

The birds circled above the abandoned camp. No one had step foot here in, I don't know, 6 months? No, it had to be longer. The bodies were almost fully decayed. The sun set on the horizon, giving the air around us a shimmery glow. Our last mission had been a complete success. We had to-forget it. If I told you, I'd have to brainwash you. So let's just say it was some top-secret spy stuff. Anyway, the T.S.S.A. must have left too late, not before Apphia could reach them. Oh, god, I hope Anastasia's ok. I left her in Nadan's care, and hopefully that was a wise choice. I shuddered as I stepped on a rotting body that looked disturbingly like Nadan, my closest friend besides the girls. *Stop it*, I thought. *You're just imagining it*. I walked over to where Kinsey and Liv, my allies, partners in every mission, and best friends stood examining some shards of glass. Basically, they were the only family I had.

"Heather, look at this," Liv said, pushing her long blond hair behind her ear. "Doesn't this look like....," She paused and handed me a charred plastic figure.

"Oh my god. This is Anastasia's, isn't it?" I asked. Kinsey nodded. Anastasia was a seven year old spy-in-training. And I was her teacher, and the one person she counted on. Liv had found her plastic Aphrodite doll. I had read her Greek myths all the time and she had adored them. Aphrodite was her favorite of all, and the figurine was a gift from her parents before they had-

"Oh no. I think this is Caroline's star. They must have killed everyone, or at least taken them prisoner. She would never leave this behind if she was escaping," Kinsey said. "Everyone really is gone."

"Maybe not. Maybe that's a decoy to throw off Apphia. Or..." I let my sentence trail off. Of course that was not true. Caroline, the leader of quarter six, would never leave her star from her first successful mission here. She was obviously dead. Or worse.

I walked over to where my assigned quarters used to be. Apphia's army had to have set a new, unknown bomb off here, because the walls were industrial steel that was supposed to be bomb proof. Remind you, I said it was *supposed* to be. My badges used to be here, my closet was here, my- I couldn't be doing this now.

"Guys, come on. We're leaving," I informed them as I ran back to them.

“Leaving? But we still have to investigate! We have to try to communicate with the T.S.S.A! We still have to-“ Kinsey started.

“Kinsey, Heather’s right.” Liv interrupted. “We have to get out of here. Apphia is probably tracking us right now. She could be sending her forces out at this very moment. We have to try and find where the T.S.S.A went, and if there’s even anyone left.”

I nodded. “So grab what you want. We’re leaving in two minutes.” I grabbed my pack and bow that I had set down beside me.

Liv and Kinsey went back a few yards, where the training arena used to be, to get their stuff and then came back over to me, jumping over a piece of cement.

“I put in the coordinates of our location in the locator and it’s calibrating where we should start looking,” Liv explained. I gave her a thumbs up. “Ok, here. It says...go about ten miles into N.Y.C?” Kinsey grunted.

“New York City? Why would we need to go there?” Kinsey asked.

“For one thing, the locator said so. That’s top-notch spy gear. Second, there’s probably someone there who can help us. Maybe someone from the T.S.S.A who escaped? I have no idea, but that’s our best idea right now,” I said.

“You lead,” Liv said, handing me the locator. The disk fit in the palm of my hand, and was almost camouflaged by the eerie evening light. Except for the fact that there were millions (okay, maybe not millions) of tiny blinking lights that would give us away instantly if Apphia caught onto us. Great.

“Ok, are you sure?” I asked.

“Go for it,” Liv smiled.

I led them away from the camp.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” Kinsey muttered. We had been walking and following the locator for about a day, and my allies had been cursing the whole way. ‘Stupid’ was the nicest thing Kinsey had said. The sky was a dark shade of purple and the air was

cool. We had walked through an occasional clearing, but it was mostly trees taller than a skyscraper.

“Apphia!” Liv muttered angrily in harmony with Kinsey.

“Guys!!!! Look!!!!” I pointed at the locator.

Liv’s hand flew up to her mouth in disbelief. “New York,” she read, “Two miles ahead.” We all looked beyond the tall trees to a fork in the road. The left path was just woods, but the second path...felt different.

I started toward the second path, with Liv and Kinsey behind me. We walked for another hour or so when we stopped to rest.

“Dinner?” Kinsey wondered aloud. As level nine spies, we were trained to go days without eating, but we were all too exhausted and afraid to remember that. Liv shifted through her black backpack.

“Uhhhh, I have a sandwich....,” she paused. “With mold on it.”

I sighed as I looked through my own pack. I had nothing, unless a piece of rotten banana was considered edible.

“Unless Kinsey has something in her pack that won’t give us food poisoning, I think we have to find something out here,” I stated. Kinsey nodded.

“Yep, nothing in mine. Heather, didn’t you bring your bow?” Kinsey said.

“Yeah, but we’ll have to be careful, because I only have five stupid arrows left from the last mission,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Then don’t let Kinsey or I touch them, because you know we’re horrible shooters!” Liv joked. I took a few steps forward.

“I’ll have to go out farther than this. I think I’ll backtrack; I might have seen some rabbits on the way here,” I told them. “You stay here and try to build a fire while I’m gone. You could also look for some berries, but don’t die on me.” They smiled. “See you in a while.”

A few hours later, we were full. I had shot a rabbit and a small deer, and Kinsey had found some sweet red berries while Liv tended a roaring fire.

"Do you guys want to rest for a while?" I asked them.

"No way. We've wasted two days walking and following the dumb locator to the middle of a forest, and who knows where Apphia is now. Who knows who she's found from camp," Liv reacted. My eyes clouded over when I thought about what Apphia could do if she found Nadan and Anastasia.

"You're right. Kinsey, you good?" I asked. She nodded. "Let's go. The locator says...NYC, two yards away." I stared at the disk in amazement.

"Anastasia. Nadan. Chloe. Caroline. Sophi. We're one step closer to finding them!" Liv said excitedly.

"Hopefully," Kinsey added. Liv glared at her.

"Guys, follow me. We're going to The Big Apple!"

No amount of training could prepare us for New York. There were gigantic billboards and millions of stores (okay, maybe not millions, but close to it) with fluorescent flashing lights. There were street vendors selling everything from tamales to hot dogs to ice cream, and yelling to advertise their products. God. Poor Kinsey was standing as still as a statue with her mouth hanging open. And Liv was taking pictures with her...**CELL PHONE?**

"Liv!" I shouted at her. The number one spy rule was to not use cell phones. They sent out signals to every enemy, which was only Apphia at the moment. "Turn off your phone!"

"What? Oh my gosh! I forgot!!" She explained, fumbling with the buttons on her cell. Kinsey gave her a severe look as she threw it in her pack and struggled to zip it up.

"Guys! Come on! The locator says that we have to find Xavier Johanson. Do you recognize the name?" I asked them, reading the disk.

"Uhh, Heather?" Liv said, tapping my arm. "How about the guy over there with the guitar?"

"Why do you think that's him? A lucky guess?" I asked Liv.

"Not really. His guitar case says 'Property of Xavier J'."

"Oh." I said, smiling. "Let's go and talk to him." We walked over to the front of an abandoned ice cream shop. There was our Xavier. He looked about 20 years old, with dark circles under his eyes and clothes that seemed to belong to the 1980's. His hair was completely disheveled, and he looked as if he hadn't shaved in weeks. He reeked of onions and trash, and his guitar playing was about as good as a cat clawing a chalkboard.

"Heather," Kinsey said. "Exactly what are we asking him?"

"No idea, but I guess we'll find out." I said.

We walked over to him. "Hi, Mr. Xavier, sir," I started.

"Umm, hi?" he replied in a deep, tired voice. I took a deep breath.

"Code #663, 994, 2329," I recited. His eyes widened.

"What camp are-" Xavier asked.

"T.S.S.A #5754, sir," I interrupted.

"Follow me," He said shakily, motioning us inside the shop.

"I thought everyone was dead! Apphia attacked, and few escaped!" Xavier said. We had been explaining everything that had happened in the store for more than a half hour. It turned out that Xavier was the senior leader of quarter two in the T.S.S.A. He had been there when Apphia's troops attacked, and tried to fight them off but had gotten bit by one of their robotic, venomous dogs and had wandered here, found a guitar in the sewer, and starting playing it for tips.

"Did you see who escaped?" Kinsey asked him before I could.

"I saw Nicole, Sophi, Jesse, Anna, Cory, Josh, Kristen, Jenn, Alex, a few others I can't name, and a tiny little girl running with a tall boy," Xavier explained. My heart stopped. A tiny little girl running with a tall boy? That had to be Anastasia and Nadan!

"Can you describe the boy and girl?" I questioned him, sucking in my breath, hoping like crazy.

"Uhh, let's see. The little girl had dark skin, and short dark hair, and she was pretty short. The boy was tall, had light brown hair, and had really pale skin. Kind of an odd pair, if you know what I mean," he described. Oh. My. God. It was Anastasia and Nadan. They got away. I broke into a smile.

"They got away," I said in amazement. "They got away! Anastasia and Nadan got away!!!!!" Kinsey and Liv grinned.

"You're right. Oh Heather, I'm so glad they're safe!" Liv said, hugging me. I sobbed into her shoulder as she patted my back.

"So why do you think the locator brought us to Xavier?" Kinsey asked.

"Well, he is a member of the T.S.S.A," Liv noted.

"I know where they went," Xavier blurted out. I lifted my head from Liv and raised my eyebrows.

"You do? Where?" I asked hopefully.

"They're here. In New York. Jac Iris-ed me," Xavier explained. 'Iris-ed' is just code for a high-tech gadget we use for emergencies to communicate with the other spies. Me, Liv and Kinsey have our own, but...I guess we just forgot to use them. Oops.

"Where *exactly* in New York?" Kinsey asked, getting annoyed.

"Harley," he said.

"Harley?" Kinsey and I repeated at the same time.

Liv smacked her hand on the small table we were sitting at and rolled her eyes. "You mean *Harlem*?"

"Yeah! That's what she said!!" Xavier exclaimed. The three of us exchanged irritated looks.

"Okay, well, thanks for everything," I told Xavier. Kinsey glared at me. I sighed. "Do you want to come with us to Harlem?"

"Thanks! But no. I'm enjoying life in N.Y.B!" He said.

"You mean N.Y.C?" Liv said, staring at him. She mouthed a curse at me that would have her suspended from a school immediately. I stifled a laugh at her expression.

"Well, bye!" I said, heading toward the door. Xavier waved. When we got back on the street, Liv started complaining.

"He was an idiot! And he's a level seven spy! He should be a level one! Anastasia's waaay smarter than him!!" I looked down at my shoes, and Kinsey elbowed Liv.

“OW! What was that for?” Liv glanced at me. “Oh. I’m sorry for bringing it up, Heather,” she apologized, her angry gaze softening.

I smiled at her. “No big deal. But now that Xavier isn’t our problem anymore, let’s find a way to Harlem.”

“But we don’t have money,” Kinsey said.

“We could steal Xavier’s guitar and play for money,” Liv offered.

“Really, Liv?” I joked. She shrugged.

“We’re not going to steal! Maybe we have some money in our packs?” I said. We all dove into our black packs. I pulled out a stray nickel, and Kinsey found a soggy five-dollar bill.

“Liv? What did you find?” Kinsey asked.

Liv shifted through her pack and pulled something out. “Twenty dollars, fellow subway riders!”

We cheered.

“The nearest subway station is right down the street. Let’s go,” I told them. We hurried down the street, down the stairs, and into the station. We paid for our tickets and walked to the loading area. Lucky for us, the next car came in less than five minutes and we were on the train, wedged in between two people too freaky and disgusting to describe. Let’s just say, I got some of the guy on my left’s hair in my sweater. When we arrived in Harlem and exited the station, I took a deep breath.

“Ahhhhhh,” I sighed. “Fresh air!” I exclaimed, shaking black locks of hair off my jacket.

“I know!! The guy next to me was putting on deodorant! And my face just happened to be at armpit level!” Kinsey agreed, shuddering. Liv made a face.

“So we’re in Harlem; what do we do now? We don’t have time to search everywhere!” Liv said. I thought for a second, then cried out.

Kinsey gave me a worried look. “What’s wrong?”

I pointed a few yards ahead. “Look,” I said in a small voice.

“Oh my god. Oh my god,” Liv whispered. I had pointed at smoke billowing in the sky in the distance. We had followed it to a battlefield. Newly dead bodies were scattered everywhere. Blood was splattered on things here and there, and there was a foul smell in the air. Swords, guns, and other spy gadgets were everywhere. The sky was a mix of orange and pink, but the smoke was moving rapidly and slowly turning it gray. Worst of all, there were T.S.S.A objects everywhere. Banners, gear, and other things with ‘Property of T.S.S.A #5754’ written on them covered the area. There were bodies that I recognized, like Sophi and Cory, but some that I didn’t that could only be from Apphia’s army. There weren’t too many that I didn’t recognize. Our home was gone. Again.