would be excited if I killed their son.

Anyway, these martial arts moves surprised Xen and gave me the element of surprise. He countered with a bunch of well-aimed swings, but the swords only met air as I nimbly

dodged out of the way. This continued on for a while, him trying to get at me and me barely managing to stay out of his way. By this time, I should have just called the police, but I was mad at him and wanted to show him that his sword skills were nothing compared to my martial art skills. With that, I performed a very risky move, a sharp dive to his feet with a back feet slam to follow it up. Amazingly, I avoided certain death by sword and toppled Xen to the ground. I quickly put his arms into an incredibly painful lock and knocked the swords away. Then, I grabbed him and threw him across the driveway - right into the path of an oncoming car. The problem is that the car was not just any car, it was a blue Honda. *Uh oh. Just my luck.* I hoped my parents saw the part about Xen attacking me and missed the part of me throwing him twenty-five meters. I was not too hopeful about this being the case though, especially when the front car doors flew open and Dad jumped out.

"What were you thinking?!" Tokero yelled, storming in my direction. "You could have killed him!"

"I didn't mean to; he attacked me first," I replied defensively. Xen slowly picked himself up, pointed his finger at me, and roared, "Uh, uh! You just attacked me out of the blue and sent me to my death!" He then followed this statement with an incredibly fake moan and sagged backwards. I groaned.

"Get to your room, and we'll talk about this later," Dad growled angrily. Knowing that any explanation on my part would be futile, I ran towards the house, swung around the front porch pole, somersaulted through the air onto the second-floor deck, and disappeared through my bedroom door. I didn't want to argue. Contrary to what you may be thinking of me right now, I dislike people confrontation, and I especially didn't want to give my uncle and aunt a bad first impression of me, though it would appear that I had just done that. I collapsed onto my bed. *What a rough day.* I could hear everyone entering the living room downstairs, and my father called me down. I didn't go. First of all, I didn't want to see Xen again as he had nearly killed me, and second of all, I knew my parents wouldn't force me to come down anyway.

I think that by now, I may have gotten ahead of myself. First of all, I'm eighteen. I attend the local highschool and have a total of zero friends. Sure, I have a few friendly acquaintances, but for the most part, everyone leaves me alone, which I guess could be good as well.

I feel bad that I had thrown Xen, knowing that I should have just called the cops, but I was so in the moment that I let my anger and excitement get the best of me. However, this brash behavior is something that is not evident in my normal character.

As I lay on my bed, trying to compose my thoughts, my pet Spark entered my room. I had just adopted this female ferret from a rescue center about a month or two ago when my parents told me that if I wasn't going to have any friends, I should have a pet. We had really enjoyed each other's company, and I am currently finishing some work on rigging up a small camera to attach to her. She was a sort of vessel of comfort, helping me to overcome my social anxiety and get back to reality. Having a lot of social interaction was very taxing on me, especially when that interaction was all but friendly. After a while of "meditation," I decided to

go on a motorcycle ride. I LOVE motorcycles. Not dirt biking, but street racing. Of course, Troutdale is not a crowded town so there are plenty of roads to ride on but, unfortunately, the speed limit never gets over 55, so I have to be content with going slow. My parents bought me a custom motorcycle with wicked-awesome speed and maneuverability when I turned 16 (the legal age to start driving in Oregon). For my birthday last year, they took me to a race track in California and rented it for an hour (which you can do by the way, although it's pretty expensive). I gunned it and reached 200mph, though I had to be careful not to accidentally kill myself. Whatever the case, I lived to tell this tale, and I had a HUGE blast.

I carefully let Spark down (yes, she "rules" my room but she never messes anything up, and she has her own carefully washed cage in the corner) and crept down the stairs to the garage. I slinked through the kitchen (taking only a small peek at the family in the living room) and reached the back garage door. Just as I reached for the door knob, two things happened in quick succession – 1. A thought struck me that my uncle hadn't been in the living room. 2. My uncle tapped me on the shoulder.

If it hadn't been for the fact that I don't scream when I get scared, you could have heard me back in my grandfather's home town in China. However, my jump told all.

"Hey, it's okay. Didn't mean to scare you!"

"Oh, hey, umm. How are you doing?" I timidly replied.

"Fine. Hey, I don't want you to feel bad about what happened, I know you didn't want to hurt my son," my uncle reassured me.

"Uhh, you do?"

"Yeah, see"-

"Could we go into the garage to talk?" I interrupted

"Sure."

I opened the door, and we walked into the garage. There stood my super-charged motorcycle and the family cars next to it. Did I mention we had a three car garage?

"Xen used to be the nicest boy you could ever meet. My wife and I raised him up in a Christian household, and we taught him everything. He was on a good path," started my uncle.

"Well, Christians aren't all they are cracked up to be, no offense," I replied. (None of my immediate family were Christians but most of my uncles and aunts were)

"Well, it is true that some Christians are fake, but there are many more who are sincere. Anyway, one week my wife and I went on a vacation to a large ski resort in the mountains of China, and we left Xen home alone. When we came back, he was very secretive and nervous. He wouldn't leave the house without those two new swords of his, and we never could figure out where he had gotten them." my uncle explained, " Did he try to *kill* you?"

"Well, it's kind of hard to say if he would have really killed me, but I was certainly under the impression that he would have if he could have," I replied.

"We need to come up with a solution to this," sighed my uncle. "Anyway. Where are you going?"

"I'm taking my motorcycle out for a spin."

"Awesome! I've always wanted to ride one of those things but never gotten the courage to do so. Well, have fun!"

"You know I will!" I replied. As my uncle slipped back through the garage door into the house, I donned my riding gear, slipped on my helmet, opened the main garage, and hopped onto my motorcycle. Not wanting to attract any undue attention, I quietly started my motorcycle and zoomed outside. Unfortunately, and as I said before, none of the main city streets have a very large speed limit, but I cruised outside my neighborhood and merged onto the main street through town. I passed the restaurants and street-side shops, and the large FedEx shipping plant; then I got out into more of the country and brought my speed up to 55mph. As I sped along, I turned a corner and, on the opposite side of the street, at least three or four black SUVs sped by. There were kind of intimidating looking, and I immediately checked my speed to make sure I wasn't going too fast. A little later, my innate curiosity kicked in, and I felt like I had to see where they were going. When the last of the SUVs shot by, I turned around in a side gravel street and started back towards town, making sure to keep myself distant from the line of SUVs. However, when I got back into town, they appeared to disappear. I sighed, but didn't feel like participating in a full on search, so I turned onto Moore Street and headed to my favorite video game arcade.

This video game arcade has been in town for a *long* time, and I love to go there and play a few classic games on the old machines. I purchased an Orange Crush at the counter (my all-time favorite drink), and sauntered over to the Pac-Man machine. I've always dreamed of playing a perfect game, but since I don't spend every waking moment of my time playing Pac-Man like some people do, my dream will probably never be fulfilled. After a few games of Pac-Man, Lon, and Shut-Up Shirle, I checked my watch and discovered it was already 6:00pm - time to go home. I dragged my feet on the way out, not wanting to go back home for obvious reasons, but I was hungry for dinner.

However, when I reached my house, I noticed my relatives had already left because their car was gone from the front driveway. I clicked the garage door opener button on my dashboard and parked my motorcycle inside the garage. As I slipped into the kitchen, I found my parents deep in conversation about something, but they abruptly stopped when I entered.

"We heard about Xen, honey," said Mom. "It's okay, we don't blame you."

"I don't need your pity. I just don't want to get blamed for things that really aren't my fault." I admitted. Then, the doorbell rang.

"Must be my brother. He probably left something," replied Dad.

He got out of his chair, crossed the living room, and opened the door. To our surprise, my uncle wasn't standing there. Instead, there was a troupe of FBI agents! Or at least they *looked* like FBI agents in their standard black suits and dark sunglasses. Somehow, though, they looked a little off - as if there was something not right. I was trying to figure out what appeared wrong, when they spoke.

"We're here to talk about some Chinese secrets you collected in China a few years ago. It has come to our attention that the Chinese are making some nuclear weapons, and we want to know what you learned."

My dad paled visibly. "Umm, yeah, umm, would you like to come in and sit down?" he replied.

"Sure, but let's make this quick," replied the leader. As my house was filling up with more agents, I slipped out the back door and crept along the fence to keep out of sight of any possible FBI agents. Then, I wove my way around to the black SUVs parked outside. What I saw confirmed my suspicion. When I had first seen them tearing down the country road, I had noticed that their license plates were not yellow like any government vehicle would. Instead, they were normal license plates; meaning that they could very well not be FBI agents, or if they were, they were very undercover ones at that. I seriously doubted that though, because there was no need to be "undercover" for this "mission" and the added fact that they never showed us their badges, which they always did in the movies (though I don't know if that is true in real life) made me worried.

"Oh dear," I said. The problem with what I said though is that I was more right than I originally thought. No sooner had I said that, than a black cloth was stuffed over my head and my arms pinioned behind me. I could barely breathe, and the guys behind me shoved me forward, causing me to trip and face plant into the ground. Now I *knew* they weren't real agents, and I quickly "transformed" into attack mode. In quick succession, I twisted my arms out of their grip, threw off the cloth, and whipped into a hi-cha stance. There were only two that I could see, and they quickly whipped out their guns. Normally, that would be a problem, but this time I had been expecting this. I took both of them out with quick leg slices and the guns scuttled harmlessly on the street. One of them tried to get back up, but I bashed his head with a nice elbow slam, and he collapsed back down. The only problem is that one of the "agents" let out a loud moan and soon the whole "armada" came charging out of my house. Guns came out of their holsters.

I dove into the street, grabbed the two guns that the other agents had dropped, and returned fire. I had handled enough guns to know that if I aimed directly at their chest, their bullet proof vests would keep them from getting killed, but they would certainly be hurt enough that they would probably not be able to keep on firing. With deadly precision, I picked some of them off. But I was doing a ton of weaving and dodging, and it would only be a matter of time before I was hit. However, that time never came because my mom arrived and finished the rest off with a few Olympic-worthy chops. I cheered, something which I never normally do, but I was quickly silenced by the sound of sirens in the background. All the shots and yells were, of course, heard by the neighbors and now the REAL police would be arriving. With two smoking guns in my hand, things would not look good for me, so I rubbed them in the wet grass and tossed them at the heap of groaning agents. One of them hit the ground awkwardly and shot

off, puncturing a nice hole in the tire of one of the SUVs which promptly exploded. If there wasn't enough noise beforehand, there certainly was now.

Needless to say, we were all marched into the police station and questioned thoroughly. By the time the "interrogation" was done, I was very tired, and I could bet my parents were too. It was pretty obvious to ourselves and to the police that the fake FBI agents had been trying to extract info from my dad in order to figure out how much he knew and to "dispose" of him if he knew too much. This meant that there were Chinese spies in America. That was very disconcerting to me, but what worried me more was that they were not afraid to kill those who did not comply. The police recommended that we move somewhere else to keep safe.

I was so tired that I fell asleep immediately at home and didn't have any dreams, which is a good thing because they could have been pretty awful. When I woke up at twelve o'clock and went down for breakfast, my dad had an announcement.

"We are going to Fairview Washington!"

"WHAT!?! Why Fairview? What is *there*?" I asked.

"Only everything," Dad replied. "My company is putting in a new headquarters there, and I figure that Washington would be as good a place as any to keep out of the way of rogue agents," Dad smirked.

"But Troutdale is your headquarters," I countered.

"Not any more," Dad said.

"As of when?!"

"As of now?!"

I turned around in my chair and looked at Mom in the kitchen. "Is he serious, Mom?"

"Deadly," she replied. (Which probably wasn't the best word to use, considering everything that had happened recently).

"Fine," I said. I mean it was summer anyways so transferring schools wouldn't be too difficult, and it's not like I have any friends anyway at my current school. However, I have grown to like the town, so moving to Washington seemed a bit imposing. However the big news wasn't over yet.

"AND because we are moving to Fairview," Dad continued, "we are buying TWO houses next door to each other and one of them IS ENTIRELY FOR YOU!" exclaimed Dad.

"WHAT?!?!" I choked (I had a mouthful of chips), "Are you serious?!"

"Stop saying that, OF COURSE we are serious. Do we joke all that often?" Dad responded.

Things were looking up. Not only would I have a chance to make new friends in a completely different state, but next year would be my senior year of high school, *and* I would have a whole one-story house to myself. I could deck it out with all sorts of cool stuff. There could be a whole room just for Spark! How awesome would that be!

Three days later, we were on our way to Washington. Some movers had already transported most of our main furniture and appliances to our houses already, so we were just

driving up with a few sensitive belongings like electronics and chinaware. (Believe it or not, but my father actually owns most of the china-ware in the house.) My parents let me drive my motorcycle, and they both took their respective cars. We arrived at Seattle about noon and stopped at a McDonalds for lunch. I sneaked in Spark, who loves to eat with us, and we sat down for lunch. The problem, though, is that a black SUV pulled up outside and two Chinese guys got out and came inside. They didn't seem to notice us and went straight to the counter to order their food. *What were they doing here?!*

However, this was our chance to catch some of them! Then, I had an even better idea. What if I just listened into what their plans were - then I could have even a better head start on them! Suddenly, a plan started forming in my head! If I could get a camera into their truck then I could listen to their conversations, and I could get the camera into their SUV by putting one of my mini cameras on Spark and getting her to go inside. That would be tricky of course, but I thought I could do it. I raced outside to Dad's car and dug furiously in a few boxes in the back of the vehicle. I frantically dug around until I found a mini camera and Spark's vest. When I got back into the store, the agents were just then sitting down to their lunch (6 big macs, 4 pepsis, 4 large fries, 4 parfaits, and two big salads). My parents were keeping an eye on them and hadn't asked any questions until I came back with the camera.

"What are you doing?" Dad hissed.

"I'm going to fit this camera on Spark and see if I can get her into their SUV," I replied.

"That's crazy," Mom said, "How are you going to get Spark and the camera back?"

"Easy. We just follow their SUV and when they get out we get Spark back."

My parents didn't know what to say, so I snatched Spark away from her hamburger patty and fitted on the camera.

"Okay girl," I said. "Get ready!"

Amazingly, those guys had already gulped down the majority of their meal and were polishing off their sodas. When they got up and left, I quickly followed them with Spark in hand. One of the spies opened his door and then walked back around to talk to his friend who was looking something up on his phone. I slinked back and shoved Spark onto the seat of the SUV; then ran back into the building. As soon as we had thrown away our trash, I jumped into Dad's car and pulled up my camera's app on my phone. There would be no way to keep tabs on what was going on in the car and help dad track the SUV if I was on my motorcycle, so I decided to ride in his car and pick my motorcycle up later. The SUV slowly rolled out of the parking lot with us and mom right behind. As it moved through afternoon traffic, I checked what was going on in the SUV. The inside of the SUV was surprisingly clean, and Spark was in the back seat hiding under a few reusable grocery bags. However, she had the camera/microphone popping out so I could see the back side of them and hear what they were saying. They were talking in Chinese, but I can speak Chinese somewhat fluently (my dad had insisted I learn the language of my ancestors). The problem was that they were talking about the latest badminton tournament

in China, not anything that would be helpful to incriminate them. Suddenly the conversation ended abruptly.

"Hey those two cars have been behind us for a while, what is their problem?" asked the bigger agent.

"Maybe they are tailing us," replied the other.

"Ha, not likely, but let's lose 'em anyway," replied the first.

"Up ahead, the SUV swerved onto a back road and disappeared down a narrow street. Dad took the turn like a pro and followed suit, with mom close behind. The chase was on, and it was pretty easy now as they were unfortunate enough to turn onto a back roads highway. According to what I heard on the camera, they didn't want to attract any attention so they slowed down and just followed the highway. After a half hour, I was starting to lose attention when I glanced up just in time to see this sign by the road.

"Welcome to Fairview. Population 140,052."

What was the chance that we would arrive at our destination city while tailing these guys, unless... Unless it was on purpose!!! With a loud roar, the SUV took a series of side roads, swerving in and out of Fairview traffic. Dad, however, kept up. He was awesome.

"We can't lose them in this car. Let's lose them on foot in that pet convention over there," said the big dude. *Pet convention?* I wondered. *Where was that?* It didn't take long to find out though, because suddenly over to our left we passed by a very large field stuffed full of people with everything from dogs to chinchillas. There was also an equally large amount of tents, booths, stands, and food trucks.

"Get to that convention," I yelled to my dad. The SUV with Dad, Mom, and I right behind pulled up into the nearby parking lot. As the agents got out, there was a blur of motion from the back seat and Spark streaked over to me. I scooped her up, as I was now in an almost full sprint and kept on going, passing up Dad in the process. The agents disappeared into the crowd with me close behind. However, I quickly lost them in the pet-happy crowd. When I saw a bit of black disappearing behind a tent labeled "Small Animals," I charged after him yelling "Excuse me" and frantically looking about. Not only was I about to lose both of them, but I was feeling terribly embarrassed by pushing past everyone and getting a lot of strange looks about the camera-clad ferret hanging onto my shoulder. Then, things got worse; i.e. I slammed into a girl who went sprawling into the grass and dirt, spilling an armload of bottles of lotion and shampoo everywhere. The look on her face was anything but happy, but the look on Spark's face lit up. If ever a ferret could smile, Spark did. For the girl was carrying in her arms another ferret, a male one.

Chapter 2: Surprising

Mind if I borrow your car for the afternoon? :-)

I sent off a text to Neph, hoping he would respond soon. Last time I had needed to use his car, he hadn't received my text because his phone battery was dead. I had been really upset about missing my favorite annual school study.

"Anaya, do you mind making lunch today?" my mom asked, turning the car into our driveway. I pushed my car door open and hopped out.

"Sure!" I love making meals, and I am always careful about eating healthily, so most of my meals include vegetables and fruits - and no sugar except the natural kind found in grapes and such.

The rear trunk door had already risen up, so I quickly grabbed two grocery bags per hand. Mom retrieved the last bag, slammed the trunk shut, beeped her car fob, and let me in the front door. With a sigh of relief, I dropped the heavy bags on the kitchen floor.

Sziddee! Twee! Zhuzhe!

The shrill notes of Neph's kazoo echoed throughout the house.

"Why does your brother keep playing Pomp and Circumstance even though he's already graduated?" Mom asked, setting her bags down in the kitchen.

"He just recently bought a new kazoo at Goodwill a few days ago," I explained. "He's probably eager to see how it compares to the others when he plays a familiar song."

Mother sighed and leaned against the counter. "Your brother must have enough kazoos to supply a whole kindergarten!" She shook her head and leaned down to take a box of Raisin Bran out of a bag.

"Only fifteen kazoos!" I corrected. "It's really not that many."

"Way more than I care to have in my house," Mom said flatly. "Kazoos give me headaches."

I like my brother's music, I thought. But I guess Mom doesn't. Maybe it has something to do with the time her brother hit her on the head with a wooden kazoo when they were little...

Thinking of an excuse to leave Mom with the grocery duty, I said, "I'll go tell him to stop."

I took the stairs two at a time and ran down the hall to Neph's bedroom. Halting at the doorway, I noticed the door was wide open.

"Did you get my text?" I asked impatiently even though the kazoo was still trilling.

My 19-year-old brother was lying upside down over the hump of his gray bean bag, his brow furrowed in concentration as he picked his notes carefully.

I snickered, thinking to myself, *He plays like a pro even upside-down!*

Struggling over an especially high note, Neph gave up and sat up, patting the couch beside him. I bounced over some computer cords and planted myself on the black leather couch, pushing aside his throw pillows.

"Sooo...." I hinted, expecting an answer to my question.

"Oh, yeah," Neph said, raking his hand through his blonde hair. "Sure, you can use it."

He stood up and carefully placed his kazoo on the top of his bookshelf. Lined up neatly next to it was his 15-piece kazoo collection. I watched him as he took a seat at his desk which was arranged in the corner next to his window. Clicking the mouse, the screen came to life and several browser windows popped up. Neph busily began typing and clicking away.

Knowing it was time for me to leave, I got up off the couch and walked towards the door. Peeking over his broad shoulders, I could see what he was working on, but I didn't understand much of it. Most likely, he was creating a firewall, installing a program, or coding a website. Or maybe he was doing all three! I was never sure.

I left his room and leaned over the balcony railing. I could hear Mom arranging the vegetables in the fridge. She would probably be ready for me to make lunch in a few minutes. I had decided to make my special chicken bean tossed salad.

Because it only took me fifteen minutes to make lunch and another fifteen to eat it, I was out the front door in half an hour, ready to pick my dad up from work.

I am seventeen years old, and I received my license right after my birthday last year in April. Ever since, I've been driving a lot by myself. On the other hand, my dad rarely drives at all. Dad and I had arranged for me to drive him home from work today because he didn't feel like taking the bus. Even though he's the manager of Fairview Inn and Suites, he usually commutes to work every day via the Fairview Transit System.

I unlocked the driver's door of Neph's Toyota Camry with the spare key that he had permanently loaned me. For being a 2011 model, the little car was still in excellent shape.

I slid into the driver's seat, turned over the engine, adjusted the seat and mirrors, and backed out of the driveway. Before picking up Dad, I wanted to visit the local library and pick up a book that was on hold for me.

The library had been recently remodelled, and a new park was added to the side of it with a spacious parking lot. Inside the cool brick building, I breathed in the warm scent of fresh pages and ink. I made a beeline for the shelves of holds and located the H, I, J, K shelf. After some searching, I found my 'James, Anaya' ticket sticking out of my book: *101 Indoor Fitness Workouts* by Tanya Hwang. I couldn't help but grin. I had waited for a long time to get my hands on this book since I'd already read every book the library had on running, exercise, fitness, and health. I had never heard of this author before, but I wondered what her life was like. Was she a fitness guru like me? What did she look like? What gave her the inspiration for her book?

Pulling my thoughts out of my imagination world, I walked over to the check-out counter and was pleased to find my favorite librarian sitting behind the desk. Her short black hair framed her skinny face which was perched atop a very thin body. Even though she was sitting down, it was obvious that she was very tall, too. I used to admire how she could look over all of the bookshelves to keep an eye on the library patrons.

"Hello, Anaya!" chirped Miss Lind, coming over to my checkout station, "What's the selection today?"

I scanned the book and it popped up on my account screen. "Oh! I should've guessed," smiled Miss Lind, "Another health book. Do you ever read fiction?"

I ripped my receipt out of the printer and slipped it into my book.

"Well, I did a lot when I was younger, but ever since I took that free exercise class at the grange, I've been trying to maintain a healthier lifestyle."

Miss Lind laughed and walked over to a nearby cart piled with books that needed to be reshelfed.

She pulled out a small skinny novel from a bottom stack and handed it to me.

"Here's a book I'm sure you'll love: *Roaring Waves*. It's about a girl who loves surfing and then has to move to the middle of the U.S.A. where there's not even a lake around for miles!"

I eyed the cover hesitantly but didn't resist when she plopped the book in my arms.

Seeing another person coming to check out books, Miss Lind waved her hand at me and scurried off. As I turned to leave, I noticed a stack of flyers on the checkout desk. The small papers sported a colorful picture of a show dog proudly sitting beside his master's legs.

Fairview Pet Fair was printed in bold letters on the top. I grabbed a flyer and flipped it over. It read **Fairview Pet Fair hosted at Fern Park. Contests and prizes for everyone! Enter your pet today online! Dogs, cats, bunnies, small critters, reptiles, and birds welcome! Come join us Saturday June 8th!**

Hmm... It's two days away. I wonder if I could enter Bitty in something. I've trained her to be gentle and calm by handling her every day, so I'm sure she wouldn't freak out if a judge held her. Her white and brown speckled fur is so soft.....maybe she could win a beauty contest?

I frowned. Maybe not. I don't think they'd have a beauty contest for hamsters.

I slipped the brochure into my health book along with my book receipt and decided to think about it more later. Giving Miss Lind another wave, I headed back out to Neph's car. This time, I took a shortcut.

I took a left turn at Walnut Street instead of right because I had just discovered a new route on Google Maps that would get me to Fairview Hotel in only five minutes – quite a time saver. I aced my parking job under an oak tree in front of the hotel, and headed for the front doors. What the hotel's unassuming name failed to imply was that it was actually owned by a man who is intensely obsessed with the Middle Ages. Whether or not he was a history teacher is still unknown, but he certainly is an entrepreneur. Exactly ten years ago, Mr. Lendall bought

the old Fairview Motel and renovated it, completely transforming it into a medieval castle hotel, moat and all!

I'm so lucky my dad works here! I absolutely love exploring Mr. Lendall's castle! I thought, approaching the front of the hotel. Beautiful landscaping edged a small river that ran all the way around the hotel's building. The little river had rocks on the bottom - but no alligators. Thank goodness! I crossed the wooden bridge and found myself at the hotel's heavy wooden front doors where giant lion door knockers stared down at me.

Entering, I gazed over at the huge brick fireplace that monopolized the entire right side of the lobby. Designed to be a seating area, there were several cushioned antique chairs with royal-looking upholstery. Ahead of me, a tired family laden with suitcases was entering as well, and I could hear the young girl pestering her mom.

"Mommy, where's the bathroom?" she whined, dragging her pink backpack behind her. Both parents looked overwhelmed by the rows of palms, dangling chandeliers, and stately armored statues.

Stepping up to the group, I quickly pointed left.

"Restrooms to the left down that hallway; you won't miss it. Just look for the lion statues."

The mother gave me a grateful smile and led her daughter down the hallway. Passing the lobby desk in front of me, I headed down to the hallway of staff offices and subconsciously waved to the secretary at the desk. Becky had been working at the lobby desk for many years. I looked over at the desk as I waved and smiled at Becky – except that it wasn't Becky.

My hand stopped half-wave in shock as I saw a young college student there instead. I knew every cleaning personnel and managerial staff – and he was definitely not one of them. His straight black hair was neatly combed on top of his round face. I could tell he was of oriental ancestry, and, being rather short, not much more could be seen of him behind his computer screen. Realizing he hadn't seen me yet, I quickly returned my hand to my pocket and zoomed down to my dad's office. I knocked politely on the light wooden door and let myself in.

"Hey, Dad!" I said, plopping into one of the upholstered chairs across from his tidy desk. A potted plant sat in the corner and a couple portraits hung on the wall behind me. I fidgeted in my chair as I felt the chubby king in the portrait behind me stare down my neck. Dad looked up from his computer.

"Oh, hi, sweetie! I'm almost done." He proceeded to close his binders and turn off his computer. I slid to the edge of my seat.

"Who's that guy managing the front desk?" I inquired.

Dad picked up his briefcase, stood up and ushered me out of the office, flicking off the lights as he left.

"Oh, he's our new summer intern. Let me introduce you two!"

I hesitantly trailed behind Dad as he happily led the way down the hall. Heavy tapestries hung along the wall, depicting ancient battle scenes and colorful dragons. The traveling family was gone, so I assumed they had already headed off to their room (which would be decorated in medieval knickknacks as well. One time when Dad was giving me a tour, I noticed that the rooms even have the stuffed faces of beheaded elk and deer above the queen-sized beds! Dad seemed thrilled about it, but I was afraid that the guests wouldn't get any sleep.)

"Hi, Xen! How's it going?" Dad greeted the new intern.

Xen looked up from a stack of papers, smiled, and politely stood up.

"I'm doing well; I just checked in the Harrison family."

Dad patted him on the back. "You're learning fast; did you remember to send off those emails that I forwarded to you?"

"Yes," Xen bowed his head slightly and motioned toward the computer screen. "I also reserved the dining room for the company meeting that will be held on Saturday."

"Well done!" Dad smiled proudly.

Just then, the lobby doors whooshed open, revealing a middle-aged man. He promptly walked to our desk, cell phone in hand. Then he looked above our heads at the massive bear face mounted on the column and gasped.

"Welcome to Fairview Inn and Suites. How may I be of service?" Xen asked formally.

The man returned his gaze to the lobby desk. "Yeah, well, my GPS isn't working," he complained. "Any of you know where Waynard Street is?"

Xen's smile turned into a frown as he searched around the desk for some maps.

"I haven't heard of it," said Dad, "Are you sure you can't get your GPS to work?"

The man disgustingly sighed and pocketed his phone. Taking it as a no, Xen pulled out a map of Fairview and all three men bent their heads over it.

Suddenly, a thought came to me. Last Saturday, I had become distracted while driving and had accidentally taken a wrong turn. While I was weaving around town returning to First Street, I remember seeing a really cool office building. I memorized the address so that I could find it later: 425 Waynard and Second Street.

"I know where it is!" I exclaimed, stepping up to the man. Dad looked relieved, seeing that none of them had found it on the map yet. Now he handed it over to me. I didn't look at it, though, because I had the directions memorized.

"Once you exit this parking lot and turn onto Trevor Street, drive north until you pass the Willy's Burgers building," I addressed the man, "Then turn right onto Seventh Street, and take a left on Blossom Street past the park with the bridge under construction, and keep going until you get to Second Street. Take a right and at the end of the block will be Waynard Street."

A smile wreathed the man's face.

"Thank you! Can you write those directions down for me?"

I grabbed a colorful Sharpie from a pencil cup near Xen's computer and highlighted the route onto Xen's map.

"What is your destination?" Dad asked the man.

"Oh, I need to get to my sister's house for a family reunion."

"What's the address?" I asked.

"2245," he replied.

I traced my highlighter farther down Waynard Street and stopped it at the approximate location of the house.

"Here you go!"

The man reached out to take the map.

"Thank you!" he said, heading back out towards the exit, studying the route.

"Great job helping out that guy," Dad said, patting Xen on the back again. "Maps are always helpful. Technology isn't always reliable."

I stared at Dad's back as he left the lobby desk. Had he just given all the credit to the summer intern?

Xen looked at me, smiled, and whispered, "You sure know your directions well." Even though his compliment felt good, I was disturbed that my own father hadn't noticed.

I shrugged and hurried to catch up with my dad.

"Don't forget to check the mail!" I called over my shoulder, noticing the overflowing lobby mailbox. I heard Xen leaving his desk as I sprinted out to the parking lot.

I love sitting behind the wheel, but I don't always love the conversations that are had while driving. This following conversation was especially awkward, so I took the same shortcut home that I had taken to get to the hotel, hoping to shorten the duration of the tense conversation.

"So what do you think of my new intern?" Dad asked proudly.

I answered his question with another question. "Why did you never tell me you were hiring an intern? You always keep me up-to-date on the latest at your hotel. Then again, why didn't you hire *me*?"

"Well, you're my daughter."

"There's nothing wrong with that."

"Well, Xen needed a job."

"Sunny's Grocery is hiring."

"If you needed an internship so bad, why didn't *you* go get a job at Sunny's Grocery? I don't appreciate your jealousy of Xen's new position at my hotel."

I shut my mouth. I couldn't argue with Dad when he had figured out exactly what was bothering me. We arrived home in silence.

To give myself a break, I decided to let off some steam and run through my backyard obstacle course. Dad and Neph had helped me put it together last summer, and it was the perfect way for me to get exercise and focus my energy on something other than frustration and jealousy.

Having changed into a pair of leggings and a fluorescent t-shirt, I hurried past the kitchen on my way to the backyard patio. Mom had just started dinner, so I figured I had about 15 minutes to work on the obstacle course.

Starting my stopwatch, I bounded off the porch and leapt onto the first obstacle: a wooden balance beam. I ran across the thin board, careful to keep my footsteps in line, and dismounted in front of a staggered path of rubber tires. Gaining speed, I hopped back and forth among the tires and lunged for the monkey bars. I swung through with ease and landed on the grass again.

This time, I found myself at the bottom of the wooden slat pyramid. Measuring fifteen feet, the pyramid had four sides. This side and its opposite had ropes and wooden studs for climbing, and the other two sides had colorful plastic climbing holds for rock-climbing. Carefully placing my feet in strategic places, I grabbed hold of the rope and began climbing. I was about halfway up when suddenly a wooden stud wobbled and snapped under my left foot. Both of my feet instantly slipped, my grip on the rope failed and I slid all the way back down again, getting a terrible rope burn on the palms of my hands. Shaken, I detoured around the pyramid and continued on the rest of the obstacle course. On the other side, I ducked and hurdled under and over several metal beams.

Then I looped back around and rock-climbed up the pyramid. At the top, I took only a moment to look at my neighbors' backyards from this height. Jennifer Schact was playing with her new puppy a couple houses down, and old Mr. Turner was trying to plant some petunias in his flower beds without getting too much dirt on his pants.

I rappelled down the other side. Once my feet hit the ground, I crab-walked back to the porch. Stopping my watch, I realized to my dismay that the broken step had cost me so much time that I hadn't even beat my worst time that week. I shed my tennis shoes and raced up the stairs to Neph's bedroom.

"Hey, brother!" I called out. "Can you help me fix my pyramid steps?"

Silence.

I peeked into the room, and saw that Neph's ears were engulfed in headphones. Sighing, I walked over to his bookshelf where I stood on my toes and grabbed a kazoo. Then I sneaked behind his office chair and blasted a note right by his ears. Neph jumped in his chair, slamming his fist down onto his desk.

He ripped off his headphones and whirled around. "What was that for?"

I mischievously smiled back at him. "I had a question."

Neph huffed. "About what?"

"I need your help fixing a broken step on my obstacle course pyramid."

Neph was stubbornly frowning, upset that I had interrupted whatever he was doing. I added an extra "Please?" for good measure, and then replaced his kazoo.

Neph slowly lifted himself out of his chair as if it pained him to do so.

"I'll go grab some tools," he grumbled, lumbering down the stairs. I skipped after him.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"Why am I always the last to know?" I complained, holding the new step steady as Neph pounded in a nail.

"If that's not bad enough, it seems that Dad doesn't even care if I know or not! He's so wrapped up in this new intern that he doesn't seem to notice me."

Neph finished pounding the nail and looked me in the eye.

"Or maybe you're the one who isn't noticing."

"Noticing what?"

"That your Dad has other things to worry about than just you. Maybe you should try and be friends with Xen. Then maybe you'll see why your Dad likes him so much."

I didn't say anything, but nodded my head to let him know I got his point.

Neph gripped the new wooden step and yanked on it, but it didn't budge.

"Perfect; I think it's good as new!" he gathered up his tools. "Why don't you give it another try?"

I quickly walked back a few yards to give myself a running start and then dashed up to the pyramid and threw myself up onto the wall, deftly climbing up with my feet and arms. To my relief, all of the steps stayed firm and I made it to the top without slipping. I grinned and gave Neph a thumbs-up from the top. Then I shinnied back down.

"Race you to dinner!" I chanted, forgetting that Neph still had to put the tools away in the garage.

Before long, I was wolfing down Mom's cheddar biscuits and cooked asparagus.

Exercise always makes me hungry, I thought.

Looking across the table, I noticed that Neph had already cleaned his plate and was starting on another helping.

Neph always seems to be hungry, too, but I wonder why? I thought. He doesn't do nearly as much exercise as I do. Maybe mental exercise has the same effect as physical exercise...?

Before heading to bed, I grabbed the First Aid kit from the upstairs hallway bathroom and wrapped my skinned palms with some soft gauze and fabric bandages.

I placed the First Aid kit on my bedside stool and then walked over to my lavender desk where Bitty's cage was perched on a far corner. She was busily running on her hamster wheel, stopping occasionally to sit on her hind legs and sniff the air. I took a seat and watched her pink little nose and whiskers twitch as she moved her little white paws furiously. Then my nose wrinkled and I realized that I hadn't cleaned her cage for a week.

Hamsters take so much care, I thought, *but it's worth it.*

I sighed and propped my head on my hands. Immediately, I jerked my head back up because my hands were throbbing.

Sighing, I leaned under the desk and pulled out my bookbag. Picking out my health book, I took out the pet fair flyer. I looked at Bitty again.

She is pretty and smart and well-trained, but there's nothing really special about her. She can't race like horses or jump like bunnies or play with toys like cats.

Except...

"Hey, Bitty," I said, an idea forming, "let's try your exercise routine."

I opened up the cage hatch, and Bitty immediately waddled over to me. I scooped her up in one hand and walked her over to a large cardboard box that I had assembled as a play area a long time ago. In it was a few teeter-totters, some ladders, a couple toilet paper rolls to squeeze through, and a square maze. I had found the inspiration for my hamster agility course on YouTube, and it had worked out famously.

Now, all I needed was to dangle a treat a few inches from Bitty's nose, and she would follow my hand through the obstacle course - at least I hoped. I had never tried to get her to follow a routine before. But here was an opportunity for me to get her to do something unique! Maybe she would win a ribbon in the pet fair after all!

I snatched a handful of peanut halves from a tupperware by her cage and dangled one in front of Bitty's nose. Slowly, I moved it over a teeter-totter. She climbed over it with ease. Then, I moved on to the toilet tube. I placed the treat at the end of the tube. Bitty walked around the tube and snagged the treat before I could scold her. Sighing, I placed another peanut inside the tube and another on the opposite end. This time, Bitty did exactly what I wanted and ran all the way through. To cement this exercise, I tried it a few more times but with fewer peanuts. Soon, she was running through the tubes like a pro.

Next, I led Bitty to the maze entrance and scattered some peanuts along the correct path. She took several minutes but finally managed to get to the end. Triumphant, I led her around some more obstacles and over the teeter-totter again before returning her to her cage.

Depositing her by her wheel, I closed the door and watched her climb up to the second story of her cage. Her cheeks were bulging with the peanut treats I had given her, and she didn't waste any time, burying them under the paper shavings and nibbling away.

"Let's call it a day," I said to her, "You did great! I just need you to get faster and not run around the obstacles but go through them instead." Bitty kept nibbling while I finished my pep talk. "I'll work on this some more with you, O.K.?"

I didn't expect an answer, though. Bitty would be too polite to talk with her mouth full anyway.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"Mayra! I can't believe it's you!" My phone was pressed between my shoulder and right ear while both of my hands were wrist-deep in sudsy sink water.

"Hey, Anaya! I'm soooo sorry I haven't called you sooner this week!"

"It's fine! It's good just to hear your voice." I placed a clean plate on the towels laid out on the counter. Before my older sister left for California University of the Arts, she vowed to call

me every week. I missed her immensely, but it was nice having a room to myself. I wondered what it was like for her to be living in a small apartment with three other roommates. I'm sure it was way more cramped than me and my hamster's spacious bedroom.

"So what's up with you?" I asked curiously.

"Well, right now I'm washing dishes," sighed Mayra. "My roommates and I generate a lot of dirty ones."

I laughed. "I'm doing the dishes, too!"

"I didn't realize that my kitchen duty chore had fallen onto your shoulders once I left!"

"Yeah, well it isn't too bad. What else are you doing?"

"I went out to the theaters to watch *New Premieres: The Last Trial!*"

"Oh, you are so lucky!" I gushed. "Did you go out with your friends?"

"Yeah, I went out with Angela, Ellie, and Nate."

"How's Nate?" I asked, scrubbing a pot. My 21-year-old sister had met Nathaniel Stratford on the day she moved into the college dorms, and one year later, I could tell that their relationship was much deeper than a surface friendship.

"We've been working really hard in our study group since we're both taking the same summer classes, and his parents came to visit him recently. We all went out to lunch!"

"I wish we could visit you, too! I'd love to meet Nate and your other friends!"

Mayra laughed. "So, what are you up to?"

"I actually just finished working with Bitty on her obstacle course. I'm gonna see if I can enter her in the upcoming Fairview Pet Fair."

"Oh! That sounds like fun! When is it?"

"It's actually this weekend," I said, remembering the flyer I had picked up at the library. I finished washing the last dish and pulled the sink plug.

"Wow, not much time for you to prepare, huh? Do you have to sign up for it?"

I thought for a moment. "I think I do. I guess I'll look online after our phone call."

I heard some muffled talking on the end of the line as I watched the soapy water drain.

Mayra talked again. "Talking about our phone call, I actually have to go. I'm so sorry, but Angela asked if I wanted to go to the Mike Willus conference tonight and I really need to go. I'll call again soon!"

"O.K. Bye Mayra!" I said, with a tinge of sadness in my voice. I missed my sister so much, and even though she was faithful about calling me, every phone call reminded me that she was 16 hours away in California.

Mayra blew me some kisses and then hung up. Wiping my wet hands on a towel, I grabbed my cell phone and ended the call. Then I sent a quick text.

I love you! Good night! Hugs! :-)

As I walked upstairs to my bedroom, a couple verses from my favorite song from Group Melody floated into my head.

*// You'll be gone, but not far / Gone but not far // Your loving presence / Is with me here
in essence // You're always in my heart / Always in my heart//*

Humming the tune, I headed to my laptop to sign up for the pet fair.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

My knee kept time, jiggling up and down, as I strummed some chords on my Ovation guitar. I could feel the low vibrations of the strings through the golden brown body of the guitar as I sat on the edge of my bed, picking out a tune that had been in my head all day. I needed to get my jitters out by doing something productive, considering that the pet fair was starting in half an hour. I had spent most of the day preparing Bitty's carrier bag and obstacle course.

I was dejected that Neph had to spend the weekend studying at Dayton Community College; I had really hoped that he would be able to go to the fair with me. I loved my big brother and even though he spent most of his free time on the computer or playing his kazoo, I would do anything to spend an afternoon with him. He's really great at playing guitar, making coffee for Mom, fixing random broken things around the house, and telling time even when there's not a clock around for miles.

Talking about coffee, Neph currently has a part time job at Wilson's Espresso, saving up money so that he can transfer to Washington Tech University once he graduates. That's also another reason why he's always busy. I sighed and propped my guitar back up on its stand. I felt out of sorts and very nervous about the pet fair. Now that I was signed up, I had to go, but I was having regrets.

I won't know anybody there! I'm sure everybody will already have their friends, and I doubt they'll want to make a new friend like me. I'm so quiet, the judges will probably overlook me and Bitty!

I took a deep breath.

Neph and Mayra would tell me to think positively: I can do this, Bitty is a cute hamster, and it will be great seeing all of the other pets.

Instinctively, I checked my watch.

I wish I could tell time like Neph. Then I wouldn't need a watch.

"Time to go!" I told Bitty, scooping her out of her cage and placing her in her carrier. I grabbed the cardboard box obstacle course as well and dashed downstairs. Neph had taken his car to DCC, so Mom had agreed to drop me off at the fair. (#Momtotherescue!)

The parking lot of Fern Park was packed by the time we arrived, and the wide expanse of green lawn was smothered by large circus tents. Each of them was a different pet category. Giving Mom a side-hug, I slipped out of the car and headed towards the **Little Critters** tent. Mom honked as she drove off, and I immediately felt all alone. Taking a deep breath, I walked through the tent flap.

To my surprise, the tent was in neat order. Four rows of plastic tables provided the perfect amount of space for each of the critters' cages.

A young lady with a blonde bun, bright red lipstick, and dangly earrings came up to me. Glancing at her clipboard, she checked something off.

"Hello, Anaya! I'm so glad you made it! I'm Evelyn, and I'm the small critters judge! Is this Bitty?" she asked, peeking into my carrier. Bitty squeaked a hello.

"Oh! So cute! You guys can set up on the third row. That's the one for hamsters. Row 1 is guinea pigs, Row 2 is mice, and Row 4 is chinchillas and ferrets."

"Thank you!" I said politely, making my way over to a table.

"All right, everyone!" Evelyn raised her voice, addressing the other kids in the tent. "I'll be coming around to each of you in fifteen minutes to judge! I'll be right back!" She flashed a cheerful smile and exited the tent.

I set Bitty's carrier and obstacle course down next to a young girl who was chatting with her friend. Both of them had cute little hamsters that were skittering around in the bins they had brought. I checked on Bitty's water supply and then looked over the obstacle course for any damage. Suddenly, I felt very thirsty.

"Excuse me, is there a water fountain nearby?" I asked the little girls.

The one with the red glasses answered.

"There's a beverage stand by the dog tent," she offered, her smile revealing the bright yellow bands of her braces.

"Thank you. Could you keep an eye on Bitty for me while I get something to drink?"

The girls nodded generously, and I walked back to the tent's entrance. Pulling aside the flap, I walked out into the sunshine and looked around, trying to figure out where the dog tent was. I knew the dogs would be opposite in direction from the cats, so I turned left.

That's when a young man came running down the path, pell-mell, with a little ferret clinging to his shoulder. I stepped to the side, thinking he was heading for the little critters tent, but he ran right past instead. Focused on something else, he didn't see a girl who *was* heading for the critters tent. Her arms were full of pet supplies and a beautifully groomed ferret. I gasped, but before I could say anything, there was a collision.

Chapter 3: Annoying

“Hurry up, Zelena, or you’ll be late for school!” yelled my mom up the stairs.

I groggily stumbled out of bed and opened my closet to decide what to wear to school today. Well, actually, for me, there was not much of a choice. I wear the same thing every single day of my life. Jeans, a white t-shirt and a black leather jacket over that. I quickly pulled on my clothing and ran a brush through my fiery red hair. My hair totally had a mind of its own, and the only time I told it what to do was when I dyed a streak of my hair blue just like my Chinese friend Tojo had done. That way, we would always remember each other wherever we are. I quickly tossed my backpack over my shoulders and ran down the stairs, smelling the scent of frying bacon and toasting bread.

“Zelena! What took you so long? The bus will be here in 5 minutes. Eat up quickly!” my mom impatiently exclaimed as she slid a heaping plate over to me. Although my mom could be rather bossy sometimes, she always made sure to cook me a huge breakfast because she knew that I was constantly hungry. I dove right in after saying my prayers, of course, and was finished in only a few minutes.

“Thanks, Mom! It was delicious, as usual,” I said, throwing a smile her way as I ran out the door of our huge two story house, just in the nick of time to catch the bus headed to Texas High School. I love Texas and everything about it. The heat, the size, the people, etc.

I quickly grabbed a seat in the bus. On the first day of school, Tojo and I had promised each other that we would sit together everyday on the school bus no matter who else we wanted to sit by. I know, it sounds like a crazy promise, but I’m crazy - so it works perfectly.

“Hi, Tojo! What’s up?” I asked as she climbed into the bus at the next stop and slid into the seat next to me.

“I’m doing great, but I’m really tired. I stayed up into about 1:00 A.M. this morning working on my book report that’s due today. You?”

“Oh! I already finished my book report two days ago. It was so interesting learning about all the different types of cars and what they can do. Toyota, Tesla, Jeep, Minivan, Hatchback, Crossover, Convertible, Sedan...”

“Okay, okay, Zelena. I get the point.” Tojo replied rather briskly.

Sometimes it was hard getting along with her because I was a straight A’s nerd sort of girl, but Tojo was just like an average girl and got some A’s but also some B’s. We had some opposing views on that topic, but I tried not to bring it up because it’s kinda touchy.

My thoughts were interrupted as I heard an all-to-familiar beeping sound coming from my pocket. That sound was meant to alert me when someone was either going into my room or doing something on my computers, and I heard that beeping noise a lot. And when I say a lot, I mean a whole lot because someone was always going into my room and nosing around. You see, I'm a hacker (and NOT a "cracker" I prefer using the term "computer technician"). I love computers and learning all about them. I also love learning about other people and what they're hiding on their computers. In fact, I learned everything that I know about hacking and computers from my Uncle Derek. He works for the FBI and is in charge of hacking into enemy databases as well as making sure all the FBI computers are running properly. He is my hero and kind of like a second dad to me. I'm pretty sure I got my overprotectiveness of my computers from him. I do not want to chance anyone hacking into my computers and stealing top secret information (As much top secret information you can have when you're 14). I have a triple lock on my room door so it's a miracle that anyone got in. I quickly grabbed my phone out of my pocket and pulled up my security app. There in the middle of my room was my brother, Zephan. Ahhh!! Not my brother! He is the nosiest person I have ever met and also one of the smartest second graders I have ever known. Since Zephan has a few mental difficulties, my mom just homeschools him at home. That means he has more time to be nosy.

"What's wrong, Zelena?" asked Tojo as she leaned over and peered at the video on my phone screen of my brother nosing around my room.

"Oh, dear. How did Zephan get into your room again?" asked Tojo with a sympathetic voice.

"I have absolutely no idea! I have a triple lock on my bedroom door! How did he figure it out?" I replied.

"What's he doing, Zelena?" Tojo asked.

I watched on the video as he sat down on my swivel chair in my room and started typing on my keyboard.

"This is totally against the rules!" I exclaimed a little too loudly.

All the heads in the bus turned to look at me.

"Sorry, guys!" I said. "Nothing's wrong."

I turned my head back to my phone and saw his face looking directly at me. He must be looking straight into my video camera.

"How?" I asked no one in particular. "I hide my video cameras extremely well. How does he always find them? This is getting outrageous!"

"I'm so sorry, Zelena," said Tojo softly. Whenever my temper got out of control, she always tried to calm me down.

But just then there was no more time for discussion because the bus pulled up at the school, and there was a mad rush of kids as they swarmed out of the bus and into the school building. I personally loved school. I got to learn so many new things, but my favorite part was

my computer class and Chinese language class. I had been interested in learning Chinese ever since I had met Tojo, and Tojo says that I'm a natural at it.

"See you at lunch Tojo!" I yelled as we parted ways in the school. Since I am in the advanced classes at our school and Tojo was just part of the regular classes, we are not able to spend much time together at school unless it is at lunch or recess. But that is okay because I get to spend my class time with my other best friend, Matthew.

I quietly entered my classroom to find that my first class was just about to start. I quickly chose a seat right next to Matthew.

"Hey, Zelena!" he quietly whispered. "Got that book report done?"

"Yep! All done and hoping for an A!" I replied with a smile.

My first class in the day was always Language Arts, which I liked for the most part.

Finally, after surviving through several classes and saying "hi" to Matthew and Tojo whenever I could, it was finally time for my all time favorite, computer class. I could hardly wait!!!! I stepped into the classroom and heard the welcoming sound of buzzing computers and the click clack of people typing away on their keyboards. I quickly ran over to "my" computer and turned it on just as my computer teacher walked into the room.

"Hi, everyone! Today I have a surprise for you," said my computer teacher, Seth. "I am going to be giving each of you a computer test to see how well you are doing in this class. Since it is almost the end of the school year, if you pass the test, you are done with this class. But if you do not, you must continue to take this class like you would regularly for the remaining few days."

I immediately started racking my brain trying to remember everything I had been taught about computers. I lived computers, I loved computers, and I thought about computers constantly. Matthew and Tojo sometimes thought I was going insane because of my love for computers. Just then, I heard a faint beeping sound coming, once again, from my pocket. I prayed that it wouldn't be Zephany sneaking into my room again. But once again, when I pulled out my phone, there was a video of Zephany sneaking around my room, but instead of trying to hack into my computers, he was stealing candy from my secret stash.

"Uggh!" I muttered to myself. If he wasn't nosing around on my computers than he was stealing candy from me. The problem is that I can't tell Mom that Zephany is nosing around my room or stealing my candy because then she would ask me how I know and I would have to spill the beans that I have hidden cameras all over my room.

"Alright, everyone!" called out Seth. "Time for the test." He handed each of us a piece of paper, explaining the rules about the time limit, no cheating, no whispering to your friends, bla bla bla. I just started writing.

After ten minutes I was done and turned in the paper to Seth. I was so anxious thinking about how I would do that I didn't even notice the fact that some students were still on the first question.

"Oops!" I thought to myself. I guess I'm just too fast.

After what felt like an eternity, Seth finally turned to me and handed back my sheet of paper.

"Wow, Zelena! You did amazing and got all the answers correct! I already talked with the principal and he said that since this is the last class of the day, the bus will just take you home early along with any of the other kids that pass it.

I knew that I was supposed to be quiet for the rest of the students finishing their test, but I couldn't help but utter a "Hooray!"

"Thank you so much, Seth. I really enjoyed this class, and hopefully I will see you again next year!" I whispered as I dashed out the door and hopped onto the waiting bus.

The ride home was actually rather depressing, and I realized that maybe it was not such a good thing to get to go home earlier, because then I would not be able to sit with Tojo. She would probably be lonely or maybe she would find someone else to sit with and would forget about me. *No! Of course not! She would never desert me!*

Finally the bus stopped, and I jumped out, thanked the bus driver, and ran to my house. I unlocked the door, threw my backpack onto the carpet, and headed into the kitchen for a snack.

"Zelena! Is that you?" asked my mom as she entered the kitchen where I was helping myself to a bowl of cereal.

"Yep! Since I passed this math test, I..." I was cut off by my mom.

"I already know, honey," said my mom. "And I have some other news too that you might not like."

At this turn of events, I got really anxious and decided to sit down in case I fainted from the news.

"What is it, Mom?" I asked.

"Well, your dad just told me today that he has to move for his realtor job. He didn't explain why, but he said that it was really important and needed to be soon. And you know how much he loves his job, so I agreed. We're going to be moving to Fairview, Washington, as soon as we can."

It was just like everything inside of me stopped, even my heart. The news hit me so hard that I felt like I was about to black out. "*Move?!*" I felt like I couldn't even say that word. It was too big. And before I even knew what was happening, I started to cry and I couldn't even stop. The tears just kept coming. And I never cry. NEVER EVER.

"Oh, honey! I didn't know it would be this hard for you. I'm so sorry!" comforted my mom. "Maybe we can talk to your dad about making a compromise."

But deep down inside of me, I knew that wouldn't work. Once my dad made up his mind, it was over. We were going to move, and I felt so helpless and weak.

The next couple of days were like a blur to me. I couldn't even think correctly. I went to school everyday, and my friends tried to comfort me, but I felt so lost and lonely. I didn't even know what I would do in a new state without any friends to help me. My dad said that I couldn't even finish the school year because his job was more important and we needed to move as

soon as possible. Our house looked like a hurricane had hit it. Bags, boxes, and suitcases were strewn out everywhere, not to mention the huge moving truck in our driveway and the “for sale” sign in our front lawn. I was going to move, and I could not change the inevitable.

Finally the day came when our whole family was going to take an airplane to Fairview, Washington, and my two best friends came to see me off.

“Wow, Zelena! I’m gonna miss you so much! What am I going to do without the super cool, crazy red haired, and best girl I know with computers?” said Matthew as he gave me his last hug for a long time.

“I’m gonna miss you too, Matthew,” I said quickly trying not to cry because I felt like I was about to explode with sadness.

Next was Tojo. “I’m going to miss you so much, Zelena. You are my best friend, and I am going to write to you and call you every single week, and text you everyday,” said Tojo who looked like she was also about to cry.

“I love you so much, guys!” I called as I gave Matthew and Tojo last hugs and hopped onto the plane to fly miles away, where I would be alone with my nosy brother and mysterious parents.

The airplane ride to Washington was so boring and monotonous, especially since most of the time my brother was trying to squeeze information out of me like why my computers were so secret and bla bla bla.

Finally I heard my mom say, “We’re finally here in Washington!” At the same time I was excited to be at a different place, but also very sad that I had to leave everything I knew, besides my family, back in Texas.

“So, Mom,” I said, “Where are we going to be living here in Washington?”

“Well..” she began, “I think we are going to be renting a one-story house for now until we can decide if we should buy a permanent house.”

“Oh, boy,” I thought. Going from a huge two story house to a small, one story house. What was I going to do?

As soon as the plane had landed, I hopped onto the new and unfamiliar Washington ground, wondering what lay ahead of me. We quickly got a taxi to take us straight to our new house, but as soon as I saw it, I knew I was in for it. The paint was peeling on the house, the door was barely hanging on its hinges, and the roof tiles were falling off. And imagine. My dad is a realtor. This is all we get?

“Seriously, parents? I mean what kind of a house is this?” I asked in a disgusted tone. “Is there even any good wifi here?”

I quickly checked my phone and was relieved to find that both of my phones worked. “Zelena and Zephan, I know that you are both not excited about our new home, but with a little bit of work and fix-ups, it will be as good as new!” said both of my parents in an unrealistically upbeat tone of voice.

I stepped into the house and quickly found the room that I would be staying in. It was miniature. Like it should have been meant for an American Girl doll's house. How in the whole entire world was I supposed to fit all of my things including my six computers into here? It seemed absolutely impossible. But just as I decided to start unpacking and see how much stuff I could fit into my room, my brother walks in.

"What are you doing in here, Zephan?" I asked.

"Well, you know, the regular. Just looking around."

"Uh, huh. I'm sure. Looking around for all the nicks and crannies so you can figure out where I am going to put all of my computers and video cameras just like you do every day," I said in a sarcastic tone.

"Now, now, Zelana. It's the brotherly thing to do. I, as your dear brother, should know what you are up to in case there is an accident," said my brother in a horribly sweet voice.

"Zephan. I am seven years older than you. I do not need you to watch over me. Now if you will please excuse me, I have lots of work to do," I said with annoyance growing in my voice.

"Okay, okay. I'll leave," said Zephan.

"Good!" I said. I knew that I should be kinder to my brother since, after all, he was my little brother, and I was his example. I still felt so annoyed at him sometimes though. That evening I mostly just unpacked, ate dinner, and went to bed.

The next morning I woke up rather early so I could work on my computers, before having to leave for my new school.

As I booted up my computers, I started to think about ways to make new friends. Being nice, striking up a conversation, sitting next to people.... This whole time I had been thinking about how lonely and sad I was going to be in Washington, but I had forgotten that I am brave, strong, and fearless. I can make new friends. I don't have to be by myself.

Just then, I could feel both of my phones vibrating in my pockets, and I pulled both of them out. On one was a text from Tojo and on the other was a text from Matthew. Supposedly they were missing me a lot and wondering who to sit by because I wasn't there. Just hearing that made feel like crying all over again. I quickly responded with lots of happy emojis to make myself and them feel better even though I still felt rotten down inside.

"Zelena! It's time to go!" I heard my mom yelling from the kitchen. "And I need to talk to you about something too!"

"Oh, great," I thought. "What have I done wrong this time?"

"Honey," my mother started when I entered the kitchen and started digging into my breakfast. "I have decided to take on a job,"

Although I was super surprised, I was ready for any kind of news after the news that we were moving. My first thought was about Zephan.

"But, Mom, what about Zephan?" I asked.

“What about him?” replied Mom. “He’s doing so well in his schoolwork hear at home, that I am positive he can go to public school now just like you. I already contacted the teachers at his new school, and they said that they would be delighted to have him.”

“What job are you going to get?” I asked, changing the subject a bit.

“Well, I am planning on applying for a teaching job, especially since I know so much about teaching from teaching Zephan,” she replied

I looked over at my brother who had the biggest smile on his face. He had always wanted to go to regular school with regular kids, and he thought that it was unfair that I got to go but he couldn’t.

“Cool, Zephan! I hope you enjoy it!” I enthusiastically said. I mean, it meant less time for him to nose around in my room. *Yay!*

As I headed out the door that morning, I was hoping that maybe I would be able to make some friends at school. But when I stepped onto the bus that morning, I realized that I was the only student on the bus.

“Wow!” I thought. “I must be the first student on the bus route.”

And sure enough, at the next stops, tons of highschoolers got on, but none of them sat by me until a girl who also had red hair got onto the bus at the last stop and slid into the seat next to me. As soon as she sat down, I started a conversation.

“Hi, there! My name is Zelana! What’s your name?” I asked politely.

“Oh! Hi. My name is Brooklyn,” the girl replied timidly, turning towards me.

“I just moved to Washington, and this is my first day at this highschool,” I said, hoping that maybe she would show me around the new school and want to be my friend.

“Oh. Cool. I hope you enjoy it.” she replied.

Okay, not what I was expecting her to say, but it works.

“Umm...” I started, “Would you mind showing me around the new school?”

“I guess,” she said, quickly pulling her phone out of her bag, clearly not wanting to talk anymore.

Okay, so this whole friend thing was not working out like I had planned, but there was still more kids. As soon as we pulled up to the school and got off of the bus, she ran ahead and disappeared. Okay, so obviously, she did not want to show me around the school. Bummer. I walked straight to the front desk when I entered the school and grabbed a map, plotting out where my classrooms were. The problem with this school was that it did not have advanced classes, so that meant I would have to just participate in the regular classes that were way too easy for me. I mean, technically, I could just snooze through the whole class and still get all of my homework correct, but I decided to pay attention today just in case I met any friendly people. But all day long, not one person sat by me, not one person talked to me, not one person even smiled at me. I began to think that this school had a “no smiling” policy. Finally, when the last bell rang for the day, I rushed outside and jumped onto the bus, ready for the day to be done. I was looking forward to talking to my mom about how this new school was not working

out for me. Thankfully, she was not starting her new teaching job until next week. My school would be out by then, but evidently, she was going to start her job by teaching summer school, so I wouldn't be seeing her much. When I finally got home and set down my backpack, I ran into the kitchen, hoping to find Mom there.

"Mom! Are you here?" I yelled.

"I'm over here, Honey!" I heard Mom yelling. "What do you need?"

"Well, I just wanted to tell you that this new school thing is not working. I can't make any new friends, no one is friendly, and the school is way too easy. I finished my homework for the rest of this week on the bus ride home!" I complained.

"Hmm..." she began, "Well, you only have two more days left, so I would say you should finish up with this new school and then maybe next year you could online school."

"Oh, yes! I would really like doing that!" I exclaimed. Anything with online or computers involved was my kind of style.

"Okay, we'll think about that for next year," my mom said, chuckling.

For some reason, after talking with my mom, I felt so much better. Kinda like she understood me and was on my side. I quickly raced to my room and was about to lay down on my bed when I heard a weird noise, kinda like a scratching noise. The first thing I thought about was that there were mice in the wall.

"Oh, great," I said. "Just what we need." But after listening for a bit, it sounded like the scratching was actually coming from behind my dresser, so I quickly pulled my dresser out, and almost screamed from surprise. Right there, lying next to the wall, was a ferret, but it did not look well. It looked super skinny, hungry, thirsty, lonely, and weak.

"What in the world is a ferret doing in my bedroom?" I thought to myself. So I decided to do what any kind-hearted person would do. I gently picked up the ferret and made a little bed for it in one of my empty dresser drawers. Next, I ran downstairs and collected lots of food and water for it. As soon as I fed the ferret, it looked so much better. I decided that since I found the ferret in my bedroom, I would keep it and name it Ferret. That's the perfect name, right?

But just at that moment, Zephan walked in.

"Hi, Zephan! What are you up to today?" I asked, sounding super sweet while silently shutting my dresser drawer that held Ferret.

"Oh, nothing much," he replied looking at me curiously. "But it does look to me like you are hiding something."

How does he always know? I asked myself. *It's almost like he reads my mind.*

"What? Why would you think I'm hiding anything? I'm not hiding anything!" I said, but I already knew I had given myself away. It was too hard trying to hide something from my brother.

"Just spill it!" my brother commanded walking towards my dresser.

"Fine! I'll show you, but you are not allowed to tell the parents, okay? Do you promise not to tell them?" I asked sternly.

"Sure, sure. Just let me see it already!" he commanded again.

I gently opened up the drawer and showed him Ferret.

"Eww!" he said, "It's a weasel!"

"Well, it's actually not a weasel. It's a ferret and it's name is Ferret! Isn't it so cute?"

"Nope! I'm keeping my hands away from the weasel. Oh, by the way, is it a girl or a boy?" he asked.

"It is not a weasel!" I said with impatience growing in my voice. "But I hadn't thought about that. Hmm... I wonder what it is. I guess I should research about Ferrets on the computer."

"Alright, well, I'd better get going. Bye, Weasel!" my brother added as he left my room.

"Uggh!" I thought to myself. "Why does he have to persist to annoy me?"

I decided to research right away about ferrets and how to figure out what gender they are. After looking at several different articles, I finally found one that was very useful. Evidently, they like to eat vegetables, meat, and eggs. Good to know, and according to the article, Ferret is a boy. Okay, also good to know.

The last two days of school went by without any problems, and when I finally came home on the last day, I was overjoyed and disappointed at the same time. First of all, I like going to school and learning new things, but that school was definitely not fit for me. Good riddance. As soon as I opened our front door, Zephan started to annoy me once again.

"Guess what, Zelana?" he taunted.

"What?" I asked.

"I heard about a pet show that is going to be going on tomorrow. I bet that your weasel won't even qualify." Zephan said in a horribly rude tone of voice.

"Is that a dare?" I asked.

"Yup!" he said.

"Tomorrow, I'll show you Zephan. Ferret will win first prize. You just wait and see!" I exclaimed. Wait! Oh no! Did I just accept a dare from my brother to enter my ferret into a pet show? Oh, boy. I'm in for it now. But since I have already accepted the dare, there's no backing down. I guess I had better fill out the entry form online. As soon as I had filled out the form, I grabbed Ferret and headed for the pet store to buy supplies for him. I needed to really pamper him and make him look like a prince. Soon, I had washed Ferret three times, shampooed him, conditioned him, clipped his toenails, and done basically anything else I could think of to make sure that he would win the prize tomorrow.

The next morning I woke up early and headed out the door with Ferret, a whole bag of supplies to make him look better, and of course, my nosy little brother. He wanted to be there when my ferret came in last place - I mean, first place. Mom had agreed to take us there (once I explained about my pet ferret) so we got there somewhat early. As soon as I got to the pet show, I headed straight to where all of the other ferret owners were getting their ferrets ready for the big day. I was so confident that I wasn't even thinking about where I was going when all

of a sudden I ran straight into another ferret owner and all of my supplies, including my ferret, went flying. I quickly got up and stared straight into the face of a boy that I guessed was about eighteen. He looked a bit Chinese too. My ferret was now on the ground in a pile of dirt, and words could not even explain how mad I was. All of my hard work to make Ferret look his best, and now here he was in a pile of dirt with all of my shampoos and conditioners strewn across the ground.

“How! Why? What were you thinking?” I yelled to the boy. “I have worked so hard to make sure that my ferret will win first prize today, and now just because you don’t watch where you are going, you run straight into me to ruin my chances of winning first place. How could you?”

I glanced over at my brother who was staring admiringly at the boy who had just ran into me. What was he thinking? Did he actually like this guy?

Chapter 4: Tensing

"Why you..!" the girl spat, "What were you thinking?! My ferret was all set to win first place and you came in here splattering stuff EVERYWHERE!"

The people around us made a sort of circle around us, and another girl was helping pick up the numerous bottles of lotion everywhere. I shrank back a foot or two, but ran out of room so I was forced to wait out my fate.

"I'm so so so sorry. Here let me help you out," I offered.

"Get yourself out of here and leave me and my ferret alone!" she thundered. I cringed; then I cringed even more when we saw where *my* ferret was. She was playfully batting at the other girl's ferret.

"What! GET YOUR WEASEL AWAY FROM MY FERRET!" she screamed. At these words, a boy nearby chuckled and was instantly silenced by the girl's piercing, laser-like look. I quickly reached for Spark, but Spark reached up and scratched me. Now, I *screamed* and jumped back. The other girl, not knowing that I got scratched, smiled and said, "That's right; move on back!" She then grabbed at her ferret, but it also scratched her. If her face could have been any redder than her hair, it was now. The yell was probably heard halfway across town and some dogs started barking in the background. It appeared she was just about to serve me a knuckle sandwich when someone stepped in. While that other girl and I were "talking" to each other, *another* girl was busily cleaning up the various bottles and sprays that were lying on the ground. She quickly stepped in before there could have been bashed noses and black eyes.

"Hey guys, calm down. Everything is going to be all.." she began.

"You are even cruel to your pets, what *is* that thing you stuck on your weasel (that other boy then laughed again) and she doesn't appear to have been washed in a year!" interrupted the other girl. Now I started to get angry.

"Well, you're ferret probably can't enjoy a good night's rest with you scrubbing it down every second! And for your information, my ferret is the best in the world and that "thing" she is wearing is a mini camera. Maybe you're jealous?" I countered.

The other girl's face turned purple, but before she could say anything or the other girl could intervene, the boy (that had been laughing at the turn of events) stepped forward. He beamed from ear to ear and said, "Glad to meet you. My name is Zephan and that girl is my sister, Zelena," he said.

"And my name is Anaya, and I think that both of your ferrets are so cute," the helpful girl finished. Meanwhile, the crowd (growing impatient at all the introductions) started dispersing. I was afraid for a moment that Zelena was going to pound me (which of course if she had started I would have prevented), but her arms were currently being stuffed full of bottles and Zephan was shaking my arm like a maniac. For being a little boy this kid had guts and strength.

"You're just the friend I want," he said while rudely grabbing Spark away from her new-found friend and tossing her to me. Spark let out a little ferret squeak. "Come on bro, let me show you how to beat the socks off Zelena in the ferret competition."

"Well, umm, I'm not actually participating in the competition."

"Oh... Then what are you doing here?" quizzed Zephan.

"It's a long story, and I have to go. See you later!" I yelled as I pulled back my hand and tore off into the crowd. I looked behind me when I emerged at the end of the convention and none of the kids were in sight. After letting out a sigh of relief, I trudged back to the car where Dad was waiting impatiently. I flopped into the back car seat, slammed my door shut, and..... yelled.

"What the.., how did you..., huh?" I began; for there right beside me in the car seat was Zephan, a big smile splitting his face in half.

"Ha, you didn't think I would let you off this easy. You're THE man. Like, THE THE man. You know, THE THE THE man," he began. Dad just started the car and started driving to our new house.

"So," Zephan continued, "What do you like to do in your spare time? Save the world? Build incredi-ferrets? Play video games?"

"Umm, I do martial arts?" I replied, a little unsure.

"DUDE! That is AWESOME! You HAVE to show me some moves. I have like ALWAYS wanted to do karate and like womp, kick, chop bad guys. It sounds like SUCH a cool thing."

"Umm, I hate to break it to you, but beating the bad guys is NOT fun. It's kind of scary." I replied.

"Spoken like a true hero," Zephan whispered, "You're my first and only hero."

He thrust his ball cap and a sharpie into my face. "I GOTTA get your autograph."

Dad in the front seat laughed.

"Dad, you're not helping!" I said through clenched teeth.

"I'm sorry, but he just seems like the perfect little brother that you have always wanted!" Dad exclaimed.

"Wait," Zephan said, "You have always wanted a little brother? I have always wanted a big brother. You should totally adopt me. We could be an amazing duo!"

"Well, wouldn't your family be upset about that?" I asked, a little kinder this time.

"Nah, my parents are hardly ever around and my sister drives me insane. We could spend ALL day together: beating baddies, playing Minecraft, watching Avengers... You like Ant-Man?"

"Yeah," I admitted.

"OMG, me too! Do you wanna come over and watch with me?" offered Zephan, "I just got it on Blu-Ray!"

"Which one?"

"Ant-Man: Curse of the Anteater" Zephan replied eagerly.

Ant-Man: Curse of the Anteater was a fan-exclusive movie that had yet to be released to the public yet. Evidently, Zephan had been one of those lucky winners of the first copy. However, I was pretty exhausted from the day as well.

“Actually, I need to get home and get settled, we just moved here today, but if you like I’ll pop on over at your house some time, and we can hang watch it!”

“Where do you live? We can drop you off,” said Dad.

Zephan instructed us where to drop him off. Then, dad drove back to the McDonalds. “Kai, I’m proud of you. Putting yourself out there to make friends; especially with one younger than you. Good job,” praised Dad.

“Thanks, I only hope I won’t have to meet his sister again.” I was excited about making friends but I was also exhausted from the amount of social interaction.

“Whoa! His sister? I think we have a lot to talk about, especially the deal with those rogue FBI agents.”

“Yeah, well we will soon.”

“Tanya left early to go home and make dinner, we can discuss then.”

“Sounds good!”

Dad drove off and left me in the parking lot to pick up my motorcycle. Before I left, I programmed into my motorcycle’s computer the address of *my* house into my GPS so I wouldn’t get lost (which I do often). Eventually, I stopped in front of a medium-sized house with a small, grass lawn in the front. Using my keys that my dad had given me, I let myself into my very own house. How cool is that?! Except for a mound of boxes lying on the ground in the small garage, the house was bare, but I kind of liked it that way - so clean! Spark was investigating her food dish in her cage (Dad had taken her with him when he drove home and let her off in my house). Her camera and leather harness were still on, so I unclicked the little buckles and eased it off as she chowed down on her ferret food. Then, I grabbed a big box labeled “electronics” and lugged it over to a room that I decided to designate as the “computer room.”

Part of the reason, I decided on this particular room was because the movers had already set up a large desk in there (according to my wishes to have one in a room). I set up my monitors and two desktop computer on the desk. Then, I went back to the living room and pulled in my boxes that contained my sorting trays and electronic bits and parts. On my spare time when I am not gaming, I like to put together robots and computer hardware. I also can do a little bit of programming, but I prefer the hands-on of hardware. When I finished with all my technology boxes, there was still a lot of empty space in the room, but I figured I could easily fill it up later, so I started setting up my bedroom. A few boxes later, I had made my bed, set up my night stand, outfitted my closet (more on that later), and set up my rock bean bags in my room. I love bean bags, and my favorite are the ones that look like giant rocks. You really should see the look on people’s face when you just collapse into one of those things. They honestly think you are falling on top of a giant rock. It’s hilarious.

For my “wardrobe,” I have a decent variety of clothes, but I definitely like long-sleeve shirts and jeans. My most coveted clothing item is my combat outfit and my motorcycle outfit. My motorcycle outfit is really snazzy/cool looking with extra padding and protection, special pants with lots of pockets and cool decals. My combat outfit, Dad’s company specially built just for me - a custom outfit! I only use it every now and then just for fun. The outfit has several pieces. The first looks kind of like a black wetsuit that stretches over my body. Then I put on my pants which are composed of long segments of bullet-proof Kevlar with small leather connections for where my joints bend. For my torso, there is a thick vest made of the newest innovation in blast proof clothing. Even your average bullet will only make a bruise. Next I have a special circle of kevlar that goes around my neck and snaps into my vest as well as some arm kevlar with leather joints as well. The special part about this suit, is that I can connect a padded, small backpack on my back that is basically a large battery. I then connect the back pack to a small port into the neck piece. Then, wires in the suit take the electrical current to my gloves which have small sensors in them. If I turn on the battery backpack, my gloves have the capacity to give large electrical shocks without me feeling anything. All I have to do is squeeze (the smaller the squeeze, the less the jolt). A full on squeeze gives a dangerously large amount of electricity (thus why I hardly ever use it!) The arms and neck are specially made so I have the full range of motion. Last of all, I have a full head helmet with little spikes on top so I look like one of the kids from Big Hero 6. When I have it on, it weighs a good amount, but I wear it every now and then; and especially with its steel-reinforced gloves, I feel almost like a superhero!

When I finished my bedroom and computer room, I was virtually out of boxes, so I would need to go online and find some furniture for the other rooms as well as go shopping for some food for the kitchen. I still planned on going over to my parents’ house for dinner like we used to do in Troutdale. Speaking of which, it was time to go over, so I made sure Spark was set (which she was as she was sleeping in her cage), and walked on over next door for dinner. We had some discussing to do.

When I walked in the door, the delicious aroma of chili, cornbread, and brownies hit me like a wrecking ball. I didn’t realize how hungry I had gotten chasing a bunch of spies. I sat down at the table and dug in. We talked for a while about Dad’s new headquarters and how it was working out, then Dad broached the subject of the events of the day.

“So Kai, tell us about what happened when you ran after those guys,” Dad began.

“Well, I quickly lost them and then ran into this girl who got all upset at me. I mean, I did run into her, but it was an accident and I apologized. Anyway, her little brother is super excited about me so I said I may hang out with him sometime this summer.” I replied. “So what is the deal with the Chinese spies. I mean, how important are you to them?”

“I wouldn’t know. I mean, when I worked for them, I figured out that they were constructing something really powerful, but I never found out what.” Dad explained. I glanced over at Mom, because I was going to ask her for another brownie, but I stopped talking before I

started because the expression on her face had hardened a bit; she almost looked like she was frowning.

"Are you *sure* you don't know anything else that the Chinese might be after," Mom insisted.

"Nope!" Dad replied (a little sharper I might add). He looked at Mom with a funny stare, and Mom quickly looked away.

"Umm, is there something you guys are not telling me?" I said.

"No!" they both replied (at the same time which made me even *more* suspicious).

"Okay.... Well, I guess I'll be heading back over to my house and getting some sleep. I need to go get a few things for my house tomorrow. Have a good night!" I said.

With that, I dumped my plate and bowl into the sink and waltzed out the door; leaving an unusually quiet Mom and Dad behind me. I knew there *was* something that they were not telling me, but I figured that if it was important enough for me to know, they would tell me.

When I got into my house, I nearly stepped on Spark, who was lying in the front entryway looking really sick. Needless to say, I freaked out. I carefully picked her up and ran towards my bathroom. I grabbed all the most comfortable wash cloths and a small empty box. Then, I put her inside and carried it back outside to my parents' house. I practically flew back through their door (which they hadn't gotten around to locking when I had left a few minutes ago) and screamed, "Get the car started. We are going to the vet!"

Dad just sat there staring at me, but Mom jumped up and practically dove into the garage. I followed suit, and stumbled into the back seat. Before I had even put on my seat belt and told the GPS to get us to the nearest veterinary clinic, Mom had us going pell-mell down the neighborhood street. Going five miles per hour over the speed limit on every road, mom barreled towards the vet. We screeched into the parking lot, and I raced into the clinic. Luckily, it was still open. The nurse on the front desk was definitely startled by me, but the look of pure terror on my face told her exactly what to do. I handed her the box, and she took it into the back room immediately. I promptly collapsed in a nearby chair and filled out the required information on a form provided by the nurse when she came back.

"Okay, can you explain what is going on?" Mom said as she sat down next to me.

"I don't really know. Spark seemed fine when I left her before dinner, but when I got back she was just lying in the entryway looking really bad. If she dies, I don't think I will ever be able to forgive myself. I *need* her Mom. She is my best friend. She has to live!!!" I babbled.

"She'll be fine, don't worry," Mom soothed.

"I hope," I murmured. The next half hour felt like an eternity, and I mean ETERNITY. Finally, a nurse came out and walked over to us. Since, we were the only ones in the waiting area, she probably figured it would be us.

"There is good news and bad news," the nurse announced. My heart sank.

"Good news first," replied Mom.

"Well, your ferret is an excellent shape - no infections, no broken bones, perfect teeth, wonderful claws, beautiful tail - everything is great," the nurse went on.

"So, what's the bad news," I said.

"We don't know what is wrong with her. The only thing we can think of is that she is dealing with depression," the nurse finished.

"Depression? Why would she be dealing with depression?" I pondered out loud.

"Can I ask a question? Did she meet up with a certain *male* ferret this afternoon that was owned by a girl with red hair?" the nurse questioned.

"What?! How did you know?" I exclaimed.

"Well, a girl came in just an hour before you guys arrived with a male ferret that was showing the exact same symptoms but having equally good health. Perhaps, they miss each other; maybe you should get them together," the nurse responded.

"I don't want a bunch of baby ferrets," I stated (though the real reason is that I didn't want to have to talk with the other girl!)

"Well, according to her file that you supplied us, she has already been dealt (I was glad she used that word instead of the alternate ones!) with by the animal shelter, so you don't have to worry," the nurse smiled, "Ferrets are very social animals actually."

I blanched. On one hand, I really wanted Spark to be okay; I was very worried for her. On the other hand, I really didn't want to have to go by the other girl's house. What was I going to do.

"You wouldn't happen to have her phone number would you?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, but our policy prevents us from handing out patients' phone numbers. Perhaps, I can call her and let her know the situation. In the meantime," the nurse continued, "Why don't you make sure she is really comfortable and gets some good food. If you can't get her back together with the other ferret, perhaps you should consider getting another ferret to keep her company."

"Alright, thanks," I responded. We paid the bill, and I took Spark home. I carefully made a nice cozy bed out of some blankets in the corner of my room next to the heater and brought her some chicken, which she actually did eat. I was just resting in my bed, wondering what to do, when my phone rang. *The nurse!* I thought. I quickly answered the phone.

"Hello? This is Kai," I spoke.

"Hello, this is Zelena. Well, uh, you see; my ferret is not doing good, and he needs to get back together with yours," she explained. I panicked slightly. First of all, I hadn't expected *her* to call, and second, I was really nervous about talking to her.

"I took my ferret to the vet," continued Zelena, "and the nurse told me that I needed to get my ferret back together with yours - something about him suffering from depression."

"Oh, mine too," I added.

"Well, no offense, but I'd rather not have *my* ferret at your house," Zelena continued.

"Me either," I added again, "Got any ideas?"

“What about that girl that helped me pick up my bottles of lotion?” she responded.

“What about her?”

“What if she took in both mine and yours, she looked like she took good care of her hamster.”

“You think a perfect stranger will just take in ferrets?!” I exclaimed.

“Well, if she is up to it, would you follow through?” Zelena responded.

“I guess...”

“Okay. And... I’m real sorry about today.”

“Me too, talk to you soon,” I finished.

The next day, I woke up to the sound of my phone ringing again and realized that I had fallen asleep.

“Kai, this is Zelena. She actually said yes! I’m dropping Ferret off there right now. If you can, drop yours off at her house soon. I’m texting you the address.”

“Wow! I can’t believe she actually agreed! Okay, I’ll do that.”

After hanging up and receiving the text from Zelena, I quickly bundled Spark up in some blankets and hopped onto my motorcycle. Normally, I would have just gone over to the parents and driven their car, but there was no sign of them having awoken, and I didn’t have either of their cars’ keys, so I just played it dangerous and drove over to Anaya’s house while balancing Spark’s box on my motorcycle’s dashboard. It didn’t take me too long, because her house wasn’t that far away. I jumped off my motorcycle and raced up the driveway, tapping quietly on the doorway. The door opened, and there stood Anaya with a big smile on her face. Spark shot out of the box, because on the floor next to Anaya sat an equally excited ferret.

“Wow,” Anaya and I both said.

“That’s crazy,” Anaya replied.

I bent down to the ground and said, “See you later Spark. Be good!”

I stood back up and smiled, and Anaya did too. Then, Zelena appeared behind Anaya.

“Oh, hi Kai,” she said, “Anaya is going to show me her father’s medieval themed hotel!”

“Well, it’s not actually his, but he manages it,” Anaya corrected.

“Cool, well, see you guys later!” I hopped back onto my motorcycle and rode away before I cried. Spark and I had developed a special relationship, and I was sad that I couldn’t be with her as much anymore. I was almost on the verge of tears when I parked in front of my house. Mom was outside, weeding her front lawn (It is unfortunate, but a lot of people just pour bark mulch on top of their weeds when they sell their house so it looks good for a week or so, and then all the weeds come up)

“Kai! What’s wrong?” Mom gasped.

“Nothing really. I just dropped Spark off at a friend’s house (I said friend so I wouldn’t have to explain that she really wasn’t my friend, just an acquaintance). I won’t be able to spend much time with her now that she is obsessed with that other ferret,” I said. Mom put her dirty

glove on my shoulder, “I know it’s hard honey. You need to do something fun to get your mind off your ferret. How about you go see that cool medieval themed hotel downtown?”

“Wait, what?” (Zelena was just talking about that!)

“Yeah, there is this hotel that looks just like a medieval castle. I’ve heard all sorts of good things about it. Check it out, and let me know what you think,” Mom finished.

I wasn’t necessarily interested in going there as I knew one person who would most certainly be there and of whom I really didn’t want to see, but I told Mom I would check it out.

I looked up the address of the hotel on my phone and drove off. It didn’t take long to find it. It has tall stone towers and a large wooden drawbridge which were both pretty noticeable.

The hotel was magnificent. It looked like a modern version of a medieval castle. I instantly loved it. I gazed at the wonderful trellis and rock walls; there was even a small moat around the hotel. It was astounding.

I walked over the moat on the weather-beaten drawbridge (which I’m sure was quite safe, just made to look weather-beaten) and into the hotel. There was a roaring fireplace in one corner and intricate wooden chairs (with authentic-looking plush cushions) scattered about the place. My eyes drifted everywhere as I walked up the aisle. A hallway to the left looked like it had some cool medieval weapons and suits of armor decorating the wall. I walked up to the front desk to ask the clerk if it was okay for me to just look around. The only problem was that it wasn’t just any hotel clerk. No, with the way my life had been going lately, I really should have seen it coming, but I didn’t.

“Hi, Kai. Glad to see you again,” smirked Xen.

Chapter 5: Training

Zelena breezed through the front hotel doors with me behind her. Then she halted so suddenly I almost ran into her.

"What?" I asked.

"Woah! Anaya, this place is even more medieval than I thought!" Zelena's head tilted back as she took in the view of the gigantic fireplace, armored soldiers, tapestries, and other miscellaneous decorations.

I shrugged, not as impressed by the decorations as Zelena was. I had seen them a lot before. But there was one thing I still wasn't used to yet - the new summer intern. At first, I had thought of Xen as a nuisance and had even been jealous of him, but now I was starting to change my opinion. For the first time, I noticed that he was friendly, organized, meticulously dressed, and caring.

Zelena marched right up to the desk, so I followed along. She stuck out her hand and Xen politely shook it.

"Hi, Xen! I'm Zelena - Anaya's friend."

"Hi, Zelena. What are you doing here?"

"Well," she said, looking over at me, "We met at the pet fair this weekend and - long story short, now she's showing me her dad's business."

"Well, make yourself at home."

As my gaze turned to the lobby, I noticed a leather sheath propped up under the desk. From what I could see, it looked like a double-sword scabbard, holding two Chinese swords.

"Those are just my swords that I like to take with me everywhere because they're valuable," Xen said quickly.

I looked up at him, surprised he had noticed that I was looking at his weaponry.

"Cool!" exclaimed Zelena, leaning over the desk to get a better look, "Is it like a hobby? 'Cause honestly, it totally fits this whole medieval theme."

"You could say that." Xen quickly changed the topic. "What are your hobbies?"

"Oh, running, cooking, taking care of my ferret," Zelena ticked off the list on her fingers, "...and computer skills like Anaya's brother except that my work is more secret."

Xen's face lit up with interest. "What kind of computer stuff do you do?"

"Oh, everything from hacking secure accounts to decoding secret messages," Zelena said nonchalantly.

I could tell that Xen was thinking up an idea, but all he said was, "You'll have to show me sometime!"

Just then footsteps echoed down the hall and Dad rounded the corner.

"Hi, girls! Glad you made it! Zelena, I'd like to give you a tour if you're ready," smiled Dad.

Zelena bounced on her toes. "Yes, I'd love to see around this place! I really feel like I'm in a castle! Is there a dungeon?"

Dad laughed and launched into tour-guide mode. "Lendall Castle was not constructed with a dungeon, but it does have a moat, turret, drawbridge, and throne room." Zelena gasped as Dad headed down the hall and pointed out some ancient swords hanging from the wall.

"These are rumored to have belonged to Sir Rutherford the Faithful."

I rolled my eyes and slipped behind the lobby desk with Xen. He chuckled. "I'm pretty sure that 99.99% of what your dad is saying is fiction," he remarked, winking at me.

"Yep, but at least Mr. Lendall would be proud."

Xen plopped a cardboard box on top of an edge of the desk, and pulled out bundles of hotel information pamphlets that were secured with rubber bands.

"Mind helping me get these sorted and slipped into the room door handles?" he asked, pulling off the rubber bands.

I dug my hands in and pulled some more bundles out.

"I'll take the first floor if you take the second," I said.

Xen placed the unbundled pamphlets into another box that had been sitting by his sword scabbard. "I'd prefer it better if we went each hallway one at a time together; it'd be easier for us to figure out what's been done and what hasn't."

Ready to get to work, I stuffed my rubber bands into my back pocket and grabbed the cardboard box. Unfortunately, I didn't realize how heavy it was and it slipped out of my fingers onto the floor. I was lucky that it didn't squash my toes.

"Yikes! For such a small box, it's so heavy!" I exclaimed. I tried to pick the box back up again, but Xen motioned me not to. Frowning with puzzlement, he dug out the pamphlets. At the bottom of the box was another package that we hadn't noticed.

"Maybe that's what's so heavy," he wondered aloud. Picking it up with both hands, he placed it on the desk and unfolded its cardboard tabs. I peeked over Xen's shoulder, but to our dismay, the box was filled with only a bunch of heavy staples cartridges.

Xen turned around to place the staples elsewhere, but I didn't move away in time and instead our shoulders collided. The impact knocked me to the ground and my legs flew out from under me as I tripped on the pamphlet box that was still at our feet. I landed hard on my back on the tile floor only to have Xen fall onto me next.

For such a skinny guy, he's very heavy, I thought, sprawled on the floor, waiting to regain the breath that had been knocked out of my lungs.

Xen groaned as he picked himself off the floor. Then he offered me a hand up. I grasped his hand, and wheezed with pain as I straightened my back and stood up. Xen released his hold on my hand and offered me a seat in his office chair. I sank into it and checked my limbs for any damage.

"I can NOT believe my EYES!" I heard someone roar from behind me. Xen turned his attention to a person at the lobby desk and I heard a gasp. I lifted my eyes to see none other

than a red-faced Xen staring at an equally red-faced Kai. Their eyes were locked in a hateful glare as Kai continued to talk with clenched teeth.

“What – are – you – doing – here?” he questioned. Then he pointed a finger at me, keeping his gaze on Xen, whose hands were folded across his chest. “You act like I’m an enemy of yours – and then you’re being all nice to HER and helping her off the floor after CRASHING into her – which I’m sure was NOT an accident –”

Xen slammed his fist onto the desk and the pens in the nearby jar jiggled.

“Hold it there!” he hissed, interrupting Kai. “Number one: It WAS an accident. Nombre deux: You’re NOT my friend and she IS. Numéro tres: I am the new Fairview summer intern. And Nummer vier: What are YOU doing here?”

Wow, I didn’t know Xen spoke different languages when he’s angry, I thought.

Kai’s face turned redder, if possible. “I can’t believe you act so nice to everybody except me! And how DARE you call Anaya your friend when you aren’t willing to treat me like the nice cousin that I am!”

I stared in horror as Kai and Xen’s tomato-red faces, clenched fists, and hateful words turned the temperature up ten degrees hotter than the fireplace.

“Please calm down,” I pleaded, fanning my face with a stray piece of cardboard. “We can work this out.”

Nobody heard me. With one swift motion, Xen lunged for his Chinese sword scabbard and swung one of them into a battle stance at his side. I dropped my cardboard fan. Kai instinctively ducked backwards and crouched into a defense posture. Then, he flipped himself over the desk and whipped Xen’s other sword across the room and onto a plush chair. The two young men stood frozen, staring at each other and challenging the other to make the first move.

“Um guys?” I gulped, shrinking into my chair. I had never been this close to an unsheathed sword before – besides the ones used for decoration in this hotel. Kai’s eyes glanced in my direction, and I saw worry in his expression for a second before he looked back at Xen. Kai backed out of the lobby desk area and out into the main lobby entrance. Xen stalked him. I stared in fright. Then Xen started slowly swinging his sword in rhythmic movement, as if challenging Kai to a duel. Kai took his chance. He swung through the air with the prowess of an acrobat, flipped his feet into the air, and firmly shoved his hands down on Xen’s shoulders.

Suddenly, the front hotel doors opened. Kai and Xen both froze - the latter with his sword in his hand in a defensive stance. The former in the middle of a backflip on top of Xen, looking upside down at those coming through the doorway.

An old lady eyed the boys from behind her thick black glasses. “Oh my!” she smiled, clapping her thin hands together. “Looks like we’re just in time for some medieval swordplay!” Her husband cocked his head to the side, studying the two boys, but kept silent.

Kai did a double backflip off Xen and stuck the landing a few feet from the guests - doing his best to look like he had just been in a mock fight by pasting on a smile. Xen looked

sheepishly down at his sword and placed it on a nearby chair. Straightening his collar, Xen approached the lady and asked politely, "Let me take your luggage. Do you have a reservation?"

Seeing that Xen was taking care of the visitors, I dashed over to Kai, grabbed his arm and dragged him down the hallway to my dad's office. I didn't say anything until I had closed the door and shoved Kai into a seat. I sat across from him in Dad's chair.

"What in the world got into you?" I began - doing my best to look like an interrogator.

Kai looked down at his feet. "I – I don't know. I was just so shocked to see him and – we aren't on very good terms, so things just kind of exploded."

"Let's just say the swords and martial arts were really making me nervous."

Kai restlessly tousled his hair. "We know how to use our skills," he reassured me, "but you need to know something about Xen. I don't trust him and you shouldn't either. He's dangerous."

I sighed. "Actually, he's a nice person. You should get to know him. He's - "

Kai snorted. "I DO know him, and he's only putting on a false front because you're innocent. I, on the other hand, am not his favorite person. He's tried to KILL me before. It's just – too much to explain right now." Then he looked at me firmly. "Just be on your guard."

I was about to reply when the office door swung open. Kai jumped up into a defensive stance. But instead of Xen, Zelena's face popped in. "Oh! You've got people in your office!" she said to my dad, who was right behind her.

"What are you guys doing in here?" my dad asked disapprovingly.

"We, uh, needed a private place to talk." Kai explained.

"About what?" Zelena questioned, puzzled. She gave us a look that said 'What is going on?'

I tried to give her a look to say 'Don't ask any more questions; everything's fine,' but for all I know, she might not have even been looking at my face – she could have been staring at my dad's weird portrait of that chubby king. I shivered in disgust at the thought of the painting.

Dad opened the door wide. "Well, hopefully you guys are done talking, because it's about time for me to be going home for the day and ending this tour. So if you'll please leave, we can all head home. And by the way," he added, looking at Kai, "Who are you?"

I realized I had never introduced him to my dad.

"Oh, he's my other friend that I met at the pet fair," I quickly explained.

I dutifully followed Kai out of the room, and we all walked to the lobby in silence. To my relief, Kai and Xen acted as normal as if nothing had happened, but didn't look each other in the eye.

"Well, how was your tour?" I asked Zelena, trying to make conversation.

"It was great!" she responded. "I didn't know this place was so historically rich!"

Dad laughed happily as he picked up some papers at the desk. "It sure is a neat place to work."

"Do you need a ride home?" I asked Zelena as we walked towards the hotel doors.

“Yes, that’d be great,” Zelena said, checking her phone. “My mom sent me a text saying dinner’s going to be soon.”

Zelena, Kai, and Dad headed out to the parking lot, but I hung behind. Walking over to the velvet chair, I retrieved Xen’s swords from where they had been left and silently handed them to him.

“Guess you’ll have to do the pamphlets yourself,” I said. Xen grunted, and I left.

Chapter 6: Hacking

After that horribly rude interruption from Kai, I decided that I was done, so I promptly grabbed all of my lotions and shampoos from Anaya. As I bent down to pick up Ferret, I was disgusted to see that he was playing with Kai's ferret, Spark!

Was this betrayal? Out of all of the ferrets that Ferret could like, why did it have to be Kai's?

I didn't even offer a polite "goodbye" as I hurried away (mostly because Kai was doing the same in the opposite direction); although I did glance back once to see Zephan closely following Kai.

Uggh! What was Zephan doing? I would have to give him a piece of my mind when he got home!

And it was only a few minutes after I arrived home that Zephan opened the front door and raced up the stairs to his room.

"Zephan!" I yelled. "What were you doing with Kai? He's a stranger, and you know what Mom thinks about us hanging out with strangers! He could have hurt you or kidnapped you."

"Really, Zelena? That's ridiculous! Kai is a really nice guy! You shouldn't have been so rude to him. He's really friendly, strong, kind, and basically everything else! I bet if you got to know him, you would really like him. Plus, it was an accident that he bumped into you. He said that he was trying to follow someone, so it was actually probably your fault since you weren't looking where you were going," explained Zephan.

All of a sudden, I stopped what I was doing and took a big breath. Maybe Zephan was right. Maybe I was overreacting. Sometimes my fiery temper could get out of control and cause me to not think things through correctly.

"You know what, Zephan. You're probably right. I was overreacting, and it was both of our faults - though I still think it was mostly Kai's!" I said. "I'll find his phone number when I get home and give him a call to apologize."

"Good idea, but when you do find his phone number, could I have it too? I really want to send him a text and see when we can watch Ant-Man: Curse of the Ant eater together."

I sighed dramatically. Although I was feeling better about the situation and was over the "Kai is my mortal enemy" phase, I still wasn't too sure I liked the idea of my little brother hanging out with him, especially since there was something suspicious about him. I mean, why didn't he ever want to hang out with me? But just as I was about to say something, my smartwatch on my wrist buzzed, which mean a text message was coming in. I quickly glanced down and saw that it was from Matthew.

It read: What are you doing this weekend?

I decided to do a video call with him when I got back home.

“Well, now that we’re home, Zelena, could you figure out his phone number, please?” pleaded Zephan. “I want to get in contact with him as soon as possible.”

“Why are you so interested in Kai all of a sudden?” I asked. “I mean you have your own older sister. Why do you need someone else?”

“You know what, Zelena. He’s kinda like the older brother that I never had,” replied Zephan quietly as he scooted upstairs to his bedroom.

This revelation struck me in the heart like a dagger. The older brother he never had? *What?!* I thought I was always the greatest sister anyone could ask for. I spent plenty of time with him, didn’t I? I mean, okay, there was the time that I went out to a movie with Matthew instead of to his school talent show or the time I went to the Game Con instead of staying home and building LEGO spaceships with him, but those were just a few times. They didn’t matter, right? Or did they? Maybe Zephan felt like I was ignoring him and that was why he was so annoying. Maybe he just wanted some attention? From then on, I resolved to spend more time with him, and maybe if I did, he wouldn’t feel like he had to spend so much more time with Kai.

I quickly ran up the stairs to my bedroom, popped Ferret into his cage, and booted up my computers to have a video call with Matthew. While I was waiting for Matthew to answer my call, I searched the web for Kai’s number.

“Aha! I found it!” I said out loud. Evidently I had said it a bit louder than I wanted, because I could hear running feet as Zephan ran pell-mell into my bedroom.

“You did?” Zephan questioned my excitedly.

“Yep! Sure did! It’s 541-478-908!” I said quickly, wanted to get Zephan out of my bedroom before I had my video call with Matthew.

“Thanks, Zelena! I’m going to shoot him a text right now!” said Zephan excitedly as he ran out of my bedroom again.

“Hi, Zelena! What’s up?” I almost jumped out of my skin as I glanced at my computer screen and saw that Matthew had accepted my call.

“Oh, hey, Matthew! Nothing much. Just unpacking boxes, being annoyed by Zephan, not seeing my Dad much, and taking care of Ferret.”

“Wait! What? You lost me when you said Ferret! What are you talking about?”

Oh! That’s right. You haven’t seen my new pet yet. I found him, rescued him, made him a place to live, and named him Ferret. I think the name’s great. Don’t you?”

“Very original. Ha, Ha! Hey! I have another quick question for you. How is your project going that you are doing for your uncle?”

“Oh. That. Well, I haven’t really gotten around to it yet.”

A few days ago, before my family and I had moved, my uncle had contacted me and asked me to do a very special top secret project for him that had to do with hacking, and, of course, I said yes! Basically, my uncle works for the FBI, and the FBI is trying to find a man who lives in America that has really important secrets. My uncle couldn’t tell me what kind of secrets, but just that they’re very important and the FBI needs them. So I’m supposed find his

online account, hack into it (his name is Tokero), and then see if I can find where he is. After I find out his location, the FBI can do the rest. Now at first, I was wondering why the FBI didn't just hack his account themselves, but my uncle explained to me that they couldn't do it themselves, and they needed someone to do it that even if Tokero found out his account was being hacked, he wouldn't be too worried. But if Tokero knew that an FBI agent was doing it, he would run. I actually felt really special that I was asked to do this. It made me feel important and needed.

"Okay. Cool!"

"Yeah. I'm kinda a procrastinator. So how's life in Texas?"

"Really good! Schools going great, and I'm doing soccer through the summer, so I've been very busy going to meets and playing games."

"Cool!"

We talked a little longer and then Matthew said, "Okay, sorry, but I have to go, because it's lunch time. Talk to you later."

"Sounds good! Bye!"

I quickly clicked off of the video call and walked over to Ferret's cage for a quick holding session before calling Kai, but as I reached into the cage, I noticed that Ferret was curled up into a ball in the corner and was not moving at all.

"Zephan!" I yelled. "Come quick!"

"What is it?" He asked worriedly as he rushed into my room for the third time that day.

"Something is wrong with Ferret!" I said quietly, not wanting to startle Ferret.

"I have an idea, Zelena! Since Mom and Dad are not home, let's ride our bikes down to the vet. It's not very far away," said Zephan.

"Okay! Good idea!" I replied. I quickly reached into the cage and scooped up Ferret into a little soft basket I had that I could carry as we rode to the vet. Zephan and I quickly grabbed our bikes and started furiously pedaling towards the vet. Ferret's life was at stake.

As soon as we reached the vet, I dropped my bike onto the ground and ran as fast as I could into the main lobby room of the vet. I probably looked crazy with my helmet still on my head and a basket carefully balanced in my hands. I ran right up to the front desk.

"Excuse, ma'am. My name is Zelena, and this is Ferret. He's a ferret," I said. "Can you please help him?"

"Maybe, Zelena. But first of all, I need some information from you. What's your birthday?" the secretary asked.

Why in the world does the vet need to know your birthday? "It's August 23," I replied. "Now can you help my ferret?"

"Slow down, sweetie. I still need your phone number."

My patience was really draining away from me fast, but I quickly answered that question and the other ten questions she asked me such as my address and a bunch of other unnecessary stuff.

"All right," the secretary said finally. "The vet will now see your ferret."

I took my little basket with the ferret inside and handed it to the vet, while explaining the situation. A little while later, the vet came out.

"Well, Zelena, I think I may know what your ferret's issue is," said the vet kindly.

"What is it?" I asked, surprised.

"Well, it actually seems rather simple to me. Has this ferret been in contact with any other ferrets lately?"

"Well, yes."

"Just what I thought. This ferret is lonely. Ferrets are very sociable animals and probably wants to be with that other ferret. They've evidently become friends. As long as your ferret is able to meet up with its friend soon or another ferret I guess, it will be just fine."

"Thank you so much for your time, Doctor. I appreciate it."

As I walked out of the door of the vet's office, I thought about what the vet said. How was I supposed to get both of our ferrets together?

"Well, Zelena, what happened?" pried my brother who had stayed outside to keep an eye on our bikes.

"So, you know that other ferret that Ferret was playing with?" I asked my brother as we headed home again on our bikes.

"Yup! She was Kai's ferret!" answered my brother.

"They need to get back together. Supposedly, Ferret is lonely, but how do you think we will get them back together?" I asked Zephan.

"Oooh! I have an idea!" exclaimed Zephan. "What if you and Kai take your ferrets to live at Anaya's house for now until they are not as lonely. She has a hamster and you know how much she liked you guys' ferrets. She seems really nice, and I'm sure she would love to take care of them."

"I don't know Zephan," I replied slowly, "You really think she would be okay with that?"

"Of course, who wouldn't want to take care of two cute weasels?"

"FERRETS! Well, I don't have any better ideas, so I guess I'll give her a call."

As soon as I got home, I put Ferret into his cage and gave Kai and Anaya a call (It took a bit longer to find Anaya's phone number on the "web"). Once I talked to both of them, they seemed really thrilled about the plan (well, Kai didn't seem quite as thrilled), and we decided to deliver them to Anaya's house the next day.

"Okay, now for my uncle's special project!" I said excitedly. I began searching the web for who Tokero was and if he had any family.

"Oh my goodness!" I yelled a little too loudly. According to the web page that I was on, Tokero was Kai's dad. "That's crazy!" Thankfully, Zephan didn't come rushing into my room (perhaps that was due to the fact that I finally remembered to lock the door!), but I really did not know what to think about my new discovery. I mean, I really didn't know if the secrets that Tokero held were good or bad, but if the FBI were after him, than something was fishy. Maybe I

was right to be a little bit skeptical about Kai and his family, just to be on the safe side because you never know.

After about two hours of trying to hack into Tokero's account, I decided that it was impossible. What was I going to do now? He must know that he was being watched and decided to lock down his online account. I decided to send a text to my uncle letting him know the situation. But just as I was about to hit send, I could feel a slight breathing on the top of my head. When I turned around, I almost hit the ceiling.

"What are you doing in my room, Zephan? I told you not to come here unless I tell you that you may." I sternly told Zephan.

"Sorry, but I was reading the text that you're sending Uncle Dan. Are you really hacking into Tokero's account for the FBI? That's crazy!" exclaimed my brother.

Oh, no! My worst nightmare had come true. My nosy little brother had figured out what my secret project was. This was not good!

"What, Zephan? Are you serious? I mean, why would I be doing that?" I said, trying to sound like the text was just a huge joke.

"I think you're lying. Why would you be sending a text to Uncle Dan unless you were really hacking into Tokero's account?" he questioned me.

"Well, fine. Yes, I'm trying to hack into Tokero's account for the FBI," I said flatly, knowing that I had been caught. "But do you even know who he is?" I asked my brother, hoping that he thought Tokero was just a random person.

"Well, no; but I'll find out!" my brother exclaimed.

"Look, Zephan. This is serious. I know that you don't like to keep secrets, but I need you to do this for me, okay" I pleaded with my brother.

"Maybe or maybe not!" my brother yelled as he sprinted out of my room.

Ughh! What was I going to do now? Knowing that my brother was quite good at finding out information and also a tattletale, he was going to go promptly to Kai and tell him what I was up to as soon as he found out the connection. Then, Kai would be skeptical of me, tell his dad, and the whole mission would go down the drain. All because I couldn't lock my bedroom door well enough, and Zephan's lock picking skills were too good. Well, there was nothing that I could do about it now, so I decided to try hacking into Kai's account instead of his father's. Maybe, if I could, it would lead me to the answer of how to open up his father's account. But before I could start to hack into Kai's account, a big red button appeared on my computer screen with either the decision to "accept" or "decline" a video call invitation from Tojo back in Texas. I pushed the "accept" button.

"Hi, Tojo! How are you doing? I miss you so much!" I squealed with excitement.

"I'm doing great! And, yes, I miss you too so much! I feel like I haven't talked to you in ages," Tojo answered.

"I'm doing great up here. In fact, I just had a video call from Matthew today, too!" I said.

"Oh! That's great. You and Matthew make a great couple," said Tojo shyly.

"Wait! What? Who said anything about couples? We're friends!" I shot back at Tojo.

"Nope!" my brother intervened from outside my bedroom door (I forgot to mention that Zephan was also a good eavesdropper). "He's your boyfriend without a space!"

"With a space!" I yelled back at him.

"Without!" he shot back from somewhere in his bedroom.

Tojo started laughing hysterically on the video call. "Sorry for starting that."

"Well, you should be sorry," I said, "because I will NOT hear the end of that from my brother. Once he finds something that annoys me, he sticks with it. Anyway, how is the summer treating you, Tojo?"

"Great!" she replied. "I went to a music camp the other week, and now I'm just staying home, and swimming in our pool - wishing you were here."

"Aww! I wish I was there too!" I said. Just as I said that, I heard my mom open the front door and yell, "I'm home!"

"Oh! I'm so sorry, Tojo, but my mom is home, so now I have to make dinner. But I'll talk with you later," I said regretfully.

"You're good!" she said cheerfully. "I'll send you a text this evening. Bye!"

As soon as I ended the call, I ran downstairs and started getting out the ingredients for macaroni and cheese.

"Hi, Mom! How was your day teaching summer school?" I asked.

"It was really good, Zelenia. How was your day? Did you get to talk with Tojo or Matthew?" she asked.

"Actually, yes. Both of them. It was great to hear from them because I really miss them," I said, as I started mixing the noodles and cheese together.

"Me too. I miss my friends too," my mom said sadly as she headed up the stairs.

My mom rarely talked about her friends, let alone if she missed them. This whole time I was thinking about how hard the move was for me, and I hadn't even been thinking about how hard it had been for my mom and brother. Maybe even for my dad.

When dinner was ready, I yelled up the stairs to my mom and brother.

They both came running down the stairs. My mom was fun in that way, because she would race us up and down the stairs even after a long day at work.

"Your dad is not eating dinner with us this evening. I stopped by his office this afternoon, and he said he had too much work. It feels like we don't see him much anymore," said my mother sadly.

I couldn't help but wonder if my father was up to something more that we did not know about. I mean, did it really take that much work to be a realtor? With Kai, Tokero, Uncle Dan, and now my father, I was starting to think that something weird was going on.

I slept really well that night and woke up bright and early the next morning to get ready for church. The only time that I did not wear jeans and a leather jacket was when I was going to church. Then, I wore a skirt and a leather jacket. It was really different (or at least for me!). I

quickly tied my hair into a messy bun, chose a choker that matched my skirt and hurried downstairs for breakfast. Even before I made it to the kitchen, I could smell the sizzling bacon and cooking pancakes.

"Wow, Mom! It smells really good!" I said before I realized that my mom was still sleeping on the couch (because her bed hadn't come yet) and my dad was cooking in the kitchen.

"Oh! It's you!" I said, giving my dad a squeeze before picking a plate and loading it with food. "How was work yesterday?" I politely asked him.

"It was actually quite good."

Sometimes I felt like my relationship with my dad was quite strained. I never knew what to talk to him about and it felt like I never saw him. But before I could say anything else, I heard something like an elephant pounding down the stairs.

"Good morning, Zephan!" I said as I caught him and slung him over my back.

I always did it because I knew he hated it!

"Hey, Zelena! Put me down!" he yelled as he eyed my pancakes and bacon.

"What's the magic word, Zephan?" I asked.

"Please?"

"Okay! I'll put you down."

And as soon as I set him down, he went racing for the kitchen to get some delicious breakfast.

The church service went well that morning, but I was quite focused on getting to my room to hack into Kai's account, which caused me to not focus very well on the message that the pastor had prepared that morning. We all silently rode home in our car after church, without a word being exchanged between any of else. I guess the move, and my dad being gone a lot has really affected my once close family. It is actually really sad that we are now so far apart and that each of us just did our own thing each day. It was like we were four completely different people except that we just slept and ate in the same house.

As soon as our car pulled into our driveway, I hopped out of the car and hurried into the house to get Ferret and deliver him to Anaya. After carefully scooping Ferret into a little soft basket, I rode my bike to Anaya's house and knocked on the door.

"Hi, there!" exclaimed Anaya as she excitedly opened the door.

"Hi! Thanks for letting me keep Ferret at your house. I think he will do a lot better if he is able to play with Spark," I said.

"Okay, Ferret!" I said to him as I took him out of his basket. "It's time for me to go!"

"Aww! He's so cute!" crooned Anaya. "Oh! I also have another question for you. Would you like to take a tour of the hotel my dad owns tomorrow? It would be so fun!"

"Sure!" I replied. I mean, it's not like I had anything important going on tomorrow.

"Okay! See you then!" Anaya replied as she closed the door.

Chapter 7: Deceiving

I jumped.

"What are *you* doing here?!" I exclaimed.

"I could ask you the same question," replied Xen.

"Don't," I followed up, "Just answer my question."

"Touchy. I'm the new intern/hotel employee here. And I'm doing an amazing job if I do say so myself." Luckily, before I said anything else, Anaya appeared.

"Guys, calm down. What is this all.."

"Get out of my hotel, you don't deserve to be here!" Xen roared.

"Well you don't deserve to get hired - an assassin as an employee?! You must have forged your resume!" I shot back

"Wait, let's just -," Anaya tried to get a word in, but it didn't work. Well, in a way it did, because we stopped talking - but we started fighting. The fighting ended up being pretty short because some visitors walked in on us. As Xen signed them in, Anaya dragged me into her dad's office.

"Sorry, Anaya. That's my cousin, and he tried to kill me once! I wouldn't trust him if I were you," then I thought to add, "What is he doing here?"

"He's the new desk clerk, and my dad loves him. He always seemed so nice until today. That's weird," Anaya mentioned.

"No kidding, he's a piece of work," I replied - being as generous as possible with my wording. Then, Dad and Zelena walked in.

"Uhh, hi!" I said. Zelena, recovered quickly and avoided any awkwardness (about why we were together in her dad's office) by making introductions.

"If it's alright with you, I would like to look around some more and then I'll leave. It's magnificent!" I told Carson (Anaya's dad).

"It sure is, it took five years to complete. Let me show you some things I bet you don't know." With that, Carson guided me back down the hallway telling me about the rich "history" of the place (which I was pretty sure was all fake). We walked through the rest of the first floor and some of the upper floors. Just when things couldn't seem to be any better, they were! You should have seen the dining room - I wouldn't have been surprised if they had a boar with an apple in its mouth on the table.

At about noon, I started to feel hungry, so I made my way to the entryway. Xen was still lugging in huge piles of suitcases, so I left him to his task and got on my motorcycle. At home, I grabbed a frozen pizza from my freezer and popped it into the oven. While it was cooking, I went over to my "computer" room and turned my desktop on. I looked up "Medieval-themed hotel in Fairview Washington" and looked at the results. Of course, the only valid result was

Carson's hotel. I looked at its website and the reviews. There were only good reviews, and everyone seemed to like it. This confused me; how in the world did Xen get to work there? How did Carson come across Xen? Why was Xen still in the U.S.? I couldn't answer any of these questions, and I was pretty sure Anaya didn't know them herself, so I would have to do some detective work. The only problem is that I'm not a detective - not even close. I had no idea what to do next - well besides eat my frozen pizza that had finished cooking. I missed having Spark around to eat the meat off some slices, but I guess it is more sanitary this way, and I get more meat myself. Whatever the case, I now had to figure out what I was going to do to keep myself busy this summer.

The first thing that I needed to do was find a gym that I could do my weight-lifting in, and tour my dad's new company headquarters. Since Dad was still at work, I figured I would talk to him about going there tonight at dinner. In the meantime, I looked online for a good gym. There were a few around town, and a few even had decent reviews. The best one appeared to be "Gem's Gym." A little cheesy sounding, but it apparently had everything I needed. After my pizza and a little salad to round out the unhealthiness, I decided to hop down to the gym and get my membership. I went back out to the garage and started my motorcycle. Typically, I don't put on my full get-up unless I am going to be driving for a while, and since this was supposed to be a short run, I just put on my helmet. I swung out of the garage and followed the directions on my phone (my motorcycle has a special connection place on the dashboard for my smartphone. My phone can then dictate directions to me without me having to hold it or it be in my pocket). I turned onto Main Street and was driving down it when I noticed a girl and her little brother walking on the sidewalk alongside the street-side shops. I probably wouldn't have thought twice about them if it wasn't for the fact that the girl was Zelena and the boy was Zephan. I veered off the street and into a street-side parking spot right behind them. My motorcycle isn't very loud, so they didn't turn around. I climbed off and quickly jogged over to them.

"Zephan!" I said.

"Kai! How's it going?" Zephan replied.

"Good, what are you doing here?"

"Oh, I'm going to a computer store with her," said Zephan while pointing at Zelena.

Zelena just scowled.

"You want to come with us?" Zephan asked.

"Zephan," Zelena said through gritted teeth, "We're actually really busy and don't have time. See you later!" Zelena dragged off Zephan by the arm. Being me of course, and also not wanting to cause too much trouble, I pretended to walk off. Then, I spun around and followed them when they were sufficiently far in front of me. Fairly soon they shunted off into a store that I found out was called "Eugene's Electronics." I entered in, intrigued in part because I like electronics myself. The store had a feel of a type of thrift store as there was stuff literally piled up *everywhere*. However, all the stuff was new. I wandered around, making sure to stay out of

Zelena's way. In one aisle, I came across a computer the size of a small elephant. In another I found what was claimed to be an 85-bit processor. In still another, I discovered an "indestructible flash drive" as the package said. It proclaimed itself to be shock-proof, water-proof, chemical-proof, human-proof, and wild animal-proof. It seemed to me that the distributor had taken on more than it could handle. I mean, what sort of thing can be that resistant. However, the package gave a life-time warranty. What was even more surprising is that the flash drive was made by a well-known company. The price was ridiculous, but it seemed like just the thing I could use, so I plucked it off the rack. Then, I walked down the aisle towards the cash registers. However, I never made it there, because I ran into Zelena coming out of a side aisle.

"What are you doing here?!" exclaimed Zelena.

"Obviously, he's smarter than you thought. Maybe, he's trying to figure out why you need a 100 terabyte solid-state drive?" Zephan mentioned. Zelena just sighed.

"What's that in your hand?" she asked me.

"Oh, uh, an "indistructible" flash drive," I explained, "It seems a bit far-fetched to me, but it has a life-time warranty so I figure I can't go wrong."

"You can afford one of those!!"

"Well, I can't personally. But my parents allow me to make purchases on their account," I replied.

"Honestly?!"

"Yeah. I mean they have enough money - because they own their own company. I guess I may be a bit spoiled," I admitted.

"I've always wanted one of those, especially since it has 100 terabytes of memory," she said.

"It does?" I looked down on the package. "Oh, yeah, I guess it does," I replied, "So, why do you need that much memory?" I asked.

"She's a cracker," Zephan interrupted.

"Zephan! No, I'm a *hacker*," Zelena quickly said.

"What kind of computer setup do you have?" I asked.

"Its huge, tons of monitors, tons of computers, lots of security. You need some website hacked, she can do it," Zephan announced.

"That's not true," Zelena said, "I don't just hack anything. I have morals you know."

"Could I come see your setup?" I asked.

"Yeah, NO. I don't let anyone see it. I don't want any unwarranted, unsafe people seeing anything they shouldn't"

"So you *are* cracking."

"No, just being safe."

"So I can't come in"

"No, final answer."

"Not even if I bought and gave you this flashdrive?" I bartered.

"You're kidding!"

"I wish I were," I replied. Then, I walked away from them down the main aisle to the front of the store (I could see Zephan and Zelena staring at me from behind). I sauntered up to an available cash register and paid for it with "my" credit card. The attendant's eyes got a little wide and said, "What are you planning to do with this?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure I will find something," I replied. The clerk shrugged his shoulders, and I moved on; as in looping back into the store and finding Zephan and Zelena who were still staring at me. I waved the flash drive temptingly in front of Zelena's eyes.

"You know you want it!" I told her. I could see her brain was working. She really wanted that drive, but she also really did not want me to see her technology setup. Finally, she cracked.

"Alright, but let's do it now," said Zelena, "You can follow me in your motorcycle." She snatched the drive package out of my hand and lightly stepped to the front of the store. She was probably wondering if I was playing her. Zephan followed but kept in line with me.

"Dude, could you spare a few bucks? I have this lock picking kit that I have been eyeing for quite some time..." Zephan said to me.

"Maybe," I said coyly, "but let's make sure that I actually make it to your house." Following a speed-walking Zelena, Zephan and I jogged down the sidewalk until we met my motorcycle first.

"Ours is the old, green station wagon," said Zephan.

"Alright, see you soon!" I yelled back as I turned on my motorcycle's engine. I waited for a little bit until I saw Zephan and Zelena stop and get inside their car. Then, I pulled out and got behind them as they veered off into traffic. We wove around some downtown streets for a while, and then turned into a suburban area. I quickly became lost amid all the curvy streets, but Zelena's mother (who was driving) appeared to know where she was going (or at least I would assume so since she lives in here). Soon, the car parked in the driveway of a slight-run-down, one-story suburban house. I pulled up alongside the car and jumped out.

"You've got a nice house," I said to make them feel better about it in case they were not.

"That's the spirit!" replied Zelena's mom, "I've got to go grade some papers, but you guys are free to use the living room TV if you want."

"Alright! Ant-Man here I come!" Zephan yelled enthusiastically.

Zelena, Zephan, and I followed their mom up to the front door and filed in after her. Zelena led me to the second floor and in front of a room with three deadbolt locks and what appeared to be a security camera positioned over the door (it actually just looked like a girly do-hickey but I knew enough about Zelena to think otherwise).

"Zephan, you stay here; okay?" Zelena said.

"Oh, come on. Why can't I come in?" Zephan whined.

"You know why." With that, Zelena undid the dead bolts with three different keys from her keyring, and opened the door to her room. She quickly pulled me inside and shut the door

behind her (as well as locking all the dead bolts). I could hear Zephan sigh outside. It was relatively dark inside the room, so it took my eyes a little while to adjust, but when they did I was quite impressed. There were lots of computers everywhere: everything from laptops to desktops to even something that looked like a small server. Besides that, there were shelves of electronic equipment on one side and tons of monitors screwed to the wall on the other.

"Wow, this is very impressive," I exclaimed.

"Do you have a setup as well? I'd assume you would with as much money as you have," Zelena curtly replied.

"Not really, I just have two simple desktop computers and a laptop. I mean, I could have some fancy setup if I wanted to, but I really am not *that* good with computers, so I keep my setup pretty simple," I replied. Zelena pushed a button next to her, and the whole room lit up with lights and the hum of computers starting. It was almost breathtaking. Suddenly, the monitors lit up and displayed the login screen. However, this login screen had three passwords and two voice activated phrases – very secure.

"I want to get an iris scan as well," Zelena continued, "But the scanning equipment is still too expensive." Zelena typed in the passwords and spoke some words into a microphone next to her. The main desktop now displayed.

"Time for you to leave," announced Zelena.

"Ha, you don't waste any words do you," I replied, "Okay, well, I may see you soon."

I was just about to turn around and go out, when an "instant message" popped up on her computer with a loud ding. It said – Z, how is TH's database hacking coming?-. Zelena quickly minimized it, and I walked out, pretending I hadn't seen it. After undoing the three locks, I stepped outside and closed the door behind me. Immediately, I could hear the locks being set back into place on the inside. Zephan was standing nearby on his smartphone.

"Hey," I whispered, "Do you know what 'TH' stands for."

"Does it have to do with Zelena's hacking," replied Zephan – a little louder than I would have liked.

"Shhh. Yes," I said.

"Oh; she's trying to help my uncle, who is an FBI agent by the way, hack into a guy's database. I guess he owns a large weapon-manufacturing company," Zephan replied without looking up from his phone. I suddenly sickened a bit.

"What is this guy's name?" I replied.

"What?! Oh, yeah. Tokero Hwang. Funny name, funny guy – I guess. I honestly don't know much, I just heard her talking on the phone with my uncle a few times and the name came up," finished Zephan. At this, I nearly had a heart attack. *The FBI was after my uncle?! Why?!*

"Well, thanks for everything. I need to go get a gym membership now," I said.

"Yeah, uh huh," Zephan muttered, still with his eyes glued on his phone. By now I recognized the noises that the phone was emitting. He was playing Wrathful Birds – Revenge of

the Lil' Birdy. I headed downstairs, but Zephan suddenly realized that I was heading out and pulled himself from his game.

"Wait! We haven't watched our movie yet!" he exclaimed. Honestly, I couldn't resist watching it either, so I agreed. Two hours later, I was back on my way (and following my phone's GPS directions because I really had no idea where I was). I thought about what my dad could possibly have that the FBI wanted. Did the FBI simply want to keep tabs on exactly what my Dad was making, or did they want to steal some of his weapon designs for themselves? Neither made a lot of sense, since this is America after all. What made even less sense was why they would hire a young girl to hack in. Couldn't they just hire a professional to do it?! Maybe Zelena was so good she was better than professionals. I just did not know, and there was no good answers. What I did know was that Dad was hiding something. Two of the largest countries in the world were both after him. That couldn't just be a coincidence.

Fifteen minutes later, I pulled up at Gem's Gym and walked inside. Sure enough, there was every type and style of exercise machine and equipment that you could think of. The building was HUGE, and, for the second time today, I was impressed. I went up to the counter and asked for a yearly pass. The attendant was a very skinny and short girl.

"Hello and welcome to Gem's Gym," she squeaked.

"I'd like a year pass," I replied.

"That'll be \$100."

I passed her my credit card and she rang up the purchase. Then, she reached under the counter and handed me a card.

"There you go, enjoy," she replied.

"Thanks!" With that, I trotted into the main gym room and walked over to the weights area. Unfortunately, most of the buff guys had not bothered to put their weights back on the rack, so I couldn't find the forty pound weights. Eventually, I found two next to the tread machines. Then, since I was next to the tread machines, I jumped on and started running while lifting the weights - it's a very good work out by the way! About fifteen minutes in, the girl at the front desk came in and proceeded to move the weights spread about onto the racks. It pained me to see her do it. She was so small and weak that she could barely lift the ten pound one. With the bigger ones, she did a terrible version of a waddle walk, with the weight between her legs. I covertly looked over to the corner where some guys were lifting their one hundred pounds weights and saw that they too were looking at her. They watched her drop a fifty pound weight onto the rack and then go over to a two hundred pound monster that some dude had left really far away. The poor girl was straining every muscle but couldn't move it. That did it for the weight-lifting guys, they quickly got up and over to help her.

"Hey, I'll move that for you," replied one of them.

"No, I'll do it," insisted another. The girl looked very much appreciative that they were going to move it for her.

The genius of the gym's management occurred to me a few minutes after the girl trudged back off to the counter. See, I noticed that the weight lifting guys had all made a special effort to put their weight back after they were done. Thus, I figured that the management had specifically hired a weekling so that her poor attempts to keep the weights on the rack would make the weight lifters feel bad, and they would put the weights back themselves. I was still chuckling about this when I finished and got back onto my motorcycle.

I parked in the garage and trotted back inside; then sacked out on one of my rock beanbags. I had to know more about what Zelena was up to. The only way to do this, though, would be to sneak into her room and plant a listening bug or video camera or something. The problem with that though, is how in the world I would get something into her room. I thought that Zephan might, but his sister already didn't let him in anyway, and since he has such a loud mouth, I figured something may slip eventually. I didn't want to know what Zelena would do if she found out that I was spying on her. I sat there for a while trying to figure out something that would do the trick (from remote control drones to trained animals) when my idea hit me. *What if I trained Ferret to drop off a bug in her room?* That would be a great idea. Ferret is probably the only thing she ever lets into her room. If I could train Ferret, then maybe I could get something into her room. Better yet, why don't I train both Ferret and Spark. If I could get Anaya with me (just not tell her what exactly I will be using them for) then I could drop them off at Zelena's house one day. Assuredly, she would have to let *both* of them into her room and then I would be in!!! I had to go see Anaya. I figured that I would call her tomorrow. Right now, I wanted to work on some equipment that the ferrets could handle and that would be very inconspicuous. Problem is, is that I did not have any materials, I always went to my dad's work and used their stuff – and now that he had a new headquarters, I would need a tour and permission to use that stuff. This meant, I needed to go see Dad.

I looked at my watch and saw that it was three. I decided to nap until five and then go over to my parents' house next door and wait for dinner. Then, I could ask Dad for "permissions." *Alright, the plan is underway!* Then, I fell asleep. My phone woke me up at 4:45, and I groggily slapped my hand across the screen. It took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust. Then, I got up and left the house. There was a nice breeze outside, and I was enjoying myself so much so that I almost didn't want to go into my parents' house, but I had a "mystery" to solve so it had to be done. I was glad I did when I went inside because Mom was making chili and cornbread. Her recipe is especially good. Over hot bowls of chili and fluffy squares of cornbread (with honey on top of course) I broached the topic.

"Dad, I haven't gotten a tour yet of your new facility, is there any way I can get one?"

"Oh my! I was going to take you there a while ago. I completely blanked. Would eight tomorrow morning work?" Dad replied.

"Of course. I don't have any school or anything going on," I said, "What are you working on currently?"

"A mini laser gun," Dad began, "Something small enough to be the same size as a laser pointer, yet actually be a laser. The hard part is getting a powerful enough electrical source and keeping the laser pointed in the right direction and not continuing forever."

"What if you used an electron reflector and laser splitter in the device so that you get two beams of light that will hit each other at a certain defined distance. Then they will bounce back down and you can catch them and use that to recharge the electrical source," I pondered out loud.

"Interesting, that may just be possible. I need you over at my company more often it seems."

"Ha, well, I'd probably be bothersome; what with me trying to improve everything all the time. Whatever the case, I'm looking forward to the tour."

"You know, Kai, I think you're up to something," Dad questioned.

"Why would you say that?" I asked (as innocently as possible).

"You typically don't ask about my "work stuff" unless you need something," Dad replied.

Rats, I really should be more careful about asking Dad for "favors."

"Yeah, okay. I really want to check out your laboratory and work on a mini project of mine. I'm trying to outfit Spark with some technology."

"Ha! I knew it! Well, we'll see. I don't want you bothering my technicians, not that you would."

"Alright, well I need to get some rest, because I got a "big" day tomorrow. See you bright and early!" I said.

"Night!" my parents replied. I walked back over to my house, and booted up my computer. I needed a way to get something into Zelena's room without her finding it and something small enough that Spark could easily hide and deal with it. The problem is that I might want some visual and it would be hard to put a mini camera somewhere in her room in a good place without her spotting it. I needed a better idea, but what could I use. I gazed around my room, looking for inspiration, but nothing really stood out. The only thing that *did* stand out was the fact that it was 9. I decided to get some sleep and perhaps I would get inspiration then.

The next morning I awoke, still without an idea for my project, but feeling excited nonetheless for the tour today. I quickly dressed, and ate a light waffle breakfast; then, I bounded out the door and next door. Dad was just finishing his breakfast and joined me a little later. We hopped in his car and drove for a half hour to a large, sprawling complex on the complete other side of Fairview. It was a very huge center, three or four buildings - all of which were probably four stories tall. There was a huge iron fence that separated the complex from the nearby forest and city. At the fence was a security shed, where Dad swiped his card. When we got through security, we came to a large parking lot where we got to park in the "employee only" space. We then walked into the most impressive looking building. The lobby was decent, but cool with all of the funny metal sculptures and ancient weapons decorating the room. It

would have taken me awhile to look at all the stuff, but Dad was already launching into a speech about the room. Before I could even process the info he had just told me, we were moving on.

"This building that we are currently in is pretty much offices for sales and marketing. Over there is HR and to your left is the kitchen (it was pretty huge and even had a complementary soft-serve machine!)," Dad said. We then left the building (I didn't feel the need to visit all the other floors of the cubicle farm) and walked down the main cement path to the next building. We entered it and it was actually only one floor, but with lots of catwalks and safety equipment. Buttons, bulbs, and noises were everywhere.

"This is the testing facility. Most of the time, very few staff are let in here; but they don't start tests until 10, so we're safe..." Dad droned on about guns and speeds and stuff, but I wasn't concentrating too hard because I was amazed at all the cool equipment and weapons that were behind the massively thick glass and steel doors. It looked VERY epic but also dangerous. Eventually we made our way to the last building.

"This, Kai, is the weapons development building. Floor to ceiling parts, materials, and scientists," Dad began. We walked inside a side door and onto a steel floor. Everywhere I looked were machines designed to cut, chop, sand, or create technology. The second floor was basically a warehouse of boards, wires, and other pieces that the scientists could use. The third floor consisted of a lot of building stations and high-tech 3D printers. The fourth was the most interesting. Dad had to swipe his card at the elevator before it would let us onto that floor.

"This floor," said Dad, "is where we are working on small flying vehicles."

"Like self-driving planes and things?" I asked.

"Sort of, more like mini, weaponized drones and such."

Dad and I carefully picked our way around the room since (it was pretty obvious) the flight technicians there weren't the most organized. It was when I nearly tipped over a can full of the smallest propellers that you have ever seen when the idea for my project hit me. I needed a teeny, portable drone! If I could outfit it with an even smaller video camera, I could remote control it around the room, and keep out of Zelena's sight while also getting good video feed.

Dad showed me some other cool things that they had made up or were working on. Then, we went back down and into the first building to eat some snacks.

"So," Dad said (with a mouthful of chips), "What are you thinking you want to do?"

"Isn't it obvious," I replied, "I need to work in the flight-zone!"

"Really? Well, if there is any place where you could be the most helpful, it is probably there. My employees there need some organization help and someone to keep them on track and focused. Now that I think about it, you would probably be a good fit. How about this, if you keep things looking and running good up there, I'll let you use virtually all the parts you need for your project. How does that sound?" Dad said.

"Really?! When can I get started?"

"Tomorrow. I want to make sure the guys have plenty of notice that you will be showing up."

“Ha ha, okay. That’ll work,” I replied, “I have a few things that I need to do today, but I will make sure to be over at your house at 8 like normal to catch a ride.”

“Alright. Well, I need to get to my office, but feel free to stay around and out of trouble or just get to whatever you need to do.”

“See you soon!”

Dad left, but I stayed to get another bowl of ice cream. Then, I rode my motorcycle home and pulled out my phone to call Anaya.

“Hey Anaya, it’s Kai”

“Hey Kai, what’s up?”

“How is Spark?”

“Good, want to talk to her? Let me go get her.” There was some shuffling noises and then I heard a ferret squeak.

“Oh, she misses you,” said Anaya.

“I miss her to,” I said. Promptly, there was the distinct sound of ferret claws on phone followed by Anaya saying, “Hey, stop scratching on my phone, Kai isn’t in it!”

“HA! I want to know if I could stop by your house for a minute,” I replied.

“Uh, yeah. We have dinner at 5, but if you come soon should be fine,” replied Anaya. I hung up, raced back to the garage and roared on over to Anaya’s house. I knocked on the door.

“Hey, Kai; what’s up?” said Anaya when she opened the door. I would have answered but two balls of fur hit me and I was forced to react quickly so I wouldn’t drop them.

“Fine, thank you. I wanted to talk to you about training them,” I said once I recovered my balance. Anaya led the way up the stairs and I followed.

“Oh, yeah. What kinds of things do you want Spark to do?” Anaya asked, ushering me inside her own room. I noticed Spark and Ferret’s living habitats stacked in a tall wooden shelf in the corner of the room.

“Well, I want them to be able to understand verbal commands over the phone or via something in which I or you are not there, and then act on it.” Anaya and I sat down on a leather couch which was facing a 75” widescreen TV monitor.

“Now that would be cool. How do you propose to do that?”

“Well first, I was thinking about just getting them to retrieve something, drop something, hide, run – you know, the basics.”

“Hmmm. That still might be pretty tricky, but we could give it a shot...”

We decided to give training a shot and quickly burned through an entire package of pepperoni; though, to be fair, we had made some progress – i.e. getting them to stop when we told them so. Before I left, I asked Anaya if I could see Bitty.

“Sure, she’s over in my bedroom. I didn’t know how well she’d get along with the ferrets,” Anaya replied. She took me to her bedroom where a hamster cage sat up against the

wall on a wooden bureau stand. Bitty was in the second floor eating something. Anaya opened the cage door.

"Here, Bitty, come meet my friend!" Anaya beckoned. Immediately Bitty dropped her bit of food, scampered down the tube, ran across the main floor, and popped out of her cage into Anaya's hand. At this, Spark and Ferret (who had been in my arms battling at each other) stopped what they were doing and looked at Bitty. I could not swear by it, but it looked like they got a guilty expression on their face or at least as guilty an expression as a ferret could have. Bitty sat there in Anaya's hand washing herself and looking around – a perfect hamster. By this time, it was almost five so I said goodbye and went back home. After a nice dinner of casserole and chips at my parents' house, I sacked out in mine and played a video game. Then, "Tim Impossible" came on so I watched a few episodes. It was right in the middle of a spy sequence when Tim was crawling through air ducts with a "Stop-Amateur" camera strapped to his helmet, when I had my next "lightbulb moment" of the day.

I finished the show and ran over to my technology room. On one of the shelves was the harness that Spark used that could have a mini camera attached to it. I hardly ever used it as Spark didn't think it was very comfortable, but it worked nonetheless. My idea was that in the future, I could send Spark on "missions" with a teeny video camera connected to her harness. If I used that same video camera that I was planning on developing for my drone, then I could have live video feed of Spark's progress. Of course, the main problem would be directing Spark to do certain things - i.e. I would need some way of communicating with her. I puzzled over this, as I adjusted some straps and sealed onto the harness a tiny plastic case with even smaller metal screws. This would allow me to use different sizes of cameras or other bits of technology on top of her as well. I was just beginning the delicate process of screwing in the tiny metal screws when my phone (on vibration mode) rang in my pocket. My body shook and the screw fell out - *RATS!* However, I quickly realized that my phone was actually a genius! Well, actually I was the genius, but my phone gave me an idea (humility is my strong suit - I'm sure you have noticed).

The text message was just from my Dad to all the employees on the flight-level at his work about me showing up tomorrow. Dad had just forwarded me the text. I put away my phone and finished with the screw. Then, I looked online for "vibration collars." If I could train Spark to recognize the difference between vibrations, then she could follow instructions remotely. The next thing I did was order two brand new ferret harnesses, a hamster-sized one (At the last moment I decided it would be awesome to have Bitty also suited up!), a few extra metal screws and casings, and six, small vibration collars. The harnesses had two loops around the ferrets so I figured I could disassemble the vibration collars and place them in the harnesses to make the "suit" more compact. I also ordered a few wireless transmitters that I could add to the harness. Then, I paid for my order and had it sent to my Dad's work. I could pick it up tomorrow and assemble everything. By this time, I was tired as well as my brain so I collapsed in bed.

The next day, bright and early, I followed Dad to work (on my motorcycle of course). We stopped by the main building to pick up a pass for me (which, by the way, made me feel very official); then Dad went his way, and I went to the receptionist and asked for my package.

“Do you work here?” she asked.

“Sort of, I’m Tokero’s son. I will be working with the employees in the flight-technology level of Building 3.” (I also flashed my card for extra measure)

“Oh,” the lady obviously was still confused, but reached under her desk and produced my mid-sized package. “Here ya’ go.”

“Thanks!” I replied. Before I started work on my mini drone, I wanted to make sure to assemble the harnesses and get them sent to Anaya. I went to the third floor of Building 3 and found an empty workstation. Using some tools that I found in a room marked “tools,” I disassembled the collars and got to work reassembling them in the harnesses. How the makers of the vibration collars had made them was kind of ingenious, but also pretty simple so it didn’t take me too long to pull at the “guts” of the collars and reinsert them into the harnesses (after pulling out the stitches in the harness straps). Next, I used a high-end micro chip from the complex’s warehouse and installed some software on it that would allow me to monitor their health at any given moment as well as send out wireless signals. Then, I used a special machine that a very kind employee showed me how to use, to embed the chip into the top of the harness and seal the plastic camera holder encasing on top.

Next, I swapped out the standard buckles on the harnesses so that they could only be unlocked when a special “wand” was nearby. The wand (when turned on) would send a unique electrical signal to the chip and tell it to allow the buckles to be unlatched. The whole operation to create the camera-holding, vibration-emitting, health-monitoring, pet harnesses took a little over five hours which is actually pretty fast. When I finished, I packed them back into the box and included a note to Anaya “pretending” that these harnesses could be used for a “mission” and that the whole operation is “top-secret.” I hoped she wouldn’t think I was being serious; I don’t think I would ever send my or anyone else’s pet on an actual, dangerous mission. I texted Anaya to find out her address (I explained to her that I was sending her something first!) and walked back to the receptionist. She promised that the package would be sent right away. (Evidently, she had talked with Tokero and made sure that she was supposed to treat me like a normal employee) Then, I began work on my mini drone.

I needed to first draw up a digital representation of what I was going to make to get an idea of what parts I needed, and the only place with sophisticated enough software to do this was on the fourth floor.

I walked back to the third building and scanned my card so the elevator would take me up. I stepped out onto the fourth floor, and opened the door into the main laboratory to make some notes about the pieces available. Later, I would go into a side office where I could use the software. I opened the heavy door and saw about four guys working on different projects.

None of them even looked up, so I moved to one side of the space where there was some bins with micro propellers and motors.

The first slide-out drawer had propellers that were still too big. If I was going to make something tiny enough to not be noticed, I would need a near-micro-sized drone. I opened the last drawer, and found some micro motors. They were so small, in fact, I had to use a nearby pliers to pick them up.

However, I didn't notice that the pliers was holding up a precarious stack of electro-boards. When I pulled out their support, they all fell over and made a loud noise. That would have been bad enough if it hadn't been for the fact that the noise scared the guy across the room who was soldering his electro-board. He jumped (still with the flame going) and torched a thin cloth-like fabric that could transmit electricity through it. The cloth immediately burst into flame and set off the fire-alarm and sprinklers.

I literally don't know whose idea it was to put *sprinklers* in a place that was loaded from floor to ceiling with sensitive, electronic equipment. Anyway, the sprinklers came pouring down which also would have been bad enough if it wasn't for the fact that the guy working on his satellite thingy with treads had a bunch of batteries out and was trying them to see which worked best. The batteries started crackling and popping, and I knew what *that* meant. I back flipped over a table of transistors, capacitors, and mini-jets to reach the outside window. Then, I performed a carefully aimed kar-judo kick to break the window. The other guys in the room didn't even notice because they were running around panicking. They weren't panicking like in the movies; you know, with their hands in the air and running into every possible wall and table. No, they were just rushing about trying to protect their inventions from the water and trying to put away all the stuff that was everywhere.

Meanwhile, the batteries started sparking. I raced across the room and grabbed the nearest plastic drawer out that was lying on the ground. I then pushed all the sparking batteries (ranging from ultra-small to mid-sized) into the plastic drawer using my pliers. Then, I dove across the room, and launched the batteries outside of the building through the hole in the window. Just as the batteries were halfway down the side of the building, they exploded. For being small batteries, they really made a noise. Their explosion caught the attention of all the panicking scientists, and they all watched the cloud of black smoke and ashes fall down below onto the perfectly groomed walkway (luckily no one was on the walkway!).

We were still all looking at the mess outside (and inside) when Dad burst through the door followed by several security guards and a few guys loaded down with industrial-sized, backpack fire extinguishers. They didn't wait to see that the danger was gone. No, instead they pulled their triggers (probably because they had never been able to use their equipment until today, and they were more than trigger happy). Suddenly, the air filled with thick foam (which by the way isn't a good idea to inhale as it is suffocating!), and I thought for a minute about jumping out of the hole in the wall myself (to get away from the foam but since I didn't have a parachute, I knew I was out of luck).

I noticed that the guy closest to me had a large propeller connected to a motor, so I asked him if I could borrow it. He was trying to keep out of the way of the foam (which was quickly coming at us), so he let me take it. I immediately popped open a side panel, and fiddled with some wires in it. I crossed the correct two, and instantly the propeller whirled to life.

Right now, I had been pretty impressed with how well I had handled this crazy situation. I had saved the life of myself and the other scientists in the room as well as prevented destruction to the laboratory. I knew that water and batteries do not mix, and I also knew that fire-extinguisher foam and human lungs also do not mix very well so I figured that I could blow all the stuff away. However, the propeller was so big that I was thrust backwards and into the wall with a bone-crushing “thump.” I held on tight though and the propeller started blowing the foam back across the room (as well as all sorts of other bits of electronics and propellers as well). The propeller was keeping the foam at bay and starting to gain on it when suddenly, with a whoosh, all the remaining foam in the room was splayed against the opposite wall, leaving a dozen or so very white people near the back wall. The two guys were looking at their equipment (probably trying to figure out why their supply of foam ran out so quickly) and the rest of the security guards and my Dad were either looking very angrily at the “foam men” or me. Luckily, Dad came to my rescue.

“Okay everybody,” Dad began, “I want all of you to leave this room, until we can get it cleaned up and running again. If you have any injuries, we can take you downstairs. Otherwise, try to stay clear of this place!”

I tried to get out with the rest of the guys, but Dad caught me on my way out anyway.

“What went on here?” Dad asked. I did not see any other option, so I told him the whole story, starting with me causing the avalanche of electro-boards. Dad sighed.

“Yep, I knew something like this was bound to happen. The guys here are very smart, but they are not organized or level-headed in situations like this. I am going to look forward to you working here. Perhaps, you can keep everything working smoothly,” Dad said.

“Um, I hope. You’re sure they will be okay with me?” I asked.

“Yeah, they aren’t very social, so I doubt they will bother you anyways,” Dad said, “Well, get busy on your project. I’ve got a whole lot to clean up here. Well, not me, that is, but the janitors do.” With that, I slinked out of the room, and into one of the small, available, cubicle offices to work on my drone’s design.

I designed my drone to have light, wire roll bars around it so it could easily be carried by a ferret and bump into things without the propellers being damaged. I also incorporated a small area for the video camera to be inserted under the drone. The color of it would be all black so that it would blend in well with computer cords and technology. Last of all, I decided on a GPS like transmission system that would communicate with my computer about its current location as well as allowing me to control its motion.

By the time it was 5pm, I had finished designing it. According to the company’s database, they had most of the pieces, and the rest I just sent to the 3D printers which would

get the parts done by tomorrow morning - probably. I figured that by tomorrow, I could start assembling it.

I drove home, mulling over the different designs possible, and as to whether any of them would work. I parked my motorcycle in my garage, changed out of my slightly funny smelling jacket, and walked over to my parents for dinner. I was finishing off my cherry pie, when Mom spoke up.

"Any of you want to play a game tonight?" she said, "I saw this really interesting one down at Ned Fire's, and I thought we would want to play it."

"What's it about?" I said with a mouthful of pie.

"That, my dear son, is for *you* to find out!" Mom exclaimed, "Since you are so excited to figure out what it is, why don't you go to my office upstairs and get it. It's on my computer desk."

"Me and my mouth," I mumbled, getting up from the dinner table. I slowly jogged up the stairs and into her office. I hadn't ever been there before, but it really wasn't all that interesting – just a typical home office space. My thoughts were interrupted by a small beep emitted from Mom's computer. The screen quickly turned on and showed a Word document (nothing interesting, I checked, it was just talking about how to create your own exercise program. Now that I think about it, that might be something Anaya would like), and in the bottom right corner was the beginning of the email message.

It read, "We know where you..."

I looked behind me to make sure no one was watching; then, I quickly clicked on the box, and mom's email account maximized. I clicked on the corresponding email and the full thing showed.

It now read, "We know where you are, and we know what "you" have. Give it to us, or we'll tell Tokero all about your past. By "all," we mean ALL!"

I gasped (quietly that is!). *What were Mom and/or the mysterious messenger hiding?!*

Chapter 8: Spying

My sigh was deep as I threw myself onto my bed. I had NO idea that ferrets were so much work.

One ferret is fine, I thought to myself. Two ferrets is crazy. And two ferrets and a hamster is insane! I had no idea those little pets had so much energy!

Having gotten more exercise than the pets themselves, I was finally ready to relax. I had finally gotten them to take a nap, and I felt like one myself. Flopping onto my stomach, I propped my elbows onto my pillow and stared out my bedroom window. Fluffy clouds hung in the perfectly blue sky, and the willow tree in our backyard swayed back and forth gently in the breeze. If it weren't for Kai's tasks that he had given me, I would be outside in my backyard exercising my biceps and calves on the rock-climbing pyramid.

Kai had sent me a package yesterday at my house while I was gone shopping for cage bedding and ferret food, and I had eagerly opened it that night to find inside three mini black leather harnesses. The note inside had read:

Anaya - I have decided to launch Operation Cunning Ferret and I need your help to train Spark and Ferret for it. (I would like to only send one of them, but I doubt they would take kindly to being separated, if only for a few hours.) I can't explain the details of the mission, considering that it is confidential, but it shouldn't be necessary. I simply need you to teach the ferrets to be able to mentally connect gentle vibrations in the harness to basic commands. (I have enclosed a list of the commands and corresponding vibration numbers for your reference as you work with them.)

I fashioned the harnesses to be adjustable and comfortable with padding on the inside, and each of them also has a tracking chip installed that allows us to track their location via the software that I have sent you in the enclosed flash drive. The special chip will also remotely measure blood pressure, pulse, oxygen levels, and other vitals. That may help us in emergencies.

This operation is level two on the Hammerson Hazard Scale, so I can guarantee the ferrets will be safe. Just as a precaution, though, the harnesses' adjustment buckles have a lock on it that can only be released through official authorization so that nobody can take the collars off the ferrets while they are on a mission. The stylus-looking rod in this box has an electrical signal that unlocks the adjustment buckle when in contact (as long as you turn it on first of course). (Don't lose it - I only have two.)

Please train Bitty with her smaller harness as well, even though she is not needed for a mission yet. Her extremely small size may come in handy one of these days.

Thank you for your help. - Agent Hwang

FYIO (Destroy immediately when finished reading)

V#1: Go

V#6: Jump Down

V#2: Stop

V#7: Duck

V#3: Hide

V#8: Deliver

V#4: Run

V#9: Retrieve

V#5: Jump Up

V#10: Attack (this is only to be used in emergencies)

I reached into my back pocket and pulled out the crinkled note. Even though he had written FYIO (For Your Eyes Only), I still hadn't flushed it down the toilet yet. I felt a little guilty because of that, but I still hadn't memorized the vibration numbers and commands yet. Nor had the ferrets. Stop and Go was easy, but Hide wasn't.

Probably because those two insist on hiding together, I thought, and there isn't any place in the TV room where both of them can hide without one of their tails sticking out!

The only reason I had gotten those two lovebird ferrets to even get as far as the Hide command was because of their weakness: They do not like being inferior in skills to a tiny hamster. Thus, Spark and Ferret had been working really hard this afternoon to pass the HideUnderTheOttoman Test while Bitty was literally running circles around them on her RunningAsFastAsYouCan Test.

Bitty had already excelled way past the ferrets. Hiding was easy because she was so small, and running was a piece of cake as well. Vibration Commands #5 and 6 were the ones she was stuck on. Jumping up isn't one of her assets because of her teeny legs, so I had to modify it to Climb Up and Jump Down.

Even though I was exhausted from all of my work with them that afternoon, I felt a little twinge of excitement in my chest as I thought about how pleased Kai would be once I had gotten them fully trained in Critter Bootcamp and was ready to send them on their first mission!

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The two dots on my phone screen were moving slowly toward the target. I tapped the V#5 button on the side of my screen and the dots leaped up onto the windowsill in my brother's room. The video feed from Ferret confirmed their location. After getting the harnesses, Kai had sent me some ultra-small video cameras that could be attached to Spark, Ferret, and Bitty on their harnesses. For this mission, I had Spark just carry her camera in her mouth. The video feed from the tiny camera on Spark's harness jostled all over the place until I pressed V#3 twice. That meant Hide The Object In Your Mouth. I had worked with the ferrets on getting them to hide their bodies, but recently taught them to hide objects as well, such as balls and candy and cameras.

As Spark deposited the camera onto the sill, I got a good view of Neph's bedroom from Ferret's camera that let me see the going-ons of this training mission. Neph was still engrossed in his homework at his desk and hadn't noticed Spark and Ferret skitter into his bedroom.

Ferret led the way as the two critters slinked across the windowsill. I pressed V#6, and they agilely leapt down onto the floor behind his couch. V#4 and V#3 directed them to dash and hide under his desk by his feet. Then I had them wait, and after a few seconds to make sure Neph was still oblivious, I tapped V#11. Spark and Ferret each dashed up one of Neph's legs and up onto his back and perched on his shoulders, wrapping their tails around his neck. I didn't

have to look at the hidden camera screen to know what happened next. I could hear it. Neph's roar made it clear that I had caught him completely off guard.

I dashed down the hall to Neph's bedroom and entered the doorway to see Neph sprawled out on the floor next to an upturned swivel chair. Two happy ferrets were licking his red face. When Neph saw me, he growled.

"What is going on here?" he grumbled, lifting himself off the floor. "I'm doing my homework, and then suddenly two long balls of fur spring onto me, half scaring me to death, so much so that I fell out of my chair!" Neph pointed a finger at his chair and then at me.

"Operation ThisIsOnlyATest was a success then!" I said proudly as I pocketed Spark's camera after taking it off Neph's window sill. Neph didn't notice my excitement, though, because he was busy trying to pry the ferrets off his shoulders.

"What are these things doing?" he complained. "My face is all wet with ferret slobber!"

I giggled. "I came up with Vibration command #11 myself. It's Hugs And Kisses."

Neph wrinkled his nose. "Gross. Save that for Valentine's Day."

I reached out my hands and Neph deposited the ferrets into my arms. "Good work, little buddies!" I crooned, walking out of the room. "You guys are ready for a real mission now!"

"You're saying that I was the victim of one of your practice tests?!" yelled Neph. "I'm not a guinea pig!!"

I just smiled. "He needed a break from his homework anyway," I whispered to Spark.

Chapter 9: Running

The next day, I woke up bright and early and devoured a breakfast of eggs, toast, bacon, cereal, yogurt, and fruit. No, I'm not a glutton if that is what you are wondering. My mom always tells me that I'm just a normal growing 14 year old girl with an extraordinary large appetite. My brother, Zephan, on the other hand, eats meals as though he was a mouse. For example, he ate one small cup of blueberries for breakfast, and he said that he was full after that! To me, that was insane. But before I could think anymore about food, my smartwatch buzzed with an incoming text.

Hey, Zelena. It's me, Anaya. My dad owns a really cool medieval-themed hotel close by, and I was wondering if you would like to take a tour today. Let me know!

Wow! Anaya's family must be rich to own a whole hotel! And medieval-themed? That's way wicked cool! One of the little known facts about myself is that I love history and basically anything that has to do with the past. This was going to be awesome! I quickly replied.

Sure, Anaya! Sounds way cool. I'll meet you there in 5.

I quickly researched the hotel on my computer and found out where it was. But before I could escape out the back door with my bike, I heard an all too familiar noise.

"Zelena! Where are you going?" asked my nosy little brother, who was acting like he was Mom.

"Why does it matter to you? And anyway, why aren't you at your weekly soccer practice?" I asked skeptically.

"That's none of your beeswax!" he replied. *Ugggh! Sometimes he could be so annoying!* "Just tell me where you are going, and I'll leave you alone ...maybe....."

"Well, what I'm doing is none of your 'beeswax' either!" I tartly replied as I quickly hopped onto my bike and furiously pedaled down the street, away from my little brother. I knew that I didn't always have the best attitude towards my little brother, but he was just so annoying. It didn't help that Zephan was now attached to Kai either. It was almost like Kai was Zephan's 'idol.' I mean, come on, he was just a regular dude doing mostly regular things. How is that so cool?

Before I knew it, I had arrived at the newest hotel in town that was owned by Anaya's dad. It looked absolutely stunning and it looked like it had just come from the days of knights and princesses! Aww! It was so realistic!

"Hi, Zelena!" called Anaya from the front of the hotel. "I'm so glad that you could make it! Welcome to Fairview Inn and Suites."

"Good morrow, my fair maiden, Anaya!" I replied. Just being at the hotel made me want to speak like the good old days.

Anaya giggled as she gave me a huge hug. Now there was something I was not used to. I never got hugs and especially from people that I had just met a few days before. But at the same time, it felt great to have a friend in this new city.

"Thanks, Anaya! It's so kind of you to invite me. I love learning about people of the past, and this looks like the perfect place for just that!" I exclaimed happily as I waltzed inside the lobby of the hotel. But when I walked inside, nothing could have prepared me for what I was about to experience. My jaw dropped and I could only stare at my surroundings. I had thought that the hotel would be medieval-themed, but no. No, no, no! I was completely wrong. This hotel was medieval even down to the rugs on the floor. There were swords sitting on the tables, pictures on the walls of knights riding on horseback and even an old staircase that led to the upper stories of the hotel. I could barely believe my eyes.

Anaya looked over at me and tried to stifle a laugh. "Are you okay, Zelena? You look a little pale."

"I think I'm okay, but like, everything is just so realistic!" I finally blurted out.

"Well, that was the point," admitted Anaya. "But let's get started on this tour. You have so much to look at, and we don't have much time, so here we go!"

But being the friendly person that I was, I noticed a young man sitting at the welcome desk at the front of the hotel and decided to introduce myself. He looked kinda handsome with his black hair slicked back and a crazy amazing medieval-themed suit on.

"First, I want to introduce you to the hotel's intern!" Anaya announced. We walked over to the desk.

"Hey there, Xen!" Anaya said to the young man. "This is my friend, Zelena. Zelena, this is Xen."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss. Any friend of Anaya is a friend of mine," he replied politely.

Hmm... okay, he was polite and handsome, which gave him extra points in my book. (I'm not sure what book but some book!)

"So how did you meet Anaya?" he asked, looking up from the papers that he had been sorting through.

"Well, it was sort of an accident. I bumped into another boy and caused a very small collision, and Anaya was there to help me pick up all of my stuff."

"Cool! So do you have any hobbies?"

"Well, I like to cook, take care of Ferret, exercise, ride my bike, and hack,"

"Wait! You hack? Like into other peoples' online accounts and stuff?"

"Yep! I do it all!"

I could tell that he was really impressed with that and was going to ask me another question, but before he could say anything else, Anaya's dad walked up and started another conversation.

"Hi, Zelena! I'm the owner of this hotel, aka Anaya's dad, and I heard that you would like to take a tour of this place," he said kindly and rather proudly.

"Oh! Yes, please. This hotel is amazing with a capital A. It has everything!" I replied dreamily, thinking about what it would be like to have a dad that owned his own hotel.

"Well, let's get started!" he said excitedly throwing Anaya one of those looks that said "I'll take this one."

I guess I wouldn't be able to take a tour with Anaya today, but it was almost better to take a tour with the owner himself. Then, he could tell me all the ins and outs of his medieval

hotel. I could just smell the adventure awaiting me. Well, okay, not literally. But I do have a pretty good sniffer, if I do say so myself.

The tour was absolutely amazing! I got to see several of the rooms, sit by the gigantic fireplace, eat medieval-themed food, stick my feet in the old-fashioned pool, and do tons of other AWESOME things!!! For me, it was like nothing else I had ever seen before.

"Thank you so much for taking me on this tour. Your place is absolutely amazing, and I'm sure that you will get lots of vacationing families. I mean, if I didn't already live in a house in Fairfield, I would totally book a room in this place," I gushed.

"Well, you're very welcome. It did take a lot of time and money, but it was totally worth it," he agreed. "As the last part of the tour, I would like to show you my office. It has one of my most prized paintings in there!"

"Sure. Sounds great!"

I quickly headed over to his office, but as soon as I popped my head in the room, I realized that it was already occupied. Kai and Anaya were having a deep conversation about something, and Kai was acting weird - or at least more weird than normal. I couldn't imagine how Kai had found his way here. Anaya's dad, on the other hand, had a thing or two to say about people being in his office when he hadn't give them permission.

"Now what exactly do you think you are doing in my office?" he commanded, staring pointedly at Anaya and Kai.

"Well, um, sorry ..., Dad." Anaya said first. "We were just having a ... conversation?"

Wait! What were they up to? I mean, Kai does not know Anaya any more than I do - or so I thought. Whatever the case, I didn't want Anaya getting in trouble so I broke the tension.

"Your dad just finished showing me around the castle. It's so amazing and detailed. I mean, just look at his office. Who is that picture of?" I asked Anaya's dad. This completely distracted him. Kai quickly caught on and followed suit with some more questions about the place. Unfortunately for him, Carson launched into his history spiel again and gently guided him out of the room while explaining all the decorations on the walls, ceiling, and floor.

"Well, the guy in the picture frame is King George the Swift. Then, in a valiant battle with..."

Anaya chuckled. "Would you like a ride home, Anaya?"

"Sure, do you have room for my bicycle?"

"Yep!"

As I followed Anaya outside, Xen passed by me and shoved some sort of paper into my hands. He didn't even acknowledge what he had done. He just continued on his way to the desk in the hotel's front lobby. Now Xen was acting weird! What was wrong with the people in this town?!

The ride back to my house was quiet, but the car wasn't too loud or messy so it wasn't an uncomfortable ride. As I took my bike out of the back, I yelled, "Thanks for the ride, Anaya!" I wheeled my bicycle to the garage door, opened it, and parked my bike alongside the wall; then I waltzed on inside.

As soon as I walked in the front door, I knew I was in trouble with my little brother. He was glaring at me from the couch like I had just committed the worst crime in the history of America.

“So...” I stalled for time. “What have you been doing, Zephan?”

“Oh! Do you really think that’s funny? You know very well what you did. You left me at home to rot while you escaped to have a fun day with all your friends. It’s so not fair! And you even know that Kai is my friend. We spend lots of time together. I bet you didn’t take me along with you to the hotel just because you are jealous of Kai! Yeah! That’s it!” yelled my brother, pointing an accusing finger at me.

“Wait! What? First of all, how did you know that I saw Kai. Second of all, I didn’t spend any time with him. Third of all, I’m not jealous of Kai. I just didn’t want you tagging along because only I was invited by Anaya, and you weren’t. It would be kinda rude to just bring along another person that wasn’t even invited!” I said, trying to calmly respond amidst the accusations and raised voices that were flying around.

“Oh, I was talking with Kai on the phone because I called him up, and he said that he saw you. I didn’t know you just saw him briefly.” said my brother embarrassed, as he hung his head. Ugggh! I hated it when he did that. I should be mad at him right now for how he was treating me, but whenever he did that thing where he hung his head and looked guilty, he just looked so cute.

“It’s okay. I know you like to spend time with Kai. Maybe next time I go to the hotel, I can ask if it’s okay for you to come along too!” I said kindly, giving my brother a big hug.

“Let’s go eat some dinner!” my brother Zephan exclaimed happily as he sprinted into the kitchen. That’s where Mom was standing by the stove, stirring something in a pot that smelled really good. She didn’t seem the least bit perturbed at me or my brother for the fight that we had just finished resolving. That’s the way she was. Always calm and chill.

“What’s for dinner tonight, Mom?” I asked cheerily, hoping that my good mood would make up for our fight earlier.

“Umm, Duh! What do we have every night for dinner?” answered my brother with a glance at me that he only used when he thought I was acting stupid.

“Oh! Thanks for answering my question, Mom!” I shot back rather rudely. He had this really bad habit of answering every question that was asked whether or not it was meant for him.

But sure enough as I peeked into the pot, I saw orange, which could only mean one thing. Macaroni and cheese. It’s the same thing we eat for dinner almost every night. It’s sorta become a tradition now, I guess.

“Yep! It’s macaroni and cheese, again, but I have taken some time this evening to go through some of my old recipe books and look for some more healthy options for dinner!” my mom stated proudly.

“Oh good! I mean, macaroni and cheese is good and old, but it does get a little old after a while. Are we going to have, like, steak and ribs now? Or maybe gourmet pizza with a tossed salad?” I asked hopefully, as I scooped some macaroni and cheese onto my plate.

“Well, I didn’t mean that gourmet and healthy. I was thinking more along the lines of macaroni and cheese with pieces of hot dog, peas, and corn mixed in!” said my mother slyly with a funny smile on her face. “Just kidding!”

“Oh, good! I’m so glad that you’re joking because for a second there, I thought you were serious. I was really getting worried.”

"I was thinking about salads and casseroles. There are a lot of casseroles that are healthy and easy to make at the same time. But now that I have a job, you might have to help, Zelena!"

"Ooh! Ooh! I can help!" interjected Zephan.

Both mom and I shot him glances that said, "No!" We knew how messy and crazy Zephan was in the kitchen. He was like a cooking maniac. The one time when he tried to make a breakfast in bed for me on my birthday without parental supervision was an absolute disaster. It took us an hour to clean up the kitchen after he was done.

After dinner was over, I ran up to my room, crashed on my bed, and quickly pulled out the paper note that Xen had given to me earlier that evening. What could be in it? What did it say? With shaky hands, I gently unfolded and started to read:

Zelena! I need help! I know that you said you are really good with computers and hacking. I need you for a certain hacking job. Text me ASAP at 624-675-4572! -Xen

I was starting to get the vibe that everybody wanted me to help them with their hacking projects, but not with just regular computer stuff. I was feeling a bit, I don't know, taken advantage of. I mean, I was already working on a hacking project for my uncle which was going nowhere, and now Xen wanted me to work on another one? I just didn't know. But, I decided to text him anyway. I quickly grabbed my phone from its charger and set up the texting conversation.

Hi, Xen.

Hey there, Zelena. What's up?

Well, I got your note, and it said to text you, so that's what I'm doing.

Nice! I have a very top secret and special hacking job just for you. But you can't tell anyone. Got it?

Okay.... What is it?

Well, I need you to hack into Tokero Hwang's online account for me and report anything you find back to me. Okay?

Well, I'm actually trying to do just that for someone else.

Who?

My uncle who works for the FBI.

Oh. Have you found anything yet?

Actually, I can't hack into his account. It has too many special security codes, but I have hacked into Kai's account. He has a lot of videos of your sword-fighting tournaments on his computer.

Hmmm... Is he stalking me I wonder?

I take it, then, that you don't get along with him very well?

Definitely not. There's been several bumps in our relationship. But it's cool getting to talk to you. I've seen you around, but I haven't been able to talk to you until now.

Yup! We actually just moved in and have been trying to get used to this new place.

Well, I certainly hope you like it. Maybe I could show you around the town one day. We could even go to the movies. They have a great theater here in Fairfield!

Cool! We should totally do that sometime. I mean, besides Kai and Anaya, I really don't have any other friends in Fairfield. Thanks for being so kind!

No prob! I mean, I'm sorta new myself too.

Sorry! I've got to go now. Talk later!

Oh! Okay. Remember, if you find anything on Kai's account, let me know. And, if you make any progress on Tokero's account, keep me posted. Okay?

I'll try.

Bye!

Hmm... why doesn't Kai like Xen? He seems like such a nice person. He's so friendly and kind. Although it was still rather strange to me that he wanted Tokero's information. Why did he need it so desperately? Something strange was definitely going on, and I aimed to get to the bottom of it. After my previous work I had put into hacking Kai's account, it only took another hour to finally break in. I quickly started looking around his account for any information that might be helpful. I came across some of his emails, pictures of Spark, and finally, something helpful. It was a video but as I watched it, my smiled slowly turned into a frown. It was a video of me working on my computers, and the camera zoomed in when I entered some passwords on my keyboard. How did Kai get a video of me working on my computers? Did he hack into my security camera feed or was he planting his own cameras in my room? And if he did, how did he do it without me noticing? Was he a spy against the FBI? I didn't know what was going on, but I knew one thing for sure: Kai was up to no good.

Chapter 10: Suspecting

Needless to say, I was shocked and slightly alarmed. I knew the email could have been from some Russian hacker who was just trying to make a few dollars off my Mom, but I had a nagging suspicion that there was a lot more going on than I knew about.

“Kai? Are you okay up there?” Mom yelled up to me.

“Not really. I can’t find the game!” I lied, “Where is it again?”

“It should be there on the right side of the desk – next to my printer.”

I paused for a moment to actually look at the desk and found it easily. “Oh! Found it, I’ll be right down,” I said.

I raced down the stairs, and slowed down at the bottom so it would appear I wasn’t running. I put on a big smile as I showed up into the living room.

“I am super excited about this game. You guys don’t stand a chance!” I exclaimed - trying to allay any suspicion of me taking a long time. “Mom, I couldn’t find it because it was buried underneath a pile of papers.” (Which was a bit of an exaggeration. Two papers do not really count as a *pile*, but I was anxious for someone else to blame, which, in retrospect, probably isn’t a good thing to do.) Dad chuckled.

“Honey, you really need to keep your place organized,” Dad commented.

“Says the person who leaves the garage looking like a tornado hit it!” Mom fired back.

“Hey now. No commenting about the garage!”

My parents didn’t seem to be worried about the length of time it took me to get the game, so I figured I was okay. After all, I had no way of knowing if my parents even knew there was something like that email that they did not want me to see.

After all the “excitement,” I had forgotten about the game that I was opening up in my hands. The title read “Scrabble – Ultra Edition.” My body sagged.

“I’m so glad you are excited to play with us,” Mom told me, “I was under the assumption that you didn’t like Scrabble.”

“Heh,” I replied unconvincingly, “I guess I’m just excited to try a new version of the game?”

“Let the best man win!” Dad said as he grabbed his tile holder. “Since I’m the only *man* at the table, the winner will most certainly be me!”

“In your dreams, buster,” Mom replied.

The game was pretty uneventful, except for the fact that I was soundly defeated by my parents’ impressive vocabulary and Scrabble-playing skills. I put on an interested face, but really, my mind was off trying to figure out all the crazy things I had gotten into recently. First, I had been attacked by my only known cousin, shot at by a bunch of psycho agents, yelled at by a girl that is hacking into my father’s servers, and in the dark about supposed secrets of Mom.

This had all happened in the last two weeks! I was working on spying on Zelena, but other than that, I really had no idea how to even start figuring out the other problems. As I said my goodbyes to my parents, I thought back to what I knew about my mom. Her full name was Tanya Decotu Hwang, and she is half Japanese – half American. All she knew about her parents is what others told her. I guess her parents had left her on the street at an early age and a local orphanage had taken her in. While at her orphanage, she was bullied a lot, so she started learning the art of karate. When she was 17, she won the national 18 and under martial arts tournament and won a free scholarship to Stanford University. There, she majored in national defense, and met my Dad later on.

With all of the unknown circling her, there really could be something that she knew about herself that she was not telling me or Dad. I could only think of two options to solve my curiosity. Either ask her about it or try to find out myself. Neither seemed like very good options, so I decided to let it go until after I had finished my spying mission on Zelena. Speaking about spying on Zelena, I could probably begin construction on my mini drone tomorrow! Now that is something exciting (sorry to all the Scrabble fans out there!). Whatever the case, I hurriedly got into bed, because I was super thrilled about how well my mini drone was coming along, despite the setbacks.

The next day, I collected some parts that I thought I would need from the warehouse on the first floor as well as some tools like pliers and tweezers and such that I would need to put the drone together. The janitorial crew had worked over time last night and gotten the lab fixed up, so I pulled up my drone design on my phone at one of the work stations, and got to work. The outside frame of the drone was unique to my model, so I used the 3D parts that I had sent to the printers yesterday afternoon. Inside the basic frame, I carefully installed the mini motors, battery, and HD vision video camera. It took a lot of work and patience, because most of it had to be done with painstaking human effort or a robotic arm which required a lot of careful controlling. By noon, I had gotten the thing completed, but now I needed to test it out. I went to an available cubicle office outside the lab and pulled up my custom software for controlling the drone. I then sent it on a sample mission to Building 1's lunch room to see if any new fruits were there (yesterday they had a fresh mango and it tasted amazing!). The drone worked wonderfully! I was able to get through four doorways, simply by following an employee. The employees never knew they were being followed, and the camera was working like a charm. When I got to the lunch room, I checked the fruit basket, but it was just apples and bananas. So then I checked the soft-serve machine and it had a new flavor – strawberry. It was replacing the vanilla for the time-being. I turned it around and made a B-line for the exit when suddenly the camera froze and went black. Obviously, I had suspected that something like this would happen, so I had programmed into my software some graphs about the current status of the drone such as its position in line with the horizon and speed. Everything appeared to still be fine, so I could only guess the camera was dead. Assuming this, I steered the drone to a table that I had last seen and hoped that I would land it correctly. Then, I gently eased it down. On

my altitude meter, it suddenly showed that it had stopped moving downwards, so I turned it off. I locked my computer and quickly walked to the lunch room. A minute later, I got into the room. There was only one other employee there, munching on an apple and reading a newspaper (the headlines read “Scientists explain how Pigs Evolved into Cows”) in the corner. I scanned all the tables in the room for my mini drone, and found it sitting nicely on the corner of the table closest to the soft serve machine. After pouring myself a large strawberry cone, I was back to the lab to find out the camera’s problem.

It turns out that the camera had been power-starved and after running for a few minutes, had simply fried its circuits and died. Since I couldn’t get a better, more powerful battery, I decided to work on making a better camera. I knew a little bit about the workings of cameras, but not enough, so I emailed Dad to see if there was anyone in the office today who could help me. By the time I was crunching down the last of my cone, Dad emailed back that if I went to the second floor I could find a guy by the name of Chris who could help me. I immediately went downstairs. By this time it was two o’clock, and I was anxious to get my drone finished and ready. It wasn’t too hard to find the guy’s cubicle, and, just like Dad said, this guy was super smart. We had a new teeny camera ready to go by 5 pm. I had to adjust the camera casing on my drone to fit the improvised camera, but once I had done this, the drone still flew perfectly and the camera operated wonderfully. Now all I needed to do was see if Spark had enough training to complete the mission. She would need a camera though, so I made three more cameras and sent them priority mail over to Anaya.

I knew it was time for dinner at my parents’ house, but I needed to see Anaya. I drove on over and knocked on the door.

“How’s it going, Kai?” Anaya asked when she opened the door.

“Good, how’s Spark doing?” I replied.

“Wonderful, do you want to see what she, Ferret, and Bitty can do now?!”

“That’d be great. I’m not interrupting your dinner, am I?”

“Nope. The parents are in the dining room eat burritos, and my older brother is gone at his college tonight, so I was thinking about just having some left-over salad later on.” Anaya took me over to her bedroom, and as soon as she opened the door, Spark came at me (as fast as a ferret could, that is).

“Hey Spark! What’s up little girl?” Spark replied by licking my hand.

“Here, let me show you what they can do!” Anaya told me. She picked up three small balls from a basket of toys in the corner and held them out in her hand

“Spark, Ferret, Bitty. Hide,” Anaya commanded. Immediately, Spark jumped out of my arms and ran over with the other two. They each grabbed a ball and scattered over the room, trying to find a place to hide their item. It did not take them very long, and each ball was out of my sight. They all made sure to go back to Anaya and get their corresponding treat afterwards.

“Cool! What else can they do?” I said.

“Spark, roll over. Ferret, jump. Bitty, climb up Kai,” Anaya commanded again.

Spark rolled over three times, Ferret jumped four times (pretty high I might add), and Bitty scampered over to my feet (I was standing up) and immediately began climbing up. I was nervous about this last trick and scared that Bitty would fall – but she didn't. She clung to my pants and then to my shirt. When she reached my head, she climbed onto my shoulders and sat there.

"Cool!" I exclaimed, "Have you tried out the equipment?"

"Indeed I have," Anaya stated, "Let's suit them up, and I will give them a sample mission.

Anaya opened a drawer next to the cages in her room and pulled out the three harnesses and "buckle wand." She handed me Spark's harness, and I carefully put it on her. By the time I finally got it on her, Anaya had gotten on Ferret's and Bitty's (probably due to her having more practice than me). Then, we pulled up my software on our phones.

She started by issuing commands to the pets by pushing certain buttons on her phone. The ferrets darted out of the room with Bitty following. According to Bitty's cam, I could see that Spark was jumping down the steps to the first floor of Anaya's house and Bitty was riding. Then, they slinked across the floor and under a couch in the living room. Anaya handled the button commands on her phone like a pro and had Bitty scamper across the floor and aim her camera at the front dining room table. I got a perfect shot of Anaya's parents eating their dinner. As I watched, the dad dropped a bit of his burrito on the floor.

"Oh! I'm going to send Ferret to go get that piece of food," Anaya told me. Ferret raced across the floor (in his funny waddling type of motion). I could see on his video feed as he dodged the chair legs, passed up Bitty, and snatched the bit of food lying on the ground next to Anaya's dad. Suddenly, her dad reached down to the ground to pick it up. When he couldn't feel the food, he leaned over to look under the table. Anaya quickly hit the "hide" button. Bitty squeezed under the table's support beam and froze while Ferret flattened himself against one of the table's legs. Bitty's camera was still rolling as the dad looked around and then looked straight at the camera - Anaya and I both held our breath. Then, her dad continued his search and sat back up. I could hear Anaya's mom downstairs say, "It's probably halfway across the room by now."

Incredibly, she was right. Except that food was in the mouth of Ferret. He and Bitty both scrambled back over to the couch in the living room. Ferret split the burrito bit into three equal parts and nudged them over with his nose to Bitty and Spark.

"Awe," said Anaya.

"He's so sharing," I replied.

"Time to come back up!" Anaya declared. She punched a few buttons on her phone, and the pets began their trek upstairs. Bitty was surprisingly agile, clinging to the carpet stairs and climbing up the stairs in record time. Soon, they were all in Anaya's room - Bitty eating some cilantro out of Anaya's hand and Spark and Ferret eating a few bits of pepperoni. Despite their snack on the job, they had done a great job and deserved some extra treats.

"Bravo! Well done. This is incredible," I said, then added, "Can I take Spark and Ferret to Zelena's house tomorrow and show her what they can do?"

"Better yet, I'll take them there and you can meet me there," Anaya replied, "I've been wanting to show her for a while myself."

I wasn't nearly as enthusiastic as Anaya to have her come along, but I didn't want to say 'no' so I acted excited as well.

"I'll call you and let you know what time we can come over after I call Zelena."

"Alright, see you then!"

"Bye!" I walked out the door and made it home in time to catch some lasagna at my parents'. Then, I set up my drone software on my home computer and my smart-phone and synced them up with the drone. While that was happening, I called up Zelena.

"Hey Zelena! Anaya has done wonders with out pets. Could we stop by your house tomorrow and show you?" I began.

"Whoa, why the sudden urge to come over?" Zelena asked. (I tried to stay calm)

"Well, um, I went over to Anaya's house today because I was missing Spark, and I saw how well Anaya has trained them, and I thought it would be cool to show you. Anaya volunteered to bring them over if you're up to it," I replied.

"How about 11?" Zelena answered, "That'd give me enough time to finish my morning stuff."

"Works with me. Have a good night!" Tomorrow was going to be the BIG day! I was pumped (and nervous).

The next day after a breakfast of more refrigerated waffles with some apricot jam, I made sure all the remote controlling software was working and set up an antenna in my bedroom. Then, I rode over to Zelena's house. The house was pretty quiet as I walked up the sidewalk, and I noticed that Anaya had not arrived yet. When I knocked on the door, Zephan opened the door.

"What's up Zephan?" I said.

"Yo, - good," Zephan grunted. It was pretty obvious to me that he was completely absorbed in his video game again. This time, however, it sounded like he was playing Zario Smash Sisters. I let myself in (since Zephan wasn't) and sacked out on the living room couch.

"Where is Zelena?" I asked. However, I didn't get any answer, unless you count the furious tapping of Zephan's fingers on his smartphone as an answer. I took another quick look at Zephan, who had transitioned himself to the dining room table, and pulled out my smartphone and the mini drone. I checked the battery and video status of the drone, and they both checked out. I looked down the hall to see what Zelena was doing, but her door was closed, and I heard a faint humming sound coming from her room so I figured she was pretty occupied as well. I wondered if "being occupied" was a thing in this family. Since no one was looking, I decided to do another test run for my drone, which was sneaking up behind Zephan and checking out his video game. I put the drone on the ground, and sent it dodging around the

furniture. It was a bit difficult to control it via my phone, but I managed. It took me no more than ten seconds to get the drone to the table, but the problem would be getting it behind Zephan's tiled chair without him seeing or hearing it. My fears were unfounded though because he was so absorbed in his game. I probably could have run my drone into his head, and he would not have noticed. On his game, he was on level 20 and was busy smashing funny-looking mushrooms and simultaneously battling a large, gorilla-like creature. I had my drone centered behind his head against the wall, but eventually I got tired of watching him destroy virtual "bad guys" so I brought it back to me and pocketed it. No sooner had I done this, then the doorbell rang; except, no one moved.

I decided to answer it myself, so I trotted over to the door and answered it. Sure enough there was Anaya with Spark, Ferret, and Bitty.

"Hi Anaya!" I said.

"Hi Kai!" Anaya replied, "Where is Zelena?"

"I think she is in her room, but she appears to be occupied, perhaps we should knock lightly on the door," I replied.

Anaya handed me Spark and took the lead. I let her go first because I wanted to secretly give Spark the drone. Spark took it in her paws and sniffed it curiously. When Anaya reached Zelena's room, she stopped to deal with Bitty and Ferret so I gave my instructions to Spark.

"Wait, run, hide, return," I whispered to her. Spark looked back up at me and blinked. I really hoped she knew what I was saying.

When I reached the top of the stairs, Anaya knocked on the door. We waited for a minute and then Zelena opened it up. She was instantly bombarded by Ferret.

"Ferret! My boy, how are you doing?" Zelena cooed. Meanwhile, I slipped Spark on the ground and gave her a small push towards Zelena's bedroom. As Spark disappeared into the bedroom, I started talking with Zelena and Anaya. However, I really didn't need to because Zelena was obsessing over Ferret, and Anaya was watching the reunion with big eyes. By the time Spark came back out (which was probably no more than 30 seconds but felt longer), Zelena was just getting Ferret (and herself) under control.

"Check out what Spark can do!" I said, "Roll, jump, hide." Instantly, Spark performed the actions and hid under a little book shelf with Ferret joining in.

"Wow, that is incredible!" Zelena said, awestruck, "However did you get them to do this?"

"Well," said Anaya, "It turns out that they do not like being bested by Bitty, so if Bitty does it, they are sure to follow suit."

"Let me try," said Zelena, "Dance!"

"What! They can't dance," I said; but I was wrong. Ferret and Spark kind of jumped around and over each other while tapping their heads together every now and then - a sort of ferret dance.

"Did you teach them that?" I asked Anaya. She just smiled back at me.

"You're a wonder with rodents."

"Not a wonder, just a miracle," joked Anaya. We all laughed.

By the time, Anaya and I left it was two o'clock. I immediately ran up the stairs of my house and powered on my computers. The video feed showed that Spark had deposited the drone under one of Zelena's servers. I took a deep breath, gripped my custom controls and sent the stick forward - and my drone obeyed. I quietly slid the drone along the floor, up a table leg and aimed it at the large monitors in the corner. Only, Zelena wasn't there. I landed my drone in the corner in an out-of-sight pile of cords and put it on a special mode that would alert me once it sensed movement. In the meantime, I surfed the NET for info related to my Mom. I had never needed to research my Mom, but after the strange message last night, I had become suspicious. What I first did, was look at the member list of all the orphans that had supposedly been in her orphanage. I thought that maybe that info would be confidential, but it wasn't because the orphanage did not exist anymore and all that was left of its website was a shell with a link to a bigger orphan program run by the Japanese government. They did have a list of all the kids that had lived there (perhaps to impress those who looked at it). I looked under "Akiyama" (her maiden name) but I didn't find anything. I tried several similar names but with different spellings and still found nothing. This interested me quite a bit. I decided upon texting Mom to make sure that I had the right orphanage

Mom, didn't you grow up in the Yakima Home for Kids?

Yes, why do you ask?

Because I can't find you on the list of kids that were in there.

Maybe the records were lost.

Don't think so, the list looks pretty complete. You'd think they'd be proud to have a name like yours on the list - what with all your accomplishments.

Hmmm, don't know.

?!?

What?! How should I know why I'm not listed?

Were you not there for as long as you said?

No... I have to finish my book, talk to you later tonight!

The text conversation made me even more suspicious and confused. Was Mom hiding her past? If so, why?

BEEP!!! My software alerted me that movement was recognized by the drone.

I quickly switched to my video feed of Zelena's room. Zelena was just walking in. She sat down at her keyboard and pushed a button. Instantly, the servers roared to life, and her screens showed the "loading" sign. I recognized the welcome screen and desktop, but all the icons were for different softwares I didn't recognize. Zelena pulled up a software and began typing on it. I flew my drone in for a quicker look (making sure to stay behind her), but there

was just strings of characters. I was just starting to wonder if she ever played computer games when she pulled up a streaming software. The software was loading, loading, loading - suddenly my computer froze.

I yelled in frustration and whipped out my smartphone. I quickly turned it on and pulled up my drone's video feed. What I saw scared me silly. I was looking at Zelena looking at herself working on the computer. I rotated the drone to the left and then flew it back over to the right, and the video feed on Zelena's screen matched accordingly. There could only be one explanation. For some reason, Zelena had hacked *my* computer and was viewing what I was viewing - which was Zelena! Now we both knew that we were spying on the other. Things were about to get hot!

Chapter 11: Escaping

"We're here!" I announced, steering my brother's car into a parking space in front of the looming three-story Fairview hotel. Unlocking the doors, I popped out of the car, and Kai, Zelena, and I quickly walked over the moat and up to the entrance. Today was the day that we would be trying out the hotel's newest addition – a themed escape room!

As soon as we entered the gaping hotel doors, Mr. Lendall's wide smile greeted us.

"Hello! Hello! Welcome!" He extended a long arm in our direction and shook our hands.

"Good morning, Anaya!" he greeted me. Patting me on the shoulder, he added, "Daughter of my most favorite manager!"

I smiled and rolled my eyes. "Daughter of your *only* manager."

"Well, I suppose that's true, too." Mr. Lendall corrected himself, adjusting his jacket vest and patting down his wiry white hair. He turned to Kai and Zelena. "And these are your friends you told me about?"

"Yes, Kai and Zelena are just as excited to try out your new escape room as I am!" I smiled.

"Well, then," he said, straightening his wire-rimmed glasses, "Let's not wait!" With a skip in his step, he eagerly led us down the office hallway, talking as he went. I noticed that Kai was pretending to be busy on his phone as we passed the hotel desk where Xen was scowling.

"It took me a whole year to make this!" continued Mr. Lendall, oblivious to the tension between his new intern and my friend. "I gathered artifacts from places as near as Emerald Antique Shop here in town, and as far as India!"

"How many rooms did you say were in it?" asked Kai, perking up with interest.

"Three!" Lendall proudly announced, halting in front of a wooden door and unlocking it with a key. He pushed it open and led us inside a small room arranged with seats, lockers, and a desk.

"The whole purpose of this escape room is to attract more attention to my hotel. I want Fairview Inn & Suites to be a tourist destination; not just a place people sleep at night!" He smiled proudly, then continued, "Normal guests will have to pay per person, but since you three are my guinea pigs, you get in free!"

Stepping behind the desk, he gestured at the array of computer monitors.

"Here is where I keep an eye on your progress through the hidden camera feed."

Then he pointed at the lockers. "Please put your belongings in there and then we'll commence!"

I opened a locker about my height and laid my purse inside. Kai tossed his backpack in the tallest row, but Zelena kept hers in hand.

Walking up to Mr. Lendall, she asked, "Is it O.K. if we bring a few more guests with us?"

Mr. Lendall confusedly scratched his white hair and glanced at the doorway. "You have more friends?"

Zelena smiled and unzipped the top of her backpack. Immediately, three little noses and six small eyes popped out.

"Oh, my!" he exclaimed, peeking through his glasses at Ferret, Spark, and Bitty. He reached out a gentle hand and stroked the ferrets' fur.

"Well, they certainly look like intelligent creatures; so calm and gentle. It looks like you've all done amazing jobs at training them!"

"Well, actually it was mostly Anaya who did all the training," Kai said.

I blushed at the compliment and watched as Mr. Lendall scooped up Bitty into his wide hands. After petting her for a moment, he handed her over to me.

"As long as they are careful not to damage any of the props or decorations, they are welcome!"

Kai grabbed the ferrets while Zelena placed her backpack on a chair, and then we lined up by the side door. Mr. Lendall placed his hand on the doorknob.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes!" we chorused. The animals chimed in with their own squeaks.

"Three, two, one! GO!" He swung open the door, pushed us inside, and closed the door behind us before I could say 'ferret.' We were enveloped in midnight darkness, and I couldn't even see my nose on the front of my face.

"Uh, guys? Where's the light switch?" I asked timidly, rooted to the floor.

"There is none, silly!" came Kai's voice from several yards away.

Obviously, the dark doesn't faze him, I thought.

"Isn't it obvious?" he continued, "We're in a dungeon, not an office building!"

"How'd you know that?" asked Zelena from beside me.

"Feel the walls!" Kai suggested. "The floor is stone and so are the walls."

I heard a clunk as something fell to the floor. Then I heard Kai rustling around.

"I found a torch!" he exclaimed.

The room did indeed feel like a dungeon. The room was cold and even felt a little damp. Bitty squirmed in my grasp, but I didn't dare put her down for fear that I would step on her.

"Let's see if I can light it," mumbled Kai. "Anaya, start doing something!" he added, as if he knew I was still in the same spot I had been a minute before.

"Way ahead of you!" came Zelena's voice from the left. "I found a - Umph! - jailor's desk! It's -"

And then I heard a metal clang.

"There's a jail cell over here!" came Kai's voice.

"See if you can find matches in the desk," I told Zelena.

I heard a bunch of rustling as Zelena felt around the piece of furniture.

"Ugh! The jail cells are locked!" Kai grunted. I heard him jiggle the bars but nothing moved. Then I heard a squeal of creaking metal.

"Got one to open?" asked Zelena.

“Yep!”

Suddenly, I stubbed my toe. “Ow!”

“You O.K.?” asked Kai. I thought I’d stumbled into a brick until I realized that Kai’s voice was literally in front of my face.

“Oh. *This* is where you are,” I said.

“Yeah, you hit my foot,” grunted Kai.

Then his elbow stabbed my side and I stumbled backward and rammed into a cell.

“Oops!” Kai apologized unapologetically.

“Matches!” Zelena yelled. “I’m sending Ferret over with them!”

In a moment, I heard the patter of Ferret’s paws, and Kai taking the box out of his mouth. Then, I heard him trying to strike a match.

That’s not going to be easy. I sure hope he doesn’t burn himself, I thought, still leaning against some metal bars.

After a nervous twenty seconds, Kai finally got a spark lit on the end of a match. For such a small flame, it was surprisingly bright. The flame danced around a bit, illuminating Kai’s face and the makeshift torch that was in his left hand. It took another couple seconds, but he managed to light up the torch and blow out the match. The torch quickly burst into a sizable flame. Kai expertly held it up above his head so we could see the dungeon better. The room ended up being smaller than I expected – about the size of my bedroom.

Sure enough, all the walls were stone, and Kai and I were standing in front of a row of cold metal cage bars. The only other object in the room was Zelena’s jailor’s desk; now that she had some illumination, she was furiously searching the desk in and out.

“Ha, found ‘em !” she yelled. Kai lunged for the metal keyring dangling on her finger, but Zelena pulled back. Kai’s momentum sent him tumbling into the jailer’s desk. *thud*

“Oh, you want the keys? My mistake,” Zelena laughed, handing them over to Kai.

“Ha! Very funny,” Kai replied. He stood back up and quickly returned to the jail cells.

“Zelena – look in the cell that was already open,” Kai directed, “I’m going to unlock the other two, and Anaya, please keep looking in the desk for anything else.”

As I walked over to the dimly lit desk, I couldn’t help but think that so far we hadn’t even found a door out of the dungeon to the next room yet.

Most likely, the exit is located in a jail cell, I figured.

I knelt on the floor and inspected the desk. I lifted up the chair but couldn’t find any markings on it. Then I tried moving the desk. Surprisingly, it didn’t budge. Then I opened every drawer, even though some of them were already partly open. The rough wooden panels slid open easily except for one near the bottom. I pushed and pulled until something popped. I jerked at it and then it opened to reveal a lump of rope. I pulled it out and then, to my dismay, realized it was knotted tightly into a tangle. Done with the desk, I headed back to the jail cells where Kai and Zelena were busily conversing about their finds.

“So far I’ve got a metal pan, rotten hay, and planks of wood,” said Kai.

I shivered. *I wouldn't want to be locked in that cell*, I thought.

"I've got a cot in here, but that's pretty much it," said Zelena with a sigh. Kai looked at me as I approached.

"Anything?"

"No, just some tangled rope."

"That's *something*." Kai lifted up the torch and inspected every corner of the cells. I fidgeted with the knotted rope and tried to undo it.

"Hey! I think I might have found the way out!" called Zelena from her cell. Kai exited his and walked over. Zelena was perched on top of the rickety cloth cot, pointing at a metal grate on the ceiling.

"Can you reach it, Kai?" I asked him expectantly.

Kai sighed and handed the torch to Zelena, who stepped off of the cot.

"O.K. Stand back," he directed. Zelena stepped to the side while Kai positioned the cot directly beneath the grate. Then, he walked a distance out of the cell and paused in a running stance. He bolted into the cell, leapt onto the cot briefly and bounced up and grabbed the grate with his fingers. I held my breath as he dangled in the air, expecting the grate to open under his weight. But it didn't.

"Well, *that* didn't work," Kai retorted. He dropped onto the floor with a soft thud and paced back and forth, scratching his head.

Zelena handed him the torch. Then she went over the facts. "The only supplies we have here are fabric, rope, and wood. So maybe we're supposed to make something out of it?"

"Like a rope ladder?" I suggested.

Kai's face lit up. "Perfect! Anaya, untie those knots!"

I refocused my attention on the knot and furiously pried the cords loose while Zelena and Kai arranged the wood planks on the floor. Like Zelena said, the supplies worked well as a rope ladder once we had knotted it firmly around four of the planks. Then Zelena and I gave Kai a leg up so he could tie the ends onto the grate bars.

"Is it sturdy enough for us to climb it?" Zelena asked.

"Yep! But for safety's sake, let's have you try it first since you're lighter than me."

Zelena climbed up slowly and then inspected the grate as Kai held up the torch, which was starting to burn farther down the stick.

"I found the lock that keeps it in place," Zelena announced. "Maybe I can use the keys to undo it!"

Kai handed over the key ring. Zelena inspected each one, trying to figure out which one had the pointiest edges. I held my breath as she fiddled with the screws.

"Is it working?" Kai asked impatiently.

"I think so," she replied. Even with the bright torch's flame, I couldn't see her hands very well. It took her another minute, but she managed to pop each of the screws off. She tossed down the grate cover with a clang and scrambled up into the ceiling.

"Come on up!" came her muffled echoing voice from within. "It's a ventilation tunnel shaft!"

I timidly shinnied up the rope ladder, feeling the rope stretch dangerously under my weight. I grabbed the edge of the hole and pulled myself up into the darkness. It was so similar to a pullup that I felt like I was at home doing my fitness routine. Just like Zelena had said, I found myself on my hands and knees inside a cramped metal tunnel.

"Wait!" called Kai. "I'm handing up the pets!"

I squeezed my knees to my chest and turned myself around so that I was hovering over the hole. Kai was holding onto the rope ladder with one hand and with the other was thrusting up Bitty. His torch was propped on the ground beneath him by the metal bars. I grabbed my little hamster quickly and stuffed her into my jacket pocket and then let the ferrets crawl from Kai's arm onto my shoulders. I turned around again and felt my way down the tunnel.

"Zelena?" I asked.

"Here!" echoed her voice from in front of me. A few more crawls and I bumped into her tennis shoes. Then Kai bumped into mine. His smoldering torch was still in his hand and it let out an eerie smoky glow.

"What's the holdup?" he asked.

"I found the exit hatch," explained Zelena. "It has four sliding panels on top. I think I have to slide each of them in the correct way before it'll pop open. Anybody have any ideas?"

"What in the dungeon would give us a clue as to how we should slide these panels?" I wondered aloud.

"The only thing I can think of is the desk, but I didn't find any markings or papers in it," admitted Zelena.

"Was there four of anything in the dungeon?" Kai asked.

"Only three cells, one rope, eight wood planks, one chair – and four drawers!" I exclaimed.

"Were they on top of each other?" Kai asked.

"There were two on both sides of the desk," I answered.

"So what helps us figure out which way to slide these?" Zelena asked again.

"Well, the top left drawer was fully closed, and so was the bottom right," I pondered aloud. "But the bottom left was slightly open and the top right was completely pulled out."

Zelena started fiddling with the panels. "O.K. Let's assume closed means 'no sliding' and the order of clues is top left, bottom left, top right, and bottom right."

She slid them into place according to the formula, but surprisingly, nothing happened.

"Try pounding it open," Kai suggested.

I snorted and muttered under my breath, "What an idea; not everything works when you hit it!" It was Kai's turn to snort.

"Still nothing," sighed Zelena.

"Is there a trigger button?" I asked.

"Maybe." Zelena patted the walls all around her. Suddenly, the panel creaked and a sliver of light pierced the darkness.

"I must have pushed the hidden button!"

I gave Kai a look that said, "*I was right.*" He rolled his eyes.

Zelena lifted off the cover and propped it against the wall. While my eyes were adjusting to the light, Zelena disappeared below. Checking to make sure Bitty was still in my pocket, I climbed over the edge too until I was dangling by my fingertips. Then I dropped down and collapsed onto a hard tile floor.

"Move out! Coming from the top!" came Kai's voice from overhead.

"What?" I said, scrambling to my knees.

Then I saw where I was – an armory! Huge tapestries hung behind rows and shelves of – PLOP

"Umph!"

I was knocked flat onto the floor. Kai had landed superhero-style right onto my back. He probably looked great having descended in style from the ceiling tunnel, but at the moment my face was squashed on the tile and my hands were pinned to the ground under Kai's weight.

"You're always in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I'm always running into you!" Kai sighed, hopping off of me.

I dragged myself to my feet and checked to make sure Bitty hadn't been turned into a pancake in my pocket. Thankfully, she and the ferrets weren't around at all. They must've heeded Kai's warning to move much better than I had.

I looked around myself and gasped. The place was filled with weapons from top to bottom. Maces, swords, knives, crossbows, axes, bludgeons, and more.

"Wow!" Kai breathed, "where'd Mr. Lendall get all these?!" He walked over to an old rusty chest that was lying open and pulled out the spiky tip of some spear-like weapon.

"A genuine halberd!" he exclaimed, examining the curved metal points.

I rolled my eyes. "What's a halberd anyway?"

Kai gave me a pointed gaze as he carefully laid the weapon back in the chest.

"Unlike you, some of us enjoyed learning about the Dark Ages during history class."

I ducked my head guiltily and looked around the room.

Tables in the center of the room were overflowing with polishing cloths, paper, and more weapons. Over on the far side of the room, Zelena was inspecting a sheath of arrows. I decided to look closer at the weapons on the shelf in front of me.

"Did you notice that a lot of these have symbols?" Zelena said.

I took a sword off the shelf and inspected the worn handle. Sure enough, a symbol was etched below the blade. Then I walked over to a bunch of maces mounted beneath a medieval flag. Three of the weapons had a symbol etched on their handles as well. So far, I'd seen K, β, and ξ.

"How about we keep track of all the weapons and different symbols on them?" Zelena suggested, rummaging around the center table for a paper and pen. To her dismay, she only found parchment and quill.

"I never learned cursive, let alone how to use a quill pen!" she despaired.

"Let me try," I suggested. "Call it out to me and I'll write it down."

Popping off the lid of a nearby ink jar, I dipped my pen in and started writing – or scratching. After trying to write the word 'bludgeon', which ended up looking like the word 'bloodier', I used abbreviations for the weaponry instead.

"A rounded letter E on a sword," dictated Zelena.

"And a Greek/English dictionary to boot!" chimed in Kai. I looked up at him as he thoughtfully flipped through the yellowed pages.

"I found it under the spindly wood chair," Kai explained.

I kept writing as Zelena walked around the room, taking an inventory of the weapons. Kai peered over my shoulder.

"Those are Greek letters!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, really?" I said, surprised. "I never was bilingual."

"And finally a crossbow with a capital K on it," Zelena concluded, "Now I'm going to focus on the tapestry while you and Kai decipher what you've written."

Again, Kai peered over my shoulder, flipping through his book as he looked at the markings on my page. Then he shook his head.

"None of this makes sense; it's just a jumble of letters so far."

"Let's keep looking then," I persisted. I looked up and noticed that Zelena was closely examining a unique tapestry depicting a wooden door opening in a wall of cobblestones.

"Found something?" I asked.

"Yes, come look at this!" She peeled it back and I gasped.

"It's a phrase written on the wall!" Kai dashed over, dodging a suit of armor on his way. When he looked at the string of words, he started reading: 'The hidden door concealed, thou must weigh out thy options with heed.' Huh?"

"Well, I notice that only two of the words are darker than the rest," suggested Zelena, "They're 'hidden' and 'weight'."

"So maybe something of weight is hidden in this room and will lead to the revealing of a hidden door!" I exclaimed.

I immediately started looking around the room somewhere for any tell-tale clue. On the other hand, Kai hadn't budged.

"But how are we supposed to know what this hidden thing is?" he complained.

I sighed but kept looking under the tables and around the mounted weapons. I found a few gold coins under a shelf and an ancient book written in Greek, but nothing else that we hadn't already seen.

Having just laid on the ground to look under a cabinet, I straightened up and promptly hit my head.

“Ow! What was that?”

“A scale,” Kai said, matter-of-factly.

Sure enough, I had banged my head against a giant golden scale that was mounted on the wall. An angel holding an olive branch was carved onto the top ornament. The two golden bowls that were suspended in the air seemed big enough to weigh several weapons at once!

“I wonder why I never noticed that before,” I mumbled to myself.

Zelena huffed. “We’re so close, but it feels like we’re miles away!” She paced back and forth on a worn scarlet rug. “We know these two words have something to do with Greek symbols, and the Greek symbols have something to do with the weapons, but how?”

I straightened up and leaned against a table.

“Well, it looks like the symbols we found on the weapons are associated with the Greek translations of those two words,” Kai said, picking up my parchment paper.

I idly walked over to a crossbow and took it off the wall. As I pulled it, a metal screw snagged on a tapestry which tumbled to the floor. Kai lunged for it.

“Careful!” he reprimanded. “You don’t know how old this is.”

I cringed, trying to imagine what Mr. Lendall was thinking, watching the video feed from hidden cameras.

Kai turned the piece of fabric over.

“Oh, boy! Another symbol! It’s an angel holding an olive branch.”

“Wait – I saw one, too – on that scale!” I said.

Zelena peered at the huge golden scale. “You’re right!” she said.

Kai looked at the fabric. “This pattern is a scene of a blacksmith weighing metal – on a scale...”

“Oh! I’ve got it!” he continued. “We’re supposed to weigh weapons on the scale!”

“And-” Zelena added, “we pick the ones that have Greek symbols that correspond to the Greek translation of the message.”

I dropped my crossbow and rushed over to the lettering on the wall, grabbing Kai’s Greek/English dictionary from a chair where he had left it. Furiously flipping to the pages of ‘H’, I located the word Hidden. The translation was: ΚΕΚρυμμένος.

“Kai, do you still have my parchment?”

“Yep,”

“Bring it over here.”

He shoved it in my face and I read off the translation in terms of weapon types.

“K - crossbow,”

“Got it!” Zelena shouted, grabbing one, checking the symbol, and laying it on the scale.

“Put all the ones from this word on just one side,” suggested Kai, running to grab the next one I was shouting out.

“Ε - sword, K - arrow, ρ – halberd, U – mace, two μ’s – two arrows, Έ – crossbow, ν - spear, ο - bludgeon, and finally ζ - knife.”

“Got it!” shouted Zelena, out of breath from running around the room.

“Next word!” Kai shouted.

I plunged on, flipping to the page where I found the Greek translation for the word ‘Weight’ which was βάρος.

“β - club, ά – mace, ρ – sword, ο – bludgeon, and ζ – axe.”

“All right, now what?” Zelena stood expectantly in front of the scale, which was loaded with weapons. Nothing was happening.

“Um, maybe - ”

Just then, I heard a low groaning sound, and a vibration through the floor.

“Woah, what was that?” Zelena said, grabbing the edge of the table as the weapons and books started rattling and shaking.

“Is it an earthquake?” I panicked.

“It sure would be the worst time for that, considering that we can’t find our way out of here,” said Kai, trying to steady the dangerously swaying suit of armor. The groaning and creaking and rumbling sounds got louder until suddenly the gigantic shelving unit on the far side of the room began moving to the right, revealing a wooden door.

“No way!” Zelena gasped.

I let out a sigh of relief. “I’m glad this wasn’t an earthquake, because Bitty sure doesn’t like it when things are unstable and moving.”

Then a thought struck me.

“Hey, guys, where’s Bitty?”

The rumbling had stopped and Kai was walking towards the door, which was loaded with metal rusty locks of all shapes and sizes.

Zelena also was too interested in the next piece of our puzzle to bother with where the ferrets had disappeared to.

Sighing, I figured the pets would be fine wherever they were, and walked over to the door, too. Kai pulled and jiggled on the locks, but they and the door were firmly locked into place, not budging an inch.

“Looks like we’re forced to use keys – or karate,” he decided.

“I don’t think Lendall would appreciate his door being reduced to splintered boards of wood, so I think unlocking the locks would be the best option,” I pointed out.

“I wonder why this one handle and bar needs twelve locks!” Zelena wondered aloud.

“It’s an escape room!” Kai said, rolling his eyes. “Obviously!”

Another thought struck me. “Hey, guys, Mr. Lendall never told us how much time we had to get out of all three of these rooms!”

Zelena and Kai paused, thinking.

"That's a very good point," Zelena said, looking at her watch. "We've been in here for about an hour."

"Maybe there isn't a time limit," I mused.

"Well, let's just hurry anyway." Kai dashed away and started peering in every drawer and cupboard for any sign of keys. Zelena and I followed suit, looking under tables, peeking in arrow quivers, looking under rugs, and behind shelves. After fifteen minutes of searching, I found neither keys nor our pets. Depressed by this setback, I collapsed onto my back on the floor in exhaustion.

The scratchy red rug and tile floor was hard and uncomfortable, but I closed my eyes and tried to think of where the keys would be hiding.

"Don't give up! Keep looking!" Zelena urged me, stepping over my legs on her way over to the rusty chest where Kai had found the top of a halberd. I could hear Kai inspecting the inside of the suit of armor.

"I'm just trying to get a new perspective," I gave myself an excuse. Opening my eyes again, I looked up at the ceiling. Above me was nothing but an old chandelier, which was illuminating the armory. Like most old chandeliers, it hung from a hook on the ceiling and had a long rope attached so that it could be lowered and the candles lit or extinguished. The rope draped down from the ceiling to a hook on the nearby wall. Obviously, the chandelier had fake candles instead of real ones.

Although, I wouldn't be surprised if Mr. Lendall used real ones, considering that we had just used a real torch, I thought to myself.

The plastic candles were set inside bronze stands that were attached to the curling metal arms of the chandelier.

"Hey, I've got an idea!" I said, sitting up and looking over at Kai, who had disassembled the top of the suit of armor and was looking down the legs.

"What?" Zelena sighed, plopping down onto a leather chair, obviously tired of the hunt as well.

"The chandelier!"

"Oh," she looked up at the ceiling. "I didn't even think about that."

"I guess it's worth a try." Kai removed his head from the suit of armor and watched as I untied the rope from the hook and slowly lowered the chandelier until it was half a foot above the table in the center of the room.

Zelena peeked into the bronze candle stands that were designed to catch the melting wax.

"The keys are in here!"

Kai dug them out with Zelena.

As I pulled the chandelier back up, Kai counted them. "Thirteen, not twelve."

"We've got an extra?" Zelena looked at the keys in Kai's hands.

"How are we supposed to tell which one goes to which lock?" I asked, feeling hopeless again as I stared at the cluster of locks.

"I guess the only way to know is to start sticking them in," Kai said.

Zelena and Kai immediately starting fitting the keys into the locks. One by one, they opened locks and tossed them to the side. When Kai had finished opening the last one, he handed me the extra key.

He firmly shoved the wooden door open and it creaked open to reveal a long, skinny hallway of doors. Occasional torches lit the way down the hall. Walking slowly, we tried the handles, but all of them were locked.

"Your key!" Zelena said. I pulled it out of my pocket and began trying it on each of the doors. Strangely, all of the doors looked the same, and so did the torches. No paintings or decorations hung on the walls. It was oddly bare. Halfway down the hall, I stuck my key into another lock, and as I jiggled it, it turned.

"I think I've got it!" My two friends rushed over to me and I pushed open the door. We walked into a square room about two times the size of my parents' master bedroom. And it reminded me very much of a bedroom because it was one – and a royal one at that. Everywhere we looked were purple and red royal robes, golden crowns, linen sheets, feather pillows, fuzzy slippers, soft woven rugs, and handmade furniture. A pair of a buck's antlers were mounted on the wall above a huge bed on the side of the room.

"Now I know why we call them king-sized beds," I commented.

"Whatever king lived in here sure liked clothes!" Zelena said, inspecting an overflowing closet of outfits. "This almost feels like the bedroom of a French king, not a medieval king!"

"No way!" Kai said, looking at a chair which was piled with furry blankets.

"What?" I asked.

"It's our pets!"

I walked closer and realized the fur was actually two ferrets and a hamster cozily curled up together taking a nap on top of the pile of blankets.

Zelena gasped. "How did they get in here?"

Kai put his finger to his lips, signaling us not to wake them up, and then smiled and walked away to find any clues this bedroom would have to offer.

I found a wooden hairbrush behind a heavy drape, a vase of violet flowers above a wardrobe, and several Latin books underneath the king's pillows on his bed. Even Zelena and Kai couldn't find anything out of the ordinary in this room. There was *one* difference, though, that set this room apart from the rest. It had an obvious exit. Opposite the room from the bed was a tiny locked door.

I sat down on the edge of the bed, and then the lights went out.

Zelena shrieked. "What's going on?"

The lights flickered a bit and then turned back on.

"Woah, that was weird." I said, standing up.

"Maybe Mr. Lendall's having trouble with the electricity in this room," Kai suggested.
"We should tell him his plastic candles need to be checked."

"O.K. Back to business," Zelena said. "Anybody found any clues?"

"Well, I found a hairbrush with hair in it!" I laughed.

Zelena giggled. "Show me!"

I walked over to the heavy drapes and pulled them back and pointed at the floor.

"Right-"

"Where?" asked Zelena. "I don't see anything."

My heart started beating really fast.

"Anaya?"

"It was right here, but now it's gone," I whimpered.

Zelena turned around and asked Kai, "Hey, did you take the hairbrush here?"

"Nope," he replied, busily sifting through a drawer.

The room went dark again.

I shivered.

When they turned back on, Kai sighed and muttered, "Lendall needs to hire an electrician."

Zelena pulled me over to a wardrobe.

"Well, forget about the hairbrush. I want to show you a funny outfit in here."

As we passed the king's bed, she halted.

"Where is the golden pillow that was on there?"

We both looked at Kai expectantly who was flipping through a stack of papers.

He shrugged and looked back down at his find.

Zelena and I looked at each other with wide-eyed stares.

As Zelena pulled open the wardrobe, the lights went dark again.

"For the third time, what's this all about?!" Kai shouted, frustrated.

"Something really weird is going on." Zelena said in a matter-of-fact tone.

This time when the lights turned on again, I looked intently around the room. And noticed that the purple vase of flowers was gone.

"O.K. Kai," I said firmly, my hands shaking. "Things are disappearing every time the lights go out. Which means this isn't an accident."

Kai dropped his book onto a nightstand and stared at me.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you're not paying attention!"

Kai shrugged. "Well, then tell me what we are missi-"

The room was bathed in darkness once again.

"A hairbrush, pillow, and flower vase," I answered as we waited in the darkness.

The candles turned on to once again reveal that another thing was missing: the blankets that our pets had been sleeping on. Ferret, Spark, and Bitty were now blinking their eyes, sitting

on the cold leather of the seat, having been awakened by whoever stole the blankets they had been sleeping on.

"Oh, Bitty!" I rushed over to her, and squeezed her tightly. "I'm so scared you might be taken next!"

"Yeah, *right*," Kai said sarcastically. But he grabbed Spark anyway.

Ferret stayed put on the chair, curled up and sleepy.

"So, why is everything disappearing?" I asked.

"Because we're supposed to notice what's missing and do something about it," Kai said.

"Like what?" I asked, stuffing Bitty in my jacket pocket.

"Stay put," I whispered to her.

For ten more minutes, we sat together in the middle of the room silently, waiting to see which things disappeared after the lights turned off and on again five more times.

"Hairbrush, pillow, vase, blankets, book, robe, crown, necklace, and chair," Kai recited.

The lights turned off again and when they turned back on, instead of something being missing, something was new. A crown, missing all of its jewels, was mounted on the exit door. Cautiously, Kai walked up to it, and took it off of a hook it had been hanging on. He examined it with his hands.

"O.K. I guess we find the jewels that go on here?" he asked.

Zelena and I stood up and looked around the room. I walked over to the bed and found one right in the place where the golden pillow had been.

"I found a green jewel over here behind the drapes where the hairbrush was!" Zelena said.

"And here's a purple one where the animals were sleeping," added Kai, petting Ferret on the head as he picked it up.

"Why didn't we notice these before?" I asked aloud.

"For some reason, I don't think these were here until the last time the lights went off," Zelena said in a hushed tone of voice.

Together, we gathered all the jewels from where things had disappeared and laid them in front of the crown. Kai knelt down and started putting them on.

"Wait – they're all the same shape," I observed. "Is there a special order that we have to put them on the crown?"

"How about in the order of which things disappeared?" Zelena suggested. She handed him the green jewel she had found by the drapes. Next, Kai put on the yellow one, turquoise one, green one, and the rest. Then, holding our breaths, we watched him replace the crown on the door. He tried the handle on the door but it was still locked.

"Hmm. I guess the crown doesn't magically unlock the door," Kai said. Picking it back up again, he looked around the room. "Where else might it go?"

"On your head?" Zelena laughed.

Kai placed it on his head as he walked around the room.

“Wow, this is surprisingly not as uncomfortable as I thought crowns are supposed to be,” he said, adjusting it.

Zelena walked over to Ferret and picked him up. “Time to wake up, buddy. No more lazy bones.” She walked over to Kai and helped him dig through a chest under the bed.

That’s when I noticed a key on the chair directly on the place where Ferret had been sleeping.

“Hey, Ferret was sitting on top of the key!” I said. Zelena turned her head and looked at the key I was holding in my hand.

“Wow! Try it on the lock!” she directed.

I walked over to the door and stuck it in. As I turned it, I could hear the lock clicking. Unlike most keys, I able to rotate it 360 degrees in the lock, but it did not help. Similar to using a screwdriver to rotate a stripped screw, it kept rotating with no avail. I pulled it back out.

“It doesn’t do anything. I think it’s the wrong one? All it did was click and rotate.”

Kai kept digging through the box. “There’s lots of papers in here. Maybe there’ll be one about that key.”

Zelena pulled out a sealed envelope on which was inscribed a Latin word.

“What’s this?”

Kai leaned over. “Oh, that says ‘Rotatione’. It means ‘rotation.’”

“Yep, that must be it.” Zelena tore it open and handed it to me.

On it was written a diagram of a key in a lock. The first picture depicted the key rotated at 90 degrees. The next was of it back at the 12 o’clock position. The third was 180 degrees, then back at 12 o’clock. It continued in this pattern as 270 degrees, 12 o’clock, and then 360 degrees, and 12 o’clock. I tried this pattern in the lock as Kai and Zelena abandoned their truck exploration and watched me fiddle with the key. On my final rotation, the door clicked and I pushed it open to find myself walking out of one of the lockers into Mr. Lendall’s office!

“Well done, well done!” he said, smiling and walking around his desk towards us to shake our hands.

“What was our time?” Kai asked, checking his watch.

“Exactly two hours and 45 minutes.” Mr. Lendall responded.

“Was there a time limit?” Zelena asked, retrieving her backpack from where she had left it, and then putting Ferret inside.

“Well, not exactly since this was your trial run,” Mr. Lendall said thoughtfully. “I wanted to see how fast you could do it in order to gauge what would be a reasonable time limit for everyone else. I’m thinking of three or three and a half hours. What do you think?”

“Sounds fine,” Kai said. As he lifted his hand to his hair, he bumped it into the crown which was still perched atop his head.

“Oh!” Mr. Lendall laughed. “You finally discovered the piece of my decorations that you carried out with you!”

“I’m sorry,” Kai apologized sheepishly, “I didn’t realize it was still on me; I forgot!”

Zelena leaned over to my ear. "It must've been more comfortable than he said it was," she whispered to me. I giggled.

"What did you think of the crown puzzle?" Mr. Lendall asked Kai, who took the crown off his head.

"Well," Kai said, "The crown didn't seem to serve any purpose! What was it for?"

Mr. Lendall thought for a moment. "It was supposed to be a sort of red herring, but maybe I'll replace it with a different puzzle in the room instead. Thank you for the input."

"So, how did the rest of you enjoy it?" he asked, turning to Zelena and me.

"Well, it was a little creepy in the bedroom," I confessed. "How did everything disappear?"

Mr. Lendall chuckled and winked at me. "Secrets."

I frowned as he changed the subject and asked us if we needed some water.

"That'd be nice," Zelena said politely. I followed Mr. Lendall over to the water fountain. "And how did the pets get into the bedroom before we did?"

"Well, I saw the video feed," Mr. Lendall said vaguely as he filled up plastic cups, "and let's just say your hamster and ferrets are quite clever."

"How?"

Mr. Lendall chuckled again and handed water to us all.

Changing the subject again, he said, "I'm so glad you all could come and test it out! I think it'll be a smashing success!"

"Thank you," I said, retrieving my purse out of my locker.

"Wait, why is my locker unlocked?" Kai asked suspiciously, inspecting his backpack.

"Oh!" Mr. Lendall said, "Your friend, Xen, came in, and said he needed something from your backpack that you had forgotten to give him earlier. So I gave him the master key and let him look in there."

Kai stared blankly at his backpack while Mr. Lendall waved his hand at us and escorted us out of his office.

"I apologize for hurrying you out, but I've got lots to do this afternoon! Thank you for visiting and come again some time!"

Kai's face was a blank stare as we walked down the hall. Once we were out of earshot of Mr. Lendall, Zelena stopped us and looked at Kai.

"That was really weird. Obviously, Mr. Lendall doesn't know that you and Xen aren't friends. He believed everything Xen said about you!"

"Did Xen take anything?" I asked worriedly.

Kai shook his head. "Nothing looks missing." He zipped up the front pockets.

"Why did Xen want to look through your backpack?" I asked.

"I think he knows I'm up to something," Kai replied firmly, staring down the hallway at the lobby desk. "And now I know *he's* up to something too."

Chapter 12: Confusing

After a tense phone call, Kai and I called a sort of “truce.” I was still very wary about Kai after finding out that he was videoing me, but since there wasn’t anything that I could do about it, I decided to wait it out and keep my eyes peeled for anything suspicious. At the first sign of danger, I would make Kai tell me exactly what he was up to. Then again, there was always the possibility that Kai wasn’t up to anything more suspicious than trying to make sure I wasn’t hacking into his or his father’s account, but it was way more fun thinking that he was an undercover spy or something. See, the problem was that there was no information on Kai’s account that would help anyone find Tokero’s “supposed” secrets; unless you count ferret food receipts and an Amazon order for a new motorcycle helmet a secret. And trust me, my uncle would not be very happy if I sent him that information. It was totally useless! And I was getting very frustrated. I mean, there were no secrets anywhere! How was I supposed to please my uncle and Xen if there was nothing to please them with? What if there were no “secret things?”

The next day, as I was sitting down with my mom and brother Zephan for a yummy dinner of pepperoni pizza, there was a loud knock on the front door. Since Zephan was way too lazy to get up and open the door himself, I was voted as the unlucky candidate to go get the door. I knew that the moment I got out of my seat at the table to get the door, Zephan would grab all the rest of the pizza slices and gobble them down. Anyhow, I went to open the door, but just as I was about to turn the knob, I heard a key being inserted into the outside lock. Huh, it must be my dad. I mean, it’s not like a robber would just waltz into our house with a key and join us for dinner while swiping the silver serving utensils (not that we had any!).

“Hi, family!” exclaimed my Dad in an unusually cheery voice as he stepped inside the door and untied his shoelaces. “Guess what? I have some really good news for you all!”

It was very surprising to see my father at all, let alone at 6:00 P.M. Usually, he came home at 10:00 P.M. And, as soon as he got home, he would grab a snack and lock himself into his study.

“Ooh!!!! What is it? Did you get a raise? Or a free trip to the Bahamas? What about a new car?” pestered my brother Zephan eagerly jumping up from the table and consequently dumping the rest of the pizza slices off the table. I watched sadly as the rest of my dinner slid onto the polished wood floor.

“Actually, no, no, and no, but I did get something much better! I finalized a new sale for the old building on Trevor Street!” exclaimed my Dad with a huge smile on his face.

What was he doing? Was he starting to do some hybrid Russian-American dance? Wow! Dad never does that. He must be in a really good mood.

“Honey,” interrupted Mom. “I understand that you sold another building, but what does that have to do with us?”

“Don’t you understand? For every *big* building I sell, I get a few days of vacation! That means that I can do something fun with you guys before I get my next assignment.”

“Really?” all three of us said at the same time. Dad has hardly spent any time with us for the past few months. He is so “busy” with his work that it is almost like he has forgotten about us. The person that it has hit the most is my mom by far. She loves Dad so much, but she can’t seem to talk to him any more. Every time she asks to go on a date with him, he has some lame “work” excuse: this building needs to be sold, these papers needed to be signed, this house needs a showing.

“You know what?” my dad continued. “I haven’t been a very good father for the past months...”

“You can say that again!” interrupted Zephan. I shot him a death-by-glare stare.

“No, it’s all true. Every single thing. I don’t even know about how Zephan is doing in school or what Zelena’s new hacking project is. It’s terrible! And I owe the biggest apology to you, honey. I’m so sorry. From now on, we are going to hang out together so much that you will be tired of me!” Dad joked.

“And I have the perfect activity to do together as a family!” my mom said with a bright smile. “Let’s go laser tagging!” At the word laser tag, Zephan started running around the room at about 100 miles per hour, kicking furniture, dancing, and all together going crazy. If you know one thing about my brother, it’s that he is obsessed with laser tag. He would spend every waking minute of his life doing laser tag if he could. I blame my mom for his obsession. She took him laser tagging with all his friends for his second birthday. Ever since, that is all he has ever done on his birthday. Some of his friends have even stopped coming to his birthday party because they are simply too tired of laser tag.

“Sweetie, could you please calm Zephan down? Your father and I are going to get ready to go!” my mom said. I hadn’t seen her this excited for months! She was finally brightening up. But, really? Why did I have to calm Mr. Crazy Man down? I decided to just do it the easy way.

Zephan!!!! Calm down!” I yelled at my brother. At this, he slowed down to about 60 miles per hour and ran over to the pizza slices still lying on the floor. I knew what was coming next, and I was bound and determined to stop him.

“Zephan!!! NO!!!!!!” It seemed like I had been saying that a lot lately. “Don’t eat those pizza slices!!!”

But, it was already too late. He had crammed those pizza slices into his mouth with a satisfied grin on his face. “Five minute rule!” he said as he raced upstairs so as not to be caught by his angry older sister.

“That’s the five second rule,” I mumbled under my breath. Why even try? I thought to myself. It was no use anyway. I quickly rushed up to my room and changed from my leather jacket and jeans to a leather jacket and jeans. My usual messy bun was turned into a messy ponytail instead. And my black choker was changed out with another black one. But, just as I was about to leave my room, my computer dinged with an incoming call from Xen. Just as I was

about to answer the call, another one came in from my uncle. Oh, boy! What was I going to do. I clicked onto the Xen one and dismissed my uncle's. First come, first serve. I didn't know I was so popular!

"Hey, Zelena!" he said to me as his face popped up on the screen. But, actually, it was more like one of his eyeballs and a tuft of hair shoved into the screen. What was going on?

"Look, Xen. I got to go soon, so get going. What do you have to say?" I questioned.

"Basically, I'm just wondering how your hacking of Kai's father's account is going! I hope that it's going well, because if it isn't-well, you know, things might not work out so well for you" answered Xen with a weird satisfied smirk on his face.

"Look, buddy." I said as I inched my face closer to the screen. "I'm not sure what you're up to!" I whispered. "But, whatever it is, you won't get any info-not now, not ever!" I threatened.

"Hey, hey, hey! Why the frowny face, Zelena?" he taunted. "All I wanted was a bit of information. So, give it to me!" he yelled into the screen.

I quickly clicked off the video call and invited my uncle to have a video call with me.

"Zelena! My favorite niece. What's up?" he asked as his face popped onto the screen. Thankfully, he looked a lot better than Xen did.

"Oh, you know. Nothing much. Sorry I didn't answer your first call, but I was video calling with someone else," I apologized.

"Don't worry about it," he answered. "I just wanted to know how the hacking is going!"

"Zelena! It's time to go!" I heard my mom yell from downstairs.

"Oh! Sorry, uncle. I gotta go, but I'll text you tonight. Okay?"

"Wait, Zelena! Give me just one more minute. I need to know how it's going now," he demanded. His smile had disappeared, and he looked desperate.

"Fine. I'll tell you. It's not going at all. I hacked in, but I couldn't do anything helpful. Sorry. That's all I have," I responded with a slight bit of irritation in my voice.

"Well keep looking!" my uncle practically yelled into the screen. "It's very important!"

At that point, I sorta tuned out. He kept ranting about how important this was, and how I needed to do a better job, and if I didn't, the whole country could be in serious trouble. Somewhere along his rant, I clicked off of our video call. I was tired of everyone wanting something from me. It was time to do some laser tagging!

After a delightfully fun night of laser tagging, I was sprawled out on my bed watching videos of Ferret that Anaya had sent me. Man, how I missed that little guy. After watching about five videos of Ferret, I switched to Youtube to watch some comedy videos about hacking gone bad. They were actually quite hilarious, and 60 videos later, I was conked out. I was dead asleep all night long and most of the morning long too. In fact, I ended up sleeping in until noon. Yikes! I finally woke up to someone breathing right onto my face. I cracked my eyes open and jumped about five feet in the air, hitting my head on the ceiling, since I sleep on top of a bunk bed. My

scream could have been heard all the way from Antarctica. A face that looked quite familiar with a wide smirk pasted on it was staring down right into my face.

"Zephan! How dare you? Do you know how big of a bump I'm going to have on my head for the next week?" I questioned. "You scared me half to death, and phew! Your breath stinks like rotten cheese!"

"Oh! Was that what it was? I was so hungry this morning, I grabbed something out from the back of the fridge and stuffed it in my mouth. Come to think of it, it did taste a bit peculiar. Thanks for clearing that up," Zephan replied, gleefully running out of my room. He always loves it when he gets the better of me.

I simply rolled my eyes and got ready for the day. He couldn't come back to me complaining when he dies from food poisoning. I didn't force him to eat rotten cheese. As I was rationalizing all this info in my head, I suddenly gave a little squeal of joy! I had totally forgotten about my plan for today. I was going to work some more on my super top secret new computer password-solving program. In short, it tries 10,000 different password combinations per second using an AI type algorithm. By the time I was done with it, it should be able to find a password for anything in less than 2 minutes. I was so pumped about my day's work, that I had completely forgotten that the rotten cheese might still be in the fridge. Hand it to Zephan to not throw away a brick of rotten cheese. I didn't even realize my mistake until I had mindlessly taken a nice big bite out of a slice of the block. My body wouldn't even accept the terrible cheese, so out it went all over the kitchen table. Yuck! Unfortunately, no matter what else I ate, the taste was still in my mouth. Now, you might be wondering, who eats cheese for breakfast? Actually, I eat cheese for breakfast on a regular basis, but trust me, I will be avoiding any cheese for at least a whole week.

After I had washed out my mouth about twenty times, eaten thirty tic tacs, thoroughly cleaned off the table, and thrown out the block of rotten cheese (or what was remaining of it because Zephan and I had eaten so much) I decided to head to my room and work on my program. About an hour into working on my program, I get a notice that Kai was calling me. I picked up my phone.

"Hello, Kai! Zelena here. What can I do for you?" I asked politely. I was still a bit suspicious of Kai and why he had been spying on me, but he seemed nice enough.

"Well," he started, sounding a bit uncomfortable, "I happened to hear about how you're working on this new computer program, and I..."

"Wait! Stop right there!" I interrupted him. "How did you know about my new program? Only my computer and I know about it." Yes, sometimes I treat computers like people. "Under no circumstances are you supposed to know about it. Were you spying on me again?"

"Zelena, wait. Before you go off getting all mad, just hear me out," he calmly said.

"Fine!" I huffed. I knew that I might have been acting like a five year old that didn't get what she wanted, but I was mad that he had found out about my supposedly secret computer program.

"I need your help to hack into the Chinese government's account. I need your password program to find the password for their account! In short, they are up to something suspicious, and I need to know what. So, will you help me? Please? Oh, and Zephan wanted me to tell you that he most certainly did *not* tell me about your password-hacking program."

Oh, bother. Lately, so many weird things have been going on (and I would have to talk to Zephan later on tonight!). How am I supposed to know if I should help Kai or Xen or my Uncle? Could they all be doing the right thing or could one of them have the wrong motives?

"Listen, I guess I'll help you. So many people have been asking for my help lately that I'm not sure who to trust. But, I could probably do it for you as a sort of test to see if my program is working. Give me a day or so because it's not complete yet."

"Wow! Really? Thank you so much! That would be so awesome! Bye!" Kai quickly clicked off, and I was left wondering what I had just gotten myself into. What was going on here? Thankfully, I had a night full of fun before me, so maybe I could forget about all of my problems for a few hours.

"Zephan! Are you ready? The Fairview Game Con is going on this entire weekend, and I do not want to miss any of it!" I hollered in the direction of his bedroom. My mom had suggested that we spend some quality time together as brother and sister and go to the game convention in town. We were both game for it (pun intended), so we eagerly agreed.

"Thanks for taking me, Zelena! I'm so excited!" Zephan exclaimed. Wow! Zephan is definitely never that polite. It must be due to the fact that he wants to try out some of the new VR headsets they have there. Also, if it wasn't for me, he wouldn't be able to go, so you know, he must be trying to please me. Deep down inside, I know that Zephan is a really good little brother, but sometimes, he just gets so annoying. Aargh!

"Alright, Zephan, here we are! Let's go play some games!" I shouted as I grabbed his hand and raced inside the convention building. We first stopped by the Zario Sisters booth and played the soon-to-be-released new "Smash Plus" edition. Then, we played our way through a few classic Arcade games. We were just avoiding running into five Supermen, and Zephan was trying to finish his monster corn dog when he spotted Kai at a gaming booth in the VR center trying out one of the coolest new games: Blast-An-Agent.

"Hey, Zelena! Can we go say hi" to Kai?" asked Zephan. It was hard to look into Zephan's cute little face and say no.

"Well, sure, I guess we can quickly say hi; but we have to leave soon, so we have to make it quick!" I lectured him. We slowly edged our way through the crowd to the booth where Kai was, without getting squashed by a "hulk" with over-sized plastic muscles. Zephan tapped Kai on the shoulder since he had a VR headset on. Kai quickly ripped it off and looked shocked once he saw us.

"Hey guys! What are you doing here?" he asked. Zephan was ecstatic with excitement about seeing Kai. At first, I was jealous that Zephan was so excited about Kai, but I realized that he really just missed having an older brother, so I'm cool with it now.

"Probably the same thing you're doing. I mean, there's not too many things you can do at a gaming convention. You can choose to play some games or maybe play some games," I replied sarcastically.

"Oh, right. Well, would you guys like to try this game out with me? I just got started!" Kai said.

"Uh, yeah!" Zephan practically yelled (over the noise of convention). He quickly snatched up another headset from the bored-looking administrator and an electronic suit and shoved them on. Though I wasn't quite as enthusiastic as playing Blast-An-Agent, I couldn't resist trying out the newest gaming technology myself, so I swiped the last pair and put it on.

I found myself in an old warehouse with an oversized bazooka and a stylish, form-fitting outfit. Next to me was standing a weaponless, seven foot dude with huge bulging muscles and a massive mohawk - but with a voice that sounded an awful lot like Zephan.... To my right was definitely Kai. He had had time to customize his avatar to look just like himself. The only difference was that he had a glowing backpack on his back with electric blue wires snaking down his arms to his hands.

"Lez do this!" boomed the oversized-Zephan. Then, he and Kai charged forward down the metal cat-walk towards the first floor. Then, the *fun* began. I had just arrived on the first floor, when a wall of the warehouse burst apart and several robots with treads (that looked like they came straight out of Short-Circuit) rolled towards us - they laser cannons ready. Kai raised his hands and wiped out four with a super-powerful plasma blast. Zephan jumped ten feet, then descended to the floor and punched the ground so hard that the previous catwalk collapsed and took out another three. I finished off the last, treaded robots with a bazooka blast. The blast was actually quite realistic feeling, and I felt the kickback (which is how advanced the VR suit was!)

"Oh yeah, that felt good!" boomed Zephan's voice.

"Watch out!" I yelled as a robotic spider scuttled around the corner and took some potshots at Zephan. I squinted my eyes and pulled the trigger - sending the spider into a million flaming bits of metal.

"Don't you dare touch my brother!" I yelled fiercely in an overly feminine voice (I was starting to dislike the default female avatar).

"I believe there are more 'bad guys' out in the city," Kai told us, then took off. Zephan and I followed behind. Sure enough, a block later there was a whole hord of black SUVs and some robotic FBI agents (I was glad there were only robots. I wouldn't want to shoot humans - even virtual ones).

"Be gone!" Kai yelled and released several plasma balls at them. Zephan grabbed an SUV in each hand and swung them around - crunching countless robots in the process. I used my bazooka to take out any robots that Zephan didn't see. His avatar was incredibly powerful, but he wasn't very good at watching his back (like Kai was). Eventually, I blasted away the last robot. Then, the screen went white and the game announced, "Demo: last level!"

Next, we found ourselves in the middle of an arctic landscape (which was kind of funny since Zephan's avatar was only wearing a ripped short-sleeve shirt but wasn't freezing at all!). In front of us was a huge ice cave that was "spitting" out hundreds of robotic creatures - some flying, some walking - some sliding. Zephan let out an ear-shattering roar and charged forward - smashing the robots mercilessly. I waited a second and charged my bazooka to full level before pulling the trigger and taking out a whole horde of flying mercenaries.

"Leave some for me, sis!" Zephan yelled back to me. I looked around for Kai, but he wasn't there. Perhaps he had logged out? I didn't stop playing though - I was having a blast (pun intended). The robots got increasingly larger and more dangerous as we approached the ice cave, and Zephan and I took some hits (though our health bars were still doing okay). Zephan crunched the last mechanised polar bear up against the side of the ice cave, and then we waited for the level to be over - but it wasn't! Suddenly, a hideous scream emanated from the cave and the largest robotic yeti I have ever seen (actually the *only* one) emerged and started blasting away at us with its laser eyes. I got a few blasts in on it before its laser eyes cut my bazooka in half. Zephan bounced high into the air and body slammed it, but the yeti grabbed Zephan and slammed him against the wall of the cave - slowly crushing him while simultaneously blasting at me with its laser eyes. My health bar quickly decreased and then turned red - we were toast.

That's when I heard a funny sound. It sounded like electricity zapping. Then, I remembered Kai and looked way up to the top of the Ice Cave. There was his avatar, with his arms outstretched slowly cutting off a large chunk of the ceiling off the cave. Suddenly, I knew what he was doing!

"Zephan! Get away, quick!" I yelled. With a mighty heave, Zephan pushed the yeti back and ran as fast as he could out of the cave - the yeti close behind.

"CRRRACK!" Suddenly, the ceiling of the cave broke off and fell to the ground, crushing the yeti beneath in a bone shattering "KaBOOM!" Kai then jumped off the mountain and stuck a hero pose on top of the destroyed mechanical yeti. Zephan gave a last war cry, and the game ended.

"That was SOOOO much fun!" Zephan exclaimed as he pulled off his headset, "How did you know that a giant yeti was going to attack us, Kai?"

"Well, I honestly didn't," Kai admitted, "But I thought that I would at least be able to take out a whole army of robots by doing so."

"Congratulations guys!" the administrator told us, "You were the first to beat this demo game. As a prize - you all get these VR headsets and suits!"

He then winked and added, "I hope you'll buy our game when it is finally released!"

"Definitely," we all said together.

As Zephan and I boxed up our gear, Zephan said "bye" to Kai.

“See you later!” Zephan said. Since it was so late, I quickly rushed us home.

The next morning, I got up early to work some more on my computer program and was able to successfully complete the neural network encoded with a hexadecimal and Caesar Cipher base. Finally, at about 2:00 P.M., I decided that I was satisfied with my work. It was coming together very well, but I was still a bit nervous. Computer programs usually did not work the very first time you tried them. Unfortunately, I did not have much more time to work on my program because the break-in was scheduled tonight. Supposedly, we were going to break into this building where the Chinese government’s headquarters is here in Fairview. To tell the truth, I didn’t really know, and I didn’t really care.

I sent a quick text off to Kai to tell him that my computer program was finished. It read: “Hey, Kai. Finished the computer program. Can’t guarantee that it will work, though. Didn’t have much time to work on it.”

Almost immediately, a reply text from Kai came back: “Thanks. Well, fingers crossed we will not need it. See u at 10:00 P.M.” Kai had included some sort of weird emoji at the end of his text, but I couldn’t even tell what it was. It looked like a cross between an alien and a giant marshmallow.

That whole evening, I was sorta on edge during my nightly routine. Everything I ate for dinner felt like cement in my stomach and my words came out all jumbled up. Thankfully, my family didn’t really seem to notice because they were way too thrilled about Dad being home. Don’t get me wrong, I was happy too, but how happy can you be when you are about to break into some sort of top secret building? It was going to be a long night.

“Um... I’m sorta tired. I think I’m going to head off to bed,” I told my family as I scurried off to my room.

“Are you sure?” asked my mom. “We were thinking about going to the movies tonight to the ten o’clock showing of The Incredible Sulk that’s coming out!”

“Oh! No, thanks. But have fun!” I replied, silently rejoicing in my head. They wouldn’t be home while Kai and I were doing this mission. Hooray!

At exactly 9:30, my whole family left, except for me. As soon as I heard the car drive off, I hopped on my bike and pedaled over to Kai’s house with my password program safe stored on a special, unbreakable USB drive that Kai had (interestingly enough) given to me a week or so before. I was so nervous that I almost biked right past Kai’s house. Sure enough, there was Kai waiting for me right in front of his house. I couldn’t even believe that he had a house all to himself!

“Hey, Kai!” I whispered. “I have the special cargo,” I motioned towards my black backpack where the drive was hidden.

“Good!” he approved. “Also, guess what? Anaya’s going to come with us tonight!” he said excitedly.

“Oh! Cool!” I said, while waving at Anaya. And off we went into the pitch black night.

The mission that night went terrible. We got there, broke in, and lo and behold, my program didn't work (though it did discover a few of the password's letters). It was terrible. I felt like I had let down Kai and Anaya. Why did it always have to be that way letting people down? Thankfully, Kai and Anaya were compassionate and simply said that we could try again once I had perfected the program. Sigh.....

As soon as I got home, I hopped into bed, and hoped that my parents wouldn't have heard the doors opening and closing. They were home from their movie earlier than I expected, but still, it wasn't really them that I had to worry about it. Zephan was always so nosy if he heard any noise that wasn't supposed to be, well, happening. Sometimes, he would even run into my room in the middle of the night and wonder if it was me who had just flushed the toilet and run the water from the sink, or if a robber had done it. He was always so paranoid about robbers. As if a robber would come into our house and take a bathroom break in the middle of robbing our house. Yeah, that's never gonna happen.

Sure enough, a few seconds later, I heard pattering of feet outside of my door and then the creaking of my door opening. I panicked! What was my excuse going to be? At least I didn't have to worry about still being in my street clothes because my pajamas were exactly the same as my street clothes.

"Hey, Zelena!?" Zephan whispered inches from my ear. "I'm pretty sure that I heard the creaking of the back door opening and closing. Was that you, and what were you doing in the middle of the night?"

How did Zephan even hear it? I could barely even hear it myself! This boy had to be a detective. He could notice anything and hear anything.

"Annnnnndddd," Zephan drew out the word, "I noticed that your shoes have a fresh layer of grass and mud on them. You were definitely somewhere tonight."

I quickly opened my eyes and searched my brain for an excuse. Thankfully, I wasn't like Pinachio whose nose grew every time he told a lie.

"Well, Zephan. I just happened to be out shopping for a present for you," I lied with a nice little smile on my face. "I didn't want to tell you because it was a surprise." *Oh! Great move, Zelena. Now, I actually have to have a present for him. Would my stinky socks do?*

"Oh! Well, just to make sure that you're not lying, show me it!" replied Zephan adamantly.

I quickly walked over to my dresser and grabbed out the present that I was going to give him for his birthday. Oh, well. I guess that I would have to get him something else for his birthday now. As soon as Zephan saw the present, his whole face lit up and he rushed out of my room to try out his new present in the middle of the night. Whew! I barely escaped that one. But still, it didn't seem right to me that Zephan didn't even thank me for the new video game (Wack-A-Pig: Level Oink) that cost me \$30. Oh, well. That was Zephan for you.

When I woke up the next morning, I quickly rushed over to my computer and started working on my password computer program. I was definitely not going to let anyone else down

even if it meant spending a whole week on this crazy password program. I worked on it day in and day out for three whole days, perfecting the NN (as I call it) to weight the different passwords correctly so that the time frame could be shortened. By the end of the third day, my eyes were completely fried and my body was screaming for some exercise. My head was spinning, and I felt like I was about to faint. But, it was totally worth it because I was so close to perfecting my program. All I needed was a few more lines of code, and I knew the perfect person to ask.

“Hey, Uncle!” I exclaimed as soon as I saw his face pop up on the screen. “I have some very exciting news for you. I am so close to finishing my password program!”

“Wow, Zelena! That is amazing. Thanks so much! So what do you need me for?” he asked.

“Well, I need some of the internet codes for Tokero’s (that is Kai’s father) database storage so I cannot get in myself. You can just insert the program at the closest server, then run it! Okay?”

“Yeah! That sounds great! I’ll be waiting for it. Oh! And Zelena, I need to apologize. I was very snappy at you the other day during our video call. I’m so sorry. I was so impatient to close this case that I wasn’t even thinking about how important you are no matter what you do. Would you please forgive me?”

“Of course! We’re all good now. Talk to you later!” I clicked off of our video call feeling very content. Before I encoded it to send to my uncle via a secure server in Kazakhstan, I decided to clone it so that I could use it to help Kai with his mission. Finally, everything was turning out well. Little did I know what was coming next. The next day was going just fine until I got a video call from my uncle.

“Zelena! Want to see how your program works?” he asked.

“Yeah!”

“Okay here goes!” On the video screen I watched as he pulled up his console application and entered in the command line to run my program. The application filled with hundreds of characters and numbers and cycled through them all for what felt like an eternity. Then, the screen froze. All the numbers fell away except for ten symbols. Breathlessly, my uncle ran a command line to enter those as the password.

“Dalaling!” The noise scared both me and my uncle, but it was simply the noise of the database acknowledging valid entry.

“Yes!” we both exclaimed. My uncle quickly navigated through the complex database to the folder entitled “Top Secret Plans.” (Not to discrete huh?) However, when he opened the folder, there was nothing inside.

“What?!” he exclaimed. Furiously, he started typing on his keyboard, but nothing happened.

“Where did it go!” he exclaimed breathing faster. I too started getting nervous. That is when I got a phone call from Kai. Little did I know that this phone call would change my life drastically.

“Hey, Kai! What’s up?” I asked.

Kai sounded like he was hyperventilating too. “Zelena. I have serious news for you. I just found out that Chinese agents have taken off with my father’s plans. They have actually taken them off of the database. It’s time for you, me, and Anaya to get together. We have to find those plans before they get in the wrong hands. We have a serious break-in to do!

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Chapter 13: Infiltrating

I sat there for a while just gazing at the screen, trying to figure out what I should do next. NOT!!! When I realized what Zelena was up to, I dialed her phone number.

"Kai, I know it's you," Zelena answered.

"What are you doing hacking *my* computer?! You were just supposed to be trying to hack Dad's!" I shot back.

"Why are *you* spying on me!" Zelena said, "Answer quick or I'll destroy your camera!" Evidently Zelena still hadn't figured out that my camera was actually a drone. I quickly forced my computer to turn off so she couldn't get a view from my drone, and I dropped my drone to the floor and flew it way back under a server.

"Yeah, you do that!" I retorted.

"You little-" Zelena began.

"Look, Zelena; I'm sorry I tried to spy on you, but I was concerned that you were up to no good when I figured out that you were trying to hack my Dad's computer. I understand why you are mad at me but can you see why I did it?" There was a long silence followed by an exasperated sigh.

"Yeah, I guess so. But Kai?"

"Yes?"

"I'm not just hacking your account or your Dad's for fun, you know. Someone else told me so."

"I know - your uncle."

"Kai, my uncle works for the FBI. What is your Dad hiding that is so important?"

"I literally have no idea. All I know is that he has had dealings with top secret military weapons for China, but I don't think he has any information on it."

"Well, my uncle and your cousin thinks otherwise."

"Wait. MY COUSIN?! You mean XEN?!!!" I exclaimed.

"Yeah, you didn't know he was also trying to hack into your Dad's account?"

"No, but I'm not too worried. He's not smart enough."

"But I am."

"Wait again. He wanted *you* to hack Dad's account."

"Yep!"

"That is worrying."

"I know. He wouldn't tell me why though."

"Alright, Zelena - no more hacking. I'll try to talk with Dad and find out what he is hiding."

"Okay, Kai; but what am I going to tell my uncle?"

"Tell him that you are looking into if Tokero actually is hiding something before you go to all the work to actually hack his account. Okay?"

"Uhhh. Okay. Where's your camera?"

"I'll only tell you if you promise to not hack me either okay?"

Zelena sighed in frustration. "Fine."

"The camera is actually a drone, I'll pilot it over to you. Keep it for me until I come over tomorrow." I piloted the drone back out from under the server and over to Zelena's desk. I nailed the landing and pointed the camera at Zelena's face. Her eyebrows rose in surprise, but she didn't say anything. Instead, she reached under her desk and retrieved a small, plastic container. She snatched the drone from where I had it on her desk and locked it inside her container.

"Talk to you tomorrow." I said

"I can't wait," Zelena remarked sarcastically.

By this time, it was about 4, so I walked back downstairs and over to my parents' house. I let myself in and found Dad reading a book on the couch.

"Dad, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, Kai. What is it?"

"You actually have those top-secret Chinese military plans don't you?" I prodded. I wasn't completely sure this was true, but the last month's events had convinced me that there was at least *something* Dad was hiding, contrary to what I told Zelena.

Dad sighed.

"Yes, Kai. You're right. I couldn't let the government develop those weapons, so I downloaded the plans and deleted all the evidence."

"You had that much security clearance in the system?" I asked.

"Not entirely, but I also have some good computer skills. Anyway, as you can imagine, the government found out pretty quickly about what I had done and went after me, but I had already fled the country. Now they know I am here and are sending spies."

"Why don't you just tell the police?"

"Because I'm afraid that the U.S. government will get a hold of the plans and misuse them."

"Then why don't you just delete the plans so nobody gets them?"

"Think about it this way, Kai. If China had enough good scientists to be able to make these massively destructive weapons, what is stopping them from remaking all that stuff? If I don't have these plans ready to give to other countries should China find out how to make these weapons, then the world could very well be "toast!" Dad reasoned.

"Oh." I said. As mom came into the room to show us her new fitness schedule she had made I asked her, "Mom, so is that email you got yesterday from those Chinese spies?" (Mom had been listening in on our conversation while making dinner).

“You saw that? No, no. It was just a joke between my colleague and I. Anyway, check this out, Tokero,” Mom said.

It was pretty obvious to me that she was trying to change the conversation which made me even more suspicious about why she wouldn’t just tell us that she was getting emails from the Chinese spies. I mean, there really is no shame in admitting that those idiots have managed to acquire your personal email address. They were bound to find out one of ours eventually anyway. However, I didn’t want to embarrass Mom if she didn’t want to say anything about it; especially if the email actually *had* been a joke.

We had dinner together. Then, I decided to go on a sunset motorcycle ride to clear my mind from all the troubling things that had happened. The only problem is that the ride did very little to clear my brain because I met up with a black SUV with smartly-dressed Chinese guys in the front. See, I was going along a residential street on the other side of Fairview, when the SUV pulled out of a side street. I thought of going after them, but then I considered that maybe they had just come from their “headquarters” perhaps there would be some strange building nearby that I could find. I quickly veered right, and continued down the street. The street, although it had once been residential, quickly turned into commercial except that it was mainly composed of warehouses. Nothing looked too out of the ordinary, which I kind of expected because the spies weren’t exactly trying to be found. I reached the end of the street and turned left onto another avenue. When I did so, I immediately noticed a mid-sized office building with five black SUVs in the parking lot. I slowed down, and turned into the driveway.

At this point, I’ll admit that I was being pretty stupid. I mean, turning into the “driveway” of the organization out to get your father is pretty risky, but I was dead set on bringing those irritating spies to justice. Plus, I figured that I could handle them. I parked my motorcycle in the farthest away slot, and walked nonchalantly up to the rather-ramshackle building. The building was by no means nice, rather ugly, but I guess it served the spies’ purpose. As I got closer I noticed there were not many windows and the ones that did exist all had their blinds down. This meant I would have to enter the building via a door - no fun. I hid behind some bushes near what appeared to be the “main” door and waited and waited. About ten minutes later, a tall caucasian man with a brown suitcase quickly walked out of the building. I was surprised at this. They had other people working for them as well? I mean, I guess it makes sense, but I kind of did not see it coming. Whatever the case, I took the opportunity to enter the building as the door closed shut. Even if the door had been unlocked (which I don’t think it was), it would be suspicious if the door opened and no one announced their arrival through it (in case there were lots of people looming around). When I entered I found myself in a pretty small hallway that was lined with doors. It felt kind of like a lab or something. All the doors were labeled (amazingly). However they were all in Chinese. BUT- I can read Chinese of course! I quickly went down the aisle reading what they said - dorms, kitchen, library, communications, office space, weapons, computer room, holding cells... Computer room?! I

doubled back and tried the door handle - it opened but my eyes must not have been because everything turned black.

I woke up slowly, trying to figure out where I was and what was going on. The first thing I noticed was that I couldn't move my hands (which were restrained behind my back) and my legs couldn't move independently of each other (which meant they were also probably tied together. Closer inspection proved my guess). Next, I noticed the two burly guards talking to each other in the other corner. Then, I noticed that my head was REALLY hurting. I couldn't help but groan.

"Oh! He's waking," said the first guard.

"You fool, he's not waking," replied the other guard gruffly, "He's just pretending to be waking so that we don't talk about our secret stuff while he is really asleep."

"He *was* asleep, but I think he is awake now and listening to everything we are saying!"

"Of course not, any smart kid like him would know we know this and would pretend to be waking up when he really is about to lapse back into unconsciousness."

"Awe, but if this kid is as smart as Xen says he is, than that means he already knows *that*, so we should spill our plans now."

"But that is doing the same thing as if the kid was just stupid!" (I took offense at that.)

"Well your idea is also stupid!"

"So we can't talk about how to use this kid for ransom so that we can get the plans from Tokero, and Xen can send them to China?"

"You fool yourself! You just said everything!"

"Only because the kid is asleep!"

"Is not!"

"Is too!"

My head was throbbing at this point, partly because of the guards' constant arguing, so I let out another groan.

"Quick we have got to restrain him, this kid is slippery!" Both guards rushed over to make sure I was pinned to the ground. However, they didn't know that even though I was in a lot of pain, I was still a force to be reckoned with. Both of the guards' feet were swept out from under them as I swung my legs around in a hammer motion. Then, I used the flopping whale motion to get to my feet and nail a guard's head against the concrete floor in the process. The other guard got up quickly and reached for his gun, but my head made contact with his stomach. My head won. I stretched my arms as best as I could and picked up the gun in his hands. Then, I rotated the gun to be pointing right at the knot between my hands and pointed it at the wall. I stretched my hands as far apart as possible and pulled the trigger. I knew that it was dangerous doing this because everything was behind my back, but I didn't have a lot of time. The pistol kicked back into my back and created some more pain, but my hands were at least free. I shot my legs free and borrowed the other guard's gun. I rushed out the door which led me into a bigger room full of monitoring equipment and chairs and rope. I tore out of that

room and into the hallway in which I originally was. The door to the “barracks” was opening, but I opened fire and filled it with holes like Swiss cheese. I heard a few yells and some screams as I rushed by and the door closed. I did not bother to even re-open the outside door – I just took it down with a smash kick while in mid air. I sprinted across the parking lot and emptied the pistols’ clips at the building. As I jumped onto my motorcycle, I threw the smoking guns at two of the windows on the second floor of the building. Then, I revved off with a large cloud of smoke and raced away as fast as I could. I was glad that they hadn’t found/impounded my motorcycle, but I made a mental note to make sure my motorcycle hadn’t been bugged or anything. By the time I got home, I was feeling very bad, and I had a HUGE headache – I didn’t even notice that it was noon (the next day!) I parked my motorcycle, ran upstairs, and collapsed in a heap on my bed.

I didn’t wake up until 4 in the afternoon. My head still really hurt and my body felt like a sack of very wet potatoes, but at least my headache was gone. I was also feeling hungry what with missing breakfast and lunch, so I carefully walked downstairs and over to the parents’ house. I was hoping I could get a pre-dinner snack. What I got, however, was more of a pre-dinner attack.

See, I was mentally and physically tired. After being kidnapped, shot at, spied upon, hacked, and sprayed down by fire-extinguisher foam; I think it is pretty understandable how I felt. Perhaps you can also understand why I felt like eating a giant, lemon poppyseed muffin with chocolate sprinkles on top. I didn’t know if Mom had any in the house, but she had before - just for me. I entered the house using my key and trudged over to the kitchen. My nose practically jumped off my face when I smelled baking brownies in the oven. I looked both ways quickly, 1. To see if Mom was around, 2. To see if there were any muffins around - both were negative. I went back out to the living room and plopped down in one of the Hazy-Boy’s leather chairs my parents just got. Then, I fell asleep again.

I don’t know how much time passed, but suddenly I was awakened by the doorbell ringing. I sat up as Mom came quickly down the stairs.

“I’ll get it Kai, you should keep on sleeping. You know you don’t look very well?”

“Tell me about it,” I mumbled. I would have gone back to sleep, but Mom opened the door at that moment, and I wanted to see who was at the door. When I *did* see who was at the door, I quickly wished I hadn’t. The five burly guys at the door barged through the doorway, and one of them threw mom across the room and against the outside kitchen wall.

“Where is the plans!” he roared. Then, he roared again - but not because he was mad. No, this time he was roaring because I had sent *him* against the glass lamp near the fireplace. Him being so big and the lamp being so fragile (luckily that lamp wasn’t Mom’s favorite), it quickly broke apart and sent several large chunks of glass into the guy’s back. He roared another time. The remaining four guys converged on me, but I used the multiple-slip-up method to trip them all up. Each of them fell on top of each other, which bought me time to flip them all outside the front door. The last guy I came a complementary Fumbart-spin. I turned

around to deal with the “lamp-guy” when he went flying over my head and out into the yard. Mom was standing there grinning.

“I may be older than you, but I still haven’t forgotten my Karate!” she said.

“What in the world do they want Dad’s plans from you?!” I asked.

“I’ll explain later. Right now, we need to show them that we mean business!”

Mom was right. There were at least five silver Dodge chargers parked in the street in front of our house and about ten big burly guys. What I didn’t know was they also knew karate.

They all came at me quickly, throwing punches and trying out various moves. Their problem was that they didn’t know I didn’t just do karate, I also did slice-whip.

“Oof” “Grunt” “Aaaah” “Ohhh” was all the sounds that could be heard. I grabbed one guy via his shirt and swung him into another that was sneaking up behind Mom as she decked another into our neighbor’s rose bushes (I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t be all that happy to learn that her rose bushes were being used as “torture” devices). Another guy got me in the side with a well-aimed kicked, but I snatched his outstretched foot and decked him in the head thrice. Then I flipped him over the sidewalk and into the street. That was when I noticed that I had sent the killer over the heads of three teenagers looking at the ensuing fight. All of them had their mouths open. As Mom’s fist met one of the guys’ face, the teenagers stopped staring and started clapping. I figured I might as well make a show of it after another teenager pulled at his Tie-Phone. I backflipped over of the teenagers and sent my elbow into one thug’s back while kicking another guy in the head with a stun-kick. Both of them reeled forward and collided with another who was desperately trying to avoid painful-death from Mom. From then on, it was pretty smooth sailing. Within two minutes, all of them (but a few in the cars) were lying on the lawn/street in semi-unconscious states. The teenagers were cheering and rushed me (I couldn’t help taking a selfie with them. Plus, they had already gotten 1,000 views on My-Tube). Mom walked over to the closest Dodge and swiftly broke open one of its windows.

“Take these guys and scam!” she yelled in the driver’s face. The guy quickly got out of the car and started dragging his motionless companions into the car - the other drivers followed suit. I guess the guys were planning on a hit and run mission. Little did they know it would be a hit and run mission against *them*. Mom and I went back into the house.

“Alright, Mom. You have got some explaining to do,” I told her.

“Kai, you need to keep this a secret, okay?” she told me warily.

“Okayyy”

“Kai, I’m not an orphan. I grew up in a perfectly normal household with two great parents and a bunch of siblings. By the time I turned eighteen, my karate exploits had gained the attention of Japan’s undercover service, and they recruited me to track down some military secrets of China. They already had several of their agents in China working to uncover information. See, the Japanese government had heard rumors that China was developing some very deadly weapons, and since they are so close, Japan wanted to make sure those weapons were never made. Anyway, they assigned me to spy on a young man by the name of Tokero

Hwang. The only problem was that I ended up liking him. When he fled China, I followed him to the U.S. and “met” him at that conference. Now that I ditched the spy program of Japan, they have been trying to get me back. Those guys out there are Japanese agents, as you no doubt figured out.”

“Well, I knew they were Japanese, but I didn’t know that they were agents. That explains a lot. Does Dad know about your real past?”

“No. I don’t know what he would say or do if he found out that I was really a spy.”

“I already know,” said Dad as he entered the doorway. “I saw you spying on me when I was working for the Chinese company. I figured out real quick what you were up to, but I pretended not to know. When you followed me to the U.S., I was for sure you didn’t know I had those plans with me so the only reasonable explanation was that you liked me - which was true of me as well.”

“Honey. I’m sorry,” Mom apologized, “I just was scared how you would react. I knew I had changed, but I didn’t think you would believe me. I guess that shows you were the better person.”

“Not true!” Dad replied quickly, “I was afraid to let *you* know that I knew about you, because I thought you might not like me anymore.”

“BEEEEPPP!” The oven’s time was beeping, so Mom and I rushed into the kitchen and pulled out two fresh batches of the most delicious looking brownies.

“Who is ready for dinner!?” Mom asked.

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“Guys, I need your help.” The next morning I had called up Anaya and Zelena and started a phone conference with them.

“We need to break into the Chinese spies’ center and get all the info we can off their computer system,” I said.

“Why can’t we just hack in?” Zelena asked.

“Because, first of all, they work for the Chinese government which probably has a ton of security on all their info. Second, I’m not convinced they are even connected to the internet.” I replied.

“Let me check real quick,” Zelena said.

“Wait, is this the first mission for your pets?!” Anaya exclaimed.

“No, I mean what do we need them for?” I said, “Zelena and me need to run into the building’s computer room, download whatever we can off their computers’ databases, and run back out - mission accomplished.”

“Oh. I was hoping to get them in on a real mission,” Anaya said.

“I know, but I’d rather them be as safe as possible. They may be smart and well-trained, but they are still animals, and I’d rather them not have to be put into life-threatening situations if possible,” I said.

"Kai, you're right. They aren't connected to the Net. It looks like we are going to have to do the old-fashioned method." Zelena said.

"Which is break in?" I guessed.

"Bingo!" Zelena said.

"Alright. Anaya, could you drive Zelena and I over to the building and wait around outside. You can be our "get-away car." Zelena, you and I will break in and download what we can. I'm bringing a gun for you and me just in case things get "hairy.""

"Won't that place be crawling with guards though, especially after you infiltrated the place just two days ago?" Anaya asked.

"Maybe, but probably not. My dad is doing a big talk at his complex about his new weapon that he has developed. I bet a lot of the agents will be there." I said

"Cool! Let's do this!" Zelena said.

The next day in the afternoon, Anaya drove Zelena and I over to the old office building and dropped us off two buildings away.

"I'll be waiting for you when you come out!" Anaya whispered.

Zelena and I quickly jogged to the dilapidated building and entered through the front door. We didn't bother to wait for someone to come out; we just barged through. The hallway was empty like last time (which kind of freaked me out) but I kept calm and we entered the computer room. None of the doors were locked (or very sturdy for that matter). There were plenty of computers and servers throughout the room, but only one keyboard and mouse on the right. Zelena pulled up the antique swivel chair and clicked the mouse. The three monitors in front of her (the only monitors in the room) lit up - with the login screen requiring a password. I thought that there was going to be a password, that is why I brought the tech genius.

"No prob. I've got this," Zelena announced. She pulled the flash drive like object that I had given her out of her pocket and plugged it into the nearest USB port. A side window popped up on the monitor and Zelena clicked "Yes." Suddenly, the monitors went wild. I whipped around, but nobody was behind me.

"Calm down, Kai, that's just my program at work, it should only take a few minutes," Zelena told me. However, it didn't just take a few minutes. We were in that room for ten minutes, and nothing really happened. At this point we were really nervous - Zelena was nervous that her computer program was not working, and I was nervous that we would be caught at any moment. Finally, the computer beeped, and the program displayed a quick message.

"It says that it cannot find the password but that the first three letter are "s-t-u," Zelena said.

"Let's get out of here!" I replied and made a break for the door with Zelena reluctantly following. I threw open the door, but the hallway was *still* deserted.

"That's weird, you would have thought *someone* would still be here," I said, "I wonder where they all are?"

That was when a horrible thought struck me. We quickly flew down the hallway and out the front door. We sprinted across the front walkway (which probably wasn't necessary since nobody was after us anyway) and threw ourselves into Anaya's car that was idling in the front parking lot. Anaya punched the gas pedal (throwing Zelena and I backwards) and roared down the street. We were ten blocks down the street before Anaya slowed down to the speed limit - showing that we were all a little paranoid about our first official "mission." I watched a documentary about FBI agents once and it said the mental complications of dealing with breaking and entering can take years to deal with.

"Anaya, something is not right. Could you drop me off at my Dad's complex? I'll give you the directions." I finally said.

"Sure, how did it go?" Anaya asked.

"Terrible, my program couldn't crack the password and we all know is the first three letters. How in the world are we going to figure out what the password is?" Zelena blurted out, exasperated.

"Dunno," I replied, "How about you guys work on that while I work on one of my leads."

"Which is?" Zelena replied.

"Xen's connection to the whole mess," I said.

"What does Xen have to do with the Chinese spies?" Anaya quickly asked.

"Maybe a lot, maybe none - that's what I need to check up on," I replied.

Anaya pulled up in front of my Dad's complex a little later.

"Thanks guys! We'll talk soon!" I promised them. The big announcement was just finishing up, so it took me a while to make it to the podium.

"Dad! Over here!" I yelled. Tokero looked around a bit, then found me amidst the hordes of people.

"Kai! I'm ready to go home! What about you?" he asked.

"Absolutely." After the crazy day, I was ready for some rest.

After dad finished talking to all the important people about his new laser pointer, he drove me home.

The next day, I went with Dad to the headquarters, because I wanted to improve upon my wireless software. I was just finishing up some last minute details, when I heard some shouting and a few "pops." However, in a plant that made guns, everyone knew what a gun sounded like - and those noises were definitely gun shots. Since we could hear them, we also knew that they were not in the safety lab building which meant something was not right. Me and a bunch of other guys quickly raced to the exit or a nearby window to see what was going on. Outside were a dozen or so black SUVs all idling, a few of the rogue agents were outside aiming their guns at anyone outside, the rest were streaming into the main office building.

Everyone else was calling on their phones, so I stayed put and tried to think about what the agents were after. My conclusion was not good. I'd bet all my money that they wanted physical access to the database - I hoped that Dad was okay. Then, just as suddenly, the agents came running out of the office building, hopped into their vehicles, and peeled out. That's when the fire alarms turned on. Someone must have pulled the alarm out of pure panic. If the confusion of people running about was bad before, it was awful now. When I finally got out of the building there were about ten police cars and trucks, an ambulance, and a few fire engines all blocking the way. Worst of all, I knew that I was right. The Chinese spies were here for the plans, and they figured that they could just infiltrate the physical facility. Now someone had to steal them back, and there was only one person who could do so. Well, three people and three animals to be exact. One martial-arts expert - Kai, one techno-hacker - Zelena, one animal-trainer - Anaya, two courageous ferrets - Ferret and Spark, and one very adorable hamster - Bitty.

Chapter 14: Reminiscing

"How are you feeling?" Mom asked me, giving me a pat on the back.

"For my first half marathon," I panted, "not so bad."

Mom chuckled as she jogged beside me. Having done two marathons, five half-marathons, and countless 5-Ks in her lifetime, she was barely breaking a sweat as we jogged along the Stanford River path. On the other hand, I was currently experiencing a side-ache - but I tried not to let on. I wanted to finish the race even if it meant that I had to crawl across the finish line.

A river of sweat slid down my neck as I pumped my arms in slow rhythm with my legs. I had done so much training for this race, and Mom had been my personal trainer all year. I had even designed my own special diet for the month of the race! As soon as I was done with the race, though, I was going to eat donuts with the family.

"Well, the bridge construction is coming along well," commented Mom as we neared the east side of the bridge.

"Too bad we couldn't run across it today," I wheezed.

"Yeah, I agree," said Mom. Dodging a dog on a leash, she added, "With this new detour this year, the race is .5 of a mile longer than last year's half-marathon," she smiled, "You're literally going the extra mile!"

I pasted on a smile, but inwardly, I felt myself wilting.

You. Can. Do. This. I kept repeating to myself in my brain.

"Oh, honey," Mom said, unzipping the pouch strapped to her waist. She pulled out the long tangle of a set of earbuds attached to an MP3 player.

"This'll give you some energy." She pulled apart the knots and turned on the player before handing it to me.

"Thanks," I said breathlessly, tucking the player into my pocket and the earbuds into my ears.

"I should've given this to you earlier, but I totally forgot," she chuckled. "We're almost at the end of the race, which is the hardest part."

I breathed deeply as my favorite song "Tread" burst into my ears. I pumped my arms and legs in tandem to the beat of the drums, and tried to catch a glimpse of the finish line up ahead where the bike path ran into a park.

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"Our champion arrives!" Dad triumphantly announced at the dinner table as I took my seat. My face turned red.

"Champion? I didn't win the race!"

"You're a champion in our eyes," smiled Mom, setting a bowl of warm biscuits on the table. "Not many kids your age are as passionate about running as you are."

I laughed. Neph kicked my foot under the table.

I looked over at him, and he smirked. "You didn't look so good afterwards."

I nodded and sighed. "Yeah, sorry we didn't get to go out for donuts after all."

"It's only natural that you would need an afternoon to recover," Dad sympathized. "Not to mention, I grabbed some donuts while you and Mom were taking showers."

Neph's face lit up. "And bear claws, too?"

Dad smiled and winked at me.

"First, let's eat our dinner before thinking about fat and sugar," Mom replied.

After saying grace, we dug into our Caesar salad, rolls, and potatoes, and of course, once Dad had dug the donut box out of hiding in the kitchen, Neph wolfed down two bear claws even after all that!

I only ate one maple bar, but even then, it seemed like a lot of sugar, considering that we'd be having movie night that night as well! While Mom started on the dishes, I headed upstairs to cuddle Bitty. I had cleaned her cage yesterday, so it was all fresh. Bitty was buried in a volcano of paper shavings. I tapped lightly on the bars.

"Bitty, Bitty! Cuddle time!" I loudly whispered.

The volcano rumbled and then fell apart as a pink nose emerged. I slid a carrot piece into the cage to hurry along the process as she crawled out and over to me.

Once she had stuffed the carrot into her cheek, I opened the cage door and scooped her out. Sitting on the floor, I let her crawl over my arms, onto my legs, and around me on the carpet. After five minutes of playing, I yawned. Setting Bitty inside her cage again, I watched her bury herself back in her volcano, and then she yawned, too. After washing my hands and brushing my teeth in the bathroom, I came back into my room and sat on my bed. Bitty, despite her pretense of being tired, was already running away on her little saucer.

I'd heard somewhere that hamsters can run 5Ks during the night. I guess Mom and I aren't the only ones who love to run!

Dangling my stockinged feet off the side of my bed, I laid back onto the soft throw pillows that topped my pink quilted bed. Then my phone buzzed. I jumped on it and pushed the call button.

"Hello?"

"Anaya! It's Mayra!" came a cheery voice from within my phone.

A wide smile spread across my face. "Hi!"

"Wow, I really want to catch up with you!" she said. "What's up?"

I smiled. "Well, I went to the Fairview Inn escape room with Zelena and Kai, and today was my first half marathon!"

Mayra giggled. "How could I have forgotten?! How was your run?"

"It was worse than I thought during the race, but better than I thought afterwards."

"I'm so happy for you! Did you get a trophy or award or something?"

"Nope - just a ribbon participation award," I said.

"Well, it sure is something to be proud of!"

“Wanna hear about the escape room?” I switched the subject, eager to fill her in on Fairview Hotel’s newest renovation.

“Yes! I can’t believe Mr. Lendall made an escape room! How authentic is it?”

I snuggled into my pillow pile. “Very authentic. There were three rooms: a dungeon, armory, and royal bedroom. Each one was decorated very elaborately. The dungeon even felt damp and cold!”

“Wow! I wish I could come and try it!”

“I know! I’m so lucky Zelena and Kai and I could do it for free!”

“How easily could you solve the puzzles?” Mayra wondered.

“Well, the funny thing about it was that it was a very strange escape room. Not like your usual one with locks to pick, clues to decipher, and riddles to figure out. This one was way more unique and realistic. Torches, weapons, locks, Greek letters, tapestries, and more.”

“Hmmm... that does sound different. Sounds like Mr. Lendall will have to put a lot of effort into resetting it each time a group goes in.”

“You can say that again!” I smiled. “But there’s one thing that was *really* creepy.”

“What?”

“In the bedroom, the lights kept turning off. Every time they came back on, an object in the room disappeared and was replaced by a jewel that we used to put on a crown. It was very creepy.”

“Wow! How’d he do that?”

“That’s what I was wondering, too, but Mr. Lendall didn’t give out any secrets at all! In fact, he didn’t even talk to us much about the escape rooms either. Just kind of had us in and then out.”

“Sure sounds like a fun day, though!”

“Yeah, I guess so.” There was a pause in the conversation, and then I asked, “So what did you do today?”

“Well, this morning I worked backstage at a fundraising runway show that the university put on for the Fashion Design Academy. My friend Karen was a model, and I got some really great pictures of her walking down the stage!”

I jumped off my bed and walked over to the horse calendar posted above my desk. In red marker was written **Runway Show**. “Oh! I totally forgot that was today! I’m so glad you got to go to that! What did you do after it was over?”

“Well, I helped with the tear-down, and then went out for lunch with my friends. And I just got home from window shopping with Nate.”

I snickered. “Does Nate even like shopping?”

Mayra laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous! Not all men hate going to the mall! We went clothes shopping, and then had ice cream together at Frosty’s.”

My mouth started watering. “Seriously?! I love Frosty’s! Man, I wish I had been down there with you guys!”

Then, I thought otherwise. *It sure would be weird joining in on a date between my sister and her boyfriend I'd never met before!*

"One of these days, when I visit you guys for winter break or something, I'll take you out to Frosty's, O.K.?" Mayra said.

I grinned. "Sounds like a deal!"

Just then, Mom knocked on my door and her muffled voice floated in. "Honey, come down in five minutes for the movie!"

Covering my phone with my hand, I shouted. "O.K.!"

"What was that?" Mayra asked.

"Oh, just family movie night starting in five minutes," I said with a sigh.

Mayra noticed my bitter tone of voice. "You don't like movie nights anymore?"

"No, it's not that – it's just that I miss the times when you were with us. You always made the best popcorn mixes for movie night."

"And whenever you fell asleep, I'd tease you the next morning!" Mayra laughed.

I smiled. "Trust me, I don't fall asleep during movies anymore."

Mayra's voice turned serious. "Look, I miss you too, but don't let it ruin your family movie night. Tell you what, how about you make my famous Mayra Movie Marshmallow Mash?"

"Popcorn, butter, salt, marshmallows, pretzels sticks, and M&M's, right?" I asked, ticking the ingredients off on my fingers.

"Yep! But don't forget the napkins!"

I jumped out of bed when I heard Neph walking past my door to the stairs.

"Well, I'd better go, but thanks for calling!"

"Love you, little sister! I'll send photos of the runway show!"

"O.K. Bye!"

"Bye!" Mayra blew me a kiss.

I hung up and slipped my phone into my pocket, then raced downstairs to help Mom make popcorn.

As soon as I reached the bottom of the stairs, I could hear loud pops from within the microwave. The rich smell of buttery goodness wafted around the kitchen and living room, where Dad was already burying himself into a recliner. Mom was pulling bowls out of the cupboard as I scuttled into the kitchen.

"Mayra called," I stated, digging some M&Ms out of the pantry. Seeing that the pretzel sticks were nonexistent, I pulled out some cookies with the marshmallow bag.

Mom pulled a hot bag of popcorn out of the microwave and swapped it with another. Closing the microwave door, she turned around and began pouring the contents into a large metal bowl where I'd already started dumping the extra ingredients.

"How was her Runway show?" she asked.

"Well, she seemed to have fun! Her friend Karen was a model."

"Hmmm," Mom said, sifting through the kernels at the bottom of the bowl. She threw away the empty bag and went back to the microwave.

"Movie's all ready!" Neph proclaimed from the living room. He marched to the kitchen, TV remote in hand, and peeked over my shoulder at the bowl of popcorn mix.

"My stomach's ready, too!" he added.

I laughed and swatted him away with my spoon. "What are we watching?"

"Agent Century," Neph answered, wandering to the stack of napkins on the counter.

I sighed. Mom sighed. Then Mom said what we were both thinking. "When we said you could pick out the movie, we were hoping you'd pick out something that *all* of us would enjoy."

"Well, half of us enjoy the Mystery Agents TV series," Neph retorted.

Dad and Neph were obsessed with those episodes of action and peril, but Mom and I preferred calmer movies - like panda documentaries, family comedy, or romantic Western movies.

Mom poured the last bag of microwave popcorn into the metal bowl, and I stirred it all together with the treats.

"Well," she loudly whispered into my ear so that Neph could hear, "Next time we'll pick the movie and it'll be *Outdoor School*."

Neph rolled his eyes. "That's not much better."

"Well, at least everyone in our family enjoys watching it," Mom stated flatly, smiling.

Mom picked up the metal bowl, Neph grabbed the bowls, and I snatched the napkins. We paraded into the living room where Dad was already half asleep piled with pillows and blankets. Mom chuckled and served him a bowl of popcorn mix. Then she stuck it beneath his nose.

"Here you go; this is a movie you love, so stay awake!"

Dad grabbed the bowl and propped it beneath his mouth on a few pillows.

I served myself a bowl and settled onto the couch. Mayra wasn't here in her kitten pajamas, and the movie wasn't my favorite...

But who cares? I'm still gonna make the most of it.

That's when the movie started with gunshot that made me jump two feet in the air. Neph roared with laughter as I grumpily picked up the popcorn pieces that had fallen in between the couch cushions.

Mom just sighed.

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Chapter 15: Failing

I ran as fast as I could towards the main office building, hoping that Dad was okay. I managed to get close before I ran into some police tape. There were people everywhere (most of them were employees) and responders also everywhere. I noticed a few cars had broken glass and dented sides as well as some of the buildings had a little bit of damage to the outside. I turned around and ran into one of the scientists who worked on the fourth floor's "top secret" lab that I had seen while working on my mini drone.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Oh my! You're Tokero's son, right?" he replied.

"Yeah, what happened?"

"Well, everything was normal, but all of a sudden, those cars and agents showed up and tore into the office building. A few of us called 911, but by the time the police arrived, all the guys had escaped!"

"Do you know where Dad is?"

"Yeah, I think he is in his office with some of the police," he replied.

"Thanks!" I shouted back as I wove my way through the crowd - back to the entrance of the main building. There, I found a policeman managing the crowd.

"Hey! I need to see my father, Tokero Hwang. I heard he is in his office in this building?" I told the man.

"Geoge," the policeman said into his walkie-talkie, "I've got this kid down here who claims to be the son of Tokero. Is he fine to come up?" A few seconds went by before there was an answer.

"Affirmative; let the kid come up," the phone crackled. The policeman moved aside the tape long enough for me to get through the front door. Everything was deserted, but I quickly found my Dad's cubicle since there was a lot of noise/talking coming from that direction. Inside, there were about four FBI agents (or at least they certainly looked the type with their black suits and sunglasses).

"Kai! So glad to see you. I need your help," Dad said when he noticed me, "These guys are taking me in for questioning, but I need you to see if you can find out what happened to all my computer's info."

"We're taking that laptop in too," replied one of the agents.

"Wait, the thieves took all of your *games* off your laptop?" I asked Dad.

"Yes, and erased all the data" Dad said through gritted teeth.

"That's not good. I'll get 'em back. Keep safe!" I replied. I left in a hurry, leaving the FBI agents wondering what the big deal was with a few missing games. I charged back out the front door and past the startled policeman. Then, I pushed my way through the crowd and back out onto the street. I first called Mom.

"Hello?"

"Hey Mom, can you come pick me up at Dad's office, there is a slight commotion going on over here, and I need a ride home," I told her.

"Should I be worried?" Mom asked.

"Yep, just hurry please," I said, then hung up. Next, I called Anaya.

"Hey Kai! How's it going?" Anaya said when she picked up her phone.

"Bad news, Anaya. The Chinese agents nabbed Dad's games. Get your *supplies* ready to go, we need to go on another impromptu shopping trip."

"What? - Oh - yeah. Umm, well I'm really busy at the moment, would two hours be okay?"

"I guess, where are you?"

"I'm at my Dad's hotel, managing the counter for Xen."

"Do you have your car with you?"

"Yep!"

"Alright, Zelena and I will stop by when we're ready. Then we can drive to your house and you can pick up the *supplies*." Last, I called Zelena.

"Kai! Just the person I want to talk to. I figured out the bug in my program, I think it'll work..."

"Zelena, get all your gear ready. We're going on another shopping expedition like we just did. Dad's games were stolen."

"Wait - huh? - ... - Oh, okay!"

"I'll pick you up in an hour. Bye," I finished.

By that time I could see Mom's car down the street. She pulled up next to the curb, and I jumped in.

"What's with all the cars and stuff here?" Mom asked.

"Dad had all of his Chinese plans stolen by the Chinese spies, Mom. I'm going to get them back, so I need to get back to my house pronto!" I replied.

"Honey, you have no idea where they are. Plus, it is too dangerous to try to grapple with them. The Japanese agents were tough in themselves - and they have a much smaller force," Mom stated.

"I know Mom. I've got a plan, and I think it'll work," I said.

"At least let me go with you!" Mom said.

"Alright, let's just get home!" I said. Mom drove home very quickly. As soon as we pulled up in her driveway, I jumped out and sprinted down the sidewalk. I fumbled with my keys, because I was in such a hurry but finally managed to open the door. Then, I charged upstairs, taking three steps at a time (crazy, I know!). I reached into my closet and pulled out my special combat suit. It took a bit to get on as it was very heavy, but it was also super slick. Then, I raced downstairs, put my helmet on, and started up my motorcycle. I launched out of the garage and turned to the right where Mom would be waiting in her car. Only, she was not

waiting in her car. There in the driveway were three police cars, and a few officers were escorting Mom out of the house. I quickly hopped back off my motorcycle.

"Mom! What's going on!" I yelled.

Mom quickly noticed me. "Kai, I won't be able to make dinner. They are also taking me in for questioning." I knew Mom actually meant she wouldn't be able to go with me, so I got back on my motorcycle and zoomed off before the police decided to take *me* in for questioning. It took about ten minutes to reach Zelena's house, but she was already outside waiting for me with her bike helmet on. I helped her on to the back of my motorcycle (much to the displeasure of Zephan who was looking out the window), and we zoomed on.

"I brought all of my hacking software," reported Zelena.

"Let's just hope we escape with our lives! They are sure to be all there and ready for action," I replied back. I reached Anaya's dad's hotel in no time, and we both hopped off and got into the hotel. Anaya was talking at the counter with Xen.

"Well, look who is here!" Xen smirked at me.

"Can it, Xen!" I commanded, "You ready Anaya?"

"Almost, I just need to finish folding these pamphlets," Anaya replied.

"I guess your father's business finally blew apart!" Xen laughed.

"It's already on the news?" I said, surprised.

"You bet, that 'stupid weaponizer' probably messed up one of his weapons, and it blew up!" Xen exclaimed.

"Yeah right! You probably ruined it while trying to show off your lousy sword skills!" I shot back.

"Calm down, guys," Anaya replied, "Ready to go Kai!" I glared hatefully at Xen who also was doing that; then followed Anaya and Zelena back to the hotel's parking lot - Xen followed.

"Where are *you* going?" I said.

"Carson wants me to run and errand for me," Xen retorted, then roared off in his truck in a cloud of smoke.

Zelena hopped into Anaya's brother's Toyota Camry and took off towards their house, while I followed suit in my motorcycle. We pulled into the driveway, and Anaya let us in.

"Zelena, you get the pets - they're in the TV room and Bitty's in my bedroom," Anaya said, "Kai, you go ask my brother in his room on the second floor for three of his headsets, and I'll get the pet harnesses that you made."

Zelena and I jogged up the staircase. I quickly deduced where Anaya's brother's room was, judging from the furious typing I heard, and Zelena discovered where Anaya's room was by doing the ol' sniff test. It wasn't until I barged into Anaya's brother's room that I realized that I had never met him before.

"Umm, hi! My name is Kai, I'm a friend of your sister?" I said.

"My name is Neph, and, yes, you can use three of my headsets. There in that drawer over there," Neph replied.

"Wow! You have good ears," I said as I rustled around in his drawer.

"Only good enough to hear some ferrets sneak up on me," Nepha replied dryly.

"Ferrets?" I asked.

"Don't ask about it," Neph replied. I took the headsets and left. I met up with Zelena who had two ferrets on her shoulders and a hamster in her hand. At the bottom of the stairs, we met up with Anaya.

"Let's go. Zelena can put on the harnesses as we drive," Anaya said. I was surprised by how much of a leadership role Anaya had taken on. We went outside, and I started on my way to the building with Anaya following. I quickly got there and we parked at another warehouse a block down the street. Anaya and Zelena ran up to me; Zelena had Ferret in her arms and Bitty was in Anaya's hands (Spark jumped over to me). They looked really snazzy in their gear, but I still wasn't sure we really needed them. They might pose a big problem. I told Anaya and Zelena to pretend like there were on just a normal walk. Despite our instinct to run or creep stealthily along, it would look way out of place; so doing the obvious thing was actually the best option.

We crossed the last intersection and walked along the row of bushes. I casually looked to my right – into the parking lot – and saw that the whole place was pretty busy. There were guys loading things into a big semi, and guys stuffing items into their black SUVs. There were even more talking and laughing together while drinking bottles of beer –so I surmised they were celebrating their "victory." Boy would they be shocked if our plan succeeded.

"Alright, let's go through the back entrance this time guys," I whispered over my shoulder. I led the way past the building in plain sight of the guys and circled around to the back of the building. There was a single, locked door in the back next to a broken window, so I pulled out my lock picking kit and went to work on it.

"You know how to pick locks?!" Anaya exclaimed, "However did you get all these skills?"

"When you don't have any friends to spend time on," Zelena spoke up as I twiddled some of the wire sticks, "You have more time for learning."

Snap!

The door clicked open, and Anaya caught it. I quickly threw my kit back into my backpack and cautiously opened the door. To my surprise, we entered into the computer room. Except this time, all the servers were on.

"Lay low guys," I whispered back as I flipped on my electric gloves and pulled out my taser, "I'll clear the room."

"My hero," Zelena replied sarcastically – but she didn't refuse me going first. I felt like an FBI agent in one of those spy movies with my gun out in front and my body following cautiously behind.

Many of the servers had a whole lot of drives inserted into it that were blinking a variety of colors. When I reached the last set of servers, I crouched down and peered around to see who was working on the computer. It was Xen.

Of course, it had to be him. I mean, it would be just too easy if it was some regular thug. At that moment an exclamatory prompt appeared on the left monitor which said, "Warning! Security Breach!"

"Stupid prompt," Xen mumbled under his breath as he clicked the close button on the prompt, "Stop popping up!"

On that note, I decided to make use of the element of surprise. I sprang out from behind the server and advanced on Xen – my taser ready.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't my slightly deranged cousin all alone and without protection? What are you doing here?" I sarcastically asked him.

Xen jumped a bit, but remained composed. He reached to his left to a plate of cookies and shoved a chocolate chip cookie in his mouth, then began typing on his keyboard again. It looked like he was working on some code.

"Shime shnot shup to shanyshing," Xen replied with a mouth full of carbs.

"Oh, cut the innocent guy act," I replied sharply, "and stop typing – you are under arrest!"

Xen then proceeded to choke dramatically on his cookie and swallowed hard. "Under arrest? For what?! I'm as straight as a boy scout!"

With that I jumped forward and swung his chair around so he was face to face with me.

"WHAT DID YOU DO WITH MY DAD'S WEAPON PLANS!"

Xen just broke into a huge smile and reached over for a macadamia nut cookie, but instead got a handful of a furry body.

"Ack! What in the world is that!" Xen yelled in surprise.

"Sorry, Kai, Spark got away from me – she really likes cookies!" I turned around to see that Anaya and Zelena had come up behind me holding Bitty and Ferret respectively. Spark was polishing off the macadamia nut cookie.

"Scrap the talk and get to the point," I growled.

"Okay, then," Xen began, "Yep, we did get the files, and we have them on the servers. I'm just finishing up sending them to the bosses in China."

"In that case, we have no time to lose," I told Xen – though more for the benefit of Anaya and Zelena. I deftly lunged behind the chair, pulled it back as far as it could and then let it snap back. Xen was launched out of the chair and collided with a particularly hard looking server a few feet away.

"Owe! What was that for?" Xen asked as he slowly got back to his feet.

"Can you get us in?" I asked Zelena.

"Duh!" Zelena replied. She grabbed the chair like a pro, plugged in a device to a port nearby and started tapping and clicking away at a ludicrous rate.

Xen, meanwhile, walked back over and snatched another peanut butter cookie from under Spark – I grabbed a snickerdoodle too.

"I'm so scared," Xen sarcastically told me.

“Zelena is the best hacker there is,” Anaya replied hotly, “She could hack circles around you.”

“Shhatever,” Xen replied as crumbs tumbled out of his mouth onto the floor. It occurred to me that Xen had really bad manners.

“What is your deal?” I asked Xen, “You seem to be super calm and collected.”

“Oh, that? Well, I just know that Zelena will never get in – she doesn’t know the password!” Xen casually stated.

“Awe, but that is where you are wrong my poor, disillusioned friend,” I replied in my best evil super villain voice, “For Zelena has developed a password decipher program. You mine as well give up.”

At this, Xen’s bravado faded partially, but immediately returned when the computer beeped loudly. “Password denied,” a deep baritone voice coming from the computer system said.

“Uh, Kaiser, the coding in this system is way too intense. It will take me at least a few hours before I could get my program installed correctly at the right place and discover the password.”

I grabbed Xen and yelled in his face, “Tell me the password, now!” I yelled – then gave him a slight squeeze on the left shoulder. A tiny shock of current transferred to Xen and caused him to yelp.

“OWWEE! I’m not telling you anything, sucker!” Xen replied while rubbing his shoulder. Before I could do anything else, Zelena spoke up again.

“I was able to hack into the security feed system for this building, and there is a red safe in the main office that may have the password. Oftentimes, people stick the list of passwords for their devices in safes.”

“How are we going to get into there though? We can’t exactly waltz right in – the main office is probably crawling with thugs!” I replied.

“True,” Zelena replied sadly, “In just the last 20 seconds five different guys have gone by.”

“Well, we can use our pets. I’ll bet they could crawl nicely through this building’s old air conditioning and heating system.” Anaya spoke up.

“Really?” Xen and I both replied together.

“Absolutely,” Anaya replied confidently. “They did it at my house, and my house is just about as old as this place. It’s just kept up better,” Anaya added quickly.

With that, Anaya pulled her smart phone out of her pocket and loaded the app. Spark quickly gulped down another peppermint cookie and hurried over to Anaya with Bitty and Ferret. I use a hammer smash to break open the air duct over our heads and boosted the pets into the opening. Luckily, the pipe bent parallel to the room so they didn’t have to scale vertical walls. As Anaya typed commands into her smartphone and watched their progress, Zelena kept tabs on the security feed system. I too pulled out my phone and watched through Spark’s camera.

Xen, intrigued, watched over my shoulder. I gave him a menacing look, and he backed off a little.

They weaved through the system and reached a grate. Spark showed her camera through the grating, and I saw a room full of guns, weapons, and other gadgetry.

"Wrong room," I told Anaya.

"What room were they looking into?" Zelena asked.

"I believe it was a weapons room. We are now progressing onward," Anaya answered.

"Perfect!" Zelena replied. "Take them through a left, left, right, right, and left again. I have the building's air conditioning system up on my computer. My dad certainly keeps detailed records of his buildings!"

"Your Dad?!" I asked quizzically.

"I'll tell you later," Zelena replied hastily.

In a matter of moments, the pets found the grating.

"How are they going to get through the grating?" Anaya asked.

"Easy, activate module 2 on Spark's suit," I replied.

"Okay!"

On Sparks feed, I saw exactly what I had hoped to see. A red laser shot out of the suit and sliced right through the clasps in the grating. The grating flew open and revealed the back of a couch.

"You are now on the floor of the room. The safe is to the right," Zelena announced proudly. On Spark's feed, I quickly scanned the room. They were in what would have been a nicely furnished room, if it wasn't for the fact that it was being taken apart. However, all of them were standing right next to a large red safe that was under the only desk in the room.

"The password must be in there!" Anaya told me as she watched the action via Bitty's feed.

"Open!" I commanded Spark.

"What! They can't open that!" Anaya told me. The pets froze for a minute; then, Bitty jumped on top of Ferret and squeaked. Ferret stood up straight, swaying just a little. Bitty then stuck her teeny little ear up against the safe, next to the dial and squeaked again. My video feed shook as Spark reached up to the dial. Spark then proceeded to turn the dial one number at a time. On the number "5" Bitty tapped the safe door and gestured with her left paw. Spark started rotating the dial to the left. At "1," Bitty tapped the safe door again, and gestured with her right paw. Spark then rotated the dial to the right. At "9," there was an audible-click and the safe door swung open. It was so heavy that it knocked Ferret, Spark, and Bitty over. Spark rolled over and peered inside the safe. Inside, were wads of dollar bills, but no paper with a password on it. Then, things got worse - Xen pulled a gun out of the shirt.

I hadn't noticed it in there, but then again, it was pretty dark so I couldn't really be blamed. Xen immediately reverted back to his annoying self.

"Now YOU guys are under arrest!" Xen announced.

“Cookie?” I replied and snatched the plate of cookies off the desk.

“Wha—” Xen started saying, but I swung the plate of cookies at him, and it slammed full force into his forehead. I guess cookies were good for something other than making you fat. Who knew?!

I followed the cookie tactic up with a leg slice and knocked the gun out of his hand. Xen lunged for it, but I launched myself at him and knocked him into the wall.

“Stupid weaponizer!” Xen spat in my face. Xen swung his fist at my face, but I caught it with my hands and gave it a nice hard squeeze. Xen’s body went rigid and collapsed unconscious.

I turned around to see Zelena staring at me with wide eyes. I guess she wasn’t used to so much violence. “Is he okay?” Zelena began.

“Oh, he’ll be fine in a few hours. It wasn’t too strong of a shock.”

“Stupid weaponizer!” Zelena exclaimed. “That’s it!”

“Huh?” I began.

Zelena typed furiously on her keyboard and triumphantly banged her fist on the desk. “I’m in!” Zelena exclaimed. Then, with the knowledge of a computer genius, Zelena pulled up the database and began downloading stuff to her device, while Anaya (as I could see on Spark’s feed) directed the pets back into the air duct. I was just starting to wonder what I should do when the computer-room door burst open, and my purpose became clear.

Zelena was furiously typing on the keyboard, trying to get all the incriminating evidence off of their database and onto her USB drive while simultaneously monitoring our pets’ status via the building’s video while Anaya relayed simple instructions to them via her headset and camera views. What was I doing? Keeping the Chinese agents at bay. It wasn’t too hard, but it was a dangerous game because they had lethal weapons and were not afraid to use them, while I didn’t really want to kill anyone. As I let a guard grab me around the waist so that I could then launch him over my shoulder and into another unsuspecting thug, I yelled to Zelena, “How’s it going?!”

“Okay, it should only be a few more minutes. Do you think you can hold?” I tripped another agent who had pulled his gun on Anaya and sent him to his knees in pain with an improvised side-breaker.

“Zelena where in the building are they?” asked Anaya, breathless with worry. They’re stuck in the air duct and trying to figure out how to get past the heating unit.

“How?!” I exclaimed, “They made it there without having to go through the heating unit!”

“Well, actually that is not completely true,” Anaya said, “They just climbed over it since it was off. With all of the doors open and all the cold air flooding in, the heating unit turned on and now it is just too hot to climb over.”

Two more agents arrived around the corner, one holding a machine gun. I drove my shoulder into the sniper’s stomach and slung him around like a very heavy sack of potatoes. I

then let go and he slammed into the wall-creating a nice indentation into the sheet rock. I scooped up his gun and aimed for the machine gun.

"Don't try nothing or your friends are toast," the machine -gunner yelled at me. Zelena and Anaya were so busy they didn't even notice the barrel of the guy's gun aimed squarely at them.

"Okay, okay. What should I do?" I replied.

"Hand me that pistol!"

"Okay, and take this extra surprise," I offered. As I reached out the gun to hand it to him, I pulled the trigger and studded his machine gun barrel with a hole right at the barrel. He pulled the trigger on his gun, but all that happened was that it blew up and fiery bits of metal flew everywhere. Luckily, I was wearing my motorcycle helmet and protective suit but the agents weren't that lucky. Many of them, already unconscious, ended up with sharp bits of shrapnel in their immaculate suits. There was going to have to be a large cleanup effort afterwards.

In between breaths, I yelled over to Anaya, "Any ideas on how to get them out?" "No, they are so close just over there," Anaya said as she pointed to the opposite end of the room where the air duct slanted through the sheet rock and into the opposing room.

"Got it!" Zelena yelled. She slammed a few more keys and yanked out her flash drive. "Let's go!"

"But the pets! They still haven't arrived!" Anaya replied. As I knocked out the last incoming guard, I ran over to the air duct and sent my best-aimed kicks into the air duct. My hands and feet took a beating, but I did create a sizeable dent in the air duct. With all my might, I did a turbo knee thrust and punched a whole through it. Spark jumped through and landed on my head with Ferret and Bitty following suit.

"Bitty!" Anaya screamed.

"Grab 'em and come on!" I told her. "We HAVE to get out of here."

Zelena grabbed the ferrets while Anaya scooped up Bitty. We then bolted for the door and down the hallway.

"Stop right there!" a heavily accented voice said. I turned around to see five heavily machine gunned guys pointing their guns at us.

"GO!" I yelled and dived for the ground. The men immediately started firing at me (since I was the one coming at them) which allowed Anaya and Zelena to turn the corner and disappear from sight. I knew I only had a few seconds before I would be dead, but at least Anaya and Zelena would be alive. I flipped and twisted about while moving towards them. Miraculously, I was almost on them, when I felt a sharp pain in my side and stomach. It felt like someone had stabbed a knife there. I bit my lip and lashed out. All five went down quick despite the nasty pain I was enduring. Then, I limped back down the hallway and around the corner, just as bullets ripped the wall and yells sounded behind me. *There were more coming!* Just how many of these guys there were, I did not know, but I wanted to be alive so I barged through the exit. I ran down the street and over to my motorcycle. When I reached the

warehouse where we had parked our vehicles, I saw Anaya and Zelena's car leaving the parking lot and roaring out the gate.

"How's Bitty?" I yelled into my headset's intercom.

"She's alive; you?" Anaya answered.

"Alive as well, I'm coming," I replied, jumping on my motorcycle. I did a wheelie down the parking lot. Suddenly, a volley of bullets came out of the shadows and rammed into my helmet. I heard a cracking noise, and the left side of my helmet fell away, allowing the right half to come off as well. *Great, now I'm helmet-less too, besides my side killing me.* I came out of the front gate and was about to turn left after my friends, but a large SUV had driven down the street and was blocking any cars to my left, so I turned right and sped down the street. At that intersection, a few more black cars pulled out and forced me onto the sidewalk. I whipped around a few street lights and skidded onto Martin Street. A few shots rang out, but nothing too close. As I drove recklessly down the street and fish-tailed onto another. A bunch of silver-colored Dodge chargers came at me from the left. *How can this get any worse? Now I have the Japanese agents after me too, they must think I have all the info that Mom never gave them.* I flew up a parked trailer that was tilted onto the ground and soared over the cars, coming down hard on the other side. Then, I jumped the curb and rode down the bike path towards the city park. I looked back in time to see SUVs and Dodges following me down the path as well. It sure was a good thing that no pedestrians were on the path at this time of the day (which happened to be 8pm by the way). I reached the park very quickly, and turned towards the parking lot, but I noticed more SUVs there as well. Then two thoughts hit me at once. First, I had been unusually lucky to make it this far. Second, they were doing all this, because they were forcing me towards Dee Bridge (which, in case I didn't mention it, is under construction - i.e. the middle part of the bridge is nonexistent). I only had one choice really, or I was going to be dead anyway so I pressed my petal down all the way and roared up the bridge. I hit 200mph halfway up the bridge, then, at the last minute I applied a slight pressure to my back break, which launched me into the air, straight over the river.

Everything started going into slow-motion. I had heard of this happening to people in death-defying moments before, but now it was happening to me! As my bike soared through the air, I tried to size up if I was going to make it, and the reality did not look good. I wasn't. So, I did the only thing I knew of, I pulled my legs up and jammed them against the motorcycle, pushing it backwards and me forwards. I stretched my hands out, hoping to catch the other side of the bridge. At the last moment, my fingers met concrete, and the rest of my body pulled down. I almost lost my grip, but I was still wearing my tough gloves, so I held on. I could see some orange construction cones in front of me and hear the engines of a dozen SUVs behind me on the other half of the bridge.

My first thought was "Yes! I made it and am alive!" My second thought was "Owe, I do not feel good." and my last thought was "Are they really shooting at me?!" The concrete around the edge of the bridge erupted into puffs of dust and dirt. I could try to climb up, and run, but

there was no telling if that was going to work, let alone that there already may be more agents on this half of the bridge. My stomach cramped up, and I lost my grip on the bridge - meaning I plunged downwards. I knew that most humans can't live through a drop more than 150 ft, and I was sure that this was at least that. I prayed to God (since that was the only supernatural entity I thought may actually exist) that He would protect my family and pointed my toes as best I could while raising my hands above my head. Suddenly, I felt water on my toes and then I saw nothing - and felt nothing.

Appendix A:

Excerpt from

Success Is Not An Option

Xen:

“Get those girls!” I yelled to the other agents. You would think that catching two highschoolers would be a piece of cake but they had proven themselves in many ways and were harder to catch than greased pigs. That was why me and some fellow agents from China were running through the forest after two girls and their pets. In retrospect, this all sounds pretty silly.

Being the faster of the bunch, I managed to gain on the girls until I was a scarce yard behind the younger one (named Zelena). I dove on top of her and flattened her on the ground. However, I was then attacked by a crazed ferret. As I tried to pry it off my face, the girl rolled away and ran off again - just to get nailed by two large agents. I would have cheered, but I had ferret hair in my mouth, and my face was getting mauled. I finally managed to get the thing off my face, just as the rest of the agents dragged in the last girl (Anaya).

“Get help, quick!” Anaya yelled. With that, the ferret disappeared into the bushes quickly followed by another ferret. Nobody followed them. All of us agents knew that doing so would be a colossal waste of time; trying to find small rodents is nearly impossible. Zelena started kicking and screaming, but she was not big enough to get away, and we dragged her to our containment unit - a U-Haul truck we rented the other day. What better way to confiscate our enemies than with a non-descript moving truck?! As my thugs tied them up and shoved them into the back of the truck, I sneered at them.

“You’re going to give us what we want or you’ll never see daylight again!” I told them. Then, I slammed the back door of the truck down.

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Zelena:

As the truck started down the road, I thought back to the events of the past few months. Anaya and I were the only ones who knew the location of the valuable USB drive, and we were not going to tell anyone where it was. Kai’s last instructions before being taken to the intensive care in the best hospital in the nation told us not to let it fall into the wrong hands. Unfortunately, Kai’s deranged cousin, Xen, also knew we had it and had been following us. He had managed to track us down to this old road when we were driving home from a concert and ambushed us. We may have been smart, but we couldn’t beat a whole armada of armed Chinese agents.

“How are we going to get out of this one?” I asked Anaya. Anaya smiled.

“They didn’t get my hamster!” With that, Bitty climbed out of her shirt and onto Anaya’s jeans.

"A little help?" Anaya asked her hamster. Bitty immediately began work on the thick rope keeping her hands together.

A good hour later, my hands were freed due to Bitty's incredibly sharp teeth. I was just starting to get some circulation.

"Can we get out of this truck now?"

"I don't think so, it's probably locked from the outside," Anaya replied.

"Rats!"

That was when the shooting started.

Despite the truck being rather loud, it had been fairly smooth, but I had just heard what sounded distinctly like a gunshot. Then, I heard a whole volley of them. Soon there was the studded shooting of a machine gun and the violent squealing of car breaks followed by breaking glass, exploding tires, and other noises I couldn't quite pick out. Suddenly, our truck turned sharply and Anaya and I were slammed up against the side of the truck. We quickly dropped to the ground and tried to hold on for dear life (which was hard to do because there was not much to hold onto).

"What's going on?" I exclaimed.

"I don't know, is someone saving us?" Anaya spoke breathlessly. The gunshots died down briefly when suddenly our truck stopped on a dime with a sickly crunch - sending us into the front of the truck. I tried to protect my head with my hands, but I knew I was still going to have a nasty bruise. Then, the truck tipped over.

Anaya and I slowly disentangled ourselves, looked at each other, and crawled towards the door. I had barely reached out to touch it when the door slid open, and I found myself staring at an agent - a shorter American male with sunglasses. He looked just like I imagined an FBI agent to look like - nicely tailored suit with a radio wire snaking down from his ear.

"Look out behind you!" Anaya cried - just as I noticed Xen charging the agent from behind. The agent calmly put his arms behind him and slung Xen over his shoulders. Xen flew through the air - right over our heads - and into a tree by the side of the road with a crunch.

"I trust things have been eventful in my absence?" the agent said, while looking us straight in the face.

"Huh?-" Anaya began, but immediately stopped talking because he removed his sunglasses, and I found myself staring straight at none other than Kai Hwang.

Author Bios

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Kaiser Slocum is a Sophomore at Lane Community College, majoring in Computer Science. He is getting an ASOT and will move on to get a Bachelors at the University of Oregon. Currently, he is a Senior Archive Specialist at a local engineering firm, and does yard-care and other odd jobs when time allows. On his spare time Kaiser likes to play chess, program applications, build Lego robots, and watch his favorite TV series.

Kirsten Slocum:

Kirsten Slocum is currently enrolled in Baker Charters Online School as a Freshman. She plans on becoming a teacher for younger kids when she grows up as well as being a missionary for people who do not know about the Lord. In preparation for what the Lord has for her later on in her life, she is a participant of CYIA and teaches Bible clubs for kids. In her free time, she likes to watch movies, read books, and spend time with her friends.

Kailey Slocum:

Kailey Slocum is a high school senior and a new student at Lane Community College, pursuing an Associates of Applied Science in Multimedia Design, and an AAOT degree. She loves painting, drawing, horseback riding, playing guitar and piano, expanding her technology skills, listening to pop music, and reading books. Volunteering at a local Bible club, attending a Bible study, and housecleaning keep her busy in addition to her homework.

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Ferret and Spark are just two ordinary ferrets who have several things in common: They both were adopted, they both like pepperoni, they both love their masters, and they both like each other. There is just one problem, their masters get themselves caught up in a crisis involving national and universal security. To help, these two, brave ferrets team up with one very adorable hamster, Bitty, to rescue their masters. The problem with that is that they only have one shot - one mission - and one in which Failure Is Not An Option.