

**THE ROYAL ONE**

**DANIELA RIOS**



This book was distributed courtesy of:



For your own Unlimited Reading and FREE eBooks today, visit:  
<http://www.Free-eBooks.net>

*Share this eBook with anyone and everyone automatically by selecting any of the options below:*



[Share on Facebook](#)



[Share on Twitter](#)



[Share on LinkedIn](#)



[Send via e-mail](#)

To show your appreciation to the author and help others have wonderful reading experiences and find helpful information too, we'd be very grateful if you'd kindly  
[post your comments for this book here.](#)



## **COPYRIGHT INFORMATION**

Free-eBooks.net respects the intellectual property of others. When a book's copyright owner submits their work to Free-eBooks.net, they are granting us permission to distribute such material. Unless otherwise stated in this book, this permission is not passed onto others. As such, redistributing this book without the copyright owner's permission can constitute copyright infringement. If you believe that your work has been used in a manner that constitutes copyright infringement, please follow our Notice and Procedure for Making Claims of Copyright Infringement as seen in our Terms of Service here:

<http://www.free-ebooks.net/tos.html>

—

—

—

—

# The Royal One damari

—

—

—

—

—

—

—

—

—

—

—

ONE

It was the morning Andre anticipated ever since he learned about the

competition in school. He didn't want to have any part of it, afraid it would mean dire consequences if he didn't win. But that wasn't the point at all. The point was to find the next king and queen of the country of Rengal.

For centuries, the country had been run the same, electing new rulers through a competition. But as a result of the overpopulation decades earlier, parliament had decided to change the rules of the game.

During the months of January, May, June, and December of every year, mothers would be allowed to give birth. Any child born before or after wouldn't be kept. It was a rule, which Andre thought to be ridiculous. He had lost a brother from his mother's early delivery and made a vow that day to do whatever possible to change the rules. That law worked for a couple of years, until there was another problem, allowing every child to enter the competition would take a fairly long time. So, another law came into effect regarding the competition. Only males born in the month of May and females born in the month of June would be allowed to compete. This helped limit the amount of kids eligible once they turned eighteen so the competition would be ready to start in the month of July.

Unsure whether to be happy that this day had finally arrived or nervous about what's yet to happen, Andre got up from bed and dressed with the clothes sent over from the palace. It was a custom tradition for all the young males to wear the same black pants, white dress shirt, and red tie; and the young females to wear the same knee length red, black, and white colored dress. Both attires representing the country's official colors.

In the break of dawn, Andre's parents, Diane and Lenny Pearson, prepared a special morning meal so they could celebrate this event as a family first before making it national. His younger sister, Cindy, didn't seem to fully understand what the whole event was about, but he knew she would learn soon.

"Morning sweetie," his mother exclaimed as soon as she saw him. "My, don't you look so handsome. I bet all the girls won't be able to take their eyes off of you. Oh, I wish they allowed parents to accompany their children." She looked him up and down and smiled. Then with one tear streaming down her left cheek, she embraced Andre tightly.

"Oh, mom," he said, returning the hug. "Mom, it's okay. Don't cry," but she wouldn't let go. His father stepped into the living room and saw Andre stuck in the embrace.

"Oh, honey. You'll wrinkle the shirt," Andre's father said and pulled his wife's arms off Andre.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay, mom," Andre replied, giving his mom a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Oh." she said and wiped her eyes with her apron. She breathed deeply and then expressed a big smile. "Okay, enough of the emotional train wreck that is your mother, we prepared a special something for you," she said, leading him over to the dining table. Andre saw the table set for the four members of his family, decorated with plates, napkins, silverware, tall glass cups, and a fruit basket centered in the middle.

Cindy jumped on her chair and with her arms spread out wide, she yelled,

“Surprise!”

Andre laughed and walked over to pick her up. Then after a quick spin with her on his back, he hugged her and then went back to his parents. “Thanks, mom.”

“You’re welcome honey. Now, come on. Let’s eat before they come for you.”

The family sat down at the table and ate like they haven’t eaten in weeks. Andre’s plate was filled with fruit from the basket, eggs from their chicken house, and toasted bread from their wheat farm in the back. Andre’s parents owned 34 acres of land in the town of Slember, the farthest from the kingdom. But, he liked living nowhere near the busy streets of Mellani, the closest town to the palace. Even though the five towns were all under the same kingdom, each one ran itself independently, and only came together when necessary.

The car showed up two hours after the family had their morning meal together. It was a black van with tinted back and side windows, which made it hard for him to see if there were any other kids inside. There was no marking on the van, no image, either. It was just a plain dark van. Andre turned to his parents before getting inside, and smiled. He wasn’t going to come back home for a while, so he wanted to make the moment last as long as possible. The king had already chosen the ten males and ten females that would compete, so Andre wouldn’t see his family until December when they announced the new king and queen. It almost didn’t seem fair, but those have been the rules for almost 200 years. One objection wasn’t going to change anything.

Andre waved at his family one last time, then got in the van. A tall man closed the door behind him, then stepped inside the passenger seat, and the car took off. There was another kid in the van, wearing the same thing as Andre, and dark shoes. His hair was short and black, his expression was fierce. They exchanged looks and Andre knew this was the kid he had to look out for. There was no way of telling how bad this competition would get. The training would decide how dedicated each competitor was, and the tests would give the final answer.

Andre wasn’t sure how to approach this kid, but he knew if they kept this anger between them before even knowing each other’s names, there would be no hope at all. Andre extended his hand towards the guy next to him and said, “Andre.”

“Jones.” The two shook hands. Andre turned back to face the front of the car, staring out the window into the open road up ahead. Neither of them spoke again until they picked up another kid. He wore the same thing as them, and boarded the van without a word. Andre didn’t bother to introduce himself, too eager to pick up everyone already and arrive at the palace. He was anxious to get this thing started, because the sooner it began the sooner it would end. It wasn’t until they got to the next town over that they picked up the first girl.

—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
TWO

Her hair was long and straightened to reveal the shiny black color. Her pale skin made her all the more attractive. She jumped on the step of the van and holding on to the handle on the door; she pulled herself onto the carpeted floor. She sat down on the second row, directly behind the driver and leaned over to close the door before she settled down. With a loud bang sealing the van once more, the vehicle took off for the next home.

Andre had only caught a small glimpse of the girls face, but her bright red

lips could stand out anywhere. She scooted over to the window and crossed her legs, resting her hands so gracefully on her lap. She stared out the window, studying the land closely, almost as if examining it to give it a grade. Then she turned her head forward and didn't move again.

Andre was positive he wanted to get to know her better, and the way to do that was to sit next to her before the next kid did. So, ever so quickly and quietly, he bent down and got up, jumping to the row in front of him, and sat down next to her, making sure to leave some space between them. She didn't flinch as he did that, but kept her head facing the seat in front of her. Andre cleared his throat and turned to face the girl.

"I'm Andre," extending his hand to her, offering a friendly shake. She didn't respond at first, but then looked down at his open palm. She glanced at him and lifted her hand. It was soft against Andre's skin, but her grip was strong, stronger than Andre would've thought.

"I'm Faith," she said, and retreated after a long pause.

"Cool name," Andre commented, but Faith didn't reply or even move. Andre thought about what he should say next, but his thoughts were all scattered throughout his brain, making it impossible to speak again.

They picked up another six kids, all guys, and then they were on route to the palace. One guy wanted to sit in Andre's row, making Andre have an excuse to move closer to Faith to make room for the guy. But as desperately as he wanted it, they didn't talk anymore. He tried gathering his thoughts; make an attempt at conversation with her, but nothing good enough that might impress her came to mind. One thing he knew for sure, he wanted to know her. Andre was able to push that aside in time for the arrival at the palace.

It was a huge castle, made of dark gray stone on the outside, but beautifully painted walls all throughout the interior of the building. The fountain that lay in the center of the grassy field right before the entrance was surrounded by flowers of all different colors, brightening the mood. The day had begun cloudy, but eventually, some sunlight was able to get through. When the van pulled up to the gate, Andre and the others had to stay put in the van until the check-in booth was available. After twenty endless minutes waiting, the automobile started up again, and drove through the first booth.

"Vehicle number three. Nine males and one female. Henry Calvert and Michael Howard," said the driver in a deep, masculine voice, removing the dark shades he wore all throughout the ride, hiding his face from the rest. The man in the booth wrote something down, and then turned to type on the computer behind him. Since the windows were tinted, it was hard for Andre to see the screen of the monitor. With a sudden nod from the man in the booth, the van engine roared and the van proceeded to the open tent that was set up nearly two hundred feet from the palace.

As soon as the van came to a stop, both men in the driver's seat and the passenger seat got out. The driver went to sign some papers for a guy coming toward the van. The guy in the passenger seat opened the side of the van and



everyone took turns descending the vehicle. When Andre got out, he turned around and held his hand out to Faith, offering help to step down. Without thinking about it, she took it and squeezed it, using it for support climbing down.

“Thanks,” she said and let go to fix her dress.

“You look fine,” he said, trying to make conversation like he’d been practicing the entire ride there. But she only smiled and walked off to check herself in.

Andre looked down and tried to fix himself as well, fidgeting with the end of his tie. Then he ran his fingers through his hair and walked across the lawn to where Faith was bent over signing what must have been her name. She heard him approach and looked up as he stepped right behind her.

“What?” she asked. For the first time, he was able to look into her eyes, beautiful hazel eyes which were more noticeable by the paleness of her skin, the redness of her lips, and the blackness of her hair. Andre realized how gorgeous she really was.

“Umm...Could you help me loosen my tie a bit?” he asked, putting his hands in his pants pockets, tilting his head to the side. Faith looked at him, as if thinking whether to do it or not. But she reached her hands out and with one gripping the tie; she used the other to pull down on the knot, creating a small gap, between his neck and the top of the tie.

“Better?” she asked, not dropping her hands.

He nodded in reply and Faith released her hands, dropping them slowly, gently feeling her way down his chest, then his abdomen, and then dropping them completely. They looked each other in the eyes for a couple more seconds, neither one of them moving, but as if talking with their minds. Then Faith smiled and walked off.

Andre followed her with his eyes and held his breath, fighting the urge to go after her. There was something about her that made him nervous whenever she came in close contact. It was the need to impress her that made him dizzy, afraid that if he didn’t, she might disappear. That he couldn’t take her going away. The feeling was somewhat still confusing, but Andre wasn’t giving in so easily. The strong connection he felt between them just now faded as quickly as it came. So, Andre wanted more than ever, to get it back and make it stay.

# THREE

"Name, sir?" asked the lady sitting behind the table on the lawn under the tent. She was wearing a black collared shirt with a white overcoat and a name tag that said Beth Joans: Phase Two Receptionist. She looked at him with curious eyes, as if actually wondering what his name was. Andre didn't know why, but he looked shocked and hesitated before answering.

"Andre Pearson," he replied. The lady wrote it down on the piece of paper in front of her, then circled something, wrote down something else under it, and finally stamped it at the very bottom. She placed it in a pile of other papers and took out a new one from the other pile. She signaled a guy behind her with two fingers, and before Andre could tell who it was or what they were going to do, a snapping sound and a bright flash came at once. Andre blinked several times and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, trying to erase the light from his eyes.

"What was that?" he asked, but the lady was already focused on the guy behind Andre. She didn't even acknowledge that he was still there.

"Name, sir?" the lady asked, as if trying to get rid of Andre and keep her pace. Andre could tell that he was slowing her down and decided to move out of her way before another flash happened and left him blind for good.

"This way," someone said from behind, grabbing hold of Andre's shoulder and pulling him towards the next tent.

"Who are you?" Andre asked. He restrained from moving, but the boy's grip was too strong to fight off for very long.

"Kyle Armstrong," he offered his hand out to Andre.

"Andre Pearson." They shook hands and Andre knew he was going to like this kid. He stopped resisting and began walking on his own, giving Kyle the cue to let go of his shoulder, which he was now squeezing way too hard.

"So, you ready for this thing?" asked Kyle.

"What you mean?" questioned Andre.

"The competition."

"Oh, yeah. I mean, I guess."

"What you mean 'I guess'?"

"I don't know, man. It's not like we have a choice here."

"Guess you're right."

"If I could change this thing, I would. This bloody law took my brother, and my sister won't get to run for queen. I swore to my parents I'd change it if I won."

"Man, you don't know nothin', do you?"

"Huh?"

"It's parliament that votes to change the rules, not you. Even if you do get king, they all gotta vote for it to happen. If they don't wanna change anything, they won't. End of story," Kyle explained.

"Yeah, we'll see," Andre said.

"Keep talking like that, and you'll be the first one to go," Kyle warned and jogged ahead of him, annoyed at Andre's poor common sense.

"Pfft. Whatever," he muttered to himself and walked along the grass until he reached an available desk in the second tent.

"Wrist, please, sir," a guy said, holding his hand out from behind the desk.

Andre didn't object and extended his arm to the man. The man grabbed Andre's wrist roughly and pulled it closer to him, making Andre lean over against the edge of the table. The man wore the same collared black shirt and white overcoat as the women, but had no visible name tag. The man wrapped a black watch around Andre's wrist and pushed some buttons to set it up. Before returning his arm, the man took a small scanner and scanned the watch. A slight beep sound and the man let go of Andre's arm.

"Next!" the man yelled, and Andre took that as his cue to leave for the final tent.

Andre looked down at the watch tied around his left arm and it seemed very confusing altogether. There was a total of seven miniature buttons, a scroll on the side, and a dark screen divided in two---the top side told the time of day and the bottom half seemed to be a countdown timer that wasn't yet set. Andre didn't want to get in trouble for experimenting with it, so he left it alone.

He reached the third and final tent, which stood no further than fifty feet from the fountain. The tent was open, like the others, but had various closets around the middle. He had gotten close enough that a young, preppy-looking woman approached him with a measuring tape around her neck. Surprisingly, she came with a smile spread about her face, brightening every inch of skin on her body.

"Hello. What size, hun?" she asked. Andre was so stunned by her kindness, he remained speechless. "Alright, then. I'll just measure you." She removed the tape from her neck and lifted his arms out wide. She measured from wrist to elbow, from wrist to shoulder, from shoulder to shoulder across his chest and back. She measured from his shoulder to his waist, from right hip to left hip, from waist to ankle, and lastly across his butt. Without having to write down any of the measurements she just took, she smiled and walked to one of the closets centered in the middle of the tent.

A couple of minutes passed and Andre was still standing there, waiting. The tent was beginning to empty out and he wondered what was taking the lady so long. To pass the time, he played with his tie, tightening it and loosening it. It reminded him of Faith. How she had fixed his tie for him knowing there was nothing irritating about it. What mattered most to him was that she played along, which meant she must have cared.

The sight of the young woman coming back from the closet forced Andre to push that thought aside once more.

"Here you go, sweetie. Sorry it took so long. Now hurry up and change," she said. The lady walked away again before Andre could respond and began working on someone else. Andre walked off, with the jumpsuit in his hands. He studied it for a bit as he was making his way through the lawn. It was entirely made of black cloth, with decorative red stripes around the ankles, wrists, neck, and waist. There was also a white printed name on the right. He squinted his eyes to be able to read it better, and saw the letters spelled his name in unique fancy writing. However, it was only his first name and a picture of a hammer underneath. It seemed odd to him, but he couldn't question clothing that came





The room Andre walked into was large in size, but nothing compared to what he remembered about it. It had extravagant paintings everywhere, and the floor was polished to the point where he could see his reflection. The columns that stood in the middle of the room and around corners were made of light colored granite stone, and felt smooth in comparison to his roughly made walls back home. It was different in a way that didn't make sense to him. Everything about the competition was different somehow, from the documentation of the competitors, giving them a wristwatch, changing the uniform, and assigning suites to them. It was organized in a way he never heard of before. In each suite, there would be a male and a female staying together. They each had their own portion of the bedroom, with a bed, a dresser that remained empty throughout the months, a night table with a lamp, and a small window facing either the front of the palace or the back. Usually, the suites would be one floor for the males and one for the females, but this change made him wonder how different the competition would really be.

There was no introduction of the rules like there usually was on the first day. Instead, they made them change into the uniforms they received outside, and head straight to their rooms. Andre looked on the door of his assigned room, C-3, and lightly tapped on the door. He was afraid of entering without knocking for the girls' sake.

"Come in," said a faded voice from the inside. It was familiar in a way that he loved.

With a smile across his face, he opened the door and walked in. There she was.

"Hey," he said in a welcoming tone. He closed the door behind him, not taking his eyes off of her. She was so beautiful in her uniform; he had forgotten all about his concern for competition and its surprising change of rules.

"Hi," she said back. She turned her head to the window again, returning to her original position. He looked down and tried very hard to figure out what to say, not wanting to let the conversation die out this time. It was his second chance at getting to know her, and he wasn't going to let that pass. "So, I guess we're roommates."

"Guess so," she didn't look at him, which made him think he should just leave her alone. But he was giving up just yet.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

She shifted in her seat and pulled her knees up to her chest. "Not really," she said.

"Why? What's wrong?" he looked concerned and sat on the windowsill beside her. He wasn't sure if it seemed like he was coming on too strong, but he placed his hand on her knee, trying to soothe her.

"I overheard some men talking inside a room on my way here."

"And...what did they say?"

"They were talking about the rules."

“What did they say?” Andre urged her. She hesitated, unsure whether to tell him or not.

“They were...” she paused.

“Yeah?”

“Talking about the competition.”

“And?”

“About the rules and stuff.”

“What about the rules?” he was getting more eager to hear her out, and every time she paused, he felt like shaking her, spilling all the secrets she was keeping back.

“You know how things this year are different?”

“Different as in, what?”

“Like, the photograph at the first tent, the wristwatch at the second,” she held her hand out to him to show him she had gotten one as well, “the uniforms, and getting roomed with someone from the opposite gender.” Andre nodded in reply. “Well, they were talking about the outcome of the game.”

“The outcome? So they already know who’s gonna win?”

“No,” she shook her head and leaned back against the frame of the windowsill.

“Then, what?” he couldn’t wait any longer.

“What’s going to happen to those who don’t win?”

Andre stared at her, in complete disbelief. They had changed everything about this thing.

It was a completely new competition; a better word for it was a game. “What will happen to them?” he asked.

She stared out the window, the same way she had done when she studied the land on ride to the palace. She was biting her lip, refusing to tell him the rest. But he urged her to keep going. It was crucial that he knew everything. Then, very quietly, she said, “They get killed.”

-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-

That night, Andre didn't sleep. He was too preoccupied with what Faith had told him hours earlier. *'They get killed'*...he thought over and over. It was tiresome to hear a phrase continuously repeating while you tried to rest. Various possibilities on how the losers would die popped in and out of his head. They all eventually led to a nightmare.

One kid had dark brown eyes and soft, bouncy, black hair. Despite his confident look, his eyes were filling up with tears, fear rendering its way to his heart making him appear vulnerable. It was one look Andre would never forget. He was standing before a panel of black figures. Andre couldn't see any faces or a sign of them being alive. There was no movement, until one stood and held out their hand. Within an instant, his thumb popped out and was pointed towards the ground. A second black figure stood and did the same, followed by three more. Pretty soon, the entire panel of black figures was standing holding out their right arms and pointing their thumbs to the floor. Then the leader of the group crossed his arms and did what Andre didn't expect, he smiled. The only thing visible was his pure white teeth encircled by a black body-like shadow. Andre heard a scream come from the boy and then a repulsive smell left his body. It was hard to tell what the smell was, but it wasn't pleasant. More likely, it was the smell of something rotting. Perhaps, something that was alive not too long ago. It could have been an animal, but Andre knew the smell of a dead animal; this smell was definitely human. A dead, rotting human body fell from the stand and lay on the floor of the dark room in which the smell now filled completely. A minute passed, everyone motionless, then another came and went. Andre lost track of time, when someone else screamed; another boy. The smell was back, stronger than before. It was more powerful, spreading about the room faster than the first one. Then nothing, no more screams, no more smell. Minutes passed again. Andre became impatient with this whole thing when suddenly; he felt a hand press against his shoulder. He spun around and took hold of the wrist, and noticed it felt soft. The hand felt familiar, and he looked up to the person who it belonged to. It was Faith. For some reason, her face didn't show any glowing features like it had before. It was full of concern and worry, but mostly fear. She, too, was scared. He held her hand in his and pulled her closer, trying to protect her from whatever she was afraid of. She shook her head and lifted her finger to her mouth, motioning him to keep quiet. Then she leaned in to him and kissed him on the cheek. The kiss was soothing and gentle against his sweaty skin, but she didn't show any disgust. Then she fled his side and walked over to where the boy had fallen from. Andre hadn't noticed two more screams come at once, and then silence. He stared at

Faith as she stepped up on a stool and lifted her arms, joining the position of a boy next to her. With a quick glance, Andre could see three other kids standing the same exact way she was. Then, the most uttering thing happened to the one on the end. A spear pushed its way through the boy chest, creating a large enough hole to fit a human arm. It bled uncontrollably, spilling red liquid and body parts all over the floor. A scream from the boy and Andre smelled the odor of a dying body once more. Then silence. The body was dragged away by two black figures, and a third cleaned up the mess. Then a pause, no sudden movements, and no more smell. One minute passed and Andre counted the seconds between each murder. Then, after four minutes and thirty seconds, a spear dug its way through the next chest in line; a scream and then the smell again. That was when Andre realized the routine. He quickly counted the time that passed before the next person was brutally murdered. Three minutes and 30 seconds this time and a third person was killed. The scream and the smell didn't bother him anymore. What did bother him was that Faith was in that line, that line of those to die. He looked at who was next and there she was. His eyes filled with tears, but he fought them back, convinced she wasn't going to die. She couldn't. He screamed and pulled on the metal bars that held him prisoner. He counted one minute, then another. Oddly enough, he reached four minutes and she was still there. Nothing had happened to her. She looked around, probably wondering the same thing as Andre. Then, he caught sight of the spear making its way through her chest. Her scream was all it took to make him look away. It was a high-pitched scream, full of sorrow and hate. The scream replayed over and over in his head. He shut his eyes, but the image of blood pouring out of her body never left. It was devastating for him to cope with those images. The scream didn't fade, but kept going, getting louder each time he tried to push it away. He pressed down on his ears and moved frantically around the cell. Then he opened his eyes and was back in his room.

-  
-  
-  
-  
-

## SIX



The wake-up call came at five am, startling Andre as he got up to open the door. He wore his uniform, unaware that he had forgotten to change last night. The bed was warm, and he regretted having to leave it. The urge to walk over to Faith encircled his mind, but he quickly pushed it aside. The nightmare hadn't given him much chance of sleep, so his exhaustion blocked the way of speaking to her.

He had reached the door in time for the second knock. It was the same as the first, but louder. Whoever was knocking was in a hurry and Andre knew that they wouldn't leave until the door opened. With a quick turn of the knob, the person on the other side pushed the door open, forcing Andre to jump back.

"Hey!" he said, but with the light from the hallway, it was hard for him to see who was there. The person didn't speak at first, probably shocked at the remark that they were given.

"Five minutes," a sweet sounding female voice echoed in Andre's room and the figure left and knocked on the next door just a couple of feet away. Andre didn't catch much of the woman, but he would definitely remember her voice. He abruptly closed the door, upset he couldn't rejoin the comfort of his warm soft bed on the right side of the room. He turned to the left and there lay Faith, sound asleep.

He walked over slowly, and pulled open her curtains, shining heavy light into the room, forcing Andre to squint once again and rub his eyes. Faith didn't move an inch, however. *Man, she's tough...* he thought with a slight chuckle. He glided to her bed and sat down on the side. He shook her very carefully and she woke.

"What time is it?" she asked in the most genuine way.

"Man, you're human, alright," he replied.

"What? Do I look like some sort of creature to you?" she said, sitting up on her bed. He noticed she wasn't wearing her uniform but a simple white long sleeve shirt and black cotton sweatpants.

"That's not what I meant."

"Yeah, whatever," Faith said, and pulled on the covers to free herself. Her bed felt warm as well, and Andre fought the urge to climb into her bed and keep the bed warm. He was so tired, and the nightmare hadn't done him any good.

"Sleep well?" she asked.

"Yeah," Andre didn't want to go into detail about his night, so he turned the question back to her, "You?"

"Fine," she commented and looked through her drawers vigorously, desperately trying to find something. Andre couldn't help himself and got up to stand beside her.

"Looking for something?" he asked.

"It should still be here," she said, ignoring his question.

"What should still be there?" he peeked at her drawer as she violently messed up the neatly folded clothes.

"Where is it?" she asked, not paying any attention to him.

"WHAT!?!"

“My necklace! My mother gave it to me before I left. She said it would bring me good luck. I took it off last night and put it away in here. Now I can’t find it. So, make yourself useful and look over there by the bed.” Andre did as he was told.

There was another knock on the door. Andre kept himself occupied looking under the bed, so Faith went over to open it.

“It’s time. Get dressed and be down in one minute,” someone said. The loud slam of the door made Andre laugh.

“Man, are you in a cranky mood,” he laughed.

“I just can’t have lost it,” her worried tone alerted Andre and he got up from the floor.

“Hey, we’ll find it,” he said, his face serious. He looked at her and then down at her lips. She did the same. The moment was there. It was his time to make the move. She was letting him and together they got closer, and closer, and closer.....

Faith looked away and began searching through the drawers again, leaving Andre empty-handed. For a second, just a split second, he was happy that the embrace has lasted longer this time. It was a special moment, and Andre knew it would motivate him to get closer to her. But his actions could have well enough frightened her to break their contact. He did what he tried to avoid; he came too strong. But it was the least of his worries. They had embraced again, and he was certain it wasn’t their last one.

-  
-  
-  
-

## SEVEN

“Welcome everyone. I’m glad you enjoyed your wake-up calls this morning,” there were a few groans and a couple of laughs in the crowd of twenty eighteen-year-olds. “Anyway, it’s time for you to learn the rules of the competition.” The lady pulled out a long sheet of paper and read slowly, trying to waste some time. “Number One: Each test will not exceed the amount of time originally given. If there is any extra time that one receives, that test will be eliminated and he/she could either be sent home or be penalized for taking extra time. All the

competitors will have the same amount of time for each test. The time will not exceed one week per exam, but could be anywhere from minutes, to hours, even days. It all depends on the individual. Note: there is one exam every month, but you only have one week to complete it. And I don't think you will need so much time anyway.

"Number Two: There are no teams. If anyone of you tries to form any team or a group of you help each other out, you will be automatically eliminated. These exams will test your strength, both mentally and physically, and your scores will reveal the best male and female at the end to rule the country.

"Number Three: Be aware that the dorms have changed this year. And there is also a purpose for this change. It will be revealed at a later date. But for now, keep the contact to a minimal, and stay put on your own side of the room. They were designed to be divided for that purpose, males on the right and females on the left. Let us keep it that way.

"Number Four: There will be a four day break in between each exam where the panel of judges grades each and every one of you. Your scores will be added together to create your final score. In between the four day breaks, you are allowed to roam free throughout the castle, with a few exceptions: you cannot leave the castle grounds. If you are caught trying to escape, you will be sent home and punished. The punishments may vary.

"Lastly, Number Five: You must always wear your uniform when completing a test. Unless otherwise instructed, you are allowed to wear anything else you find in your closets and drawers. Remember, have fun, and try your best. The future of this kingdom rests in your hands. So don't let the people of Rengal down."

Andre wasn't surprised as much as he was worried. *The future of this kingdom rests in your hands...*he thought over and over. He desperately wanted to become king. It was a promise he had made his parents. So it was one he had to keep. The chatter among the group continued until the lady ordered for silence once again.

"Thank you for your patience. Now if you all follow me, your first challenge will begin." Everyone followed the tall lady through a door that Andre hadn't noticed before. He gulped as he reached the frame of the entrance, and inhaled deeply as he walked through, feeling both relieved and anxious about what lay inside.

-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-





The room was a pale color, unappealing, with a wide white ceiling. There were no signs of windows anywhere, an interesting feature. All throughout the palace, there had been many windows in every room, including walk-in closets in hallways. There was a big round table in the middle of the room with twenty brown wooden chairs around it, one for each recruit. Andre looked around the room for anything else, but that's all there was. The lady that had read the instructions to them and led them to the room was in front, seating the crowd one by one. When everyone was seated, the lady spoke.

"It's time. The papers in front of you are your first test: the history exam. You will have thirty minutes to complete this test. I will be right outside the door, so when you finish, just hand me your exam and I will clear you off for the first test," the lady said, then walked to the door. Before she left the room, she turned back around and said in a loud and clear voice, "One more thing, if I so hear a peep come out of one of your mouths, I will place an order to the guards to cut off your lips and feed them to the pigs. Understand?" the smile on her face showed that she wasn't fooling around. It was the unentertaining portion of the competition, but it was also their first task. When no one answered the lady, she stood tall, held her head high, and her face became stern, as she spoke once more. "UNDERSTAND?" she let out through her white teeth. This time, all heads visible to Andre nodded, and he did the same. She softened her look and turned to walk out the door.

Andre exhaled the breath he hadn't realized he was holding in, and gasped for air heavily. He turned to the table and there lay the paper. It was a single yellowish piece of paper, with a line at the top for your name. Andre took hold of the pen placed on top and wrote it as neatly as he could. The first question worried him, though. *Number One: In ten years, what percentage will the population have increased or decreased?*...he thought. It seemed like the most ridiculous question anyone could ask, but there was no getting around it.

## NINE

Andre was the fourth person to finish his test, and abruptly got up from his chair. He didn't care much about the noise he made, only that he wanted to leave and get some fresh air. The lady was reading a thick volume, entirely black with gold writing on the front. It was in a different language, restricting Andre from

knowing what she was so interested in. Without lifting her head, she reached out her hand to him, her palm open flat just a couple of inches from his chest. Andre didn't hesitate and handed the paper to her. She snatched it from his grip as soon as the paper touched her open palm, and he flinched, taking his hand away. She placed the paper on her desk, and turned the page. Then she remained still. Andre forgot he was still standing there, observing the lady as she read peacefully, until the next person came out of the room. Faith. She did the same as he and then left. Andre stood there still, but his gaze following Faith. She walked to the end of the hallway, and then made a left, headed in the opposite direction of their room.

It was then that Andre started walking, taking the same path Faith did.

She was sitting on a bench outside, looking down at her hands. Her head was lowered, almost as if resting on her chest, her hair hid her face from all her surroundings, and her feet were crossed. Andre was amazed at how deep in thought she seemed to be, and almost turned back around, afraid he would disturb her. But he wanted to talk to her, and it seemed like this would be their only moment alone.

"Hey," he said, coming around the bench to stand in front of her, blocking the sun from reaching her face.

She looked up first, then smiled, happy he was there. "Hi."

"Everything alright?" she didn't look as confident as he remembered her by.

"I guess." He sat down next to her and rested his elbows on his knees. She took that gesture to lay her head calmly on his shoulder and Andre couldn't help but smile. He gently placed his head on hers and they just sat there, looking about the garden that decorated the outside of the palace. "Hey, do you ever wonder what life is like outside of Rengal?"

Andre was surprised by her comment, and didn't know how to answer. It never occurred to him that there are other people on the planet that had a very different government system. "No," he answered.

"Well, I do," she lifted her head from his shoulder and turned her body to face him. She looked at him, with curious eyes, like she wanted to get inside his head. Andre felt a strong connection to her, but had no way of explaining it. It seemed too weird to bring it up to her.

"I keep thinking about what you told me you overheard. About the end of the competition? What happened to the rest of us?" Andre questioned, trying to keep their conversation going.

"Me too," she hesitated, but her loud gulp gave the sensation she was terrified. Andre did what he thought would calm her; he took her hand. It was soft, just like it had felt the first time they touched in the van. He wanted to comfort her, tell her everything would be fine, and that he was certain she would be picked for queen. He recalled the dream he had the previous night, and the memory made him shiver. The image of the spear grabbing hold of Faith's insides and her horrific scream replayed in his head, and he had to shake it away to not

lose focus on that moment.

He cleared his throat and spoke as clearly and confidently as he could. "I won't let anything happen to you."

She looked deep into his eyes, figuring out the truth behind the crystal clear blue color. She opened her mouth, and the next word flowed out gracefully, that Andre knew he had won her over. "Promise?"

"I promise," he said, and squeezed her hand. She smiled and leaned down to rest her head back on his shoulder. As much as he wanted to, Andre didn't smile, too preoccupied by the worry as to what he had just compromised to do.

-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
**TEN**

Several hours later, they were all called inside. A few other kids had come out to the garden for what seemed to be the same thing as Andre, some fresh air. This competition had just begun and it was already devastating for them. Despite the fact that the first test was incredibly effortless, it could only mean one thing, that it would get harder as each new exam crept around the corner.

The lady organized the group of twenty people in the same room they had been in when she read aloud the rules, and as soon as everyone was settled, she spoke.

"Congratulations, you have all officially completed the first test of the competition. To your knowledge, you will have four days of break. But throughout these days, you will be training for your next exam. I unfortunately cannot notify you all as to which exam it will be, so it's best to prepare yourself for all of them."

She turned and started down the hallway from which she came, but stopped short in her tracks and turned slowly to face the crowd again. "One more thing, according to my sources, this year, parliament has decided to change the rules of the competition. Instead of passing everyone along, if one does not meet the appropriate requirements needed to be considered for the position of king or queen, they will be dismissed permanently."

One boy had the guts to speak for everyone, as the room roared up into complaints of confusion and anger. Andre didn't know the kid, only briefly. Still, he praised him for not chickening out like Andre had. "What do you mean we'll be dismissed?"

The lady turned around once more and walked back to the spot she was just standing in. "I mean, if you do not pass the tests according to parliaments grading scale, something bad will happen to you. Understand now? Or do I need to bring out an elementary school teacher to explain even further?" her look meant she wasn't kidding. The kid just nodded. "Very well then. Thank you. Any other questions?" she looked around the room. No one said anything. "Speak now or forever hold your peace!" she shouted, emphasizing the word *forever* a little too much, which brought back the thought that whoever doesn't get crowned, would get killed. "Alright, then. You are dismissed." She turned around again and walked off, holding their papers in her right hand and swaying her left hand back and forth with every step.

Andre headed outside to explore the jungle of a backyard the castle had. Faith joined him. They walked along the stone path that led to the pond and sat on top of the small bridge. After a long moment of silence, she spoke.

"So, how do you think you did on the test?"

"Just about as good as anyone else here. What about you?"

"I guess I feel the same." They stared into the distance and only just noticed the sun beginning to go down, revealing bright shades of red and orange.

"Do you miss them?" Andre asked, looking at her. She didn't meet his gaze at first, thinking about how to respond. Then she turned to him.

"Yes. More than you'd imagine." she looked back down and her hair rolled over her face. Andre lifted a strand of hair and pulled it back behind her ear. He could see a glimpse of the formation of a smile.

"It's okay to miss your family. I miss my mom tucking me into bed and reading me bedtime stories." Andre said, nonchalantly.

"Oh, come on." Faith laughed and slightly bumped his shoulder.

"No, seriously." Andre joked. He bumped her back and then small giggles erupted from both of them.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," Faith said after a long pause. She looked at Andre and searched his eyes for a sign that he'd felt the same way. With a sincere enough smile, he leaned in closer to Faith. Her smile escaped her mouth and her face grew serious, but she leaned in as well. Together, little by little, they got closer and closer, attempting to leave no gap between them. Seconds passed, and Faith stopped abruptly, and closed her eyes. She turned her head away, but



# ELEVEN

The lady looked at Faith and Andre with surprise when neither of them answered her in the way she half expected them to.

“Faith pack your belongings and come with me.” she said, walking toward Faith.

“Excuse me?” Faith stared at the lady shockingly and looked over to Andre. But Andre knew just as much as she did.

“I said, pack your things and follow me,” the lady said angrily. From past experience, Andre assumed the lady had very little patience and did not like to be questioned.

“But why?” Faith asked.

“Is she getting thrown out or something?” Andre stepped in, taking a step forward.

“Of this room, yes.” she responded.

“Then, why do I have to go?” Faith asked once again.

The lady sighed and knew she wasn’t going to win them over without explaining anything. “Don’t think we don’t have cameras around the palace. We monitor each and every one of you, every movement has been recorded, every conversation has been written down and processed, *everything!*”

That was when Andre realized what she meant by ‘everything’. They had been watching them all along. The conversation in their room. Faith telling him what she had overheard. Their talk earlier that day. And the kiss. They knew it all. But what if it was planned. What if they had intentionally made them aware of what they now know? Andre could only come to one conclusion; they had to be careful from now on. Their lives depended on it. Without another word, Faith did as she was told. Andre didn’t try to stop her, he couldn’t have anyway. Another

move from him and she would take the punishment. All he did was watch her. She silently packed her things, which was barely anything. The lady gestured for her to hurry up and she did. Then, with a slight push through the door, Faith was gone. That was it. He didn't know when the next time he would see her would be. If they knew about them now, they would surely try their best to keep them apart. But Andre was only worried about one thing as he watched them exit his room. *We have to win this thing now...he thought...we just have to.* If they didn't.....

"Oh, and one more thing," the lady said before closing the door. "If you try any funny stuff with or without her, there will be serious consequences. You can count on it." And they were gone, vanished from his vision. He desperately wanted to run after them. Take Faith back, he cared about her. And her feelings were mutual. They were together now, and he would have to try it all to get her back.

He turned around, his back toward the closed door, and there stood his new roommate. Her child-like features made her all the more beautiful, and the light that shown through the window illuminated her hair. But Andre simply shook his head. He wanted Faith, not some girl. This new girl wasn't going to replace the emptiness he now felt deep within his heart. It was a big hole, but Faith was the only one who could repair it, and him.

After a couple of minutes in silence, he moved past her, making his way to his side of the room. He was certain that another nightmare might enter his mind that night. She followed the path to Faith's bed. Andre refused to talk to her, but when she spoke, it startled him. She hadn't said a word so far, so the sound of her voice filled the room with an echo. It was sweet, honey sweet, but Andre refused to let it get to him.

"My name is Evelyn."

"Good for you," he responded harshly. In his mind, this girl, Evelyn, didn't deserve any respect from him. She took Faith away. But, it wasn't like she sold them out. Parliament had been watching them all along. They probably just picked any girl and switched them. *No...he thought...she shouldn't have gone. If it wasn't for me, she'd still be here, with me.* He wouldn't let himself believe that this wasn't his fault, he knew it was.

"I'm sorry about your girlfriend," her sorrowful face showed that she meant no harm, so Andre decided to give her a try.

With a guilty grin, he said, "No, it's not your fault. I'm sorry I was a jerk. But, it's just....she's....." he sighed, a sign that he had given up trying to explain his feelings.

"Don't worry. They won't hurt her or anything. Just moving her to another room---"

"With another boy," Andre cut in.

"The more your worry, the more you'll hurt. Trust me."

Andre thought about it, and he actually started to like this girl. She made sense, and eased the pain he felt inside. Maybe, it wouldn't be as bad as he'd originally thought.

"Okay," he said.

He knew he could trust her, and he would. He owed her that much.

## TWELVE

Just like Andre had predicted, a dream slowly made its way through his mind.

It started out simple, with him sitting down in a chair in front of a table. The space was enclosed but made entirely of glass, which shed some light. There weren't any signs of people there other than him. Until he heard movement coming from behind him. In an attempt to turn back and see what the cause of the racket was, he noticed he was chained to the desk. Then, the lights went out, leaving him there in pitch black. He felt his heart race, and began to panic. He tried to call out, but then something had stopped him from opening his mouth. He couldn't reach his hands, which made him more nervous. He didn't know what was tied to his face, apparently preventing him from talking.

A similar light appeared from across the desk, and then the room lit up. There, in front of him, on the other side of the desk, stood two people. A woman and a man. It seemed all too confusing, but he still wasn't able to speak. He could only sit there, and wait.



The woman was wearing a beige overcoat and a white dress under it. Her hair was pulled back into a low bun, and her hands were clasped around a clipboard. She had a small object sewed onto her uniform, letters and a picture. The wording was extremely miniature, making Andre unable to read what it said, but the picture was clear enough for him to make it out; it was a hammer. The same hammer that was sewed on his uniform. Still, it made no sense. Andre looked at her face then, and her eyes showed hatred towards him, like he just disobeyed their direct orders. The only thing that kept him thinking longer was trying to figure out what he had done.

The man stood next to the woman. He wore the same thing as she, but her white dress was his white shirt and pants. The same lettering and object lay on his left side, still too small for him to make out. His expression was blank, but Andre guessed he felt the same way the woman did. The woman broke the silence first.

"I won't ask you this again," she began. "Where is she?"

Andre couldn't respond, but he portrayed an expression that said it all. He had no idea who or what they were talking about. The woman walked over, annoyed, and released his mouth. He didn't catch what had kept it closed, as she threw it away into the darkness behind him. But he was grateful he could speak again. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Answer her!" the man snapped. Andre turned his gaze toward the man, and looked at him, obviously freaked at his remark.

"I don't know," he repeated.

"Very well then," the woman said. She turned again and walked out, leaving the man alone with Andre.

"Wait!" Andre shouted, but the woman had already sealed the door shut. The man looked at him, and then did something weird. He smiled.

"Good job," he said to Andre.

"What do you mean?"

"You kept your mouth shut. You followed orders. Good job."

"I'm still confused."

The man sighed and shook his head in disappointment. "You didn't say anything about her. That's what I mean."

"What happened to her?" he asked before he could stop himself. His pulse sped up and he panicked all over again. Something had happened to her, and he didn't know what, but at the same time he did.

"You already know. You're the one who did it anyway. Stop acting, she's gone."

"No, I don't. Tell me!" Andre yelled. He started squirming in his chair, trying to break free, but the chains held on further.

"Stop your squirming, or they'll come back. And if they do, I won't be able to help you." Then the man left, through the same exit the woman had gone out. He was left alone once again. He didn't know why, but he closed his eyes. Perhaps trying to wake himself up. But then he'd realized what was going on. This dream seemed awfully real, and he usually didn't know when he was in a dream and

when he wasn't. But this one in particular had something different within. It didn't feel like a dream, couldn't have been, because he was trying to wake up. So, it was a memory. But nothing like this had ever happened before. He didn't know Faith in the past. Then it hit him, like a lightning storm scurrying out its next victim. Like a wild cat pouncing on its prey, making it its meal. Like someone turning on a light inside a dark tunnel, showing him the way to freedom. It wasn't a dream. It wasn't a memory. It wasn't real. It didn't happen yet. It was a glimpse at the future.

-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-

# THIRTEEN

The next morning, the knock woke him again. Evelyn opened the door, which he was grateful for. Unlike the previous morning, his bed didn't feel warm, and he longed for it to comfort his body. But the cold crept in, and eventually forced him to get out of bed.

"Morning," Evelyn greeted, smiling shyly, going over to open his curtains. Her actions reminded him of what he did to Faith the day before. How she hadn't moved when the knock came, and when he opened the curtains. But Evelyn kept her distance from him, refusing to touch him and look at him straight in the eye. It wasn't strange behavior from Andre's point of view; she was just as scared and freaked as he was.

"Hi. How long you been up?" he asked, spreading the sheets across the mattress.

"A while." He smiled as the comment. For the second day in a row, he hadn't changed out of his uniform. But wearing it again today bothered him. The closet door slid open smoothly and there hung another uniform. He hadn't recalled ever getting a second one, but they must have brought him another one while he was out. Maybe, everyone now had two uniforms. Evelyn was already dressed, wearing her uniform and her hair was made into the same two braids. It seemed to be her signature hairstyle.

"Well, you go change and I'll wait for you by the door," she said with a grin and left his side. Andre quickly undressed, pulling an undershirt on before replacing the old uniform with a fresher one. Once done, he threw the used uniform into a bin, and turned the corner of the room. Like she said, Evelyn was waiting by the door, grasping the knob tightly with one hand.

"Ready?" she asked upon seeing him. Her mood did lighten things up, and he was able to push aside all his hatred towards her from only the day before.

Even more, he now felt a little guilty for blaming her when she'd done nothing. She knew nothing more than they did, which only made him feel worse.

"Ready," he replied and walked forward. She opened the door and walked out first. He held the door for her and closed it when they were out.

As they walked down to the dining area, he thought about the day and what was scheduled to happen. It hadn't occurred to him until that moment that they were on break from the first exam, which had only lasted half an hour. Curiosity swept in, encircling his mind about what the next test would be and what it would require them to do. He had to really be prepared for anything at this point.

## FOURTEEN

Andre sat with Evelyn during breakfast in the far right of the dining area. The room was big enough to situate numerous tables, but there were only ten out, two chairs to a table. In the center were cards with room numbers printed in black ink. They weren't allowed to move from their seats, so Andre was unable to talk with Faith about what happened. He needed to talk to her, and thought about sneaking out to get her alone and tell her about his weird glimpses into the future, but he didn't. Something told him to keep it to himself for now. And he listened.

"I have our schedule for the day," Evelyn said, running up to him from the palace. A few guards had escorted them outside by table and they were required to stay put while the schedules were being passed out. It was arranged in the way that roommates were supposed to train together, so any hope of seeing Faith quickly left his system.

"What's it say?" he asked, leaning in to have a look.

"Today, we're supposed to have physical training. I'm guessing for the combat match. Maybe it's next." she said.

"Yeah, maybe," he agreed. She glanced up at him from the corner of her eye, and smiled at him. For some strange reason, Andre trusted her. He knew it would be a while before they became friends and all, but he trusted her now.

"Come on, let's go," she pulled on his sleeve and he followed her. She walked pretty fast, so Andre had to continuously jog to catch up to her. He looked around a couple of times on their way to the back of the castle for Faith, but nothing. Something in his mind stated that he wouldn't see her that day. He

pushed that feeling aside as well.

After walking about half a mile around the gigantic palace, they had reached the back. A man stood there, waiting, looking annoyed, probably for having to wait so long.

"Well, it's about time," he said, arms crossed over his chest. "I'm Adam, your physical combat trainer." He extended his hand to shake with Andre and Evelyn.

"What are---" Andre began.

"First off, I talk. Not you," he interrupted. "Second, you do what I say. *Whatever* I say." he looked at them, pausing for effect. "Third, if one of you gets hurt, suck it up and keep going." Another pause. "Lastly, go change into this," Adam said, handing Andre a gray baggy t-shirt and black sweatpants, and Evelyn a gray tank top with black sweat pants.

Evelyn spoke this time. "But, I thought we weren't allowed to wear anything besides our uniforms."

"You just broke the first rule," Adam said and popped his leg up only to slam it against the back of Evelyn's right knee. She fell to the ground with a loud shriek and struggled to steady herself. Andre reached down to help her, but was caught by his own flash of pain in his left knee. Adam had hit him as well.

"There, now go change," Adam said, and walked to the nearest bench, sat down, and waited.

Andre got up first, and then pulled Evelyn up. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, fine."

He looked frantically around her right leg, searching for bruises, a scratch, a sign of blood anywhere. "Are you sure? Does anything feel broken?" he asked, feeling around her knee for a broken bone or something.

"No, I'm fine," she responded. "Seriously, I'm all good." She grabbed his hands with hers, and pulled herself up, straightening him. "Thanks," she said, and walked off, heading back to the palace. It had only come up that Andre wasn't sure why he felt so protective of her all of a sudden. It could have been a reflex from hearing her scream. Such a noise startled him and sent him flying in to help her, make her stop the painful sound, make the torture go away. All that thinking only reminded him of Faith. Her scream when the blade pierced.....

He had to stop bringing that up. The more he thought of it, the more he worried about her. He shook his head, as a way to shake the thought away, and jogged back to the palace.

"Okay, ready now?" Adam said once Evelyn and Andre were back, changed and mouths shut. The two nodded, afraid of being hit again. Adam smiled, pleased that they had learned their lesson. "Alright. So, the rules are you cannot hit above the chest area," he showed the position with his hands under his ribcage. "You can use both your hands and feet, but with every hit, you need at least one foot touching the ground. Air kicks are allowed, only if one foot is still planted on the ground," Adam did a short but impressive demonstration. "Lastly, the more blood that comes out of your opponent, the better your chances of

winning are. Good luck." He stepped back and blew a whistle.

Within an instant, Evelyn was racing towards Andre, her foot ready to hit him directly in the stomach. He ducked and swung his leg out, tripping her onto her back. Then he jumped on her, pinning her legs down with his knees and her arms with his hands. She wiggled furiously, desperately trying to escape his grasp, but he held on. A smile formed on his face as he looked at her. She looked up at him and then pain swept around her face. The smile was gone instantly from Andre. She yelled, and tried to kick. Then he realized that he might be really hurting her. He loosened his grip, not fully convinced she was in any pain. But it was just enough for Evelyn to free her leg from under his knee and she threw it over his back, wrapping it around his waist. He squinted his eyes and yelped, then fell to her left. She bolted up and then she pinned him down in the same way he had, only harder. It wasn't until then that Andre realized how strong she really was. Her innocence has only been a trick, to fool anyone trying to bring harm onto her. He arched his back, rolling over to his side, and Evelyn let go of his arms. She quickly rolled away, getting as far from him as possible, then jumped back up to her feet. He did the same, and they stood a couple of feet away from each other.

She paced toward him and kicked him in the shin, forcing him to bend down. She then swung her arm, with a full powered fist at the end, and punched him in the stomach. He coughed and gasped for breath. Evelyn didn't hit him again, but he knew she would start up again soon. He had to act then. He completely lost all order and ran towards her, tackling her to the ground. He resisted any punching, but tried once again to pin her against the floor. She kicked him off as soon as he got on, and he fell backward. But then nothing. It was a sign that she hadn't wanted to hit him again.

He looked up from the ground and she lay there where he had left her. Then came the laughter. He pushed himself onto his elbows and saw that Adam was having a good old time smirking about on that bench of his, looking at them. Then he stopped when neither of them made another movement. He got up and walked toward them.

"What happened? Come on, keep it going."

"I'm done," Andre said before he had time to think. Adam walked over to him and kicked him in the same place he had earlier.

"Me too." Evelyn said and braced herself for the same punishment. Adam walked over to her and kicked her, and there came the same shriek as before.

"*You're* not done until *I* say you're done. Capiche?" he asked, but they didn't respond. "Good. Now get up and pick up where you left off," he started to walk away.

"But I don't wanna fight her," Andre said again, without thinking. Adam didn't come over to kick him, instead he kicked Evelyn. She screamed once more.

"Keep talking and she'll have one leg less," Adam warned.

Andre stood up and walked over to Adam. "Why do we need to fight each other?" he asked. Adam lifted his leg, and swung it on Evelyn's knee again. But before Adam's foot made any contact with Evelyn's leg, Andre extended his foot

out, tripping Adam and throwing him onto his back. He looked shocked, and with a change of expression, he popped back up and punched Andre right in the nose. Then went over to Evelyn and kicked her again. Then again. And again. Andre winced with each kick, too weak to get up and protect her. She lay there on the ground, not moving, but breathing. Impossibly, there weren't any people around to witness their torture.

"Wan' another punch, you little rat?" Adam asked. Andre didn't look at him, only at Evelyn. She still didn't move. "It's a good thing you fightin' her at the competition 'stead of me cause I would kill you," Adam said, and Andre heard him storm away.

A flash of anger entered his system once more and then he stood to get by Evelyn's side. But before he touched her, somewhere in his mind, deep inside, something had clicked. *It's a good thing you fightin' her.* he thought. Adam said it, and now he knew it. He would have to fight her in the competition, the real one. But then the most sympathetic and arrogant thought came to his mind. He wouldn't be fighting Faith. But someone else would, and who knew what would happen.

-  
-  
-  
-  
-

## FIFTEEN

Some fair time had passed since Adam had intensely injured Andre and Evelyn. Blood poured from his nose rapidly, but he stayed focused on Evelyn. A bruise the size of a fist lay on the back of her right knee, but there wasn't any sign of blood. She rested on the cold grass, eyes closed, but still breathing, which relieved Andre. A sudden moan came from her mouth, and her eyes fluttered open.

"Are you okay?" he asked her.

Before she could answer, the lady came out of the building, followed by Adam, holding a white rag in his hand. She raced over to them and crouched down by Evelyn. Andre hadn't noticed two large men walking right at her heels until one pulled him away from Evelyn and the other bent down to inspect her

wounds. Adam caught up with them and held up the rag for Andre to place on his bloody nose. With an expressionless face, Adam turned once again and trotted off back to the front.

“What happened?” the lady asked, looking up to Andre.

“That guy...Adam...attacked us. Hit her a lot behind her knee and hit me in--”

“We know about you. I just want to know about Miss. Jonson,” the lady cut in.

“She’s conscious, but her legs all screwed up inside. We’d better take her in and see what we can do to repair it,” one guy said.

“Alright, I’ll set up the trial,” the woman said, getting up from the ground and wiping the front part of her skirt. “Come on, let’s go,” she waved Andre over.

“What’re we doing?” he asked.

“Both of you need a trial, now.”

“I thought he was allowed to do that.”

“Let’s just say, he went too far this time. For you anyway,” she responded, pulling Andre along with her. He glanced back at Evelyn, being lifted onto a stretcher and strolling off in the opposite direction. He wasn’t sure, but he could barely make out the eyelids in her face, which were once again closing.

“Stay close to me. Do not attempt to speak out of turn. These people are very cautious when it comes to deciding a trial. And according to my records, neither a female nor a non-king has ever been allowed in the judgmental room. So, it’s a first for both of us, but I happen to be more experienced,” the lady said. They walked down corridors, turning here and there, walking down stairs, then through doors, a lot of doors. Finally they came to two big brown wooden doors. “Got it?” she asked before entering.

“Yeah,” he said. She fixed her clothes once again and then pushed open the doors.

The room was large, with stands on both sides. There were three stands on the left and the right where men in black, white, and reds robes sat. The red carpeted walkway went from the door straight through to the first pew. Andre walked quickly down the aisle beside the lady, and settled on the left side. Across the walkway was another table, similar to them, and Adam was sitting there, alone. On both front corners of the room were large desks. One of the tables was occupied with three guards sitting on chairs and leaning their elbows against the wooden surface. On the other side of the room was a similar arrangement except with only one male sitting behind the desk with a book large enough to fill the entire surface. At the very front was a stage-like podium, and seated behind it were four people. A small table was attached to each side of the podium with a typewriter on top. Andre took a seat next to the lady and then silence. With a sudden burst of energy, one man stood from the podium and spoke.

“This trial is to decide whether or not Adam Smith should be found guilty for his brutal treatment of two new trainees. Filing against him is...” he paused and the lady stood to talk.



“Ava Martin, proctor in charge. Andre Pearson, victim,” she spoke, loud and clear. Only then did Andre realize that all that time he had not known her name until she’d introduced herself.

“We were told there were two victims,” the man on the far right of the podium said.

“The other, Evelyn Jonson, is in surgery.” Andre’s eyes widened in shock. *Surgery?* For a short moment, he had forgotten to breathe.

“Shall we proceed without her?” the man asked her.

“I would say so,” Ava responded, and took a seat.

“Then let it begin,” the man that was standing said, and it did.

—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—

## SIXTEEN

“Mr. Mincov, I will be representing---” Ava began.

“Does he not talk?” Charles Mincov interrupted. To Andre, he seemed like the one with the most power, he could possibly have been the oldest one in there.

Ava hesitated, caught off guard by his question. “Yes, he does.”

“Then why doesn’t he?”

“Oh...um...well...you see---”

“No I don’t see. Now let him speak for himself. He is eighteen, correct?” Andre nodded. “Great, then talk.” Ava sat down in her chair, showing a face full of embarrassment. Andre got up and promptly went over what he should say in his

head.

“Sir, I---”

“You will address me as *Mr. Mincov!*” the old man snapped. Andre nodded in return.

“Mr. Mincov, I’m here to represent Evelyn Jonson and myself in a trial against Adam...” Andre fumbled through his brain searching for the last name. *Myth? Syth? Smyth? Smith!* “...Smith! Adam Smith.” he repeated.

“And where do you stand, Mr. Smith?” asked Charles.

“Mr. Mincov, I simply want to get back to my job training these brilliant recruits. I had no intention of hurting either one. It was a practice match and I wanted them to be ready for anything that might come their way at any moment. I really, truly, had no such mean to injure them. And hearing that the young miss Evelyn needs surgery makes me just---” he ranted. Andre couldn’t believe him and rolled his eyes.

“Alright, thank you Mr. Smith. I didn’t ask you for the entire event made into a five hundred page novel. I only asked you where you stood in the middle of this. I honestly don’t really care. This is absurd as it is already.”

He looked down at his desk and scanned a couple of papers. Then sighed and looked up again. “I cannot seem to understand why this case was brought up in the first place. But, despite the inordinance behind it, I have come to a decision. First off, it has come to my attention that I need to once again explain the reason for this court. And that is to solve *diplomatic cases* not settling the blame when someone gets a *boo-boo.*” He paused for effect. “Second, I do not want anymore trials begin requested about things like these, and I certainly do not want to hear from this case once my decision is made and recorded.” Another pause. “And third,” he turned towards the guards on his left, “if you ever let anyone else down here that isn’t a *male* or a *past ruler* or has some sort of *political identification*, then you will be sent to the underground chamber.” Andre thought about that underground chamber he spoke of, and it could only mean one thing: the torture place, quite possibly where his first nightmare had taken place.

“So,” he began again, “I have decided to lift any charges pressed against Adam Smith and restore his work position in the competition. After miss Jonson gets out of surgery, the news will be delivered to her as well. As for you two,” he pointed at Ava and Andre, “I don’t want to hear another word about this. The next time you get a *boo-boo,*” there was that word again, that word than enraged Andre so much he wanted to punch the guy in the face and give him the broken nose that he had taken from Adam, “deal with it!” he finished, and signed some paper on his desk. Then he motioned for the guards to escort Ava, Andre, and Adam out of the courtroom and back up to the surface. Andre couldn’t believe there was nothing being done about what happened. He had to say something and defend Evelyn. She got hurt, badly hurt, and his protective instincts for her rushed back in.

“So that’s it?” he asked, stepping forward. “You’re not going to punish this asshole?”

“Young man, did you not hear a word I said?” Charles asked.

“Yeah I heard you. I heard every freakin’ word you said. Doesn’t mean I agree.”

“Well, next time I need your opinion on something, I’ll ask for it. But I don’t recall ever pausing for your acceptance as to my decision, now did I?”

“I don’t care. But my...” Andre hadn’t figured what to call her yet, so he stuck with the obvious. “...my roommate is somewhere in this freakin’ castle having surgery all because this jerk face decided to practice his kicking on the back of her leg, and you want to declare him not guilty?” Andre asked, pointing at Adam.

“Yes,” Charles responded. “Now, Steven remove this annoying tick from my courthouse and do not let him back down here.” One of the guards approached Andre and pulled him towards the door where Ava and Adam were standing. Andre shook it away, and Steven grabbed him with both arms. Andre fought back and then the other two men had to come and hold him down.

“NO! YOU CAN’T DO THIS!” he shouted, straining to break free from the grasps of the men trying to hold him still and drag him from the room. “SOMETHING HAS TO BE DONE ABOUT THIS!” Andre wiggled and moved around frantically. “WHAT IF THE OPERATION GOES WRONG? THIS IS ALL HIS FAULT! ALL HIS FAULT! ADAM’S FAULT! IT WAS HIM! HE DID IT ON PURPOSE! IT WAS ADAM!” he fought and hit the guards that were hovering around him. From a small opening between two of the men, he could see Charles, who was now standing, with the biggest surprised expression anyone could have ever shown. His eyes wide, his mouth dropped open, his body hunched over, just staring at the wild behavior coming from Andre. It definitely was a first for him, and Andre knew he had done it. He had set an impression on these people. Exactly what he was intending to do from the very beginning.

He kept moving around, not wanting to show he was satisfied with the ending of the trial, but he no longer shouted. It didn’t matter, the shouts weren’t as important as his actions, resisting the men who were now dragging him out. Eventually, they got Andre out the door, and threw him on the floor. Andre didn’t fight them anymore, but jumped back up to his feet and raced down the hall. He sped through the hallways, turning at every right and left corner, winding back up the stairs. He followed the signs to the medical room. But the oddest thing happened when he got there. The man at the front desk told him they never operated on anyone by the name of Evelyn Jonson.

## SEVENTEEN

It was like a bomb exploding far away, but the noise reached to where he stood. His brain stopped working for that moment, trying to comprehend the words that the man said. But after they were processed, he still only stared at the man sitting behind the desk. His innocent look showed to evidence he was lying, but that only left one question: where was she? The last thing he could remember was seeing her being placed on a stretcher of some sort and rushed away in the opposite direction. He didn't know where she was going, or who was taking her there. All he saw were two large men dressed in white pushing her away, removing her from his vision, and from his mind. Andre still wasn't completely sure how he felt about her, but he did feel something being ripped out from his heart when he'd heard she wasn't where he thought she would be. It took every ounce of energy he had left to convince his mouth to open and produce words.

"What do you mean she's not here?" he asked.

"Look sir, there isn't anyone my records that was registered today for surgery. I would have been notified if there was.

"But, then where is she?"

"I cannot answer that," the man responded.

"Why not?!?"

"Because I do not know."

"Yes you do. YES YOU DO!"

"Sir, please do not shout. I have no acknowledgment of a young miss Jonson. I would know if she was entered in our system."

"What if someone else did it? She must be here. They took her here."

"Who did?" the man asked, standing up.

"The guys in white."

"What guys in white?" he asked.

"The guys who came outside with Ava, the medics or whatever they're called."

"Ava? Ava Martin?"

"YES!!"

"She didn't come in today," the man looked confused. Andre couldn't take anymore of these lies.

"What're you talking about? She took me to the trial, and came running to help me and Evelyn after that Adam guy attacked us. She came with two other guys dressed in white and they carried her away."

"Where?" he asked, concern in his voice. This made Andre anxious and he wondered what it was that this man wasn't telling him.

"I don't know where. Ava said in the courtroom that she was having surgery. That's all I know."

"Oh no," he said, and turned to pick up the phone. He pressed one button at the very top and waited and waited and waited. No answer. "Damn it!" he quickly looked through some papers.

"What's going on?" Andre asked, following the man's actions with his eyes.

"Look, I need you to go to your room and stay there. Do not leave your room until I come get you. We need to get you out of here."

"What?"

"Just go! Now!" the man pushed his chair back in and raced down the hall, leaving Andre standing there alone. He wasn't about to go listening to some strange guy who randomly started acting all weird, so he followed him.

"Wait! Tell me what's wrong!" he yelled after him.

"There's no time. Just go to your room and stay there. I'll come get you soon."

"Tell me what happened to Evelyn!"

The man turned and sighed, annoyed. "I honestly don't know what happened to miss Jonson, *Evelyn*. But there was a report filed this morning for another missing young lady. It was after her physical training with Adam as well. And her roommate said the last he saw of her were two men carrying her away on a metal bed. That's what happened right?" he stopped and stared at Andre.

"Yeah," he replied slowly. "But...how'd you---"

"No time. Now go. Please," he begged and once Andre turned, he sped through the hall again. Andre walked back to the desk and then upstairs. He turned on the third floor and walked to the end of the corridor, stopping in front of his room. Just as he opened the door, Ava came from the elevator and rushed towards him.

"Andre! Where have you been? I've been all over this bloody castle looking for you."

"Where is she?" he asked, startling her.

"Wha...what do you mean? Who?"

"EVELYN! WHERE IS SHE?"

"She was in surgery---"

"No she wasn't. I was just there. Where is she?"

"You were there?" she blinked and swallowed hard. Then, her face stern and cold, she continued, "You aren't allowed down there without an adult."

"What happened to her?"

"I do not know. I was with you when---"

"I know! I was there! And I'm not stupid. I know you had something to do with this! Now, are you going to tell me where she is, or am I going to have to find out for myself?"

"Get inside your room and stay there. I'll come for you in a while and then I'll explain everything."

"Yeah right." Despite his attitude, he opened the door and slammed it directly behind him. It might have been rude, but he didn't care. He no longer cared about this thing. He just wanted to have his roommate back. He wanted Evelyn. Her smile, her humor, her eyes. He had to know she was alright. That no harm had come to her. Then came the knock on the door.

He didn't open it immediately, afraid it was that guy in the medical room, or Ava. He refused to respond to either of them, and definitely didn't want to go anywhere with them. But then came the voice.



That night Andre found it hard to sleep. He would not stop thinking about Evelyn. For some odd reason, he missed her more than he did Faith. And they almost kissed a couple of times. He was so sure that she would be the one for him, but now that thought was very vague. It was as if he saw himself standing beside someone, a girl, but he didn't know which one. The dream crept up on him as the slumber closed his eyes.

The throne room; a place Andre had not been introduced to before. He was sitting on something hard, like a wooden chair or something of the sort. There was a big cape draped around him, most likely made of a very heavy and thick material which made him sweat. And the thing on his head was heavy, and irritating. Without knowing what was going on, the lights came on and before him stood hundreds of people, all crowding around two girls. Evelyn and Faith. They wore white long sleeved shirts, white pants and white sneakers, but were covered in dirt here and there. Evelyns' hair was in two half braids and Faiths' in a falling ponytail. Their faces were the worst to look at of all. They read of torture, hate and sadness; Andre couldn't bring himself to speak, all he could do was imagine what they had been through. The competition seemed to have ended long ago and but there wasn't any sign of a king or queen. Suddenly, a guard stepped up and lifted both Evelyn and Faith to their feet, then nodded to someone who was apparently standing next to Andre.

"My, lord. It is time," Ava Martin spoke. She was wearing an elegant green dress that reached the floor and her hair was tied back into a bun. She spoke with sympathy in her voice, allowing Andre to relax his muscles a bit.

"Time for what?" he asked, unaware he had until the lady replied.

"To choose."

"Choose what?"

"The survivor."

"The survivor?" Andre turned back to look at Evelyn and Faith and then realized what they were asking of him. He had to choose which of the girls would live so the other would die.

"Yes, my lord. You must choose the survivor," she walked over to them. "Faith Engelen: nineteen years old; singer; born in Augusto, Rengal." A pause. "Evelyn Jonson: nineteen years old; fighter; born in Mellani, Rengal." Ava stepped around them to the side and asked, "Which one is it going to be?"

The crowd turned their attention back to Andre. He was stunned by the curious faces staring at him he didn't respond right away. "Um...I..."

"We've wasted so much time already. Please, my lord. Just choose," she

insisted.

Andre gulped and then exhaled, relieving the tight bubble of air he held inside his lungs. He looked back and forth between Evelyn and Faith. Then, with a vulnerable tone in his voice, he said "I pick her!" and pointed to...

The jolt of energy rushed in and Andre woke up. It was four in the morning, but Andre couldn't sleep any longer. He got out of bed, and opened the window. He knew it would be a long drop as he looked down, but he was willing to do anything to get out of the room. It held too many memories. First Faith, then Evelyn. Pretty soon, there would be another girl who mysteriously went missing. He couldn't take that. The pain would sink in too deep, and it would never leave. He looked down one more time then with a gulp of fresh and cold air, he jumped.



# NINETEEN

Andre landed on a bush and pricked his arm with about fifty thorns. Despite the striking pain he felt in his upper arm, he looked around the castle grounds, making sure no one heard the noise. Then, he sprinted across the lawn and bolted through the gate. He had to get away, run away from the treacherous place. It was almost as if it held a curse, but the curse was on him--about him. What had been eating away at him was that he never heard from Faith again, Evelyn had disappeared, and the man who said he'd be back to get him never came. A shot of urgency flushed his system and he instantly thought of the obvious; did he really expect the man to go back and get him? For all he knew, he could've been the kidnapper. But there was something sane about him. Andre didn't exactly know what it was, but that man seemed to be on his side. That left Ava Martin; the woman he thought had his back; who he thought would look after him; the one who wasn't out to get him. But by the way she acted when he asked her about

Evelyn, it became clear to him that she wasn't who he thought she was, who she portrayed herself to be.

He rounded the corner of the final gate of the castle, and then came to a slow pace. Finally, he stopped altogether. It was like something shocking showed up in the middle of the path and startled him, but it was more than that. In fact, something did pop up in the middle of the road, but definitely not what he would have ever imagined.

There, lying still on the cold, hard floor, wearing the same clothes the last time Andre had seen them, with the scariest eyes and the palest face there could ever be in the world, and hands tied behind their back with some sort of silver rope, was the medic. The man who warned Andre about staying put in his room. The man who told Andre that Evelyn was missing and so was another girl, who Andre was sure by now that it was Faith. The man that promised to fetch Andre once the coast was clear. He was there. He wasn't moving. He was dead.

Andre felt the oddest thing slide down his cheek, a tear. He couldn't come to understand why he was getting emotional over some stranger. But there was something very different about this guy in particular. He wasn't like those bastards inside the castle walls. He wasn't out to destroy his life and take away everyone that he cared about. He was a friend. And someone had killed him. Not only did they take away this man's life, but they destroyed any chance Andre had of understanding the truth behind these competitions. His only hope was this man, but he was gone.

With a loud thump, the ground beside the man began to turn, forming a circle the size of old tree trunk. Then, the sound became a high pitched whirring and Andre focused his eyes even more to see that the circle had a lid on top. It was hard to believe it was actually happening, but there was evidence of it right in front of him. The lid started to lift up and then the noise stopped. It all happened so suddenly Andre didn't have any time to process any of it. The lid popped open; a light flashed from behind him; two shots were fired behind him hitting the tree to his right; people began to yell; footsteps approached him from all sides. He was left with one option: jump! And so he did. With a huge deep breath in, he swung his legs under him and pulled himself down until he touched the ground. Then he climbed the ladder back up to the opening and pulled the lid closed with all his strength. He got it to shut as soon as the people reached the pothole. Then, the darkness filled the air, circulating all around him. It was stuffy down there, making Andre unable to smell anything. The walls were very far apart and he assumed he was standing somewhere in the middle of a long tunnel. The air tasted dry and there was no draft with a possible back way out.

He used the only sense he had left--sound.

-  
-  
-  
-  
-

# TWENTY

Andre walked along the middle corridor, arms out in front of him trying to prevent from slamming into anything. But nothing. The tunnel seemed endless; it just went on and on and on. Then came the flash of white. It happened so suddenly, Andre had no time to prepare himself for what happened next. A wave of hot air came storming through the tunnel and hit him right in the face, blowing his hair back and expanding his cheeks even further than humanly possible. The air stopped after only a couple of seconds, and then all went silent again. Andre gasped for air, his face hot with the burning breeze that had attacked him. He walked again, a little bit faster. Then it occurred to him that only his face was hit. With another surprise, the wave of steam aimed at Andre and hit him in the same spot; his face and chest. He blinked several times after it stopped and then bent over to catch his breath once more. He looked up and the silent darkness had enclosed the space around him again. He knew what he had to do now. The wave only hit one spot every time and the flash of white light announced the air was



## TWENTY-ONE

Andre searched the wall, running his hands up and down, trying to find the knob. But there was nothing. It didn't make sense. He turned back around and faced the glass wall in front of him. He looked at it, no--trying to look through it. If it was a glass wall, shouldn't he be able to see into the other side? As he got closer to it he realized it wasn't glass, but a mirror. The walls were mirrors. Once again, Andre thought for a moment. If the walls were mirrors, why was he able to see his reflection here but not in the dream? It wasn't the same room. It had to be different. Maybe the room was close by, but it wasn't the one he'd been in. He looked around the walls, not exactly sure what he was searching for, but scanning the room for something to pop out. Maybe a clue as to what the room is. Or even possibly another way out.

He walked along the path of the mirrors and looked at the floor, the corners, the ceiling, the edges of the table and chairs. Nothing. *If there's not way out of here, then where's the light coming from?...*he asked himself. He kept

walking around the room. He had to find a way out. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted an opening. He turned his head towards it and approached it carefully, not wanting to set off a trap or anything of the sort. He squatted directly in front of it, and ran his fingers along the edges of what seemed to be a small door. He had missed it when he was going along the walls because from far away it didn't look like anything was there. Only up front was he able to see the small doorknob and a way out.

He took hold of the knob and turned it. With a loud bang, the door released its tight grip and popped open a crack. He let go of the knob and used both hands to pry open the small but heavy door. Once it was open, he peeked down there and it looked exactly like the long tunnel he was just in, only miniature. With a big gulp of air, he squeezed his way through. There was no time to decide his options of staying locked inside the mirrored room or crawling through the creepy tunnel.

After a couple of minutes crawling through the rat hole, he saw some light up ahead. It was broken up into tiny pieces, like the door had cuts around the middle. But, the closer he got, the dimmer the light became. He reached the door just as the light faded into nothingness, and he pushed on the sealed door trying to get it to open. The air had become thin and it was getting hard for him to breath right. If he wanted to stay alive longer, he would need some fresh air soon. He pushed and pushed on the door, but it wouldn't budge. He turned and rested his back against it and then pushed again, forcing more strength this time. Still nothing. It was being locked from the outside. He looked through one of the many holes, but saw nothing. It seemed impossible to open the door.

Andre had given up by then and started crawling back to the room with all the mirrors. He'd figured that if the door wouldn't open, there was no use in wasting his energy on it. He was making his way back and had almost reached the opening leading to the room, when he noticed a turn. He thought about the possibilities of crawling in this dark, thin aired tunnel any longer, but he took it anyway. He crawled along the corridor, when he reached a dead end.

"Great," he whispered, though it seemed to echo all around him. He sat up against the wall, but felt somewhat uncomfortable by it. He felt around behind him and noticed the wall was indeed a ladder. He jumped to his feet and started climbing it.

He went up and up until he hit his head on something. He looked up but couldn't tell what it was. *Another dead end? Or possibly a way out?...*he thought. With thinking another minute, he pushed with his hand on the top, and it squealed. The noise hurt his ears, for crawling alone in the dark and in silence had impacted him more than he thought. He immediately stopped and let go of the door. He inhaled deeply and tried again, bracing himself for the noise again. He clenched his jaw tightly and squinted his eyes. The top was heavy and he was forced to stop again. He exhaled, emptying his body of oxygen, then breathed in one last time and propped the door open, kicking the top away. He raced up the final steps and pulled himself out of the hole. He collapsed on the ground, chest heaving up and down. He was exhausted and thought of nothing better than to be

back in his room sleeping in his bed.

It just occurred to him that he didn't know why he went down there in the first place. He was trying to run away from the people with the bright lights and guns. His vision was a bit blurry, so he closed his eyes and tried to remember exactly what had happened.

The man who was dead, why was he dead? How did he die? What for? Maybe that parliament person found out he was helping. But he didn't really help. He warned Andre, yes. But he also said he would come by to get him and explain it all, and he never did. Perhaps he was caught by the guards of something after he left Andre. It was a good option, though Andre found it suspicious that they would kill him for it. After all, the man didn't say anything to Andre, just that a girl was missing, besides Evelyn.

It was then that he opened his eyes and stared at the blackness of the sky. He blinked and pushed himself onto his elbows. Too weak to run again, he got up and walked back to the castle. It had been a long night and he needed some sleep. The next day he would have to find someone to tell them about what he found out. And he knew exactly who to tell. Kyle.

-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-

## TWENTY-TWO

"It was so weird. I can't even begin to explain it all," Andre said. He sat down on the couch in Kyle's room as Kyle closed the door.

"Well, try. I can't help you if I don't know what happened," Kyle pushed. He walked over to the couch and sat down on the arm on the opposite side of Andre.

Andre leaned back rested his head on the edge of the sofa. He sighed and squinted his eyes. Then he began to speak. "It was a dark tunnel or something like that. I can't really tell since I could barely see anything," Andre paused and looked to see Kyle's reaction but there was none, so he kept going. "After a couple

of minutes walking to wherever, I saw a white light come from the end of the tunnel or hallway followed by a freakin' hot air attack. But there was no way to tell where it was coming from. I went towards it until I found an opening on the wall. There was a door, so I opened it. It led me to a room full of mirrors or glass windows or something like that. It looked like a bunch of mirrors, but something was off about it. I stayed there for who knows how long, looking for a way out because the door magically disappeared after I opened it. Then I found a little opening on the wall near the floor, like a ventilation pipe, so I went for it. Eventually it led me back to the surface, but on the other side of the palace. I figured that whole thing was a way to get across the castle grounds without being noticed, like an underground passageway."

"It definitely seems that way," Kyle still held no expression on his face, which made Andre a bit suspicious. Like Kyle had heard all this before and was no longer affected by it. Like it wasn't anything new. Like he had been there before. Like he knew more than he was sharing.

"Yeah, well. I thought I should tell someone," Andre said, looking at Kyle, but he only stared at the floor, concentrated on something. "You okay?" Andre asked after a pause.

"Yeah, fine. Listen you'd better go before they find out you've been sneaking around," Kyle said, getting up and going towards the door.

"Oh, yeah. You're right." Andre got up and made his way to the door as Kyle opened it. "Hey, you won't tell anyone about this, right?"

"Course not." Kyle began closing the door, but Andre stopped the door with his foot.

"What?"

Andre only looked at Kyle, trying to figure out what he holding back. The day before he'd been all worried that some people in white took his roommate. Now when Andre had found a secret tunnel of some sort, Kyle was blank, uninterested, suspicious. "Nothing." Andre took his foot back and stepped out of the room into the hallway. The door closed and locked, so Andre walked back to his room.

The door was open a crack, and Andre wondered who was in there or who had been in there. He peeked through the crack and didn't see anyone right away. Thinking the coast was clear, he opened the door only to find Ava Martin standing there in the middle of the room with a girl by her left.

"What is this?" he asked, leaving the door purposely open.

"Andre, meet your new roommate."

-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-



## TWENTY-THREE

“What?!?” Andre asked, shocked.

“Your new roommate, Caroline,” Ava repeated.

“Hi,” Caroline said. Andre looked at her and saw her beauty behind the uniform. Her hair was a golden brown color in crazy curls shoulder length. Her blue eyes exaggerated her honey-like skin, an odd but beautiful combination. She smiled, showing perfect white teeth, and then looked down as if being too shy.

“Hey,” was all Andre could get out. Ava noticed him looking at Caroline and cleared her throat.

"Andre!" she snapped. He jerked his head up and found Ava glaring at him. "Watch it," she said, and then she left, closing the door behind her. They were alone.

Caroline walked over to the couch and sat down. Andre followed her.

"I heard what happened to your last roommate. I'm sorry," Caroline said, breaking the silence.

"Thanks," Andre responded. He instantly got upset with himself for saying that. It sounded so arrogant, so he added, "It's not your fault."

"I just don't want you to think I'm replacing her."

"You're not. Just be careful," Andre startled himself just as he said it, thinking that maybe he had told her too much.

"What do you mean?" she looked at him, curiosity filled in her eyes.

"Nothing," he looked away.

"Tell me." Andre realized how much she sounded like Evelyn, urging him to do something. He closed his eyes, trying to make the memory fade away.

"I don't know exactly, but something weird is going on around here," Andre began.

"Yeah, tell me about it," Caroline commented and got up to look out the window.

"That's not what I mean," Andre stood up and walked over to her. "My last roommate is gone. And my roommate before that is apparently missing as well. Don't you find that a little bit suspicious?"

"Wait, you had two roommates already?" Caroline asked, turning around.

"Yes." Andre wasn't sure how much detail he should share with her about Faith or Evelyn, so he decided to keep it brief for the time being. "But there's something else."

"What?"

"Don't stress too much over it. I don't think it means anything at all, but I do have my suspicions about the people that roam this place and the competition as a whole."

"Okay, so I won't believe every word you say for now, but I think it's a good idea that you at least tell me."

"Just don't freak when I do. I haven't even proved it yet. It's still only like an idea or, like I said, a suspicion."

"Got it. Now spill."

"Well, my first roommate, Faith, she went missing the third day of the competition, or somewhere around that, I'm not so sure exactly." It occurred to him to ask the next thing before continuing. "You know Ava Martin?"

"Who?" she looked confused, but her expression said she didn't want him to stop talking. She seemed very interested.

"The lady that was here a while ago. Her name is Ava Martin."

"Oh, okay then. I do know Ava Martin. She took me from my room this morning, early, before Henry was even up. She said that Henry was suspected of being against the competition and might try to revolt, or something like that. So she said she would take me to another room where the space would be safer, and

such. I didn't really understand it much, but there also wasn't much I could do," Caroline explained. A lot of things clicked for him as Caroline went through the process of changing rooms.

"Really?" It was a stupid question, but he couldn't think of anything else.

"Yeah, really," she laughed. "You were saying."

"Okay so. Before she went missing, Ava came and switched her for Evelyn. I haven't figured out why yet, but it has to mean something."

"Maybe she knew something about you guys," Caroline guessed.

"Like what?" Andre asked.

"Like, she saw you two together, or something."

"I doubt it."

"Did you guys have a thing?" Caroline teased.

"What? No." Andre didn't want to reveal any more information about her, feeling guilty that he was talking about her when she was missing.

"Liar," Caroline said, looking at him. "It's okay, you can tell me. I won't get jealous," she smiled.

"Oh, really?" he asked, smiling back at her.

"Yup," she said and turned to her bed. Andre leaned his back against the window and crossed his arms over his chest. "So, did you?"

"What does it matter?" Andre asked.

"I see you're not going to tell me," she paused. "Let's say you did, Ava might have wanted to separate you guys to make sure nothing happened. Not anything serious, if you think that's what I mean. But, think of it like this. If you guys got together, then you would be able to affect the outcomes of this competition."

"How so?"

"Well, if you don't like how things work, two people against something is better than only one. The judges might have thought you had some connection and if you didn't like how things were going, it would be easier for you guys to go against it together," Caroline said.

"Makes sense," he responded. She grinned in reply. "Well, if that is what they assumed, they gave me Evelyn. She and I didn't show any chemistry, like you say, but they still took her. How do you explain that?"

"What do I look like? A wizard machine that you drop a quarter and it tells you everything?" she laughed.

"No, I just..."

"I know. Maybe she was up to something and they didn't want you to get involved."

"Fair enough. Now you're here. And..." Andre started.

"What?" Caroline's face turned serious.

"I think they might try to take you next."

"Huh." she looked down and played with her fingers, like reality just struck her and the pieces came falling together. After a couple of seconds in silence, she smiled and and looked back up at Andre. "Then we just have to catch them in the act."

“You have a plan?” Andre asked.

“You bet I do,” Caroline responded.

TWENTY-FOUR

Andre like Caroline. She was rather different than Evelyn or Faith. It was as if they've known each other for years and were having a normal conversation like

always. The way they spoke about things was friendly; he felt like he could tell her anything and she wouldn't get offended. It was a strange feeling for Andre, and he was certain that he would get accustomed to it in time. But that was the only problem. If he was right about the competition and there was a pattern, Caroline only had one more day. He made a promise to himself that whatever happened, he wouldn't let them take her. Despite what she said, or how the plan flowed.

"You want to let them take you?" Andre asked, shock in his tone.

"Exactly," Caroline responded.

"Why? I thought the whole point was to *stop* them from taking you?"

"That's not going to happen, trust me. Have you seen the guards that walk around this place? They make anything possible."

"Why don't we make them think they took you?"

"What?" she looked disappointed. "No. It'll never work and they're not going to fall for it. They may not look like it, but they're smarter than we give them credit for. They came up with this whole game decades ago, remember? If something's up, they'll be the first ones to know about it."

"Alright then. But do you really expect me to stand back and watch you get carried away by kidnappers? I've seen it done already and I won't let it happen to you."

She stared at him with compassion in her eyes; Andre blushed a pinkish color. "That's sweet," she paused. "But it has to be done."

"Well, I won't let it."

"So what's your plan then? Attack them all and force them to take you to where they're hiding Evelyn and Faith?" Caroline sounded annoyed and angry.

"Why not! After what they did, they deserve it!" he shouted.

"You're missing the point! It won't do any good to attacked them or force them to do anything. They're not going to talk or take you anywhere," she argued.

"I bet they will at gunpoint."

"And you have a gun hidden somewhere in your room?" Caroline crossed her arms over her chest, challenging him to respond.

"No, but---"

"But what?" she interrupted. "You need to be rational about this. You think they won't mind killing you? You're not all that special. There are other guys here that are just as eligible to be king as you are. And I'm sure they wouldn't mind taking your place."

"So what do you propose we do then?!?" he asked, walking towards her.

"I already told you! We go by our schedule, I get hurt purposely and those guys in white suits come to take me to the *medical room*. Once there, I'll fight my way through the people, find your girls, and bring them back to you. Then we can go back there and investigate even more why they were doing it and so on."

"That'll never work! You can't fight your way through those guys! You're just a..." he stopped himself, unsure whether he should say it. But Caroline finished the sentence for him, making him feel worse.

"I'm just a girl right?!?!" she glared at him. "I grew up with five older brothers. My mother was always working, so I had no choice but to be taught by my father and my siblings. I can assure you I'm a good enough fighter to kick those guys' butts all by myself."

"What if they have guns?"

"Then I'll die trying!" she said.

They both paused to take a breath. Caroline searched Andre's eyes for some sign that he understood what she wanted to do, and why. But he cared too much to let them get her.

"No," he said.

She didn't reply right away, instead she took a big breath in and sighed. But there was something that told Andre she wasn't giving up so easily. It also reminded him of his feelings for Faith at first.

"Look, I'm doing this with or without your help. But without will take more work," she said. Her tone was softer now, and she walked closer to him to really look at him in the eye. "Please. I need you to trust me. I will find out who took away Evelyn and Faith and I promise I'll get them back to you." A pause. "Well?"

Andre didn't want to admit that he'd given in to her plan. It seemed risky, but it was a well worked out idea. And it showed many signs of being successful. However, he was afraid of losing her as well. He'd lost two roommates already, and wouldn't lose another. Despite his urge to accept her offer and help her with the scheme, he opened his mouth and said, "I'm sorry, but I won't let you do this."

She exploded again. "Why not?!?!"

"I don't want to lose you," he realized it sounded weird since he didn't know her very well, so he added, "...either. It's a difficult feeling."

"Well, I'm trying to make this *difficult feeling* go away, but you won't bulge. It's like you don't trust me. I want to help."

"I know you do!" He placed his hands on her arms and looked at her in her eyes, trying to calm himself. "And I do trust you."

"Then why won't you let me do this? I won't get hurt. I promise."

He had to think about it for a second. But, he surprised himself when he responded, "Fine."

Her eyes immediately lit up with relief. She pulled him into a hug. He returned it with a smile on his face, happy that the argument was over. Even though he wasn't too happy with giving in, he also knew it was their last hope. She broke off first.

"Thank you," she said. It was a sincere reply and he knew she meant it.

## TWENTY-FIVE

A knock on the door and Ava Martin walked inside.

"You two are late for your training. Come with me," she said and turned on her heels. Andre exchanged a look with Caroline and then she walked after Ava with Andre close behind her.

"There they are! Where have you two been? I was about to give up on you guys, but Ava said she would find you. Quickly, quickly now. We've wasted too much time as it is already, and cannot waste anymore. Please, line up here and face each other." A petite woman stood before Andre and Caroline as she adjusted their positions. It was another physical training session, and an opportunity for their plan to get started. "Now, you stand there," she moved Caroline about two feet from Andre and turned her to face him. "And you there," she did the same to Andre. "Great. Now, I heard yesterday Mr. Smith showed you some techniques but I'll go over them again for better understanding."

The woman stepped back and dropped to one knee, then with a swing of her right leg, she pushed herself to the left and did a cartwheel landing in her starting position. Then she jumped up onto her feet and wiped the dirt off her shirt.

"There, now if you can do that before we begin, our session will go great." She stepped back once more and motioned for Caroline to begin.

Caroline took a step back and lunged onto one knee. She slowly lifted herself with her left arm into the air and paused at a handstand. After a second, she switched hands, balancing with her right arm, and then dropped back to the floor on her left knee.

"That was great. Nice, slow, movements. Very graceful. Determined attitude. Good job, Miss. Evans." The lady then looked at Andre and gestured for him to try as well. Andre did as he was told. He dropped to one knee and with a deep breath, he pushed himself up onto his hands. He rolled over and landed on the other knee and then got back up. The lady smiled, which made Andre believe she was pleased with their performance so far. If only she knew what they were really up to.

"Great job, Mr. Pearson. Nice," she clasped her hands together and then looked over at Ava, who was still standing about twenty feet away from them. "They're ready," she said with a nod of her head, and Ava walked off.

"Do we need to change?" asked Andre.

"What for?" asked the short woman with a confused, yet surprised look.

"For the...wait, aren't we supposed to...but yesterday Adam...isn't this...?" Andre couldn't find the right words to use without giving too much away to the stranger before them. He didn't know if she was in on the plan, or if there even was a plan. She seemed normal, but you could never be too sure of anyone around there.

"Huh?" she asked simply.

“Never mind. Let’s just get started,” Andre gave up trying to explain himself and then looked over at Caroline. She looked nervous, almost terrified. But Andre knew she wouldn’t back down out of the plan. It was her idea in the first place, and as terrified as she was, it still had to happen. How, they weren’t sure yet. But it would.

“Alright then. Why don’t you guys line up here, a little bit further apart and strike an impressive pose for me, huh?” the lady said with a smile, and then stepped back to observe. Andre and Caroline did as instructed, and struck their poses. Andre bent both knees and lifted his arms in a defensive position, while Caroline put one leg in front of the other, bent both knees, and put her arms, hands as fists, directly in front of her face.

“Good. Now, Caroline could you please do that move I just showed you, and Andre while she does it, I want you to follow her with your eyes and your body. Let your body move around as it follows hers. Don’t take your eyes off of her. If you do, it would be the perfect opportunity for her to attack, and you don’t want that, do you?” Andre shook his head. “Okay, now let’s try it.”

Caroline looked back at Andre and then crossed her right leg over her left. With a sudden jerk of her body, she dropped to the floor on one knee and kept her eyes locked on her target. Andre followed her every move, making sure he held his defensive position. She pushed on her left arm and lifted her body into the air once more, very slowly, then dropped back to the floor. Andre moved with her, getting closer every couple of seconds, then further away again. He shuffled his feet under him and kept momentum in his body, showing the lady that he was taking the exercise seriously. Then Caroline pranced forward and got back up into her original position only three feet away from Andre. He jumped back and fell down, surprised by the sudden move she had made. Caroline never broke her stare, and didn’t crack a smile as she retreated. Andre got back up and went to his position again.

“That was magnificent. Did you see how she kept her eyes locked on yours, making sure you didn’t attack? And then her movements were so slow and careful, but there was a hint of danger within? Then the final jerk forward really startled him, myself as well. Really good job Miss. Evans. Now, Mr. Pearson,” the lady stepped back again and Andre switched his gaze back to Caroline. But she was staring at something behind him. He waved at her, trying to get her to look at him, but she was frozen. Andre looked over at the lady, but she was just as confused as he was. Then Andre turned around and saw what had caught Caroline’s attention. It was coming from the window behind them. The back window he remembered that led to the judgment room. There was movement coming from inside. It was hard to tell what exactly was going on, but it was clear who it was. Her hair, her skin, her actions, the way she fought, the way her lips moved as she screamed. Andre fought the urge to go running through the window and attack until he was sure it was her. Then she met his eye. Hers were full of tears, sadness, despair. His were shocked. Only shocked. It was her. Faith.

That was when Andre snapped back to reality, and noticed she was being dragged by someone down the steps. She was trying to resist, but whoever was





Andre reached the hallway just as a door slammed shut from the other end of the corridor. He raced down the stairs, trying his best to lead the way without knowing exactly where the noise came from. Caroline was right behind him, keeping his pace. Andre stopped at the bottom of the stairs, and looked side to side. There were doors everywhere.

"Which one is it?" he asked. He walked toward the right and then back to the left. He picked a door next to the staircase and put his ear to the wood, as if trying to hear anything from inside.

"I'll go this way," Caroline whispered and walked to the left hallway. She did the same, but after a couple of seconds, she bent down and peeked through the key hole of the door knob. Then she moved on to the next door. Andre did the same thing. He peeked through the key hole, but saw nothing. The room wasn't in perfect vision, but it was empty. No furniture, no windows, no people. He got back up and moved on to the next room.

"Over here!" Caroline whispered. She motioned with her hand for him to go over. He jogged to where she was and she moved over to make way for him to see through the key hole. He saw furniture; he saw a window, like the one in the room he was in in the underground tunnel; he saw people, Faith and two tall men. She was sitting in a chair, more like she was tied to a chair. Her head was dangling from her neck, and her eyes were closed. He looked around and caught the sight of the men who had taken her. They were wearing white suits and white gloves, like surgeons.

"What do you see?" asked Caroline after some time. He had forgotten she was there and relief filled his lungs. He was happy he wasn't there alone witnessing Faith's kidnapping, and possibly torture.

"They've got her tied up. I can't see the guys' faces, but they're doing nothing. Just standing there," he said, looking up and down the key hole.

"Let me see." She scooted over as he made room for her to see. She moved her head side to side, looking for anything that Andre might've missed. Then she said, "You did say you had two roommates, right?"

"Yeah, why?" he asked.

"And what did the other girl look like?"

"Faith had black hair, and Evelyn had golden brown hair. Why? What do you see?" he asked, moving closer to her, but she held her position.

"Umm...did you know her too well?" she asked after a pause.

"I barely knew either of them. Why?" he responded immediately.

“Cause they’re both there,” she said. “Only...”

“Only what?” he asked, slightly pushing Caroline out of the way. She fell to the side and he took her place in front of the door. He saw it, but couldn’t say it. So Caroline did the talking.

“Evelyn’s their leader.”

—



the staircase. The door opened as they reached the bottom and hid underneath the stairs. They peeked through an opening and saw the guys walk out of the room and head up the stairs. That left Faith and Evelyn alone in the room. And one of them wasn't who they were supposed to be.

Caroline walked out and slowly crept to the door. She knelt down again and peeked through the key hole. After about a minute or so, she came back to where Andre was.

"Faith is still there and the other girl, Evelyn, is walking back and forth around her. Like talking to her or something." She paused. "How well do you know that girl?"

"Not very. But, I thought she was different."

"Not everyone is who they pretend to be." Caroline made so much sense. But Andre was convinced Evelyn wasn't all horrible. She could be forced to do that for all he knew. So he walked out from behind the stairs and started for the door. Caroline grabbed his arm and pulled him back down. Footsteps were being heard from the top of the stairs. Andre looked up and saw the two men coming down. They looked around, but didn't see anything and they went back into the room. Caroline acted just then. She took hold of Andre's hand and pulled him with her back up the stairs. He didn't resist, positive that if he as alone he would've stayed there.

They ran up the steps and when they reached the top, Caroline didn't let go. She kept running, pulling Andre every now and then when she felt he was slowing down. He was thankful she was there with him. He couldn't have gone through that by himself. She turned at every corner, apparently knowing the way very well. He lost track of how many hallways they went through until she pulled up at the hallway of their dorm. Surprised, Andre pulled his hand back, but kept walking. They were no longer running, and Andre assumed it was because the need was no longer there.

They reached their dorm and went inside without a word. Andre felt like he should say something, anything, maybe a *thank you* for getting him out of there, but nothing formed in his head. His thoughts were all scattered around, which made him dizzy. He decided to sit down. Soon enough the dark silence turned into a tender sleep.

Caroline woke him up. He didn't know how much he had slept, but she didn't bother him up until that point.

"Hey," she said.

"Oh, hi." He got up and rubbed his eyes with his fists. Then sat up on the couch and looked at her. "How long was I asleep?" he asked.

"A couple of hours. Ava came in here and asked what happened to us during the training. That lady had freaked out when you took off running and I said I would go get you. But I really wanted to know what was happening."

"What did you tell Ava?"

"I told her you felt sick. I followed you to keep you company. Then we came back here and you slept it off. Thank for that, you saved our butts," she smiled.



Andre woke about five hours later, still on the couch. Caroline had come back some time while he was asleep and was now over in her bed resting for the night. He didn't hesitate to go over to his bed and to the same. Andre was exhausted, but despite the long hours of sleep he already had, he wanted more.

He reached his bed and out of curiosity, he looked out his window. Nothing. The ground was still, there was no breeze, nothing moved, and it was all dark. A smile rolled over on his face, and he realized he was happy that things were finally slowing down a bit. His last couple of days there were full of surprises and unexplained disappearances. He needed a break.

He lied down in his bed, and stared up at the ceiling. Nothing important was on his mind, so he closed his eyes once more and drifted off to sleep.

The dream was unexpected.

The room was small, smaller than usual. There was something familiar about it, but nothing came to mind for Andre at the moment. He looked around, noticing the gray walls and the emptiness of the space. He'd figure that if the room had furniture, it would appear even smaller than he thought it was now. The only thing in the room, besides him, was a chair. A medium-sized, wooden chair and some rope resting on top. He felt himself want to reach down and pick up the rope, but was unable to do so. It was like he was being controlled, but to do nothing. He wanted to speak, but couldn't. He tried and tried, but nothing happened; the only thing he had control over was his mind. The door opened then and something made him turn around.

Caroline was being dragged by two guards in white suits. Her clothes were dirty and it looked like she'd been dragged for a while now through who knows what. It was the strangest thing he didn't do: he didn't move. He wanted to, fought it even, but his legs were glued to the floor, as were his hands to his sides. He was forced to keep the same expression, and he blinked every five seconds.

The guards never spoke, didn't even look at him; they only brought her in, threw her to the floor and then left, slamming the door behind them. Oddly enough, he didn't know what to do next. His head turned in her direction after nodding to the men who'd brought her there, and then she looked up at him. Her face looked beaten and was covered in dirt, like she had been enclosed in a cell prior to entering the room. His next movement was surprising to both Caroline and himself, but he couldn't do anything to stop it. He reached down and grabbed the rope, threw it on the floor, then lifted Caroline up and placed her down in the chair, all without a word. He kept thinking he was nuts for doing it. Then, Andre grabbed the rope and tied it around Caroline's body, pressing her arms close to her chest, and then he knotted the two ends. Once he was finished, he stepped back to scan his work, then leaned against the door facing Caroline and just stared at her. Without warning, words came out.

"Why'd you do it?" a voice inside of him asked. He was sure it wasn't him talking but someone or something that spoke for him. Anyway, those weren't his words. The first thing he would have said was 'I'm sorry'. But he couldn't.

Caroline didn't answer, she just stared back at him. He then felt anger rush

inside him, or what was left of his real body, and a nerve on his right arm moved, causing his arm to lift up and smack into her left cheek, sending her head turning in the other direction. His expression kept the same message, but his mind was burning with anger and frustration as to why someone had made him do that. Words were the response.

“Answer me!” Andre projected.

Caroline sobbed with her head down. She trembled all over, most likely with fear. Andre was hopeless to stop himself.

“I asked you a question!” His arm flew the other way slapping her other cheek. Her head dangled from side to side, and Andre fought and fought against his own will to stop hitting her, to stop hurting her because it was only hurting himself. He liked her, she was somewhat special, and here he was, beating the crap out of her. Something was off, but words came out again, interrupting his line of thought.

“I had no choice,” Caroline whispered, barely audible. Andre’s left arm reached up this time and extended to the back of her head, pulling it back by her hair. She didn’t make a sound despite how much Andre thought it had hurt her.

“What?!” he shouted at her, forcing her to look at him.

“I had no choice!” she repeated.

“She didn’t deserve to die,” he spat out and let go of her head. His legs began moving then, making their way around her. “Why?”

“Because...”

“WHY!!!???”

“Because she left me no choice! She left *you* no choice!”

“What?”

“You have to believe me! I didn’t want to, but she was there, dragging you away while you were knocked out and I had to do something. I wasn’t about to let her take you away—“

“So you killed her?”

Caroline had no answer to that; Andre knew he had cracked her. Inside, however, he was screaming, confused as to what was going on, but angry that she had done something so horrible.

“Did you?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“She was my roommate!” he screamed and pushed the chair back, sending her flying into the air and then crashing back to the ground. “How could you do that?”

“She...”

“She what?” he challenged, leaning down to look at her in the eyes. “She what?”

“She...”

“What!?!?!?”

“She’s Charles Mincov’s daughter.”





begin. She wore the same old thing, but somehow she looked different. Like she had done something to the uniform to make it her own, but Andre couldn't figure it out. The first thing Andre saw as soon as his eyes were open was her smile. He couldn't help but return the grin.

He sat up and faced her. Happy things were okay for now. "Hey."

"Hi. Feeling any better?" she asked, turning the smile into a concerned grin.

"A little. The sleep was great, but..." he stopped himself. He didn't want to tell her; he couldn't.

"But what?"

"Nothing."

"But what?" she urged.

"I had another dream...but...it's...it's nothing."

"What was it about?" she asked.

"My family, and stuff around that," he hoped it was enough to convince her, but by the look on her face, she knew he wasn't telling her the truth. Oddly enough, she shook it away and changed the conversation, gladly understanding he didn't want to talk about it. This drew Andre closer to her, how understanding she was without needing to say much. It was something he would really treasure about her.

"Do you miss them?" she asked.

"Yes. A lot."

"Understandable," she replied and looked away, turning her attention to the window. She stood and grew closer to the glass then turned back to Andre. "We'd better get going. Some of them are already gathering for the second event."

"Alright, just let me get dressed," he said, getting out of bed. She smiled and walked towards the door.

"I'll meet you downstairs then."

"Be—" he started, but was cut off by Caroline's sense of sarcasm.

"I know. Be careful. But you don't have to worry about me. There are other things that need your attention right now, and I'm not one of them," she said, and Andre knew immediately what she meant.

"Okay," was all he managed to say. They exchanged another descent look followed by a smile before she turned and left the room.

Andre got out of bed and pulled the sheets over the mattress. He walked over to the closet and pulled out the uniform. He quickly dressed then hurried out the door, not wanting to be late.

"Attention everyone!" yelled the proctor for the second challenge. She was a strange woman; her exotic clothes were surprising and that Andre would've assumed had been banned; her hair was a dark shade of red and very short for a lady's hair cut; and her voice was a tiny bit annoying. After a couple of seconds, the chatter came to a stop and all eyes were on her. "Thank you." She paused, eyeing the crowd before continuing. "Okay. Now, I'm here today to proctor you

second test in the competition.” Another pause. “There are some rules to this event. Despite the training you’ve had in the past couple of days, none of the rules you were told apply to this test. It is indeed your physical test, but there are restrictions as to how you should hit your partner. But first, Ms. Martin has an announcement she’d like to make,” she gestured to Ava in the back of the crowd and all heads turned in her direction.

“Thank you Maria,” she waved to the proctor, Maria, and then looked at everyone. “Now, I know you’ve all heard that you’ll be competing against your own roommate. But according to the court and...” she paused and searched the crowd then landed on a face, Andre’s, and stared at him before picking up again, “...other complaints,” she sighed, “...that it was ruled unfair and therefore you all will not be fighting against your own roommate. We have taken the liberty to pair each of you up with someone about your size and weight; girls against girls and boys against boys. That should make it easier for you all. Good luck everyone.” She waved again, and then turned and left, back inside the castle. Andre didn’t really think about where she was going, all he thought about was who he was going to fight against. He was happy it wasn’t going to be Caroline anymore. Then another thought rolled onto his mind: what if he didn’t win? What if Caroline didn’t win? Did Faith’s old theory still apply? Were they ruling out kids all throughout or just at the very end? It was all pretty confusing, but despite the nerves he felt fly in his stomach, he was anxious to start.

The lady grabbed everyone’s attention once more and read the names aloud of the pairs. Andre blanked out in the first couple pairs, not knowing anyone she had called. But his head snapped up when he heard his name being called and Kyle’s right after.

Something told him that he knew it was going to happen, but he still didn’t believe it. He didn’t want to fight his friend. And Andre and Kyle were friends, or at least Andre thought they were. Andre searched the crowd for Kyle, but couldn’t find him. He was lost in his own thoughts when someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around, and Kyle was there standing behind him.

“Guess we’re partners,” he said.

“Guess so. Hey listen, no matter what happens,” Andre extended out his hand toward Kyle, “no hard feelings, right?” he waited, and waited, but Kyle’s fierce expression didn’t fade. He just looked at Andre, with disgust hanging on his lips. The face was cold and made Andre wonder what he was thinking about. Probably how to destroy him in the match. But something else ticked him off. Andre knew that Faith had been his roommate after she was taken from him, and then she goes missing. Is still missing for a fact. And he’s not even the least bit concerned. He was when he came rushing to tell Andre what happened. But the very next day at breakfast, he was eating as much food as the lunch proctors would allow him to, and he was laughing and smiling and having a good time. It didn’t seem right, to have lost a roommate and then be all happy afterwards. She was still missing and it didn’t seem to bother him. Which made Andre more suspicious. Distracted from his train of thoughts, he blinked several times and found that Kyle had lost the cold expression on his face and was now staring hard

at him, as if wanting to enter his brain and communicate through his thoughts. This reminded Andre too much about the dream he'd had the night before. Despite his concern, then wasn't the time to start accusing people without evidence. He'd come up with a plan. He would get through this test and then he would search for the answer. It had then occurred to him that the most exciting parts of the competition was what happened in between.

A bell rang, and the first match had begun. Andre spun around and saw two girls fighting it out on the grass about fifteen feet away. The short lady was moving quickly around them, calling out bad moves or encouraging them to keep fighting. Andre could hear a couple of guys shouting and whooping; others were cheering calling out names; the girls were shouting encouragements to either girl; Andre just remained silent.

The match didn't last very long, and pretty soon, one of the girls had pinned the other one down for almost thirty seconds. The girl had unfortunately broken an ankle from being pinned to the floor almost five times.

Maria called out the next group and it was a pair of two smallish guys. Andre chuckled when they walked out and raised their hands up in the air thinking they were big and famous. He wasn't the only one who thought that was funny; everyone either laughed or booed them, making jokes as their struck their pose waiting for the bell.

Three other groups were called before the lady finally called Andre and Kyle to set up. Kyle was up front and he'd reached the "stage" first, greeting no one along the way, just staring dead-on straight at Andre. Andre made his way through the crowd, some people cheering, others just staring.

Once reaching the grassy field, Mari stepped up. "Okay, the rules are simple. Just forget what you learned in training, it was just training. The rules aren't hard to remember here either. All you have to do is pin your opponent for at least twenty seconds, no more than a minute, and you are allowed to hit anywhere. If any blood gets shed, just keep going unless there is a real injury. Ready?" she looked from Andre to Kyle. With a big gulp, Andre nodded his head, and Kyle just spit on the ground, not taking his eyes off of Andre. She lifted her arm and put in between them, then with a blow of her whistle, a bell sounded and she backed away. The match had begun.

-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-

# THIRTY

Andre ducked the instant he saw Kyle's arm fly above his head. Just as he thought he was in the clear, a foot comes his way and crashes into his left knee, throwing him onto his back. He grabbed his knee and turned and rolled on his back, dodging the next attempt hit from Kyle. This game was turning out to be more dangerous than he'd originally imagined. He rolled over again and tried to increase the distance between them, but Kyle caught up with him again, this time taking hold of his ankle and pulling him closer to him. Andre turned to look at Kyle and he saw something in his eye. It wasn't there before; he'd actually never seen anything like it. The gleam that came from his eye read of anger, which only frightened Andre even more. With his other foot, he kicked Kyle in the face, hoping it would break his grasp, which it did. Andre took that opportunity to crawl away.

Once he was certain there were at least five feet between them, he turned back and saw Kyle had recovered rather quickly and was now storming across the lawn heading straight for him. Andre then jumped up and got ready to either give the punch or take it. Kyle got as close as possible without warning and then swung on Andre, missing again. He threw his arm the other way and Andre ducked out of the way once more. His obvious lack of aim annoyed him, and Andre noticed that Kyle grew even angrier with every swing of his arm. Missing a target was obviously not his thing.

Andre took the opportunity to make his comeback then. He took a careful step forward and dodged another hit from Kyle, then when Kyle was trying to swing the other way, Andre caught his arm and twisted it, bringing him down to the floor. With his foot, ANDRE pinned Kyle to the ground and held his right arm high in the air. A slight smile crossed Andre's face, but something hinted at the fact that it wasn't over.

Just like he had predicted, Kyle bent his knee and tripped Andre, sending him flying backwards and landing on his back. Andre heard something crack, but there wasn't any instant pain just yet. So he jumped back up just as Kyle did the same. Both of them were facing each other and ready to attack, but neither made a single movement.

It must have been at least ten seconds before Kyle growled, shocking Andre to the point of illusion. He realized that Kyle wasn't really Kyle then, but someone else. Like someone was controlling him. Or he was always like this, just never showed that side to Andre. There were numerous possibilities as to why he acting so cold, but the growl had really caught Andre off guard. And apparently it was what Kyle wanted because the minute Andre lowered his fists about half a centimeter, Kyle leaped forward, slamming into him and throwing him to the

ground. Kyle got on top of him and pinned his arms and legs to the ground. Andre struggled to be set free, but he knew he wouldn't win. The boy was considerably heavy and Andre couldn't push him off.

It was then that Andre saw it. Ten seconds went by so far; he only had twenty left before the match was over. It was hard to make it out, but it was still there. Despite his nervousness, he looked from the object in Kyle's hand to Kyle's face and back. Fifteen seconds. Then he heard himself talk.

"No," Andre whispered. He looked at Kyle, but his face was fixed with rage and a crazed smile. "No," he repeated.

Twenty seconds. Andre kept moving around, trying to break free. He managed to pull his left leg out and he swung it over on top of Kyle's head, knocking him to the side. He was free. Then he got back up and created more distance between him and Kyle. Though it wasn't necessary because he didn't move. The clock started counting again. Five seconds. Kyle had a weapon, and it wasn't allowed. Ten seconds. Kyle pinned him down to the ground. Fifteen seconds. Andre had made a comeback and managed to break away. Twenty seconds. Kyle was on the floor, not really moving, but breathing. Twenty-five seconds. Kyle opened his eyes and stared dead at Andre. He knew what was coming to him, and regardless of his warning before, he didn't move. Thirty seconds. The bell rang. The match was over. Kyle wasn't done, though. He jumped up in an instant and raced toward Andre. It was then that Andre noticed the sharp, pointy end of what Kyle held tightly in his hand. He turned his attention back to Kyle, a crazy deadly grin on his face. Then for some reason, he looked to the crowd of people, some were cheering others stayed still. He searched the big group of people until he found her. Caroline was staring, not cheering or talking, but staring at him with worried eyes and a frightened serious expression. He just looked at her, and then he heard Kyle grow closer. He didn't want to break away from Caroline, if anything, he wanted her to be the last thing he would see in this life.

Then, the blade pierced through Andre's stomach, arching his stomach. He leaned down and grasped the wound. People started screaming then. From the corner of his eyes he saw people running to them, some adults grab Kyle and pull him back, other crowd around Andre. The sound was beginning to fade, so it was hard to comprehend what was going on. The pain was very faint, and he didn't understand much. Then she was there.

Caroline ran towards him and was the first one at his side, holding him while he collapsed on the grassy floor. She was crying and screaming, while looking around, probably calling out for help. He blinked a couple of times, then she touched his face. With a gentle feel, she stroked his cheek, wiping a tear that had appeared without warning. She looked down at him and Andre couldn't help but smile. He tried to say something, but there was no energy left in his system for him to make words. His eyes were starting to close.

The pain became more noticeable, and Andre began to block out more sound by the second. He blinked again, and saw that the sky was turning black. Caroline was crying harder now, and she pulled him closer to embrace in a gentle hug. She pulled away and just stared.



# THIRTY-ONE

The dream wasn't much like the ones he had before. This one was different. It was much more of a memory than a glimpse at the future. Something seemed odd, nevertheless.

Andre didn't feel anything by then, and he'd guessed he was either dead or about to be. He wasn't exactly sure of what happened after he blacked out, but he could have guessed that the medics had either taken care of him there or he was in the hospital. Either way, he felt like he had died.

He was surrounded by complete blackness, nothing there. No light, no sign of anyone but himself. He heard nothing just his thoughts. They were as if he was speaking aloud but his lips weren't moving.

Then something bright flashed across the distance and he was in the hospital, encircled with people running and shouting commands. He didn't see them but he could hear their hurrying tones and assumed they were operating on him still. It meant he didn't die; at least not yet. He also noticed he was looking down at himself, lying on the bed covered in blood from the wound. Somehow, he was able to stay calm, thinking it would all be over soon. Another flash came and he was back in the dark place.

He didn't understand what was happening, but he liked the black area he was in. It was soothing and there wasn't anything to worry about. But the dream was gone once again by another flash of white light.

The hospital room was busier than before, and he missed the quiet of the black dream he'd just been in. Somehow, he was able to avoid much conflict and disappointment because a few seconds later, he was back there.

Things seemed to go back and forth between the dream and the emergency room. After a couple more times, he realized that he was actually going back and forth between life and death. It shocked him and he felt his heart skip a beat.

In the emergency room, he heard a flat line then the darkness enclosed upon him. He stayed there a little too long this time. That was when someone else appeared. Faith.

"What are you doing here?" Andre heard himself ask. His lips trembled as he said it, worried at what her answer would be.

"I didn't make it," she replied. Andre could feel the tears begin to swell up



in his eyes.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I’m here to save you. You can’t let go just yet,” her voice was soft and calm. It was such a welcoming sound to hear aside from all the chaos he’d just been through.

“I—” he began.

“Please. Don’t let go.”

“But, I don’t know what else to do,” he explained. She didn’t believe him though.

“Yes you do. You have to stay there for a while longer.” She was beginning to cry as well.

“What if I don’t want to?” he questioned.

“Why wouldn’t you? It’s your home.”

“My home doesn’t necessarily have to be the most important thing in my life.”

“Then what is?” she asked, curious.

“I don’t know yet. But there’s something else I have to do, and it doesn’t involve my home.”

“I don’t understand,” she said, taking a step closer.

“What if I were to stay here with you?” he asked, getting closer as well.

“You don’t want that,” she assured with a slight smile. He, however, couldn’t bring himself to smile back. It was just too painful for him to see her, dead. It was a dream of some sort, and they were both dead right then. But, by her words, he assumed that he could still make it.

“Why don’t I want that?” he asked.

“Because you still have life left in you. You aren’t done yet,” she reached up and touched his cheek.

“What am I supposed to do then?”

“Finish the competition,” she simply replied. It was an honest reply and he knew that she was right. He wanted to give up and stay with her. He missed her. But she was right. His mission wasn’t complete yet.

“Okay,” he responded.

“Thank you,” she said and looked at him deep into his eyes as one tear fell from her eye. Andre reached out and caught it before it reached her lips.

He looked at her and thought about something that had just clicked in his mind. But he was unsure about how to ask it. “Umm...just...tell me one thing first,” he said.

“Anything.”

“How did you...pass away...?” he said and gulped not wanting it to sound offensive in any way.

She inhaled and sighed, probably retrieving the memories. “Before they took my from my room, Kyle was telling me about you and your naïve sense of the outcomes of this competition. He mentioned how it didn’t make any sense to him that you didn’t see what this game was doing to our people and how the government had decided to rule our nation.” She paused, taking another breath.

“So, I told him he was wrong; that more people should be more like you. Unaware of the bad things in life and just focus on all the good. I liked having someone like you to talk about the competition, and it hurt me when I had to leave.”

“Wait, so you knew?” she nodded her head. “But,” he stepped back.

“Listen: I was never going to tell you because I thought it was only going to hurt you. But when I found out what was going to happen, I knew I had to do it.”

“I’m still not following,” her arms dropped to her sides and another tear slid down.

“Do you remember that night when I told you I overheard a couple of men talking on my way to our room?” she asked, he nodded, she continued. “Well, that night I didn’t tell you everything,”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t have much time. I’m sorry. I had to do it.”

“Do what? Die?” he asked, hurt.

“Be your sacrifice,” she insisted.

“My what? Why?”

“Because they were planning on hurting you and I couldn’t let you do that. You have to finish this game. And when you do, you’ll understand. I promise.”

“But—”

“No more buts’ just go. Please?” she urged.

Andre looked at her and remembered the first moment they saw each other. She looked exactly the way she did then, and it brought another tear from his eyes.

“Please don’t cry,” she said, wiping his tear with her finger.

He looked at her and stepped closer and pulled her into a strong embrace. They held each other tightly, trying to stop time and stay stuck in that moment when nothing mattered but their presence. They pulled away and he held her hands in his with a gentle touch.

She smiled and blinked a couple of times, trying to hide another wave of sadness drop from her eyes. Andre closed his eyes and thought about their time together. There actually wasn’t enough time for them and he wished he could stay. Then Faith surprised him.

“I know what you’re thinking. Please don’t stay here with me. You need to get back.”

“I know,” he sighed. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them and he was struck by the bright light coming from a ceiling, the hospital room. He was back. So he had died, if only for minutes, he had. He realized how much emptier he felt knowing that Faith was gone, long gone. She couldn’t have come back even if she wanted to. And the thing that hurt the most was that she knew. She knew she was going to die, and she did it anyway. It really showed her true love for him. It was there in black and white.

Andre couldn’t hear anything, and the light hurt too much to keep his eyes open for very long. But he was breathing and he was back. This he sensed brought a lot of commotion back into the room. Doctors trying to keep him alive, nurses running back and forth helping out whenever they’re needed. He didn’t want to think about it anymore. It felt like such a burden to have to carry the feeling of leaving Faith once again. So he closed his eyes and enjoyed the peace and quiet of a dreamy slumber.

THIRTY-TWO

When Andre woke, Caroline was standing before him paying attention to a book she held in her hands, reading intently. He didn't want to bother her, so he closed his eyes again.

"How's he doing?" asked a female voice. Aside from his curiosity, he didn't open his eyes, assuming whoever it was was lurking nearby.

"He should be fine in a couple of day's time," responded Caroline, he knew her voice anywhere.

"Okay, then. He should be ready to go for the next event, right?" the female asked again.

"Are you kidding me?" responded Caroline. "He was stabbed, went through surgery, and died for a couple of minutes. He'll be lucky if he can remember a thing at all. So don't get your hopes up."

"Excuse me? I don't believe I asked for your disposition. I only asked you a question."

"Yeah, well you need to start thinking more about the safety of your competitors and less about the competition."

"Well!" the lady said. She was starting to sound like Ava, and Andre peeked from behind his eyelids and saw it was her. "I've never been talked to like that in my life, and I certainly won't take it from an incoherent little brat like you. Now if you'll excuse me, I have better things to do and other places to be."

"Go ahead then. The room will be better once you're gone," Caroline smirked and waved a sarcastic goodbye. Ava turned on her heels and stormed out, steam running out from her ears. Caroline then turned back to her magazine.

"Wow, you can be mean," Andre said slowly. He pushed himself up to try and sit, but he was too weak. Caroline looked up then and stared wide eyed at him. She dropped the magazine and reached down to pull him into a gentle hug.

"Oh my god!" she whispered.

"What?" he chuckled as she let go. "I'm fine."

"Yes, I know. But...it's just been a scary week."

"Week?" he asked. "How long was I out?"

"Six days," she replied.

"Really?"

"I never knew a person could sleep so much. Then again, you would wake up and fall back under. The pain seemed too much for you so the doctors would give you more painkillers and it made you drowsy enough to put you to sleep for two days at the most," Caroline explained.

"Wow," he thought a moment. "When did you get here?" he asked her.

"This morning."

"What time is it now?"

“About eight, maybe. I don’t know. I only leave when the doctors do their check up and then I come back. So I really haven’t been outside for a long time,” Andre found that to be very sweet of her and he also realized that he was getting more and more attached to her. It hurt, however, because he knew Faith was his girl and she would always be. Andre just smiled at her response and then closed his eyes.

“Well, miss, I think you should be getting up to bed now, don’t you?” asked a male. Andre opened his eyes and found that Caroline had fallen asleep in the chair beside his hospital bed when the doctor had come in. She yawned and grabbed her belonging, which wasn’t much anyway.

“Alright, doctor. Thanks for letting me stay longer.” Caroline got up and walked over to Andre and kissed him on the cheek. He couldn’t help but smile and open his arms to her. She grinned and hugged him softly, not wanting to hurt him.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then?” he asked.

“Sure,” Caroline replied, and walked out the room, leaving Andre alone with the doctor.

“You’re very lucky to have such a great friend,” the doctor said.

“I know, thank you sir,” Andre responded.

“Good. Now, get some sleep. You’ll need your energy for tomorrow,” the doctor stated and turned to the door.

“What’s happening tomorrow?” Andre called out.

“You start your physical therapy session to get you up and running again. You’re still in the competition and we need you better soon.”

“Oh, alright, then,” Andre said and leaned back into the pillow.

“Goodnight son,” the doctor said, and turned off the lights to the room. He walked out leaving the door a tiny bit open, so some light did shed into the room.

Andre lay in bed that night thinking about the encounter he had with Faith. She had said a lot in their short reunion, and some of it still didn’t quite make sense.

She had mentioned that she was a sacrifice and had been dead for days already. No one had said anything, though. Not even the other people competing. Only Caroline had been as worried about her and Evelyn as Andre seemed to be. Then there was Evelyn, who was still missing. No, she wasn’t. Caroline and Andre had seen them in that room in the basement of the castle about a week ago. She was there, they both were. And they seemed fine. No, they weren’t. Caroline had said that Faith was tied up to a chair and Evelyn wasn’t.

That had to mean something. It wasn’t possible to assume that Evelyn was the bad one. Then, Andre recalled the dream he had earlier in the week. About interviewing Caroline. She said that she had killed somebody, one of his roommates. It wasn’t her, or Faith because Evelyn took care of that. Besides,

Caroline seemed just as surprised about it as he was when they saw it happen. So, it had to be Evelyn.

What if Caroline had killed Evelyn, but only as a sign of revenge? It was possible enough to be true. And Caroline didn't seem shocked to find that he knew it was her who did it in the dream. So it was a planned attack. Caroline was in on all the secrecy going on about the castle. And so was Kyle. He had tried to kill him during the competition. And who knew what he would have done to Andre if no one was around. But why all the secrets? There was a lot of private talk roaming the palace, and apparently too many people he knew were well aware of what was happening. But, there was something else missing. It was only a matter of time before Andre figured out the rest and put all the pieces together.

—  
—  
—  
—

# THIRTY-THREE

The lights flashed on and startled Andre. He reached up to cover his face from the blinding light, but it didn't work so well.

"Andre!" whispered someone. Andre peeked through his hands and saw a boy standing in the doorway, now approaching the bed. He jumped to the side and prepared himself for anything. "Don't be afraid. I'm Henry, Caroline's old roommate."

"Oh, well, what do you want?" he asked, still alarmed.

"Caroline sent me. She caught me during dinner and said that she overheard the doctor talking with Ava. She didn't specify but urged me to help."

"I'm still confused."

"Well, she didn't tell me what they were talking about, but she did say that it was important to get you away from here tonight."

"But why?" he asked, lowering his hands.

"I don't know. But she sounded worried," he looked around the room.

"So?"

"So...come on." The boy pushed walking towards Andre and helping him off the bed.

Andre swung his legs to the side and lowered himself until they reached the ground. With as much strength as he had left, he lifted himself off the bed and put enough pressure to walk. It hurt like burning coal being thrown at you from a near distance. The pain was excruciating enough for him to fall down and be unable to walk.

"Ugh!" Andre grunted. "I can't. It hurts too much," he said.

"Here, I'll help you."

"No, don't touch me. I can do this myself," he shoed Henry away.

"Alright, fine. Suit yourself then." He headed for the door.

"Wait!" Andre called out.

"What?" he asked, turning around at the door.

Andre sighed and lowered his head. "I could use some help," he admitted.

"Hm." The boy walked back to the bed and put Andre's shoulder around his neck and started for the door again.

"So, what's going on?" Andre asked the boy once they were in the elevator.

"I'm not sure, but Caroline said she would meet us at the front door."

"Why didn't she come up and help me?"

"That, you'll have to ask her yourself."

The elevator reached the lobby and Andre hobbled alongside Henry through the hall and to the main entrance.

It wasn't that far, but it still hurt Andre to walk. They reached the glass doors, but Caroline wasn't on the other side. Instead, there was a big van. A white, unmarked van, kind of like the one that picked him up from his house weeks ago. He wasn't sure what was going on. But if Caroline was involved, he would go along with it.

"Where's Caroline?" Andre asked.

"Shut up," said the boy. Andre stopped there and looked at Henry.

"What?" he asked. "Where's Caroline?" he asked again.

"Just shut up and keep going." The boy pulled Andre along the driveway to the van. Andre tried to pull back, but he was too weak to break the grip Henry had on his arm. It also reminded him of the strong grip Kyle had in the very beginning.

Andre couldn't fight this guy and had, unfortunately, given in to the command. He walked with Henry to the white van.

The side door opened and out walked Ava Martin.

"Well, hello Mr. Pearson. Such a pleasure to see you again." She grinned wide and eyed him behind the heavy mascara applied on her eyelids.

"I wish I could say the same thing about you," he replied, sounding as ignorant as he possibly could.

"Now, now, now. Don't want to make my associate angry," she motioned behind her and there was a big guy standing there, all dressed in black, with a huge overcoat where he was probably hiding his gun, "Do you?"

Andre didn't respond and it was another reason for Ava to smile again.

"Good. Um...Mr. Hall, would you please escort Mr. Pearson to the van?" she asked, looking at Henry.

The boy did as ordered and opened the other side of the van. Inside was an empty two rows of seats, and Andre was thrown into the back. He landed on his stomach and he groaned loudly, clutching the bandaged area he had gotten surgery on. Henry got inside himself and tied Andre's hands together, then sat down next to him.

Before Ava came back in, Henry leaned into Andre and whispered, "Whatever you do, don't go against her. I had no choice. I'm sorry."

Andre couldn't respond for two reasons: he was surprised by the comment and Ava had climbed inside the van, which was now racing out of the parking lot of the hospital and heading through some woods.

It felt like a crazy drive through the middle of nowhere until the van pulled into the castle. Andre had figured the hospital was inside the palace, but apparently it was far away. Before stepping out of the van, Henry climbed to the



front and untied Andre's hands. The he stepped down and helped Andre, still to weak on his own.

"Now, before you go, I have some things to say to you mister." Ava was looking straight at him, almost through him, before she continued.

"This competition has been around since before your parents were even old enough to compete, and I will not let it burn in ashes, do you understand me?" she leaned down to look at him. He did nothing. "Do you?" Again nothing. "Felix!" she snapped, and the driver got out of the van and stepped around the van, ready to pull out his gun. Andre saw it and replied.

"Yes."

"This nation has worked too hard to keep itself running and we do not need another revolution from an eighteen year old pathetic weakling!" Despite her rage, Andre remained neutral, forcing the words to fly past him.

"It has also caught my attention that you may be aware of our plans here. Our real plans. But you need to know something mister. No one is going to stop me. Not even you." A pause for effect. "Now, you are going to finish this competition one way or another and whether you like it or not."

She snickered and then turned to get back in the van. Henry helped Andre inside the building and led him to the elevator. He pushed the button for the third floor, but didn't join him. Instead he gave Andre a slight smile and stepped back, watching the doors close. The last thing he saw of him was a wave and the boy begin to turn around.

—

—

—

—

—

# THIRTY-FOUR

When the elevator door opened, Andre stepped out and walked over to his room. It hadn't occurred to him that the last hour seemed so bizarre to him until he walked inside. He was about to turn back and find out what had just happened when he saw Caroline standing next to the window looking down. He closed the door quietly and limped over to her.

He touched her shoulder gently and she flinched as she turned around. But when they locked eyes, she gasped and pulled him in for a hug. He groaned at the pain, and she let go instantly, but held him close.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, and hugged him again. This time, Andre returned the hug.

"I honestly don't know. Something very weird just happened and things keep getting weirder and weirder by the minute."

"But, I don't understand. How'd you get here?"

"Ava," he said and looked back to take a seat on the windowsill.

"Ava? Why would she get you out of there? And why would she bring you here?"

"I don't know, but I couldn't question it. Henry told me not to."

"Henry? Henry!? What?!" she stood up and paced toward her bed. She took a seat and faced Andre. Then she sighed and said, "You need to tell me everything that happened from the second I left."

"Alright."

Andre explained all the events that had happened since she left the hospital and every now and then she would get up and look back out the window. Andre continued on with the story and when he finished, she just sighed and said, "Huh."

"That's it?"

"What do you mean?"

"That's all you have to say?"

"Well, what do you want me to say?"

"I don't know. Something other than 'huh' perhaps."

"Well, sorry to disappoint." She got back up and walked over to the

window, looked down, side to side, and back down. After another five seconds, she stuck her head back in and sat down.

“Why do you keep doing that?” he asked.

“I’m waiting for someone.”

“Who?”

“Can’t say.” She shrugged her shoulders and walked back to the window.

“Why not?” he asked and got up this time to look out with her. “Who are you waiting for?”

“A friend. I can’t say until they come. They should be here soon,” she said. Andre was only more confused than he was minutes ago.

“I’m not following.”

“Then, don’t worry about it. My friend and I need to go out for the night, but I’ll be back before morning.”

“What? Where are you two going?” he asked, looking as surprised as ever.

“I can’t tell you, but you’ll thank me later,” she said. Just then, a pair of headlights rolled up along the drive of the palace and stopped directly below their window. Caroline turned to Andre and gave him a warm smile. “Don’t worry about me. Just get some sleep. I’ll be back soon.” And then she jumped down.

Andre’s heart stopped for the second time and he leaned so far out of the window he almost went flying himself. He could barely make out her body crashing into the bushes, but then the headlights illuminated her shadowy figure as she got inside the truck.

Andre figured he should have called out to her, to tell her that is was crazy, whatever it was she was going to do. But something stopped him from speaking. He just stared down and watched the truck pull away and gain speed the farther away it went from the castle.

He didn’t understand why she did that, or where she was going, or why she was going, or who she could possibly be going with. But, despite all the questions, he managed to leave the window open and climb into bed.

The dream took longer to come, but when it did, it explained almost everything.

He was invisible; like he was there but no one could see him or feel his presence. It was such a weird thing to have happen, but it did. At least in his mind.

The courthouse; Charles Mincov, Ava Martin, Adam Smith, and some other old guys were there as well. They were seated around an oval shaped wooden table with wooden chairs. Nothing lay on the table besides photographs of people. Andre got closer to the table to take a better look at the images, and he realized that they were all of one person, him.

He stepped back and gathered near Ava and Charles, ready and attentive to listen to their conversation.

“We have to do this,” said Ava.

“We have to do nothing unless I say so,” Charles said and slammed his fist

into the table to call for silence.

"But, he cannot win," explained Ava.

"Don't you think I'm well aware of the situation as it is? That little punk has been running around here thinking he owns the place. If he gets chosen by the panel as the new ruler then we will lose everything we have created."

"What if we talked to him?" asked a short guy with a high-pitched voice.

"You can't get through to that kid, trust me," commented Adam. Andre clenched his fists and thought about how badly he wanted to beat the crap out of that guy.

"There must be another way to communicate," the guy said.

"Well, there isn't."

"Listen up!" Charles shouted. "We've already taken care of phase one," he held up two pictures and put them down next to each other in front of him, "Phase two went a little bit rougher than we'd imagined, but it's done," he held up another picture, "and Phase three has just begun. Let us complete the plan and be done with this." He stood up and cleared his throat. "This meeting is over. Now, if you'll all excuse me." Charles sighed and walked away.

The rest of the group followed shortly after, everyone except Ava. She held her firm grasp on the edge of the table and a stern look on her face. Once everyone was gone, she waited several more seconds before moving towards the side with the pictures on the table.

Andre followed her, staying close but far enough away to not be heard. He was invisible but not mute.

She picked up one picture and held it high in the air, looking at it. Andre leaned in a bit more to examine it. It was a picture of Faith; she was wearing a white dress and sitting down on a porch, maybe of her house, watching someone else run around, maybe a sibling. He smiled at the sight of her. She wasn't looking at the camera; she was smiling at the little kid. It seemed to be a spy shot, something you would do to get information on someone without them knowing, or to simply keep an eye on them. As if they were doing something wrong. But what could she have done to be spied upon? Andre knew her well enough to conclude that she wasn't the type to go looking for trouble or even get involved in anything. Then Ava turned the card around, and right there, written in bright red letters, said "Phase One: Complete".

Andre couldn't stop the gasp that escaped from his mouth, and he quickly backed away taping his mouth shut with his hands. Ava looked up instantly and looked around, but saw nothing. Then she cleared her throat, set the picture back down and walked out of the room, closing the door behind her. Andre took the opportunity then to examine the other pictures. He picked up the other picture next to the one of Faith and it was Evelyn. She was wearing a blue skirt with a red tank top. She was getting inside a car and looking far into the distance, way past the camera--another spy shot. He turned it around and it said "Phase One: Complete".

Andre set that picture aside and picked up the next one. It was a picture of Kyle; he was wearing black pants and a white short sleeved dress shirt and

walking along the road of Mellani. On the back it said "Phase Two: Complete".

With each image, Andre became more and more enraged, so much he could feel himself breathing harder and faster. But he didn't stop. He picked up the next picture on the table.

It was of him; he was wearing the uniform when he was being picked up on the first day—it was the first day of the competition. Someone was there, spying on him, and had gotten away with a picture of him. Andre tried to think if he had seen anyone, but nothing came to mind. He could barely remember that day, and it was only a dream. He turned it over and it said "Phase Three:". He was phase three? It didn't make sense. Then he thought about what they had done to him, and he put some pieces together.

He was so lost in his thoughts, he didn't hear when someone opened the door to the room. He looked up and dropped the picture immediately. He took a step back and then realized who it was: Caroline and Henry. What were they doing? He figured they hadn't seen him, and he made a run for it to the door. But when Caroline spoke he stopped in his tracks.

"Alright, where do they keep the files?" she asked.

"I think they're over there," Henry replied and pointed to the corner. Andre hadn't seen anything else in the room besides the table, so he looked over to the corner Henry and Caroline were heading towards.

"I don't see it," she said again.

"I should be here."

Both of them rambled through the drawers and flipped over the papers on the two desks. Then she opened a drawer on the very bottom and must have found what she was looking for.

"Here!" she whispered. She held up a manila folder with a couple of papers inside in one hand and a key in the other.

"Alright, come on." Henry was beginning to walk to the door when Caroline stopped and looked at the table. She stared at it and then dropped what she was holding, making less noise than he expected. She stepped lively and reached the table just as Henry took her place and picked up what she had dropped.

Caroline had reached down to pick up one of the pictures on the table, but it wasn't one Andre had seen before. It was placed farther on the end and he didn't have time to look at it once they came in.

Caroline stared at it and Henry stared at her. Andre had the sensation that Henry knew what the picture was, but he didn't dare move.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked, looking at him but still holding the picture.

"I didn't want to scare you," he responded.

"Scare me? You think I'm scared now?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm not. This just gives me more reason to keep fighting. And if I'm phase four, then bring it on. But I will not go down without a fight." She dropped the picture and then walked out of the room. Henry sighed and followed her.

Andre on the other hand couldn't move.

Caroline was phase four.

## THIRTY-FIVE

Andre slept the rest of the night, without a dream, and was awakened by the sound of the window opening and someone falling through. He sat up in bed and saw Caroline getting up. The sun was just beginning to rise and there was some light shedding into the room.

“Hey, sorry, didn’t mean to wake you,” she said and walked over to her bed. She wiped some dirt off her clothes and reached into her closet to pick out a cleaner uniform.

“That’s okay. So, did you find what you were looking for?” he asked, getting up from the bed.

“Yes, I did actually.” She held up a manila folder and a key. It was exactly like the dream he had, only it wasn’t a dream. Somehow, he was there. And that meant to conversation was real between Ava and Charles. Which also meant that Caroline was in trouble, she was phase four.

“Oh, I know.”

“Huh?” she asked.

He didn’t want to keep anything from her and he figured that by telling her what he knew, it would help her chances of surviving or something. “I was there.”

“What?” she stopped what she was doing.

“Yeah. I don’t know how, but I was. And I saw everything. The pictures. You and Henry. I even heard the conversation between Ava and Charles and the other

people.”

“But, I don’t understand—“

“I don’t either, but I’m not going to question it. If I had a ‘dream’ that happened as I was dreaming it, then it must be true. I’m not going to even worry about it being extremely weird and frightening, only the fact that I know a lot now and you’re in danger.”

“I know I am, but if you were there, then you heard what I said to Henry. I’m not giving up.”

“I think you should just be more careful. You never know when they’re going to get you.”

“Thanks, but I don’t need a dad right now, I need a partner.”

“Don’t you have Henry?”

“Yes, but he’s sneaking around with me, helping me uncover this scam, and it’s already bad enough for him. He was way out of line last night going there with me, but I need someone and you were hurt.”

“Then, you’re not partners anymore?”

“I just don’t want to put him in danger.”

“What about if I take his place?”

“Are you crazy? You’re hurt—“

“Was. I’m all better now, and we’re both on their list. If we stay together, they can’t get us. They’ll want us one at a time. And besides, I think they already got me.”

“How?”

“When Kyle stabbed me. Or was that just the beginning?”

“I don’t know, but I do agree with you that we’ll be good partners.”

“Okay, then we’re partners.”

“Guess so.”

Andre looked at Caroline for some time before he talked again. “What day is it today?”

“The third event.”

“What is it?”

“The people test.”

“And that is?”

“We go into town and try to win over the people, It’s just to see if we have what it takes to rule thousands of people and if we can be convincing enough to make them go along with us.”

“Oh, alright then. We’d better get going.”

“Yeah, the vans will be leaving soon, and if we’re not on them when they do, we’re out of the competition.”

“What? When did that rule get passed?”

“When you were out in the hospital. Everything was postponed because we all thought you died. No one did anything for that week and we refused to participate in the competition until you got better. Then, the panel consulted with each other and they came up with the rule. But it isn’t necessary now because you’re fine, right? And we’re all be ready to finish this thing once and for all.”



“Wow, sounds like I missed a lot.”

“Yeah you did, Anyway, let’s go down to breakfast You need to eat something.”

“Okay, I’ll catch up with you in a bit.”

“Fine.” She walked to the door, opened it, and walked out.

Andre was happy things were speeding up; he was tired of the competition already and wanted it to end. And the only way to do that was to complete all the events.

That’s what he had to do--what he was going to do.

## THIRTY-SIX

The next couple of months, Andre participated in every event that was left in the competition. He was notified that he had won the match against Kyle, which allowed him to keep going. In addition, the competition was stopped during his recovery because all the competitors were refusing to compete. Their choices weren’t quite clear with Andre and he thought awful hard about why they had done that. According to Ava, everyone was against each other. But it started to seem like the recruits were beginning to team up, like Caroline and he had. Maybe it meant something after all.

The people test, or as they called it “The Convince Me Exam”, went fine for Andre. He wasn’t one of the best, but he did pass, which left him another level up towards the crown. Caroline was pretty good in that challenge, convincing more than half of the people to buy the more expensive fruit. Andre thought it was funny and laughed when she told him about it, but then he couldn’t deny that it gave her second place in that event.

The maze event was somewhat tricky; it called for a completion of a maze

first on paper to and then in an actual maze for two things: memory and accuracy. The panel wanted to see how good you were at memory and trying to figure out your way out of the maze that you completed on paper. As well as check your accuracy and thinking on your feet if you forgot the way. It had seemed easy on paper, but being in that maze and at night was just a little bit more challenging. And because the competition had lost a week due to his time recovering; the test was postponed, which meant that there would be an exam, for the first time ever, in the month of December.

The final exam was just around the corner; only a week away. They were in the final month of the competition.

For the last couple of months, Andre stayed neutral—eating at every meal, sleeping when night came, surviving more haunting nightmares in which he relived his death or imagined Faiths' death, and competing in the events. Caroline hadn't said much to him besides a simple "hello" in the morning, a "hey" if they saw each other during the day, and a "goodnight" when they were going to sleep. He didn't like the fact that they had grown so apart after being so close, but he wanted to focus all of his attention on the competition.

Andre was walking along the stone path in the back of the palace when he heard footsteps behind him. He kept walking, picking up his pace, but she had caught up to him.

"Hey," Caroline said, not really panting, but breathing a little hard.

"Oh, hi. I thought you were someone else," he replied.

"Nah, it's only me."

"So I see." He walked to the bench area and sat down; Caroline took a seat next to him.

"So, how you been?" she asked after a long pause.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you haven't talked to me in months. What's been going on with you?"

"Nothing. I just want to get this competition thing over with already."

"So do I, but you don't see me ignoring everyone around me and excluding myself from my friends."

"So you have friends?" he chuckled at her comment which only made Caroline annoyed.

"You think I'm going to wait around for you to come along and start a conversation? I know other people besides you."

"Then, why aren't you with them?" he asked. Andre knew it sounded cruel, but he didn't want to talk anymore, and it wasn't only to her, but to anyone at all. They were acting like this competition was just a game and they would get to go home soon. Yeah, sure, some of them would. But most of them would die soon. And if the panel wouldn't kill them, they would probably kill each other soon fighting over the crown when the time got closer. It was just a bomb waiting for the trigger to be pushed upon.

"What's your problem?" she looked angry and hurt and scooted away from him on the bench.

"Nothing, I just don't want to talk."

"Well, don't let me stop your wish." She got up and was beginning to leave.

"Oh, good you're leaving?" he asked, folding his arms over his chest and leaning back against the bench.

"Since when did you get so obnoxious?" she folded her arms over her chest and stood to the side of the bench, looking at him with disgust in her expression.

"I'm not obnoxious, you're just very talkative sometimes and it just gets annoying."

"Oh, really? Well then consider this the last time I try to make conversation with you." She turned and started walking away.

"Good, now pack your things and get out of my room and I'll be one happy guy." He smiled as he said it. But cringed inside when he saw her face open up in shock and disappointment.

"If that's how you feel then fine. I'll just go tell Ava."

"Can you do it now? Anything to get you to leave me alone would be great by me."

She paused and took time to form her comeback, but instead her eyes were beginning to water. She walked slowly back towards him and paused a couple of inches from him. Andre got up and they stood face to face.

"For your information, I was the one who saved your stupid ass from dying. I was the one who took care of you when you were in the hospital. I was the one who was with you when you were recovering. I was the one that was there for you and this is how you repay me?" Andre saw a tear fall down her cheek and he instantly regretted what he did. But he also knew he had no choice. If they kept being so close, then the people behind this messed up game would get her next. His only option would be to convince them that they were no longer affiliated with each other; that in fact they hated each other. It was risky, but it was almost done and he didn't want to risk her death as well.

"I don't care about that stuff. Thanks for. Everything, I guess, but it changes nothing."

"What was supposed to change?"

"What we had between us."

"There was never anything between us! We were friends. Good friends. We took care of each other, and that's all that happened. And all that ever would have happened. But I guess you're too much of a jerk to see that, huh?"

"Yeah, whatever."

"You know, now I'm regretting what I did to help you. I risked my butt getting you those files—"

"That I never asked for—"

"I still went and got them for you. And they helped didn't they!? They were exactly what you were looking for!"

"So what?!"

"It means you should consider treating me with some respect."

"I'll treat you with some respect once you get the hell away from my face."

"Fine, then. I'm going." She turned and walked away.

"Good. Besides, Faith was twice the person you'll ever be."

Caroline stopped and turned around. She hadn't gotten too far and came storming back.

"You're lucky you still have her, because if she knew what the hell you really are, she would be just as disgusted with you as I am right now."

"Yeah, thanks for the help."

Caroline had had it. She was furious with Andre and then came the finishing touch to the break-up. Caroline lifted her hand and slapped Andre across the face, throwing it to the right and marking his cheek with a red hand print.

"I shouldn't have saved you. I should have let Kyle finish you off. It would have been better for everyone."

"Then why don't you finish me off?"

"You just watch out." She turned and walked away.

"And why is that? Are you gonna come after me with your guilt bombs again?"

She turned around and stared at him, fear and hurt no longer there in her eyes, but in his. Her expression was as cold as ice and very stern, Andre knew she would never forgive him. "No. Because you don't know me. And you'll never guess what I can do." And with that said, she trailed off.

Andre was left there standing in front of the bench. He was hurt as well, but he convinced himself that it was the right thing to do. Now, with her out of the picture, she would no longer be in danger, and the panel would have to focus on him instead.

He was their final piece to the puzzle after all. Andre knew what they were doing, and why. It was all about him. It had always been about him. And they were at the last strand of the competition. A couple of more days and it would be over, and then the winners would be announced.

All he had to do--make sure he won.

## THIRTY-SEVEN

"Welcome everyone to the final event of this competition," said Ava. She was standing on a stage at a replica courthouse built in the main hall of the palace. "We've come a long way in the past five months and have come up with

the best six competitors. They are: Andre Pearson, Jack Patel, Henry Owens, Caroline Jones, Mariah Taylor, and Lily Spears. Please give them a round of applause.”

All around the room there were staff from the castle, everyone who had been in the courtroom the day of Andre’s trial against Adam, and a few others Andre hadn’t seen before. Charles Mincov stepped up then and took the microphone from Ava as she handed it over to him.

“Welcome recruiters. You’ve all made it to the final round and I want to congratulate you myself. Now, let us begin. The rules of the final exam are pretty descent. It’s the political test; it measures your abilities to rule a country by having to make important decisions based on events we will throw at you. Now, the panel has decided to change that this year. There will still be a political test, but a bit different this year.” A sudden silent effect fell upon the crowd and everyone just stared at Charles like he was speaking a different language. How could they change the rules so suddenly? And without warning too. They couldn’t expect them to go along every time they changed something else about the competition. It wasn’t fair to them, but Andre didn’t have a choice. He was almost at the finish line and he wouldn’t dare back down.

“This year, the panel has turned the political test into a scavenger hunt.” He paused for effect, but the crowd remained silent. Andre was shocked.

“What?”

“Are you serious?”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

Many were upset with the change in rules and many more were upset with its replacement. Andre was upset and disappointed. He knew that the panel could have done something much more challenging than a freakin’ scavenger hunt, but they didn’t. And there was a reason why they had chosen it. Or maybe why they were ordered to choose it. Certainly they wouldn’t have decided that by their own choice, so someone or someone’s must have convinced them to agree to it.

“Alright, alright! Settle down. Now, don’t be disappointed. It’ll be just as exciting and as challenging as the other events were, maybe even more than you’d expected from a game you play at birthday parties. The rules are as follows.

“One: You will be pared up with someone else and be considered your running mate. That means, if your team wins, then you two will be crowned. And it also means, we didn’t pick it at random, it was carefully chosen by a specialist.

“Two: You will have twenty-four hours to finish the scavenger hunt in which you will start off with one clue and work your way through a case making decisions. Every clue has two choices, they will be listed for you on the card, and you and your partner must choose which one to take. Each decision then leads to another clue and another scenario with two options. Choose carefully because if you don’t find your way through the right choices, then you will have to start over and see with which choice you made wrong. It’s a tricky event, but it’s supposed to be and was designed to be challenging.

“Three: there are no separate conflicts for each team. The same problem has been placed three times for each team. So if you happen to run into each

other, well, then use your imagination.

“And finally: Good luck to you all. The clues tell you where the next card could be found, but you have to use your brain to figure it out correctly and quickly. That’s also a reason why we let you roam around the palace after every event, to familiarize each of you with the castle grounds. Note: the clues are placed throughout, so don’t occupy yourselves with the inside of the palace, you might be wasting your time. Think about your clue and about what decision you make because if you do happen to make a wrong move, there’s not much hope left for you.”

Charles then called out the names of the teams: Jack and Lily, Henry and Mariah, and Andre and Caroline.

They looked at each other and she held no expression towards him, only frustration. Andre knew one thing. His plan to keep her out of this didn’t work. She was sucked back in, and now she was to be queen--an even more dangerous move than just a friend.

—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—

# THIRTY-EIGHT

Caroline and Andre were given their first clue on a silver card and the note was written in shiny black ink. It said:

CLUE CARD  
Situation: murder

Choice 1:  
Life sentence  
to prison

Choice 2:  
Banishment  
of country

Hint: A gray wall

Hint: A green field

Andre was puzzled by the question. He'd half expected it to be a bit less drastic. But if the beginning was so straight forward, then the rest would either be of the same or more quality.

Caroline looked at him after reading the card, and he knew she was just as shocked.

"You have your first clue card in front of you. Once you've read it, make your decision, and get moving. The final event starts now." Charles finished his statement and then stepped down from the stage. Andre and Caroline looked at each other and then chatter erupted from the crowd.

Some people were cheering for the teams, and others were yelling out hints to help them out. Andre did his best to block out any sound and focus on making their decision.

"What do you think?" he asked, hovering over the card.

"I would probably send them to prison. Banishment seems too much for me."

"Really? I would banish them."

"Why?"

"Because they committed a crime."

"Oh come on. It's not like this crime hasn't been done before. What if more than one person kills someone else? You're going to banish them all?"

"It's better than keeping them in prison and near the people."

"In prison, they won't be near anyone but the guards. Besides, I'd rather have them close to me where I can keep an eye on them, than banish them to some land and risk them coming back."

Andre thought about that and he agreed that it made enough sense to go along. But he wanted to be sure they made the right decision, because if they didn't, then they would have to start over. Andre looked to the other teams and one had already left. He searched for them, but they were long gone. The other team would leave soon, so they had to make a choice right then.

"Alright. I'm with you. Where do we go?" he asked.

She smiled and looked down at the card. "The hint says a gray wall. Where do we find a gray wall?"

"Well, we could look down in the cellar," Andre began.

"But it seems too obvious to be down there. They wouldn't go through this much trouble to give such easy hints. Where else did you see a gray wall?"

"A gray wall could easily describe a room. But what if the gray wall was just

that, a gray wall?"

Caroline's eyes lit up and she gasped. "The medical room!" she said. Andre thought for a split second, then remembered when he had gone searching for Evelyn and the medical hallway was just a gray wall.

"Come on!" he yelled and they took off running.

"Which way?" Caroline asked. They had entered the castle and Andre was speeding down the hallway, turning at every corner with Caroline close behind.

"Just follow me. I know where I'm going."

"I'm right behind you."

They ran up the stairs to the second floor and stopped in front of the glass doors that said "Medical Room" in big black letter on the left. Andre caught his breath before entering, and when he did, he was hit by a wave of cold air. The room was freezing but he forced himself to keep moving.

"God, why is it so cold in here? Was it like this when you were here?" Caroline asked looking around.

"I can't remember what it was like. Let's just keep going."

Andre and Caroline walked through the halls of the medical room, looking for clues as to where the next card could be. They didn't see anyone from the other two teams, but Andre guessed they weren't far behind.

"Okay, this is pointless. What exactly are we looking for?" Caroline asked after minutes of silence.

"I'm not sure," Andre replied.

"Well, we're not going to get anywhere if we just look around. This room is huge. It's not even a room; it's an entire floor. You know how long it's going to take us to search all of it?"

"Will you stop with the whining?" Andre paused and looked at her. "Now, if you've got a better idea, it's no good to keep it to yourself."

Caroline took a second to gather her thoughts before she spoke. "Look, I'm not enjoying this anymore than you are. I didn't want to be your partner. In fact, I'm even sure I want to be your queen. But we really don't have a choice here. So let's just think about this."

"What do you want to think about?! We haven't got much time, and for all we know, the other teams might have already found the next clue."

"Well, if you would stop arguing—"

"And if you would stop whining—"

"Just stop! Okay? I'm so sick of your freaking attitude towards me! I don't even know what I did wrong, or at least to get you so upset with me. But we're not going to finish this event if we can't figure out a way to work together. "

Andre thought about what she said and he understood her point. It made sense what she was saying, but nothing could fix what he had to do. She would never forgive him, and it was easier that way, anyway.

"Alright. Where do you think we should look?" Andre asked.

"Let me see the card," she held her hand out and Andre placed it in the middle of her palm. She took it and read it over, thought about it, then read it over again.



“What?” Andre asked after minutes of patience had come and gone.

“The choice we picked was to send them to prison.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, what if we’re supposed to look for something that looks like a prison cell?” she questioned.

“Or, maybe something that represents a prison?”

“Maybe. We should split up and search around.”

“Whoa, wait. What? We can’t do that.”

“Why not? We’ll cover more ground this way. And besides, nothing’s going to happen to you or me. It’s not like you care at all about me, anyway, so why are you worried?” she sounded convincing and Andre knew it was a good idea. They wouldn’t go far, but he still didn’t like the idea of leaving her when the end was almost there.

“Fine. Just don’t go too far, so we can meet up faster if we find something or if we run into anyone else.”

“Okay,” she said and took off running back from the doors and turned left before she reached the entrance. She seemed to know where she was going, so Andre went the opposite way.

He took off down the hall, jogging so as to not be out of breath in the freezing temperature. After passing a couple of open rooms, he stopped in front of a closed door that said “Authorized Personnel Only”. It could be where the card was hidden. Andre looked back down the hall and saw no sign of Caroline, so he went inside.

The room was dark, casting a shadow as the door opened slowly. It was a storage closet, just a simple storage closet. Nevertheless, Andre went inside to find something, anything that hinted at a clue card.

He walked over to the shelf on the right side and was barely able to make out some medical supplies going down and across the shelf. He turned around, and saw the same thing on the other shelf. He looked down at the floor and there were boxes stacked on top of each other and spread about the small room, all marked with different supplies from clothes, to food, to vaccinations.

The closet was pointless; he had wasted time going in there and thinking something would be out of place. As he was turning back around to the door, he spotted something that seemed a little off compared to the rest of the supplies in the closet. He walked towards it to get a better look and then he saw the key. It was a shiny bronze key sitting apart from everything else on the shelf all the way to the left. Andre didn’t know why, but it didn’t fit. Out of all the supplies in the closet, this was the only key. But why? Why was this key there in the first place? Did it mean something? Where did it lead to?

Andre reached his hand out and picked it up. It surprisingly wasn’t very dusty, which meant that it hadn’t been there for a long time. He ran his fingers through it, admiring its shape and texture. Then he heard Caroline.

“Andre!”

He gripped the key in his hands and put it in his pocket as he stepped out of the room. “Yeah? Did you find anything?”

"I found the clue." Caroline held up another card and Andre ran towards her.

"Where'd you find it?" He reached her side and took the card, reading it.

"Easy, inside the gray wall over there." She pointed to the far end of the hallway where a wall was apparently torn through.

"I didn't see the hole when I came in."

“That’s because it wasn’t there when you came in.” Caroline smiled and took the card back from Andre.

“You broke the wall?” he looked as surprised as he’d ever been, while Caroline held a satisfied grin on her face.

“Don’t look so surprised. Just come on.” She turned and ran out of the room, Andre right on her heels.

“Wait, what does the card say?” he asked when he caught up to her running down the stairs.

“The situation is kidnapping. The choices are secret search party or public search party. I say we go public.”

“I think we should stay private. Public search parties almost always end badly.”

“Fine.”

“Wait, that’s it. You’re just going to do what I say?” he stopped and looked at her.

“For now, yes. Besides, I got to choose the first card, so it’s only fair. Private it is then. The hint is a dark tunnel.” She looked puzzled. “Where are we going to find a dark tunnel?”

Andre got back to thinking about the hint they were given. A dark tunnel could mean a lot of things: a trapped place, or dark surroundings, and not necessarily a tunnel. But then he remembered the tunnel he was in the night of Evelyn’s disappearance. It could have easily been that tunnel, but how did the panel expect anyone else to figure that out. Unless he wasn’t the only one who knew about it. It was worth a shot.

“I know where we can find a dark tunnel. Follow me,” Andre said and ran out of the palace again.

“Wait, hold on a minute!” Caroline called after Andre even though she had ran after him. “Where are you going?” she asked.

“I know where we can find a dark tunnel,” he repeated.

“I already heard that part. Just tell me where we’re going.”

“To the dark tunnel!” Andre shouted and gained speed.

They had raced out of the castle grounds and entered the wooded area near the main entrance. Andre stopped when he saw the big tree where the medic man had been lying there dead weeks ago. But what he didn’t see was the pothole. Caroline had reached his side then and was panting.

“Okay,” she breathed, “Where are we?” she asked through several inhaleds.

“It should be here,” Andre said without taking any note that she was there. He walked over to the tree and inspected it all around and from the branches to the roots. Not sure what he was looking for he felt the trunk of the tree, hoping that maybe there was some secret button that made the pothole appear.

“What are you doing?” asked Caroline as she walked over to him.

“A couple of weeks ago, I was out here and came upon an injured person—” he began.

“Oh my god! Who was it?” she gasped.

“That doesn’t matter. Anyway, when I got closer to the person, a pothole

appeared right over there and it was completely out of nowhere," Andre explained scanning the tree.

"And you think it will appear again, right?" Caroline asked, stepping back and folding her arms across her chest.

"Well, yeah."

"Great! We've just wasted who knows how much time looking for something you imagined. Come on, let's go." Caroline turned back around and began walking back to the castle.

"I'm not leaving. The next clue is here, I know it." Andre was convinced that he hadn't only imagined it. But she did make some sort of sense.

"Well, you don't make any sense, so I'm going." She kept walking.

"But we have to stay together," Andre called out, lifting his head from the tree to look in Caroline's direction.

"Then come on. We don't have much time. And who knows how many clues there are." Caroline took off running back into the castle grounds then, not caring whether or not Andre followed.

He hesitated to move. Part of him was concerned that she was wrong and they would have to start over when they'd figured out so much in so little time. But the other part of him was worried that she was right and he had been wrong about the pothole. But that meant that the other dreams weren't real. Or what he had done at night. The throne room, the investigation, the questioning. It was all a lie, or maybe just his mind playing tricks on him. Anything was possible, but he was certain that things had changed after waking up in that hospital.

Andre had thought long enough about this and he had to keep moving, so he decided that she was right and he would go along with her from then on, because he didn't trust himself anymore.

"Hold up!" Andre shouted at Caroline, but she was already way too far ahead to hear him. He had to run faster to catch her in time.

## THIRTY-NINE

Andre caught up to Caroline just as she was entering the back door of the palace. He had run the fastest he'd ever had to, and he was beginning to get a little dizzy. Plus, the day was starting to end and pretty soon they would be running around in the dark.

They had encountered another team member, Mariah, on their way into the castle. Nothing happened except some glaring back and forth, then she trailed off to the front.

Caroline had figured out the clue and said that the dark tunnel didn't have to be a dark tunnel, unlike the other clues which were very precise. But it was just a dark place. She recalled touring the castle on one of her days off and exploring the west wing of the building, where she stumbled upon a winding stairway with dark walls which made it look like a dark tunnel. So they made their way to the west wing.

"Are you sure?" Andre asked as they climbed the stairs to the west wing tower.

"Absolutely. Besides, this is something I remember happened." She smirked at her own comment which annoyed Andre, but he didn't reply. It was bad enough they hated each other; he didn't want to start another argument that would delay them even further.

The winding staircase was a little creepy, with the sensation that someone was going to pop out and scare you at any moment, and that it was pitch black inside. Caroline hadn't mentioned it was so dark, and Andre had expected there to be a little light. But nothing. They had to feel the walls to climb to the top in order not to trip on each other or make a wrong turn.

"Here," she whispered. She took his hand and led him up the last few steps. They suddenly emerged in a glowing moonlight from the sky that shown through the open tower ceiling. The room was small and open to the fresh air, but Andre didn't see anything.

"Really?" he asked looking around.

"It's got to be here." She let go of him and began searching the walls. Andre took the liberty of searching the floors.

Several minutes went by without any word from either of them, until Andre stumbled upon a big rock. He kneeled down and picked up. On the bottom, Andre felt something, sort of like paper. He turned it over in his hands and saw the shiny silver card.

"I found it!" he called out. Then set the rock down on the floor and peeled the card from the back of it. Caroline was at his side then.

"What's it say?" she asked, peering over his shoulder.

Andre read the card aloud. "Situation: declaration of war. Choice 1: raise an army of militia and civilians. Hint: red, black, white. Choice 2: go to battle with nationwide allies. Hint: a golden cross."

"The first one," Caroline said, seeming very certain.

"How do you know?" he asked looked at her.

"I just do. The first one. What was the hint?" she asked again, taking another look at the card.

"But, how you know for sure?" Andre wasn't convinced by her seeming so sure.

"When you've studied this country's behavior for so long and with your father being a professor at the local high school, one learns things. I just happened to learn a lot about the history of the country and remembered that our nation will not make pacts after the old sky scandal many years ago."

"Really?" he was surprised.

"Yes, really." Caroline chuckled and then looked back at the card. "Now, red, black, and white. That's easily the nation's flag."

"Then we go to the flag room, where they make them, right?" Andre asked. He didn't want to move without knowing her opinion first.

"Maybe," she replied.

"Oh, really? I haven't gotten anything correct here."

"But, you're thinking too simplistic. Think harder and really concentrate. What's so important about the flag and what could it have to do with the next clue? Also think about why they want us to go there. There has to be some sort of connection between the flag and the declaration of war," Caroline explained.

"The main entrance?" Andre asked. He wasn't sure but it was where the original flag was placed when the nation was freed from the influence of the Greeks. They didn't influence them that much, but it was a surrounding nation.

"Yes!" Caroline's eyes shot up and she ran down the stairs.

"Wait!" Andre said, but had to follow her anyway.

He was right. The main entrance of the palace held the original flag of Rengal. And there, on the bottom of the pole was a silver card. Caroline reached it first and peeled away. Then she held it up for both of them to read. It said:

#### CLUE CARD

Situation: country is attacked (bombed)

Choice 1:  
Gather militia  
and prepare to  
return fire.

Choice 2:  
gather civilians  
and prepare  
bomb shelter.

Hint: a cannon

Hint: an abandoned shelter

"What do you think?" asked Caroline. She looked from him to the card and back again.

"You're letting me choose?" he questioned.

"No, I just want your opinion," she laughed and waited.

"I think we should go with number two."

"I agree."

"Really?" he looked at her shocked she had agreed.

"Yeah. We're a team right? And you did find the last card and this one. So, I kind of owe you. Consider us even then. Next one, I get it." She laughed again and then walked away.

"So, the hint is an abandoned shelter. Where are we going to find that?" he asked.

"Maybe in the basement," Caroline said and began heading down the stairs.

"Alright," he replied and followed her.

They walked for a while, heading for the lowest level of the castle, thinking that a bomb shelter would have to be built way below the ground for secure protection. But the deeper into the earth they went the darker and the creepier the hallways became.

They reached the bottom and then stopped short when they came across a turn, the first one in a while. Caroline turned right and Andre did the same.

"Let's not split up here," he said.

"Agreed," she replied with a high pitched sound at the end of the word. He heard her gulp and he reached out for her hand. She jumped a little at the touch of his skin to hers, but she calmed when she saw him.

"Maybe, you'd better let me lead," he said, switching positions.

"If you insist," she chuckled nervously and then stepped aside. "But, just don't let go of my hand."

"If you insist," he laughed as well and then they were heading down the hallway again, hands entangled together and bodies pressing closely against each other.

They walked a little bit more until they finally reach the end of the hallway which was a simple door.

"Is this it?" she asked.

"I guess so, but do we have to go in?" he ran his hand through the context of the door and felt a metal sign. He got closer and saw it was a shelter sign, old and rusty, but it was there. And below it was a silver card. He took the card and then let go of Caroline's hand.

"What did I ask you?" she snapped slyly.

"Sorry," he smiled and then grabbed her hand again. "Let's go, I've got the card." He said and then turned around to head back.

So far the event was going well. They had found five cards in total and were headed to their sixth card. They didn't know how many there were, but it was beginning to dawn. They had spent the night walking around in the dark tunnel underground because they had missed the turn. But, once above ground and in the moonlight, they were fine again.

On their way to the main entrance of the building, they came across Henry and Mariah sleeping on the floor. They had six cards with them, and only two of

them were different than theirs. Maybe it was their wrong or not, either way, someone was wrong.

Andre and Caroline agreed to rest for only an hour and then keep searching because they had five cards and needed to catch up to the other teams. So they made their rest at the bottom of the stairs of the throne room, and fell asleep rather quickly.

-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
-



The light hit Andre in the face and he squinted at the sudden brightness. He sat up and rubbed his eyes with his fists before opening them. The sun was shining brightly and he looked at it. It was a pretty sight, one he had not been able to enjoy since he left home back in July. Then he remembered the event they were in and checked his watch. They only had two hours left.

“Caroline!” he shook her and yelled. “Wake up!”

“Huh? What?” she murmured.

“The sun is already up!” he yelled again.

She opened her eyes slowly but began getting up. Andre shook her anyway. “Alright, alright, I’m up. Will you quit shaking me?” she asked, annoyed but still very tired.

“Come on, let’s get going. We’re killing precious time.” Andre stood up and reached down to help Caroline up as well.

“Okay, I’m good.” She straightened her clothes and then took the card out of her pocket. “Okay, so choice two then, right?” she asked.

“Yeah, what is it?” Andre looked over her shoulder at the card.

“Well, the card says an overthrowing of the government by the people. Our choice was to try and compromise with the people. And our hint is a wooden table.”

“Okay, so let’s think. The wooden table could mean anywhere where meetings are held. And the compromising could mean a place big enough for many people to gather. So a large area for many people to gather and have a meeting about compromising with the people?”

“Not necessarily. It could be a place large enough for many people to compromise about something.”

“You have a point. But, where is there a wooden table anywhere?”

“Hey, do you remember that night I snuck out when you came back from the hospital?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“Well, Henry and I went to the other side of the castle and into this big old-looking room where Charles and Ava were having like a conference with other people and they were standing and sitting around a big wooden table. Could that be it?”

“I don’t think so, because you weren’t supposed to be there anyway, so why would they put it in there unless they expect us to search every inch of this castle to find it. Besides we don’t have much time to keep guessing.”

“Okay. What if it’s something inside the room?”

“Like a file or something?”

“Yes. But...wait a minute! I took a file from the room and gave it to you. Where'd you put it?”

“Umm...it's still on my room. But, do you think the card is in there? I mean, when would they have planted it in there?”

“It could have been there all along and you didn't check it well enough. “

“Maybe.”

“It's worth a shot.”

Andre and Caroline searched the room inside and out until they found the manila folder under the bed. When they did, Andre opened the folder and looked through the papers for the silver card.

“I don't see it,” Andre said and began searching the pile of papers from the beginning.

“Okay. It's in the room with the wooden table. Maybe it had something to do with the people there,” Caroline guessed and looked to the window.

“I'm telling you. I think we should go to the room and look there,” Andre stopped rummaging through the papers and looked at Caroline.

“Alright, fine. Let's go.” She turned to the door and opened it. Andre closed the folder and left the room as well.

“Here it is,” Caroline said and stopped in front of an old wooden door at the end of a hallway on the third floor of the palace. Andre hadn't been around the palace enough to know which way to go or even what was inside it. He was surprised when he found out that the castle had so many secret ways around it, but it fit with the type of people that ran the place.

Andre reached for the door knob and turned it left and right. “It's locked,” he said and tried it again.

“Well, I don't have a key,” she said and then looked down the hall.

“Didn't you say you took the folder and a key from the room?” Andre let go of the door knob.

“Yeah, but I don't have it with me.” She turned to go.

Andre then reached into his pocket and pulled out the key he found and kept from the closet in the medical room. He held it up to the key hole and it was sort of a match. Andre held his breath and then stuck the key in and turned it to the right, then the left, and then the right again. He kept turning it in one full circle and a clicking noise sounded. He pulled the key back out and turned the knob, opening the door.

“Hey, wait its open.” Andre walked inside the room, now filling with light from the hallway. Caroline stopped and turned around, then followed him in.

“How'd you get it open?” she asked.

“I had the key.”

“Where'd you...?” she sounded confused.

“I had the key. That's it. Just...let's just find the next clue.”

“Alright.”

They walked around the wooden table and felt the edges of it and all around the surface, but nothing caught their attention. Caroline went over to the desks in the corner and searched them. Andre could hear her open and close drawers and look through papers. After about ten or fifteen minutes of searching, she gave up.

“It’s not here.”

“Calm down. We’ll find it. It’s got to be here. Where else would it be?” he asked and walked to one corner of the room.

“I don’t know, but I’ve searched every inch of this corner and nothing.”

“Then go look in another part of the room. It won’t be in the obvious place. And because it’s gotten a lot trickier to find it, it seems that we’re almost at the end of the event. Just be patient.” Andre walked along the perimeter of the room with one hand along the wall. He knew that if the clue was here it would be hidden where no one would think to look. Too bad for them, he wasn’t a regular person.

He got to the middle of the wall and knocked on it. He put his ear close to the wall and knocked again. Then he backed away and knocked one more time.

“What is it?” Caroline asked making her way to him.

“It’s hollow,” he explained. Andre reached down and untied one of his boots, then got back up, and threw it at the wall. He picked it up and then slammed it against the broken area to make the hole bigger.

“What do you see?” she asked.

“Nothing.” Andre reached his hand inside the wall and felt around. He didn’t get much, just a lot of dust and wood. Then, he leaned further in and felt some paper. He looked in its direction, but the room was too dark to see what it was. He went on his toes and reached in even more, and was able to get the papers stuck to the wall.

“I’ve got something,” he said and took his hand back out of the wall along with another folder.

“Here, come into the light,” Caroline pulled him closer to the door. He opened the black folder and there were several papers, all about the recruits.

“It’s about us,” he said and flipped through the papers. As he did so, he found Faith’s page and then Evelyn’s page. He stopped at Caroline’s page and handed it to her. Then he looked through the papers until he found his.

The paper stated his name, his date of birth, his home town, his parents’ names and their date of births and hometowns. It seemed like pretty descent things to know about him. Then he read on further and saw that the paper had his medical records. The recent visit wasn’t printed there but there was something else.

When he was younger, and his sister wasn’t born yet, his family had just lost their second son because of the competition. Andre didn’t understand much yet and was told that his brother was sick. While the grief was still upon them, they were invited to the palace from time to time and were treated like royalty. He didn’t understand that either, but just liked all the attention.

His mother became pregnant again and they never went back to the palace. After that, Andre and his father would have to go to the hospital to get a test every two months. The test was just some blood and comparing to another person's, not his father's, and Andre never thought too much about it because he was young and always got ice cream with his father afterwards. When he turned fourteen, he stopped going for the tests and never really questioned it.

Now, he looked at the medical records and every test was printed there, with the results as well and who it was compared with. All the tests came out as a match with someone named Ethan Moore. He had heard that name before; it was the name of one of the past rulers. But why would they have to compare their blood types with each other. Unless it wasn't their blood type they were comparing but something else.

Andre was confused, but as he saw it written on the paper, it was a perfect match with Ethan Moore. Then that means he was related to him, some way they were related. He could have been an uncle or a great grandparent. But then that meant his family wasn't an ordinary family, but a royal.

"What?!" he shouted out loud. Caroline snapped her head up and looked at him.

"What's wrong?" she asked, nervousness in her tone.

"Sorry, it's just. They have my medical records."

"And? Is there something wrong with it?" she asked.

"No, it's right. But, I never knew what it was."

"What what was?" she came over to him.

"When I was little I took blood tests with my father and they were compared to Ethan Moore. I didn't understand it at first, but now. I mean, they have it written here."

"Were they positive matches?" Caroline looked over at his paper.

"Yes," he replied.

"Do you know what that says about you?" she asked, wide eyed and staring at the paper.

"I have one guess."

"It means you're a royal!" she gasped and smiled.

"Yeah, I had a feeling."

"What? Just a feeling? You should be happy. This could get us out of everything."

"How so?"

"If we win, then you could change everything about the government system. A royal doesn't need any permission."

"So, I could end this game?"

"Only if we win," she said sadly.

"Then, let's go." Andre dropped the folder on the table and walked over to the open hole in the wall. He reached his hand in and pulled out an envelope. Inside was the silver card. "Come on."

# FORTY-ONE

The next clue was a food and water shortage situation with a choice of killing off the weak to preserve the strong or cut portions and stop reproduction. Despite the way the nation was currently being run, they decided to cut the portions and stop reproduction, with the hint of a red and golden chair. They knew exactly what it was and where they would find it; the throne room.

Caroline led the way again, running, because they were almost out of time, just a little over an hour was left on the clock. They sped down the stairs and turned left at the bottom, entering the throne room.

“Okay, where do think the clue is hidden?” Caroline asked stepping around the many antique vases placed all over the floor.

“Why are there so many vases?” Andre looked around the room, ignoring Caroline’s question.

“Let me see the card again,” she said, stopping and waiting for Andre.

“What do you think they’re here for?” Andre questioned more to himself than to anyone else.

“Andre!” Caroline shouted. “The card?”

“Oh, here,” he held out the card to her, but turning back to the vases.

“What do you think they keep in them?”

"I don't know. Now, help me search the room. The hint says a red and golden chair and that is the throne, but we aren't allowed to go up there. Where else could that be?"

"Maybe, it's in one of the vases," Andre bent down and stuck his hand in a blue and white colored vase.

"Andre!" Caroline called out again.

"What?" he asked with an annoyed tone.

"Will you forget about the stupid vases?!?"

Andre looked up at her and slowly removed his hand from the vase.

"Alright, fine." He stood up and walked over to the chair. "Is it here?" he asked, scanning it.

"I haven't figured that out yet. Even if it was, we're not allowed to touch it."

"And you expect me to follow their rules?"

"Yes, I do."

"Oh, come on. You broke open a wall."

"So did you," she snapped back.

"Then...?" he gestured to the chair.

"This is different."

"How?"

"It's the royal chair," she pushed.

"So what? For all we know, the clue could be hidden in there," Andre pointed to the cushion.

"Oh no! You're not breaking open the cushion!" Caroline rushed over to him and stood in between him and the chair.

"Fine then. I'll go back to my vases," Andre said and walked back to the blue and colored vase.

"Fine. I don't need you. I can't find this next clue by myself."

"If that's how you want it," Andre shrugged and focused his attention back to the vases. He saw a red and golden vase that sat in one corner of the room and scanned it quickly. On the front of it was a brown chair painted to look exactly like the throne. He looked around at the other vases and saw many multiples, but there wasn't another vase with the picture of the chair.

"I'm gonna go look over there," Andre said and stepped around the vases slowly making his way to the corner.

"Whatever." Caroline looked over to where he was headed and then laughed. "You're not going to find anything over there."

"Yeah, we'll see."

Andre stepped carefully on the tiles and tried to make a quick and short path through the vases, without knocking one over. He couldn't believe how many vases were in there. He got closer to the corner, when he heard someone open the door from the side.

"In here!" someone yelled. Andre turned in the direction of the voice and saw Henry and Mariah standing there in the doorway. Once they caught sight of Caroline and Andre, everyone froze in place.

"What are you doing here?" Caroline asked, breaking the silence.

"I should ask you the same question," responded Mariah.

"But, we all know the answer to that already, so there's no need for talking," Henry added.

"Hey, watch it," Andre snapped. It was unexpected, even for himself, and by the look on Henry's face, it was for him as well.

"No, you better watch it," Henry said, turning his head in Andre's direction and then slowly taking a step towards him.

"Hey, let's just find the clue, alright?" Mariah stepped in front of Henry and blocked him from Andre's sight.

"Caroline!" Andre called. She came over and stood right beside him. "We were just heading out, right?" he asked her but not taking his eyes off of Henry.

"Yeah," she responded and walked over to the door pulling Andre's hand with her.

"You find what you were looking for?" Henry asked stepped forward and moving Mariah behind him.

"Yeah, we did. You kids have fun then. This place is all yours," Andre smiled and then turned to the door. He was almost out when he turned back around and added, "Just don't break any of the vases." He turned back around quick enough so he couldn't catch Henry's reaction. The door slammed before Caroline spoke.

"What happened in there?" she asked him, pulling him to the side.

"I don't know, but I'm just glad it's over and nothing serious happened."

"What? He's my friend, he was my roommate. Why'd you talk to him like that?" she folded her arms across her chest.

"Are you serious? Did you not see the look on his face when he saw me?" Andre was shocked that she would take Henry's side and not his.

"Yes I saw it, but what did you expect? Charles warned us that if we encountered each other throughout, then we should just use our imagination. It not so hard to figure out what he meant by that."

"Well, I didn't want to go through another death battle, especially with those vases in there."

"What is your freaking obsession with vases all of a sudden?!?" she shrugged and lifted her hands in the air, then dropped them back to her sides as if saying 'I give up'.

"The clue is in there," he whispered.

"I know the clue is in there, but you didn't, wouldn't, help me find it."

"No, I mean the clue is in the vases. Actually, the one I was about to look in but had to stop when Henry came in."

"What? No way."

"Want me to prove it?"

"Yes."

"Then, let's go back in there," Andre began moving to the door.

"Are you serious? Henry will kill you if you went back in."

"Well, I won't let him win this thing. I have to."

"And why is that?"

"I haven't figured that out yet, but I know it's what I have to do." Caroline didn't respond; she just kept looking at him, thinking about how to respond. "Will you do this with me?"

"I don't know. What's in it for me?" she placed her hands on her hips and leaned on one foot.

"You get to be my queen?" Andre asked.

"Right now, I'm not so sure if I want to hear that. I could care less about the competition or being queen."

"Then what is it you want from me? That will make you help me?" he asked, stepping closer to her to look her better in the eyes.

"An apology," she said.

Andre knew he had to do that, but he figured if he did, then his plan would fail. He had done what he did in the courtyard because he was afraid he was going to lose her. But he realized that he had already lost her when he was planning it. He was wrong to talk to her like that, and he understood that if he didn't admit his mistake now, they wouldn't be happy as king and queen.

"Alright," he paused and sighed. "I'm sorry."

"For?" she pushed.

"For acting like a jerk and talking to you in an inappropriate way the other day. I shouldn't have done it and I want you to forgive me."

"Alright," she paused and looked away.

"So, you forgive me?" Andre's eyes lit up.

"No."

"Why not? I apologized, didn't I?" he asked stepping back to pace.

"Yeah you did, but it was a forced apology. I can't believe I had to push you to say sorry to me for the way you treated me. And I just won't take a fake 'I'm sorry'."

"Okay, fine. I'm sorry!" he shouted and leaned against the wall behind him. "I was wrong, as always, and I mistreated you. I had a plan to get you and I to stop liking each other so there could be fewer chances of me losing you as well. I just wouldn't be able to handle it if you got killed too," Andre blurted and rubbed his forehead with one hand.

"Killed? Who got killed?" Caroline reached out and patted his shoulder.

"Faith. I saw her in a dream or something, but it was after I was stabbed and when my heart was having trouble making up its mind to be dead or alive. I spoke with her, and it's like a haunted spirit inside me. I can't get her out of my head, and for a while I thought I really liked her. But..." he stopped and looked down.

"But what?" Caroline asked.

"It's not her whom I really like."

"Was it Evelyn?"

"No!" he exhaled and pushed back into the wall even further.

"Then who?" she reached down and lifted his chin to make him look her in the eyes.

"It's you," Andre said and he felt a soft tear begin to form in his eye.



“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked. Andre took her hand and pulled her into a hug.

“I was afraid of losing you. They’ve taken away two people whom I cared about, and I thought that when they figured out I cared about you the most, they were going to come after you next.” He pulled back and looked at her, her messy golden brown hair falling freely around her face.

Caroline smiled and then leaned into him and kissed him on the cheek.

“That was much better,” she said after pulling back.

“I’m glad you think so,” he replied and then took her hand. “Come on, we’ve got to get to the courtyard.”

“But I thought we have to get the next clue,” she said, stopping him.

“I’ve already got it.” He held up a silver card and winked at her, then walked to the end of the hallway.

—  
—  
—  
—  
—

## FORTY-TWO

Everything was working out fine. They had found the last card of the scavenger hunt, Andre had finally shared his feelings for Caroline, and they were about to win the competition. It was all going according to plan, until she showed up.

Andre and Caroline had arrived at the main entrance of the building and when they walked out the front door, they were surrounded by thousands of people cheering and applauding.

“What’s all this?” Caroline shouted over the noise.

“I don’t know,” Andre responded. He looked around the crowd until he met eyes with Ava, who was smiling wide and clapping along with the people. Right

beside her was Charles, who wasn't happy at all. He looked more angry than happy.

"Hey, over there," Caroline pointed to the back of the crowd and then walked down the steps. Andre followed her, taking her hand as they walked through the big blob of civilians.

The final silver card wasn't like the others. It gave a situation and two different choices, but neither contained a hint. It gave Andre the impression that it was the final card, but something felt weird about it. On the back, however, it said:

You Have Reached The End Of The  
Political Scavenger Hunt.  
Proceed To  
The Main Entrance Of The Palace.

And that's exactly what they did. Since there weren't any more places to go that were hinted by the card, they had gone to the main entrance.

Caroline pulled Andre through the crowd of people, and as they went by, people tried to hug them and some patted them on the back. Others cheered their names and a couple held up signs with their names written on them. It felt like they were famous, even though they hadn't been crowned yet. Andre was certain about one thing though, they had won.

"Where are you going?" Andre asked, dodging hugs that came his way.

Caroline didn't answer, probably because she didn't hear him over the noise of the people's shouts and the music that had begun to play. It was all too much that Andre suddenly wished they hadn't won, just because the people of Rengal were making way too much of a big deal about it. It had been happening for decades, and he'd never remembered the crowd being this way, let alone before they were crowned.

Caroline pulled Andre out of the crowd, stopping his line of thought and he saw two people standing in front of them. Caroline smiled and then stood to the side.

"Andre, these are my parents," she said, then pointed to the woman, "Emily and Patrick Jones." She smiled.

"Hi," Andre said, and looked at Caroline with a nervous smile.

"Mom, dad, this is Andre," she introduced him in a way that gave the hint that they were involved together and he could not resist as he smiled wider and then pulled her into a hug.

"It's very nice to meet you Andre," her mother said and extended her hand out to him. He shook it while holding onto Caroline with his other arm.

"It's nice to meet you too ma'am," he shook her hand then turned to her father.

"Hello, Andre," Caroline's father said with a slight grin, but extended his hand and shook it as well.

"Hello, sir." Andre gulped, a little frightened of her father.

"It's okay, they always do this," she whispered in his ear. Andre smiled at the comment then turned to look for his parents, but all he saw was Ava and Charles behind them.

"Glad to see you two are doing fine. Come with me," Charles declared and turned on his heels. Ava smiled at them and then gave them a little push forward.

Andre and Caroline walked back through the crowd holding hands to the stage where the final event had begun. Charles was waiting for them and Ava gave them a hurried look from behind followed by another slight push forward. When they reached the stage, they walked up, still hand in hand, and sat down in the chairs that were placed behind them. Charles called for silence and the crowd hushed.

"I'd like to welcome everyone here today for the declaration of the end of the competition." The crowd erupted again, clapping and cheering louder than when they'd first walked out. Charles raised one hand in the air and silence fell upon them once more. "Now, I'd like to bring up the winners of the competition to find the next king and queen of Rengal," he paused and looked over to them, Andre and Caroline stood up, ready to be called to the podium, "Andre Pearson and Caroline Jones!" he called out, and made way for them.

It was impossible for Andre to hear himself think since the crowd was growing more into a mob than a gathering of civilians declaring the end of the competition. Andre walked over to the podium and Caroline stood next to him. They didn't talk though.

"It is my honor to declare the competition over once again, and announce your future king and queen." More clapping and cheering. "The crowning will be held tomorrow at noon in the throne room and then a celebration in the courtyard afterwards." It seemed that every time the guy spoke, the crowd got even more excited than before. "Now, I'd like to thank the people who worked hard all these years coming up with the new rules of the competition. As you all know now, there were some changes as to the rules and there were some challenges along the way," he looked over at Andre and sighed, "but the recruits were excellent in the way they handled the conflicts they faced and I want to acknowledge everyone for that.

"So, first off I want to thank our panel of judges who worked hard to figure out the best way to challenge these kids to their best potential and figure out every strength and weakness they had that would make them all better candidates for the job." Andre and Caroline applauded along with the crowd. "Next, I'd like to thank Ava Martin for her excellent companionship in helping me train and tutor the recruits." More applauding. "And finally, I'd like to thank my daughter for helping me set everything up and picking the candidates since the month of May. She's been a real help and I couldn't have done this without her help." Applauding.

Andre looked around and then saw her coming up the stairs of the stage. She was wearing a black dress with black high heeled shoes. Her hair wasn't the same as when he'd first met her; it was straighter and shining more than ever. She smiled as she made her way to the podium. When she caught eye with Andre,

she smiled even wider and expressed such a confident look on her face. Caroline stopped clapping when she realized who it was and then turned to Andre.

"Hey, look at me," she said and grabbed his head with her hands. "It's okay, don't worry."

"What?" was all he was able to say. He pushed past Caroline and walked over to her. "What?" he said again.

"Hi, Andre," she looked surprised to see him, even though she was faking it, and pulled him into a hug. "It's so good to see you again."

He pulled back and held her by the shoulders with his hands. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm taking my applause."

"But I thought you were..." he couldn't say it, not out loud anyway.

"No, I'm not. I never was. Why would you think that?" she asked, looking confused.

"Because I was there when...but how...you're...he's your father?" Andre pointed to Charles who was talking to Ava at the moment.

"Shocked I see," she shrugged. "I was undercover."

"What?" he let her go.

"I was never really in the competition, but my dad, oh, umm, Charles, thought it was a good idea that I do so I could report on how the recruits were treated. I didn't do much to disguise myself but no one really knew me. I was like a secret for nearly nineteen years," she laughed and then stopped when Andre just stared. He was overly confused and couldn't explain anything.

"Then, Faith?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," she paused, "she's gone. That wasn't part of the plan. But she got away when we took her and..."

"You took her?" he stepped back and then Caroline was at his side.

"Yes, well, no. It wasn't me, but we hired some guys to do it for us. It was all part of the competition. It happens every time."

"But why?"

"I told you, it was part of the competition and the plans. Everything went according to plan."

"But...you...and me...I thought..."

She put a finger on his lips to stop him from talking. "It was nothing. I didn't want to mess with you, because I actually kind of liked you, but my dad and the panel decided it would be a good addition to the contest. Add a little romance to spice things up; it's never been done before. And I'm sorry I played you," she looked sincere enough to be telling the truth, but still he couldn't believe her. Or was it that he couldn't forgive her? At least not yet.

Andre couldn't respond and he was glad that Caroline was a quick thinker; otherwise he would have been stuck there for days.

"Yeah, well I think he's going to need more time to think about this because you were very out of line with the whole plan."

"Well what would you have done?" she asked Caroline.

"I would have said no," Caroline smiled sarcastically then pulled Andre

back to the chairs and sat him down.

“Hey, listen to me. I know everything seems wacky right now, but it’s going to be fine, okay?”

Andre blinked and then focused his eyes on her and her beautiful smile. “Thanks,” he said.

Andre knew the crowd was watching, but he felt as if they were alone. He grabbed Caroline by the waist and pulled her in and kissed her on the lips.

The kiss was gentle and empowering. It was like fireworks blowing off in the distance and light from the rising sun illuminated their embrace even more. After about a minute, Caroline pulled away, gasping for breath. She smiled and slowly pulled Andre closer as she wrapped her hands around his neck and rested her head against his shoulder.

He wrapped his hands tighter around her waist and they sat there. No one could separate them. Caroline closed her eyes and breathed in the moment, then pulled back to look at Andre. He took hold of her hand and held it tightly as they stood up and walked off the stage. Andre headed to the palace and up to their room. It was alright. Everything had turned out okay, even better now that he was with her.

—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—  
—

## FORTY-THREE

Andre and Caroline were curled up in his bed, both with their sleeping

wear on and just looked at each other. It was such a nice night. The moon was high up, shining a small sample of light into the room. Caroline took Andre's hand and they lay there, still and silent.

"What do you think will happen to us now?" she asked, looking out the window.

"What do you mean?" Andre sat up and looked at her.

"I mean, do you think we'll ever see our families again?" she played with the sheets.

"Well, I don't know. Maybe. Why? Do you miss them already?"

"I've always missed them. I can't stand being away from them. Do you know how hard it was for me in this competition?"

"No."

"Very. Anyway, I just don't know if I want a life here in the palace without my family."

"Well, what if we can get them to live here with us?"

"You know we can't do that."

"Oh, but you forget, my darling. I'm a royal and I can do whatever it is I want."

"You'd do that?" she looked up at him.

"I would do anything to make you happy," He leaned down and kissed her forehead.

"Thank you," she replied and then closed her eyes. Andre smiled at the moon and it occurred to him that he was the king now. He was more than just a king; he was a royal. It's been a long time since any king had been a blood related relative, and maybe it was a good thing. Things could definitely change. Even though he knew they would take a long time to be complete, with time, anything was possible.

## EPILOGUE

A year had gone by since Andre and Caroline were crowned and that year was well spent. They had moved to a suite on the third floor of the palace and it was much bigger than the dorms. Andre was also able to move Caroline's family closer to the palace, since the court wouldn't allow them to live inside. He also took the liberty to move his own family closer to him as well.

Andre and Caroline were having a good time together, spending every minute they could find each other talking while on walks in the courtyard. It was a happy romance that they had going and Andre was certain she was the one for him.

After the summer was over, Andre proposed a change in the rules of the competition, promising that the kingdom would be better without the competition at all. He was denied the first couple of times he had brought it up. After three months of arguing, the court decided to bring up the issue again in another trial the following year. It wasn't a promise to Andre, but it was better than a simple "No."

Then December rolled upon them rather quickly, and Caroline had thrown a party for the families to get together.

"Okay, everyone, listen up. I want to make a toast," Lenny, Andre's father, said as he tapped his glass of champagne with a fork.

There was laughter around the room as the kids were running around and the mothers were trying to keep everything in order.

"Guys, come on. Mr. Pearson wants to speak," Caroline said and took hold of Cindy, Andre's little sister.

"Alright. We all know that none of us would be here if it wasn't for Andre and Caroline, and I just want to thank them from the bottom of my heart. I love you both dearly, and I also want to say...", he paused and looked at Andre, who then got up and stood next to his father, "Caroline," another pause, "welcome to the family."

Caroline looked at him confused and she turned to her family who was smiling and giggling. Andre's mother and sister were doing the same. "What?" she said.

Andre grabbed hold of her hand and lifted her to a standing position as she set her glass down.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Andre took her hands and squeezed them tightly, then looked into her eyes. "Caroline," he said.

She breathed deeply, "Yes?"

"You know I love you with all my heart and I want us to spend every minute together," Andre began.

"Uh-huh," Caroline responded and then started breathing faster.

"Well," Andre said and then got down on one knee.

Caroline gasped and put her hand over her mouth as a small tear ran down

her left cheek. "Oh my god," she said softly.

"Honey," Andre said, and then pulled out a small black box and held it out to her. "Will you marry me?" he opened the box and inside was a silver diamond ring with a pink sparkle gem engraved inside. Caroline let out another tear and held her hand out to Andre.

"Yes!" she said and then hugged Andre once the ring was on. He stood up and they hugged as the families clapped. Caroline pulled away and kissed him, then she hugged him again.

"Alright, you lovebirds, it's my turn," Caroline's mother said and Andre and Caroline pulled away. Emily walked forward and pulled Caroline into a hug as Andre's mother, Diane, hugged him.

After all the hugging and endless tears of joy, the families got together around the tree and, with the lights off, watched a movie as the night enclosed upon them.

"Hey," Caroline whispered to Andre. They were sitting on the couch of the living room on the lobby, Caroline leaning into Andre.

"Yeah?" he said, still watching the movie.

"I love you," she said, looking at him.

He smiled, "I love you, too," he replied and kissed her forehead.



This book was distributed courtesy of:



For your own Unlimited Reading and FREE eBooks today, visit:  
<http://www.Free-eBooks.net>

*Share this eBook with anyone and everyone automatically by selecting any of the options below:*



[Share on Facebook](#)



[Share on Twitter](#)



[Share on LinkedIn](#)



[Send via e-mail](#)

To show your appreciation to the author and help others have wonderful reading experiences and find helpful information too, we'd be very grateful if you'd kindly  
[post your comments for this book here.](#)



## **COPYRIGHT INFORMATION**

Free-eBooks.net respects the intellectual property of others. When a book's copyright owner submits their work to Free-eBooks.net, they are granting us permission to distribute such material. Unless otherwise stated in this book, this permission is not passed onto others. As such, redistributing this book without the copyright owner's permission can constitute copyright infringement. If you believe that your work has been used in a manner that constitutes copyright infringement, please follow our Notice and Procedure for Making Claims of Copyright Infringement as seen in our Terms of Service here:

<http://www.free-ebooks.net/tos.html>