

The background of the cover is a complex network diagram. It features numerous blue, stylized human figures standing on circular platforms. These platforms are interconnected by a web of light blue lines, creating a mesh-like structure. In the center of this network, one figure is colored red, standing out from the others. The overall theme suggests a digital or social network.

CROWDSOURCERS

A NOVEL

YARDELL PERKINS

CROWDSOURCERS

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Published by Yardell Perkins
Cover Art: CanStockPhoto / focalpoint
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THANKS / DEDICATIONS

I would like to send a very big thanks and dedication to Tara Roskell and Sandra Busby at "Kick in the Creatives" (kickinthecreatives.com). It is because of their efforts to inspire creativity in others that this work was inspired and created.

INTRO / DISCLAIMER

The "TL;DR": I had to edit this book myself. I suck at editing. I'm sorry.

This work is the end result of a daily writing challenge I took up for a month in February 2018 over at the Facebook group Kick in The Creatives called "February Fables". Some of the people following my efforts during that challenge thought enough of them to suggest that they be packaged into the continuous work that you – the reader- are currently viewing.

In creating this eBook, I tried to do the work – and you the reader – some proper justice by having it proofread and reviewed by a legitimate editor. I won't bother you with the details, but that didn't work out. Furthermore, the process to me finding out that it wouldn't work out wasted enough time for me to resolve to take matters into my own hands and self-edit the story to prevent any further delays towards its completion.

I am not a professional editor of any kind. That will likely become evident to you as you go through the story. While no one outright pressured or forced me to go down this road, it was one that I wanted to go down and I wanted to see it through to the end and deliver this work as best as I could.

Prologue - The Late Morning

The boy woke up from his slumber. It felt as if he had slept a bit longer than he used to. His room was quiet and lit barely by a few rays of sunshine from behind the closed window curtain. He got up and slid it open. It was a nice, sunny and quiet day...

...almost *too* quiet

He looked at the clock and realized first that he had overslept. Then he realized that his mom usually came in and woke him up in the mornings, especially on school days. That clearly hadn't happened today.

That was his first hint that something was wrong, or at least off.

Empty Nest

He must have gone through the entire house at least three times since he had ventured out of his room. His mom and older sister were nowhere to be found. His dad wasn't present either, but that much at least was normal. Usually, his dad was the first to leave the house in the morning and the last to come in at night. As far as he could tell, it didn't seem as if he had been left behind. Rather, it was as if his family had just up and vanished. All of the rooms, save his own, were in perfect order: Beds made, floors clean, tabletops spotless. If the boy hadn't know any better, he would have thought that the house had never been occupied.

To put it mildly, the entire situation was unusual. However, as the boy thought about the matter more, a thought crossed his mind that was all the more unusual: He didn't feel scared. In fact, he didn't particularly feel anything about it.

Its not that he was trying to put on some "brave face", but he figured that he should be feeling SOMETHING about the circumstance he was in.

As he started to consider whether or not he should stay put or venture outside, the decision was made for him in the form of a voice that was coming from somewhere off in the distance:

"RIIILEY"

"RIIIIIILEY"

"COME OUTSIIIDE!!!! I WANT TO PLAY WITH YOU!"

Pseudonyms

The first thought that went through the boy's head was: "My name isn't Riley. Its Matt."

The second thought that went through the boy's head was: "I always kinda wished that it was 'Riley' because it sounder cooler than 'Matt'."

The third thought that went through the boy's head – the one that set him out of the house and in the direction of the voice before he had time to even question it – was: "There's only one person I've ever told that to, but I haven't seen him in a few months...."

....and that voice...

"RILEY! C'MON MAN, I KNOW YOU'RE 'ROUND HERE"

...it was faint but became cleared as he got close to it...

"COME OUT, COME OUT, WHEREEVER YOU ARRRRRRE!!!"

...it couldn't be, but it HAD to be...

...It sounded like HIM.

The boy finally got to the edge of a friend's yard near his house with a fence just shy higher than he was. He quickly found a box to step up on and peer over. On the other side, in the next yard, was a sight that elicited the first actual bit of emotion the boy had felt since this entire morning started. Two emotions in fact: One part excited and one part confused.

It was his old friend Rob.

The boy scaled over the fence and started to briskly walk towards Rob. Rob turned, saw the boy and with a lit face of elation, ran towards the boy and toppled him in an excited hug.

"Riley!" The boy halfway screamed. "I finally found you!". "You remember me, Jason, right?"

The question shocked him for a moment. His name wasn't Jason – It was Rob - but he quickly recalled that Ro...Jason had been just as adverse to his own name and secretly wished that he could be a 'Jason'.

It was one of the things that had brought them together as friends: To the rest of the world, they had been "Matt and Rob". When they were off hanging out by themselves, they were "Riley and Jason". They had heard that there were ways they could actually change that, but it seemed like nothing they could do themselves until they were adults. There had even been a blood pact – If you could have deemed it a matter worthy of a "blood pact" - To make that the very first thing that they would do as adults.

"Ro..er...um..Jason", Riley started to say as he got to his feet and bearings.
"Man...its...um...where have...how are...."

"WHAT THE HELL, MAN?!?!" Riley finally managed to get out, half excited and frustrated.

"I know, I know!" Jason said with his hand up in a defensive, peace position. "There's a lot that I have to tell you. But hell, its good to see you again!"

"Yeah..", Riley said catching his breath in the moment. "Its good to see you too. Do you have any idea where everyone is at?"

"Oh that?", Jason started to say in a matter-of-factly tone, "There's nobody here with us right now".

"There's nobody here with us in the neighborhood?", Riley asked in a shocked tone.

"There's nobody here with us in the TOWN!", Jason replied with a grin.

The resultant look on Riley's face was Jason's cue that he had blown his friend's mind a bit more than he had intended to with that remark.

"Like I said..." Jason continued with his hands up again, sporting the same grin as if he was sitting on the punchline to the best joke in the world: "...there's a LOT that I have to tell you"

Sandbox

Riley did his best to quietly sit on the bus and enjoy the ride. It was easy in that it was a familiar route; One that he and Jason had traveled on together several times in the past. It was hard in that they were repeatedly going down streets that were absolutely empty, but still somehow felt alive.

The entire ride – Hell, the entire day thus far for that matter – had been so surreal that the fact that there was no bus driver operating the bus that was still somehow just as diligently navigating its route barely registered with him.

"Okay, okay..." Riley said to himself, "Jason said that he would start talking as soon as we got to our usual hangout." But even that was a bit perplexing in and of itself. If the "hangout" that Jason was referring to was the one that Riley suspected he was referring to, then...

DING! DING

"Wh, What?!?!" Riley said, startled from his train of thought.

"Our stop is coming up!" Jason exclaimed. I pressed the call stop button.

Sure enough, the bus started to slow to a gradual stop at the corner of the block they regularly arrived at to reach their "hangout": Mason and Gentry streets.

The doors open and they stepped off of the bus. Behind them, the doors closed and the bus – again seemingly under its own power and with a mind of its own - picked up speed and carried on about its route. Off in the distance, ahead of it, seemed to be a very dark but quiet rain cloud formation that all but blacked out the city under it. Whatever was going on - Riley thought to himself – Mother Nature seemed to still be acting normally. As he turned away from that, he and Jason stood in front of a sight that all the more confirmed for Riley that there was still a great deal of 'weirdness' about - to put it mildly.

"We've made it again!" Jason exclaimed "Its the old strip mall! Complete WITH the arcade and quickie mart! Its been a while, hasn't it?"

"Yes, Jason!" Riley exclaimed with a bit of exasperation. "It has been a while since I've seen this place! Do you know why that is?!?!"

"What, man? What's wrong with you?" Jason, replied.

"What's wrong with me?!?! WHATS WRONG WITH ME?!?! I wake up this morning in a town that has nobody in it but me and my best friend – who I haven't seen in MONTHS - and now I just got driven on a bus that somehow has a mind of its own to our old hangout, that got TORN TO THE GROUND and replaced with a parking lot right after you left! AND NOW YOU'RE BACK AND IT'S BACK AND IT'S LIKE NOTHING'S CHANGED!!!

"Whoa! Whoa! Alright buddy! Just calm down." Jason said placing his hands on Riley's shoulders. "You wanna know what's happening around here? We'll talk about what's happening around here. Though, I thought you might want to do a few rounds of Centip-"

"GAMES LATER! TALK!" Riley exclaimed, looking as if he was ready to jump out of his skin.

"Okay, Okay. First things first: This place around us? Its not really here."

"What do you mean 'not really here'?" Riley said, "It *is* here. It looks and feels like its here. Where the hell is it, then?"

"Well, to put it simply: We're inside of my head right now"

"What the hell are you talking about: We're inside of your head?"

"The people who have been running tests on me-"

"TESTS?!?! What do you mean 'tests'?!?! You're some kind of lab rat somewhere?", Riley exclaimed in a stupor.

"DUDE! Calm DOWN!" Jason pleaded "You said you wanted me to explain it, I'm explaining it. GEEZ!"

"Alright, alright!" Riley stated calming down. "Sorry. I'm shutting up. Keep going"

"The people running tests on me say that it's some advanced kind of "Remote View" or something. There are people in the world who can see other places and things without actually being there. Apparently, not only am I one of them but I can go one step farther and recreate those places in my head. Even bring people in with me. That's how we're here"

"Ooookkay...." Riley said, still halfway confused but starting to get the gist of things "But if this place is not here and we aren't here, then where are we, like REALLY?"

"I'm sleeping in my – quote unquote – room at...well....wherever it is they have me at. I don't know where you are but you're probably sleeping too. I've figured out that its easier for me to do this when me and the people I try to bring in are sleeping."

Riley sat down on the sidewalk for a moment to gather everything he just heard. The explanation was far more, left-field crazy then he could have imagined, but it all still made some sense:

The two of them had been all over their small town to the point where they both knew it like the backs of their own hands. Jason, being the natural hand artist that he was, should very well have been able to redraw or recreate any part of it – or *all* of it - if he wanted. Though, he had really outdid himself with the whole "Mental 3D Space" bit. And if Jason really could pull other people into the space with him - and he had only pulled himself in along with him- that would explain why they had the whole fake town to themselves.

"Okay then..." Riley said as he got to his feet and started to pace while rubbing his forehead "I think I'm starting to wrap my head around this, but there's still one thing that doesn't make sense"

"You wanna know about the bus that single-handedly drove us here right?" Jason asked with a smirk.

Riley was actually a bit curious about that, among a plethora of other things, but there was something else closer that he wondered about.

"No....well...actually....yes...but NO! I wanna know about this strip mall!"

Jason didn't immediately follow "What about it? It's our spot. I thought you'd be happy to see it again."

"Well, I am, but it was destroyed! I told you, it got demolished after you...well...left. You say that you can see other places and recreate them as they are. This actual place is nowhere to be seen anymore."

"Well, it HERE!" Jason lightly exclaimed. "I saw what had been done to the place the first few times I reached out to you. and like I said, this is MY head. That strip mall may have been a rundown ugly eyesore, but it was OUR rundown ugly eyesore! It may be gone out there, but here we have it back"

"Whoa, whoa!" Riley exclaimed, having been casually floored by Jason again "What did you mean by: the first FEW times you tried to reach out to me?"

"Aw, C"MON Riley!" Jason said in an exasperated tone "You been giving me the third-degree on this for like...an eternity man! Look, I get it: its a lot to sink in. I'm living it and I'm *still* sinking it in. I promise I'll get you up to speed, but for now let's just hang like we used to and have some fun with it all for a bit?"

All of the weirdness aside, Riley had to admit: He was happy to see his best friend again and he had clearly went to some lengths to set all of this up. He shook his head, smiled, and relented to Jason's plea to just go with it all for the time being.

"You were saying something about Centipede earlier. Is that still on?"

Best Day Ever

The next few hours passed like minutes as Riley and Jason had lost themselves in the bright led screens and crashing sounds of the various games in their private arcade binge.

At one point during it all, Riley had briefly wondered how exactly they were playing the games in the first place. He kinda understood what Jason had told him about having recreated the base structures of the town and its various buildings and objects; such as the arcade cabinets. But the hardware, programming and code inside of the cabinets had to have been an entirely different matter. Jason may have been a natural in art class, but he barely rated piss poor when it came time to sit down for math. For his part, Riley managed just well enough to understand that you didn't get very far in making computer games – or any kind of computer software - without running into A LOT of math.

"Deep breath, man." Riley whispered to himself while he was sitting in a stylized plane cockpit watching himself crash into the command center of an aircraft carrier, "You said you were going to just go with it for a bit. Just go with it for a bit."

After what seemed like another few hours, and another won arcade game that both Riley and Jason we're more adept at, they collectively agreed that they'd had enough of the now resurrected strip mall for the time being.

"So, what now?" Riley asked, turning to Jason.

"Now, I have a surprise for you!" Jason said as he led the way out of the arcade directing Riley to follow.

Right outside of the doors, there was a medium sided bike with a wagon connected to the back that looked to be just large enough to seat one of them; if somewhat uncomfortably.

"What's this?" Riley asked a bit perplexed.

"Its your ride. Here, get in the back and put this on!", Jason said as he produced a bandanna from his back pocket.

"You wanna blindfold me?"

"Like I said, its a surprise! Trust me, you're gonna love it!"

Reluctantly, Riley took the bandanna, climbed into the wagon and sat down as comfortably as he could make himself, and tied the cloth around his eyes.

"No Peeking!", Jason exclaimed.

Jason then mounted the bicycle, strapped on a helmet that had been hanging from the front.

"At least we won't have to worry about traffic. Here we go!" And with that, Jason started to pedal.

Riley, on the other hand, started to quietly whisper to himself: "One Mississippi...Two Mississippi...Three Mississippi..."

In one of Riley's favorite spy novels - Dan Danger: Affair with a Bullet - the hero was blindfolded to be taken to a secret location without his knowing the way. Dan, however, managed to make a mental map of the way he was taken by counting mississippi's in head while he felt as if he was going straight,

and then adding in "Right's" and "Left's" whenever he felt a turn. Riley didn't think that he'd be able to paint as accurate a picture for himself, but he figured that he could at least manage a best guess if the trip wasn't too long.

* * *

about 53 mississippi's, two left's, what felt like a "Half Right" and three solid right's later, Riley finally felt that his ride was coming to a stop. Based on where they started and the turns they had taken, he suspected that Jason had at least brought them to the Riverside part of town. He second-guessed this at first because he couldn't imagine what surprise could be there for the two of them. By and large: Riverside was largely made up of businesses and banks for the adults. There was little to be found there that could keep the attention of anyone under fifteen for very long, if at all.

"Alright! We're here. Are you okay? You we're pretty quiet back there!"

"Um..yeah..I'm fine. I was just trusting you to lead the way" Riley replied as he started to take off his blindfold.

"NO!" Jason exclaimed while grabbing his hands. "Not yet! We're here, but I'm gonna take you in."

Jason helped Riley out of the wagon and slowly guided the two of them through an open door. Through the makeshift blindfold, Riley noticed the ambient lighting go from very bright to dark with some flashes of light. After going up a series of steps and passing through another door, they entered a room that felt like it had light flypaper as flooring. Riley could also hear the sound of techno music playing. For a moment, he thought that perhaps they were in another arcade.

"Almost there!", Jason exclaimed gleefully.

Finally, they scaled another small set of step which now felt as if they were walking on glass. They took a few more steps forward and stopped.

"You ready for this?", Jason said.

"Sure.", Riley said confidently. "After everything else so far, this can't be too bad"

Jason gently but briskly pulled away Riley's blindfold and exclaimed: "TA-DAAAA!"

Riley rubbed his eyes as he opened them and began to carefully look around: They were standing on a walkway with a mirrored floor and metal poles extending from the floor to the ceiling. The room was dimly lit by strips of led lights and neon signs in various places. The sides of the walkway just below them was lined with empty chairs and there were circular tables in front. The far left side of the room had what looked to be a bar while the far right had restaurant sized booths.

"What is this place?", Riley asked after a few moments.

"ITS THE RED DOT!!!", Jason exclaimed while stretching his arms out triumphantly.

"The Red do...THE RED DOT?!?!", Riley said as the situation started to sink in for him. "WE'RE IN A STRIP CLUB?!?! DUDE!!! WHAT THE HELL?!?!"

"What? We've been past this spot on the school bus during school trips! You said that you wanted to see what the inside look liked, right?"

"Well...I mean...Yeah, but...." Riley stuttered while trying to struggle for words. "This is like an 'adult' place. We're not ADULTS."

"Dude, calm down!", Jason said reassuringly. "Have you forgotten already where we are? I mean where we really are?", He said as he tapped the side of his own head.

"Oh...right...mental...shared space and..." Riley continued to stutter while calming down a bit. "But how did you even do this? I though you said that you could only recreate places that you've seen yourself. When have you been in here to see THIS?!?!"

"For the most part: Yes, I have to see a place myself in the real world to be able to redo it. But sometimes, not always or with everyone, I can recreate a place that someone else has seen. I'm not exactly sure how that part of my "mutant ability" works. Like I said before: I'm still figuring it all out myself."

"Okay..." Riley said having finally – somewhat – wrapped his head around this latest development. "So whose head did you hijack to get this place together?"

"The janitor. His name is Rick. He's a friend of my dad's. Or, at least, last I knew he was. Haven't seen dad or mom in a bit...." Jason said as he started to trail off and get down. "Well, anyway, when I first found out that I could kinda reach out to people, I tried my dad and mom figuring they would be the easiest to connect with. I mean, hell, they're dad and mom, right? I couldn't really get to either of them but for some reason, I was able to get Rick just fine. The odd thing about that was, every time I got him, this place always showed up. Its like he's either always here or always thinking about being here."

Another explanation for the ongoing circumstances, Riley contemplated, that was crazy as hell, but too crazy to be much else but the truth.

"Well...look...thanks for doing this, man" Riley said as he put a hand on Jason's shoulder. "I was always curious about this place and it definitely was a surprise."

"No prob!" Jason said with a proud, beaming smile. "This is turning out to be one helluva day so far, huh?"

"Yeah...", Riley said as he started to look around and stroke his chin. "About that: Exactly how long have we been doing this thing? You said that we're both really asleep. Are we oversleeping?"

"We shouldn't be", Jason reassuringly replied, "So far when I've done this trick like this its never gone on for longer than a night, even if it seems like hours or days pass in here. Its like time here flows whatever way it needs to to make sure that I don't do anything more than really sleep through a night"

"What's the longest you gone for being in your head like this?"

"I had me and a couple of scientists in like this for three days", Jason replied. They said that they don't want me to try to do more than that cuz they're running their tests to see if its affecting me or them in ways nobody knows yet."

"The 'them', these 'scientists'...they're the people that you and your parents went off and disappeared with a few months back?"

"Yeah, they are.", Jason said with a bit of a resigned face. "...and I bet the wannabe spy and detective in you is just dying to ask me all about them huh?"

"Damn straight I wanna ask!", Riley snapped back. "You were my best friend. Hell, my ONLY friend and the way you just up and went?!?! It would have been like you died except that everyone afterwards was halfway acting as if you were never around to begin with. What the hell did they do with you, man?"

"Alright, alright" Jason said with a defeated smile. "It sounds like this isn't going to be put off any longer. Let's get out of here and I'll tell you everything that happened. As much as I can tell you anyway. There are parts of the deal that are still kinda over my head as much as all of this probably feels like its over yours."

The two boys turned to walk back to stairs leading down from the shimmering runway when Riley stepped straight into one of the poles on the stage that had been just behind him.

"OW! GOT DAM...I mean...JEEZ!", Riley exclaimed while rubbing his head.

"WHOA! Are you alright?"

"Yeah. I'm fine", Riley said while briefly examining the pole. "What the hell are these poles here for anyway?"

"Beats me", Jason said as he briefly examined the pole that struck his friend before turning his attention to the others on the walkway with a perplexed stare. "They really look to be in the way up here"

Guest 301

As the two friends stepped out into the apparent city-sized playground that Jason had setup for them, Riley started to look around and about at the various buildings and structures that surrounded them. He smiled and approvingly nodded to himself at what he was looking at.

"So we really are in Riverside.", he whispered to himself thinking back to the estimation he had made earlier about their whereabouts. It seemed that he had guessed correctly. But then - upon closer look - he started to notice something odd about the buildings. Many of them appeared to only have windows or doors in certain places; Other random areas were just plain blotches of gray and white. It was almost as if they were pictures that were only partly drawn. One building a bit off in the distance was completely bare. Not much more than a solid white rectangle that reached into the sky.

Jason noticed the look that was on Riley's face as he was inspecting their surroundings and suspected what must have been going through his mind.

"Yeah", Jason said shaking his head a bit while also smiling. "Its a bit of a mess these parts, huh?"

"What is wrong with this area? Its like its only half done."

"Its like I said before: I can only recreate what I've seen or what someone I've been with has seen. And you said it yourself: these parts around here are for the adults. I never much hung out with adults outside of the school, or in it for that matter. What little I do know about these parts you can thank Rick for."

"So, none of the people who have been holding you could show you any more of Riverside?"

"Aside from the scientists, the people at the hotel usually try to keep me around kids. Logic being that they haven't seen much so I shouldn't be able to see much through them."

"Hotel? Kids?!?!", Riley said with a shocked face directed at Jason.

"Right, right. I'm supposed to be giving you the whole story now. C'mon. Let's head over to that park."

Jason pointed to an open area where there was a large rectangle on the ground that was a solid light green; almost the color of grass. Inside the rectangle were smaller brown rectangle blocks with brown square blocks positioned along side. Riley looked at the area at the moment, then turned a thin stare complete with a raised eyebrow back to his friend.

"Well...look...just trust me. That's *supposed* to be a park. A small lunch area the people around here use on their break."

Riley shrugged his shoulders and the two of them ran over to one of the tables and sat on opposite sides of it.

"Alright, buddy" Jason said settling himself in. "You've got me under the spotlight, ere. Where should I begin?"

"First things first", Riley said eagerly ready to start his interrogation: "Where exactly are you, *right now*? Not like here, but wherever you are or have been?"

"I don't know exactly where it is, but they call it the hotel. Got a room of my own in it and everything: Room 301. They call me: 'Guest 301'."

"Guest 301? They don't use your actual name?"

"They do every now and then, but they don't like doing so for some reason. The especially don't like the help using it when they talk to me."

"The help?"

"The people around the hotel who clean the room and hallways and bring me food and what not" There's at least five different people that I've ran into but they all call themselves 'The Help'. You ask them their names and that's the response you get...every time"

"Well, back to this hotel. How do you not know where you are? Haven't you looked out of your room window?"

"My room window is all bricks. That's my view. Sometimes I wonder why they even bothered making a window frame. They could have just did a flat wall for all the extra view it provides."

"So aside from you, the help and the scientists there, is there anyone else? Like any other people with weird powers?"

"I think there might be, but I'm not sure. They're pretty strict about who I see whenever they move me for tests and what not."

"It sounds like you're a prisoner"

"Who are you telling? 'Guest' my butt!"

"So what about these tests? Do they hurt you or anything"

"Nah. So far, they just take me to this room with a bunch of computer screens, tape a bunch of pads to me, especially on my head, and ask me to do my thing while they take a bunch of readings. The parts with them putting the stuff on me and taking it off is more tedious than anything else, but apart from that, its been alright. They haven't tried to probe or cut me or anything....yet."

"Do you think they will?"

"I hope not."

"Well, what about your parents? Are they just letting all of this happen?"

Jason looked down and a somber expression fell on his face. He briefly pondered the question Riley has just asked before responding.

"Man...I...Its...I reall don't want to talk about them right now. They're not dead or anything - I don't think - but...look just ask me about something else. ANYTHING else."

"Well....okay...then tell me about...", Riley had started to ask realizing that he had hid some kind of nerve. However, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that one of the poorly constructed buildings in their vicinity was now in an even more basic state."

"Wait a sec", Riley said interrupting his own thought. "Didn't that building look like more of a building before?"

As Jason turned to look at the building Riley mentioned, right before their eyes, pieces of it started to disappear. Around them, the other buildings were turning white and starting to slowly but steadily shrink into the ground.

"Oh, Shit!", Jason exclaimed as he started to look around in a panic. "I'M STARTING TO WAKE UP!!!"

"What? HOW?" Riley exclaimed. "You said that you could do this for days in a night or something?"

"I know, I KNOW!" Jason replied with a half terrified tone in his voice. "I thought I had set it up right! DAMNINT!"

"Well what's happening? WHAT DO WE DO?!?!"

"You have to get out of here!!!"

"Get out?!?! I DON'T KNOW HOW I GOT IN!!!"

The buildings and streets now all seemed to be shrinking and disappearing under Jason's feet as if everything had turned to water and was flowing out through a drain directly under him. All around them, sections of the city were passing until Riley could just briefly noticed that the outer parts of their neighborhood were passing under them and away.

"LOOK! YOU HAVE TO GO. NOW!!!!!"

"BUT WAIT!!! HOW DO I FIND YO-"

Jason clenched his eyes shut and snapped both of his fingers high above his head.

Everything immediately went black and silent for Riley.

Do Over

The boy woke up from his slumber. It felt as if he had slept a bit longer than he used to. His room was quiet and lit barely by a few rays of sunshine from behind the closed window curtain. He got up and slid it open. It was a nice, sunny and quiet day...

...almost TOO quiet

He looked at the clock and realized first that he had overslept. Then he realized that his mom usually came in and woke him up in the mornings, especially on school days. That clearly hadn't happened today.

That was his first hint that something was wrong, or at least off.

His second hint to that effect came in a very deep feeling of Deja-vu.

"Wait a second", Riley said as he started to look around and collect his thoughts "Hasn't this happened bef-"

"MATT!!! TIME TO GET U-" His mom screamed as she stormed into the room, only to immediately stop and see Riley standing before her on the other side near the open window.

"Oh!", she said in a gleeful - albeit confused - tone. "You're already up. This is different."

"Uh, yeah...." Riley said, still trying to shake off the fact that: 1) He has just seen his hometown – or at least a recreation of it - collapse under his old friend a few moments prior, 2) Jason positively terrified over it, and 3) Somehow this day had restarted.

"I, uh, just had a bad dream. Been up for about a half-hour. I don't remember it anymore but I just still feel weird. I'll start getting ready for school."

"Oh, don't worry about that today", his mom said dismissively. "There's a report on the news that all of the schools in the district are closed today."

As relieved as Riley was to hear that news – he could certainly use the free time to try to process everything that had just happened – he was still a bit curious about it, as it seemed a little too convenient.

"Closed? Why?", Riley said.

"I don't know. There's a news report that there was some mold or fungus or something found somewhere and they're checking to see how far it has spread"

"Mold?", Riley said finally getting a little composure. "Cool!"

A bemused look fell on his mom's face. "You would think that. Anyways, I still don't want you just loafing about like a bump on a log. Come down and get your breakfast and then you can go find something to do with your friends for the day. My shows are still coming on and I'd rather you be out of the house like you'd usually be when they do."

* * *

Riley was sitting at the kitchen table finishing up his pancake breakfast as his mom was just puttering about as she usually did in the mornings. After a moment, it finally occurred to him that he hadn't yet seen his sister that day.

"Hey, mom.", Riley said as he started to look around. "Where's Paige?"

"Oh, she left out right behind you father this morning. Said that they wanted her at the diner a bit earlier today. Seems like you and I are the only ones in this family that can get a full night's sleep; not that I'm complaining, mind you."

Riley shrugged his shoulders and started to return to his pancakes. As he looked down to take another bite out of the last one, he noticed that the manner in which he had cut it roughly resembled the shape of one of the neon signs he has recently seen in The Red Dot; or, at least its virtual duplicate. He looked up at his mom, who's back had been to him looking up at the news segment on the TV atop of the refrigerator. He thought deeply for a second, and started.

"Mom, can I ask you something?", Riley began with.

"Um...sure honey...what is it?", His mom replied, halfway lost in the news report.

"Do you know what happened to Jason?"

"Jason? Who's that?", His mom said while still halfway invested in the news reports of the day.

Riley quickly remembered that he was actually in the real world now. "Jason" was back to being "Rob", but that also meant that he was back to being "Matt".

"Oh...um...I meant Rob. He was one of my friends from a few blocks over. You've met him a few times. Him and his family went away a few months ago and never came back. He was the one who said to me that day: 'Man, your mom has legs!' You overheard and gave him a look that sent him running."

His mom turned halfway to him and started to look up at the ceiling a bit. "Rob.. Rob...oh I don't know if I...you and Paige have so many friends."

"All of Paige's friends are girls.", Riley started to say somewhat impatiently. "And I've never heard any of them, or any of my other friends, say that you have legs."

Riley's mom turned directly to him and shot him a look of shock and distress that indicated that he had pressed a bit too hard with that remark.

Riley sat straight up in his seat and attempted to recover his position "Oh!...I...um...I didn't mean that the way it sounded"

His mom started to look down at the floor for a few more moments as if to be in deep thought. "Oh...right...Rob!. I do recall him now. He was a bit weird but always seemed nice."

"Yeah, him!", Riley said, relieved that he had finally jogged her memory a bit. "Do you know where they went and why they aren't back?"

"Oh, I don't know. They probably went on vacation. That's all."

"Its been four months.", Riley countered. "We all went to California for two weeks and I heard dad say once that it nearly broke us."

"Oh, we're doing just fine honey! You don't need to listen to your dad too much. I love the man, but he pinches pennies so hard that they bend in his hands."

She was more-or-less right about the penny pinching part, Riley thought. Its not that his dad was cheap, per se, but he didn't like to spend money and not know EXACTLY where it was going. One time, Riley had asked his dad to buy him a \$20 booster pack of Po-Ki-Oh cards and he had gotten into a half-hour argument with the cashier at the store because their register printer was broken and couldn't print a receipt for him.

Still, they were getting a bit off topic. "Well, don't you think that its a little weird that they've been just gone like this for so long. It's like their house is still there and it's not being taken care of and nobody remembers them."

"Well, to be honest I'm a bit surprised that I remember them. They all seemed nice enough the one time I talked to Robs parents, but I can only remember talking to them once. They kept a lot to themselves, I recall."

Narrator: Previously on The Fifth Estate...

the TV boomed from behind Riley's mom above the refrigerator

Narrator: Ryan's estranged long lost half step-sister Brooke returned to the McCormick estate visibly pregnant. She walked up to Ryan, rubbed her belly while looking him in the face with a devilish grin and said:

Brooke: I think you know who's baby this is.

DUN DUN DUNNNNNNNN

"What the heck?", Riley said looking up at the screen; His train of thought broken.

His mom turned to the screen, and clenched her fists. "Oh Brooke! That sleazy BIT-"

She stopped herself realizing that her son was still with her.

"Okay! Story time!", She gleefully squealed while whipping around to look at Riley. "You're outta here!"

"But where do I go? You said school is closed."

"Pretend it's a weekend day or something. Find one of your friends and go do boy stuff with them. They're probably looking for you to right now. Just stay out of trouble. Now shoo....SHOO!"

Riley quickly excused himself from the table and headed out into the world with his backpack. More by reflex than anything else, he had grabbed and packed it prior to coming down to breakfast without thinking much about. Though he wondered what he'd do with it for the day.

* * *

As Riley's mom had guessed, most of the other kids who has chosen to venture out into the impromptu free day of school had made their way to the local playground. He had tried to strike up a bit of a conversation with some of his other classmates about Jason, being careful to remember that "Jason" had to be "Rob" to everyone else in the world. Unfortunately, they had gone all the same way as the one with his mother: Everyone could vaguely recall Jason and his family, but it seemed that nobody really had ever interacted with them much and barely notice that he had left or hadn't been back.

Riley had sat down at a table – he felt a little too excited about the fact that it looked like an ACTUAL table – on the edge of the park near the river. Across the way, he could see Riverside: the unofficially designated Adult part of town. In the center of the various building and structures, he could see the one at the center that looked completely bare to him when he had been inside of Jason's head.

"Well", Riley thought to himself for a moment "They all look like completed buildings from here. Looks like I'm actually back in the real world." He started to think about Jason's artistic ability to just vividly draw and create things in so many ways and wondered if he had ever tried himself. On a whim, he pulled out a blank piece of paper and pencil and started to make some rough lines on it when he was interrupted.

"Hey, Matt! Whatcha doing over here all by yourself?"

Riley looked up to see that it was Claire. One of his other classmates in art.

"Oh, hey Claire. I'm just trying to enjoy the free day. Feels weird, thought. Being out like this on a school day."

"I know.", Claire replied halfway sighing. "Its like, I'm glad we got the day off, but what do we do with it? Me and some my friends are gonna try to head over to the mall. What about you?"

"I have a lot on my mind right now. I think I want to just sit here and think to myself for a bit."

"Okay, I won't keep you too long. You have a good day. I hope you and your friend Riley have fun when you meet up."

Riley was taken aback by her remark. He had never spoken that name around Claire; Let alone clarified that it was kinda, sorta him.

"What?!?", Riley said with his eyes widening a bit.

"That message you're writing on that piece of paper. To meet that friend of yours. I hope it goes well for you and...well...you know who." and with that, Claire turned and jogged off.

Riley looked down at the paper in front of him and saw that he had apparently been still writing while he and Claire had been talking. The message he had seemingly roughly scribbled on it clearly shook him:

RIILEYYY

WIL METTT YEW EN TWOOO DAIS

BEEE REDY JES SLEP

YEU KNO WHEW

Play Date

For all of the relaxing and focusing that Riley was able to do for the two days since reading that roughly scribbled message he had written at Riverside park, you would have thought that he was living through the 23rd and 24th of any given December.

Luckily, albeit oddly, all of the schools continued to be closed through those two days which led right into the weekend so he really didn't have to focus on too much apart from finding ways to just burn the time. All of the while, he kept thinking back to the last moments he had with Jason before he was somehow kicked out of that collapsing cityscape. He wasn't sure if he had ever seen his friend scared in the first place; let alone that scared.

Well, from the look of things, it seemed as if Jason had gotten out of that situation. But, then again, what danger had he really been in? That city was his creation and in his own words, he had been just waking up at the time. Which then raised an interesting question. One that repeatedly echoed through Riley's head for those two days..

"What would have happened to me, or someone else, had they been in that shared mind space after Jason had fully awakened? Riley would silently whisper to himself whenever it crossed his mind.

He just made sure to put it at the top of the other questions he would have for his old friend once they got back together.

* * *

That Friday evening, Riley had did his best to just keep cool and not think too much about his bedtime. It must not have been working too well as his dad picked up on his nervousness at the table during dinner.

"Are you alright, boy?", His dad said, looking up from behind his paper. "You seem a bit tense."

"Uh, yeah dad.", Riley replied with a strained smile. "I just have a lot on my mind, that's all."

"You've been saying that for the past two days!", his older sister, Paige, chimed in "How much could really be going on in that noggin of yours?"

"Knock it off, Paige.", his dad retorted. "You don't bring home the kind of grades Matt there has been bringing in by having your head in the clouds. Speaking of which", his dad said as he turned his attention back to Riley: "Your latest report card came in: Straight B's. Good work on your part, to be sure, but your mom and I have gotten used to seeing more A's from you. Is everything alright?"

Riley took the question as an opening to try to get some more answers about Jason. Because of his work hours, Riley's dad was one of the last few people he had regular contact with that he hadn't yet had a chance to question about it.

"It's been a little hard studying these past couple of months", Riley started off. "Rob used to be my study partner and ever since he left, I've had trouble finding others to do homework with."

Riley stopped there to see where his dad – or anyone else at the table for that matter – would go with a response. His mom and sister looked at him briefly and then both turned to his dad as if waiting for him to respond. His dad thinned his eyes for a moment while looking at Riley. It was as if he had something to say about it – maybe plenty – but was contemplating what to divulge, if anything.

"Humph", His father grumbled while disappearing back behind his paper. "If you haven't found any new partners two weeks from now. I want you to let me or your mother know.", he declared now completely from behind the paper. We'll then loon into getting you a private tutor. I don't want to see these grades slip any further, understand?"

"Sure, Dad.", Riley said with a bit of a smile. It wasn't the response he was looking for, but he was all the more happy with it. For one, it seemed to completely dissolve the tension in the air that just seemed to pop out of nowhere when he mentioned Jason. Also, it further cemented his father's visage as that stern but caring type that he knew he could turn to for help, so long as he was trying to help himself.

"Speaking of which", Riley continued. "I actually have some projects to work on. Can I go?"

"Projects?", Paige started with a slight tone of disgust. "On a Friday night?"

"Well, what is he supposed to be doing, heading out on a date?", her mom replied with a raised eyebrow?

"Well, why not? He always so wound up, as it is. Plus, it's been like worse the past two days. Like he's waiting to see the world to fall apart or something!"

Been there. Done that. Rather not rinse-and-repeat, Riley thought to himself.

"Besides", Paige continued to venture. "I have some really nice friends I could introduce little Matty to.", she stated while shooting Riley a wily grin.

"PAIGE!", their mother exclaimed.

"Get going boy.", his father commanded from behind his 'Percivalley Record' wall. "Well hold off your hormonal sister."

* * *

It was a little after 8pm when Riley had gotten into his room. He probably could have jumped right into bed then, but he decided to wait a little while longer. At least until Paige was off to see whomever she ran off to see on the weekends and his parents were out on their usual weekend date. The family consensus seemed to be that he could be more-or-less left alone in the house to fend for himself as long as it wasn't for more than a few waking hours. Not that he had ever done anything to suggest that he couldn't be left alone for longer than that, but why take chances.

Despite it being so close to the time of his meeting with Jason, Riley felt more relaxed then he had in the past two days. He lied down on his bed and started to read another one of his favorite spy novels: Dan Danger – Vacuum of Abundance. After about an hour and a couple of yawns, he decided that it was as good enough a time as any to...well...

"Just sleep.", Riley thought. Or at least, that's how he thinks the instruction read. The whole mess did seem pretty broken. Still, Jason did say that he was still trying to get a handle on whatever powers it were that he had inside of him. Assuming he had somehow sent the message, it was a small miracle that Riley had gotten what little he had.

He tuned off the room lights, lied down on his back comfortable and closed his eyes. For about a minute he didn't feel anything. He didn't even feel as if he was sleeping. He thought that maybe if he had warmed up some milk that would help. When he opened his eyes, however, he was staring up at a blue sky with heavy white clouds. He sat up and noticed that he was back in the Riverview section of town that he had been in a few nights prior. He stared in front of him for a moment and immediately noticed that some of the building he recalled as being patch drawn before were more completely done. The towering skyscraper off in the distance that was previously blank now at least has some detail to it.

"Hey!", A familiar voice called from behind him.

Riley turned around to see his friend Jason standing directly behind him.

"Welcome ba-"

"JASON!!!!" Riley exclaimed while lunging forward and wrapping his arms around Jason to the point of them tumbling to the ground. "YOU'RE OKAY!!!"

"Whoa, buddy! Yeah, I'm fine. As fine as can be, all things considered. Are you okay?"

"Well, yeah.", Riley started as they both got to their feet "...but NO! I've been worried about you. After what happened!!!"

"Yeah, sorry about that panic. Totally my fault.", Jason started to explain. "I think I stretched myself a bit thin putting this whole city together. I just really wanted to 'Wow!' You, y'know?"

"Really, dude. You could have did that with just our neighborhood. But it looks like you have it together again now. This area looks a bit better. That skyscraper looks like an actual skyscraper now."

"That's thanks in part to you.", Jason said as he placed a confirming hand on Riley's shoulder. "While I was sending you that message, I noticed that you had seen a bit more of this office complex than I had so I added in the details."

"So how long do you think we can be here this time?", Riley asked.

"We're not staying here.", Jason said. "I recreated this space just long enough to get back to you. Now that you're here, we're going to go someplace smaller that I'll be able to more easily stretch our time out in."

"and where is that?"

Jason smiled and turned his head to the left. Riley looked in the same direction to see that the both of them were staring directly at The Red Dot.

"Really?", Riley said turning back to his friend with a somewhat stern look.

"Trust me, that the best place for us to go to have more uninterrupted time. I'll explain once we're inside. Speaking of explanations: I know you well enough to know that you probably still have that mile-long mental list of questions to ask me that you've probably added like five miles to since we last saw each other.

Riley certainly couldn't debate that point.

"C'mon.", Jason said. "I'll get us setup and we can get back to your interrogation, 'Agent Danger'"

Twenty Questions

As Riley and Jason entered back into the main lounge area of the Red Dot, Riley noticed a third person, off in the back shrouded partly in the shadows. From first glance, he appeared to be pushing a broom in front of him.

"Whoa! Who's that?" Riley exclaimed while pointing directly in the person's direction.

"Him? That's Rick.", Jason replied in what was becoming his matter-of-factly, nothing-to-see-here tone. "The guy who's mind I was able to build this place from. He's not really here. Well...he IS...I mean you can SEE him...but we'll get to that in a moment. First, I've got a trick to show you."

Riley didn't know whether to be more eager or anxious about that. All of the "tricks" he had seen thus far during this affair, while ultimately non-problematic and kinda cool, had been somewhat jarring at first sight.

The two of them went off into a side hallway near the bar that led to what seemed like a small string of doors. As they entered into one, they found themselves in a small room – It couldn't have been much larger than a closet – with a seat and a couple of pillows that had a large window facing the outside area they had just came in from.

"What kind of room is this?", Riley asked, starting to look around. "You come in here and people can just look at you from the outside? Why would someone want to be looked at like that?"

"You're asking the wrong guy.", Jason said, shaking his head "This isn't even the half of the weird that I've found around this one place. I sometimes think that if I actually knew what all of this stuff was about, it would make the stuff I do seem kinda boring."

Riley shook his own head in disagreement. "I don't believe that for a second, and I don't think I ever would. So what's this trick you're going to show me?"

Jason pointed outside past the window. "You see the city of mines out there? The Riverview area and all the rest of it?"

Riley look at the area outside they had just came in from. "Yeah?", he asked cautiously.

"Just watch", Jason replied with a grin.

Jason closed his eyes and extended one of his hands forward as if he was about to snap his fingers. After taking a couple of breaths he snapped his fingers. At that point, Riley saw a sight that had sent just as much of a chill up his spine the first time he witnessed it: All of the buildings, streets and structures outside of the building they were in were now starting to slowly shrink down, melt and drain in the direction that Jason was standing in.

"Whoa...whoa...WHOA! ITS HAPPEN-" Riley begin to exclaim.

"Dude, DUDE! ITS OKAY! I Got it this time! Just keep watching. Look closely. Look at the sidewalk."

Riley looked at the sidewalk not sure of what he was supposed to be looking for. Then he noticed it: Before – when this city of Jason's had been collapsing – everything had been draining directly under him. This time, the drainage seemed to be stopping at the curb of the sidewalk.

Just as before: Riley saw the last bits of Riverside disappear under the other side of the sidewalk, then the other parts of the city, including the intersection of their strip mall hangout. Finally, he began to even see their neighborhood – including his own house – leak away like so much water down a sink. When it seemed as if everything that could have been their town had vanished, then the very sky started to melt under them. The sun itself even began to make its approach, getting brighter and brighter before them until it had gone the way of everything else.

Once that had disappeared. The space outside had grown dark, almost pitch black. It was as if day had turned to night with nothing to illuminate the area but the neon signs of the building and the couple of streetlamps that has remained on what was now left of their street.

"What. The. Heck?" Riley said, completely astounded.

"My dad had a word for when things at his job got cut down somehow. He called it a 'downsize' or something. That what I'm calling this. Basically, this one building we're in an a few bits and pieces outside of it is basically the mental space now. Better one small building than a whole city of them to keep up with, you know?"

Riley thought about it for a second and concluded that did make sense. He still wasn't sure of how Jason's powers worked – or even what powers he had to begin with – but there were probably some limits to them. He probably pushed himself too far last time redoing their entire home town. In hindsight, the fact that they had kept it all together for the hours on end that it had felt like was probably a feat in and of itself.

"Okay.", Riley said nodding his head to at least that much of Jason's explanation for what happened. "But there's still one thing I don't get about what just happened."

"What's that?" Jason asked, with a raised eyebrow and perplexed look.

"Why here?", Riley said, spreading his arms and looking about. "What's so special about The Red Dot?"

"That's where Rick comes in. You remember when I said that it seems as if he thinks about this place ALL of the time?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, I brought just enough of him into this space with us that he's doing most of the work of keeping it together. I think I could do it on my own if I had to – again its just the one odd building and parts of the street now – but I didn't want to take any chances this time."

Again, after a bit of brief contemplation, Riley had to admit that there was a certain bit of solid, irrefutable, logic behind all of that.

"So, he's sleeping right now like we are?"

"Either that, or he's somewhere where he feels very relaxed right now."

"But what happens if he wakes up or stops relaxing?"

"We'll both start to see this place melt down just as you saw the city meltdown. If that happens, I'll catch it and keep things going for us."

"And how long do you think that you could keep things going for us this time?"

"As long as we need. Like I said when you first came back: I know you must have like a zillion more questions about all of this."

* * *

Riley and Jason had made their way back into the main area of the establishment and sat down in one of the booths. Jason had very much prepared himself for a barrage of deep and probing questions from his old friend the moment they sat down. Riley, however had elected to them just sitting there for a few moments. He had wanted to just collect his thoughts and formulate what he was going to ask about and when.

But more importantly, he just wanted to enjoy a few quiet, weirdness-free, moments with his friend. Kinda like the ones they used to have in the playground when they would just quietly be in each others company: Him doing some homework or reading and Jason either drawing or zoning out on his portable game system.

All talk of the weirdness of the past few days aside: Riley had his friend back.

"Alright.", Riley said, ready to get back to the bottom of the mystery he was in. "Let's get back to this 'hotel' that you say you're in."

"Finally ready to interrogate me again, copper?", Jason replied with a grin.

"You know, people who are being interrogated usually aren't so happy about it", Riley remarked.

"Well why shouldn't I be happy about this? I don't know what things were like for you after I basically got picked up witness protected like I saw some mob hit, but I've been going through and seeing a lot of weird stuff, man. It feels nice to have someone to at least tell it all to; especially you. I can't really talk about it with the people I'm with cuz they are the ones doing it all"

"Well I'm here now.", Riley said reassuringly "I'll be here as long as I can."

Jason nodded, "Okay then, you wanted to know more about the hotel. What about the hotel?"

* * *

Over the next few hours there was a steady back-and-forth between Riley and Jason regarding the details of Jason's predicament. Overall, Jason's mood about the conversation was pretty light just for being able to talk about it. Still, Riley noticed that there were certain questions that seemed to strike upon matters that Jason didn't want to delve too deep into, if at all. After Riley had felt that he had drained himself of just about everything he could have thought to ask about. He leaned back, took a deep breath and just shook his head at it all.

"Its a mess and a half, huh?", Jason said

"It sounds like a few messes and a half.", Riley replied. "Alright, let's take this from the top. I want to be sure that I've got at least the gist of all of this."

"Okay.", Jason said sitting up a bit straight for what seemed like it was going to be "Round Two".

"You and your parents got invited on this vacation by some people who said that you were going to be given a full scholarship to some art college."

"That's how it started."

"You all got brought to this hotel where, at first, you didn't know where you were but you could at least see an outside and go outside and do regular vacation stuff?"

"Yep, that's right."

"For the first bit, the science people were talking just to your parents, but then they started to talk to you about your ability and what you could do."

"Right. I told them that I could often see distant places and people in my head. Almost as if I was there or had been there. Usually when I was asleep, but sometimes when I was awake. They had me draw a lot of pictures over about a week while showing me different places and people and things. Things were going pretty okay until they saw a pic of this one guy I drew who looked like he was in the military."

"Right, and you apparently drew him sitting in some room surrounded with a bunch of screens and papers and what not that only he should have been able to see there."

"Yep. That alone seemed to freak one guy there out, Oh boy, did THAT turn everything on its head." Jason said, shaking his head.

"and a few days later, you went to sleep in the hotel you started in, and woke up where you are now and have been ever since?"

"Yep.", Jason replied nodding his head. "...And that's when the weirdness all started."

"and your parents just went along with all of this?" Riley asked, raising an eyebrow.

"It's like I told you: Seemed like they were nothing but happy to go along with it. They told me that I had won the scholarship, but that I had to stay in the college for a straight year just with the scientists. No going home, even for visits. The college would pay for everything and even gave my parents some money on top of that."

"And they haven't tried to contact you?"

"Not that I know of.", Jason said with a tone of depression. "I'm not sure if its more because they've tried and just couldn't or if they just haven't been trying. Something tells me its the second thing. I've always heard them talk here and there about how much money I was costing them and how much work I was. I knew they weren't exactly thrilled to have me around, but I didn't think I was that much trouble."

Riley saw that they were heading off on an uncomfortable tangent. He quickly tried to change the subject back to the hotel. At least that was just a matter of 'Weird' and not 'Abandonment'.

"Sooo...as far as you know: There's nobody else with you there? No other people being experimented on?"

"I haven't seen any. But still, the people around me are very careful about who I talk to, see or even walk by."

"Have they mentioned how long they are going to keep you?"

"Well based on the deal they made with my parents, I guess I'm supposed to be there for at least the next year. I haven't been thinking about it too much. It all happened pretty fast. Besides, the way they've been doing things with me has been taking some getting used to, but once I got past all of that, its like, they at least seem to want me around me there."

"But you're like a prisoner there! And I wanted you with me! Doesn't that bother you?"

"Of course it does! That's why I'm glad all of this is happening. They can keep doing their thing and now we can also hang out."

"And what if they figure out what you're doing?"

"They haven't figured it out yet. I only do this when I sleep. They don't bother me when I'm sleeping. They like to make sure I have my energy for my tests and what not over the days."

"But...I...this...we...we can't possibly keep this up forever."

"Let's not worry about forever. Let's just worry about right now and maybe tomorrow."

Riley started to respond, but quickly realized that Jason was right. It was something that they had gotten back together at all. They should just take it for what it is and run with it as best they can.

"Well", Riley began as he started to look around at their dimly lit, neon infused settings again. "Could we at least find a different meeting place? This spot...even though we're alone and it's ours...it kinda creeps me out. Isn't there some other place you could connect through with someone else?"

Jason didn't say a word. He simply smiled, closed his eyes, raised a single hand and snapped his fingers.

In an instant, the surroundings of the Red Dot began to spin and disappear into what seemed like a whirlwind of tables, chairs, and neon signs. Just as instantly, it all began to change into a mess of books, figurines and clothing that began to slowly but surely take more and more familiar shapes until it all finally settled together and stopped as Riley's own bedroom.

"Is this better?", Jason asked with a smile.

Before Riley had a chance to process that question enough to answer it, he had caught a sight of something out of his eye that startled him all the more when he had turned to get a direct look at it.

It was his bed, with him lying asleep in it.

Real Imaginary Places

"WHAT THE HE-", Riley exclaimed at the overall sight of him looking at himself in his own bed.

"Relax, man. You're fine.", Jason said. "You're sleeping and now, you're helping to create this place: Your room. This is better, right?"

"WELL SHOOT!", Riley said shooting a wide eye at his friend while clutching his chest and taking a few deep breaths. "You could have warned me!"

Riley took a few more breaths to calm himself down "So, you can just shoot yourself to any place inside of anyone's head?"

"Oh, not quite any place, I don't think. It has to be a spot someone really cares about, or at least visits often.", Jason replied.

"Man!", Riley said with a bit of admiration "So, you could just see anyone's room or spot and just go through all of their stuff without being there?"

"Yeah. I think that's one of the reasons the scientists are so hung up on me. One of them said something about it being some 'top secret security' issue. But I don't know what 'top secret' stuff they think I'm trying to deal with. I'd try to pop into your sister Paige's room and look at her diary before I'd try to look at any military codes or anything."

Riley's eyes widened and for the first time, he got a grin on his face similar to the one Jason had been displaying before he did something weird and wonky.

Now, it was Jason's turn to look slightly concerned: "What are you cooking up in that head of yours?"

"Does the name 'Billy Rourke' ring a bell?"

Jason's eyes squinted and looked downwards for a moment as if he was trying to recall a long lost memory. Then he looked up and met Riley's eyes with the same wide-eyed grin. The name had definitely rung a bell in Jason's head, along with the same – if not similar - idea.

"RIIIIGHT!" Jason exclaimed. "We can DEFINITELY get him, now!"

* * *

That following Monday, school was back in session. As with the two days between his first meetings with Jason, Riley was particular anxious to get to one part of it: Fifth period gym.

Billy Rourke was the resident nere-do-well of the school. It wasn't that he was a typical push-around, steal-your-lunch-money kind of bully – in comparison, Riley and Jason had

kinda wished it was that simple – he was a more slimy type. The kind that would take things from people and then either give them to others to make himself look like a good guy or offer to help you find them; which wouldn't happen unless you agreed to do a big enough favor for him.

For one valentine's day: Riley had saved up to get one of his teacher's a small figurine. He had bought it from a local store but opted to hide it near the school so that he wouldn't have to explain it to his parents; or worse yet, Paige. On the day of, when Riley went to the spot he had hidden the figurine at, it was missing. As he started to look around for it, he quickly ran into Billy. Billy said something about having possibly saw it somewhere else, but that he couldn't make time to look as he had to rush to work on a project he had waited till the last minute to start.

The implication was that Riley was to trade his finished work for the figurine; or at least the location of it. As much as he wanted to get that gift back, one of the few real-world applicable lessons he had gleaned from his 'Dan Danger' books was to never make such trades as they'd never stop coming. Begrudgingly, he turned away Billy's offer to help. That alone made Riley's blood boil enough. The real salt in the wound, however, came when Riley had to watch Billy hand his teacher the gift he had bought her the day of as his own gift.

Riley and Jason both suspected that Billy must have had some spot somewhere in the school or close to it where he was stashing people's stuff, but they had no way of knowing where to even look for it. When the two of them were last together inside of their mindspace, they hatched the plan to see if Jason could peer into Billy's head to figure out where the stash was so that Riley could then actually find it and somehow turn it against him.

* * *

"It will be perfect!", Jason had remarked when they last spoke. "Wherever he's been putting all of that stuff, That's gotta be a place that he thinks about a lot."

"Well, can you snap us over to him now?", Riley had asked in anticipation to actually see that whirlwind move put them a step closer to actually busting Billy

Jason had closed his eyes for a moment and remained silent. Riley had begun to notice parts of the room begin to shimmer and distort, as if something was trying to happen but just couldn't"

"Awwwww, its no good!", Jason had said shaking his head. "I can kinda feel him out there somewhere, but its been a while since I've seen him. Its hard to get a lock on him."

"I can take care of that.", Riley had exclaimed. "The next time I'm at school, I'll just make sure to get close to him and really get a look at him. Then, the next time we see each other, you can look at him from my head. Just like you did with that skyscraper over in Riverview, right?"

"Yeah, YEAH! That should work! "Operation: Person look for mind copy, is on!" Jason had said punching a triumphant fist into the air.

The resulting look on Riley's face told Jason that he hadn't come up with the most elegant of names for their plan.

"Well...look...you're the one who's been reading those spy books. You got a better name?"

* * *

Now, Riley had made it to the gym. He tried to conduct himself in his regular manner, but this was hardly another regular day.

"Just stay calm, man", Riley whispered to himself. "Its not like you have to talk to him. You just gotta look at him. Just get a really good look at him."

He grabbed a ball and started to just bounce it around in small circles while pacing. All of the other activity around him has turned into a buzz of white noise that he had all but tuned out. So much so that he had completely missed Claire asking twice about him.

"MATT!!", Claire exclaimed, halfway shouting.

"Wh-WHAT?!?!", Riley said, breaking out of his somewhat self-induced trance.

"I asked, 'whats up?' Are you okay?"

"Uh...yea...yeah. I'm fine. I just..."

"Let me guess: You have a lot on your mind?"

"Yeah. Kinda", Riley said while still looking around.

"Well, did you ever catch up to your friend, Riley the other day?"

"Uh, yeah. Yeah. He's okay."

"Does he live around here? I've never heard of any Riley here at the school."

"He, uh, lives in a nearby city. He visits once a while. His family keeps to themselves. I think he's home-schooled."

"Oh, well, it might be nice to meet him one day."

"Yeah, I'll talk to him when he ne-"

"HEEYYYYY!!! CLAAIRE!!!", a loud voice boomed from behind Riley. He turned to see his target: Billy.

Billy waved in their direction with a sly smile on his face. He came strolling towards the two of them with a small, gray rectangular object in his hand.

"Hey Claire, Matt!", Billy exclaimed.

"Well, this part of it was easy enough.", Riley thought to himself. "Hey Billy", Riley said, forcing a civil smile.

"Looking good, Matty!", Billy said before turning his attention to Claire. "Oh, Claire, here's your calculator. I found it outside in the bushes near the bike rack."

"Oh! THANK YOU!", Claire exclaimed as Billy handed the calculator to her. "I would have been done on the math test later without this! You're like a living lost-and-found!"

"Hey, hey, no worries. Are you still good for helping me with that English report?"

"Sure thing! Its the least I can do. There's no way my parents would have bought me a replacement. I'm gonna put this in my locker right now! Claire lunged and gave Billy a big tight hug and then ran off to the girl's locker room."

With Claire gone, Riley and Billy were now, more-or-less alone.

"So, Matty.", Billy said turning back to him. "How's your day going so far?"

"Uhhh, same as ever.", Riley slurred. He had been so busy with trying to mentally take in as much of Billy's appearance as he could he had almost missed that question. "Think man, think", Riley thought to himself. "Gotta do this quick but not rush at the same time and not look weird. Try to work it into the conversation."

"So, uh, you're not usually late for this class."

Usual gym gear. Nothing special there.

"Yeah. I wanted to make sure that I had Claire's calculator with me. I almost forgot it."

Legs. Legs. Bruise just under his left knee. Kinda red but not 'today' red.

"Did you take a fall recently? That bruise there looks bad."

"Eh. No big deal. Nothing I can handle."

Arms. A couple more bruises? Look recent. Was he in a fight? Worry about that later. Keep going. Arms otherwise look a little dirty. Patches of dirt and...red brick?

"So..um..that was pretty neat of you finding Claire's calculator."

"What can I say? It's a gift."

Face. Sick smile. He's just so sure of himself. Eyes look a little red. Maybe he was crying? Hair? Well, its his hair. Nothing seems off about that.

Overall: Its Billy.

"Well look.", Billy said. "I'm gonna head to the court and shoot a bit. Are you using that ball?"

"Ball?", Riley said as he looked down at his hands to see the ball he was holding. He had completely forgotten about it.

"Oh, uh, here.", Riley said as he handed it over.

"Thanks mate!", Billy said as he took the ball. "You know where to find me if you need something found!", and with that he turned and ran off.

"Oh, I'll find you.", Riley said with a thinned stare as Billy strolled off. "Both me and Jason will."

* * *

Later on that evening, Riley and Jason had convened inside of their mindscape to set the next part of their plan in motion. It was starting to get easier for them to link up as they did so more and more. Riley had literally went into his bedroom, lied down without being too tired closed his eyes for a few seconds and when he opened them. Jason was standing over him awaiting news of Riley's recon.

"So how did it go?", Jason said, eagerly awaiting Riley's report.

"Can you believe it?" Riley started while shaking his head in disgust as he got up out of his bed. Barely paying attention to the fact that he was somewhat stepping out of his own body. "I actually watched him 'return' Claire's lost calculator to her! UGH!"

"Don't worry man! We're gonna get him. Did you get a good look at him?"

"I did! So how do we do this? How do I give you the good look of him?"

"Just start thinking about him. Everything that you saw earlier. As hard and clearly as you can!"

Riley closed his eyes and begin to go back over Billy and every little aspect of him that he could recall from earlier. After a few quiet moments, he heard Jason exclaim:

"PERFECT!!"

Riley opened his eyes and was instantly startled by the depiction of Billy in his gym uniform standing straight up with his arms at his side in the room with the two of them.

"WHOA!", Riley said taking a step back.

"Relax, man!", Jason said. "He's even less here with us than Rick was with us in the Red Dot. This is just like a copy of your memory of him; And a darn good one!"

"Good...good" Riley said, with a sigh of relief. He was pleased, albeit a bit shocked, that their plan was going so well, thus far. "So, what's next?"

"It's my turn to focus." Jason took a few moments to look over the visual of Billy that was with them and then closed his eyes.

"Now that I know exactly what I'm looking for...", he started as he lightly waved his hand through their virtual suspect "...I should be able to..."

Then Jason's eyes shot wide open.

"I'VE GOT HIM! I GOT THAT SONOFAGUN!"

"So we can find him? We can do that 'tornado room change' thing now?", Riley eagerly asked.

"Right now!", Jason excitedly smiled before turning to the virtual depiction of Billy and looking it square in the eye.

"Sleep while you can! These two flatfoots are on the case!"

And with that, Jason closed his eyes, raised a hand and snapped his fingers. Just as before, the room began to disintegrate into a flurry of random objects sending the two boys on their way.

Mousetrap

As the torrent of space and objects spinning around them and begin to slow down, both Riley and Jason noticed that things around them were starting to get very dark. When things has completely quieted down, they both found themselves standing in near pitch black darkness.

"What the heck?", Riley remarked as he started to stretch his hands out and feel his way around. "It looks like we're in that dead space that was outside of the Red Dot when you sized down the town the other night"

"Nooooo, we're definitely somewhere, alright. I can feel stuff at my feet. Let's feel around for a light."

The two intrepid detectives began to carefully step about while feeling their surroundings. Their periodic bumping into what felt like shelves tables and random items at their feet confirmed that they were in some kind of room, but just needed to find a light source. Jason, while stepping in one direction, felt his face run into what felt like a thin metal piece of string hanging from the ceiling. He carefully followed the line up to what felt like a bulb at the very end.

"Hey, I think I got something here.", Jason exclaimed.

He pulled down gently on the string. A click and a burst of light later, their surroundings were illuminated in a soft room lamp glow. As the two friends began to then quickly scan their now visible surroundings. What they found before their eyes – for the both of them – was equal parts exciting and infuriating.

It was a small room – slightly smaller than Riley's own bedroom – with a table and a bunch of boxes laid out next to it making a makeshift bed on one side. On the opposite side of the room was two shelves filled with various books, pencil bags, and other personal effects. A large box sitting next to the shelves had two bookbags and a suitcase sitting inside of it. The only apparent exit out of the room seemed to be in the way of a makeshift opening at one end that had looked to be picked out from an otherwise solid brick wall. The opening seem to lead into a dark passage that, at first look, had no opening on the other side.

"I don't believe this!", Riley had first exclaimed with a twinge of excitement regarding the continued success of their little investigation. "I don't...I...don't FUCKIN BELIEVE THIS!!!", Riley had then exclaimed with a bit of anger.

It was extremely rare that Jason hear Riley use such language, but he certainly could emphasize with his sentiment.

"I knew the man was a cheat...", Jason had started looking around the room in disbelief, "...but its like he's turned it into an operation here."

"Is this for real? Like, REALLY for real, Jason?!?!", Riley said. "Like, this place is actually SOMEWHERE back in the real world like this?"

"It has to be!", Jason nodded. "Its like I told you man: When I'm able to connect to somebody – especially for the first time – I usually end up in a place that's important to them unless I'm trying to take them somewhere else myself. He has this room somewhere. We just gotta figure out where it is!"

"Alright", Riley said. "Lets see if we can figure out where this tunnel goes!"

The two boys carefully ventured into the dark passage past the brick opening. Riley first, and then Jason as it was only wide enough for them to pass through one at a time. As Riley entered, he noted that the coloring of the brick was similar to some of the reddish spots he had seen on Billy earlier in the gym. Once again as they ventured in, the space got a little dark, but at least now they had a little bit of light on them from the room they had just found. At the end they came to what felt like a metal panel blocking the way. Some light knocking and shuffling revealed that the panel could be easily slid to one side.

As Riley slid it to the side, he found himself looking at what appeared to be the inside of one of his school's lockers. A quick examination of the books, effects and a PE t-shirt was all the confirmation he needed of exactly where he and Jason were at.

"The School! That sonofagun has a secret passage to a hidden room inside of his OWN LOCKER!"

Thinking back to the earlier situation at the gym for a moment. It now made sense why Billy had shown up late to gym class: He couldn't have entered or exited this place with the halls full of students and faculty switching rooms.

The two boys quickly turned around and retreated back into the new crawlspace they had found.

"Okay.", Jason said, punching his hand. "We already knew what he was doing. Now we know how he's doing it. How do we go about leading the school admins to this place?"

Riley looked down for a moment trying to formulate a plan. Then he started to look around the room until his eyes fell on a hair ribbon that was sitting among some various other things on the shelf.

"We don't.", Riley said as he turned to Jason with a wry smile. "He's going lead them here himself."

* * *

Two weeks later, Riley was off to the edge of the lunch area looking across the way at one of his other classmates, Penny. She was sitting at a table looking really down. A month ago she had lost a hair ribbon that her mom had given her just before she had passed away about a year ago. To her, it was a living heirloom that she had deeply cherished.

When it had first turned up missing, Penny had been in a panic. She had been frantically asking around about it, but after weeks of searching and putting up flyers, it had never turned up. Riley didn't know if she had actually misplaced it or Billy had somehow taken it from her, but he knew: 1) that Billy had it and 2) that Billy knew that it was important to her.

As fast as Billy liked to move in 'assisting' people with finding things, it hadn't been immediately clear to Riley why he hadn't made a similar proposal to Penny any sooner; until he had realized that the spring dance was a few short weeks away.

No doubt, he was playing a 'long' game of waiting till the event had gotten close before miraculously finding it to soften up Penny for an ask to the dance.

Riley waited until he saw Billy show up in the lunch area. He took a seat on the edge of the area a ways off from Penny. Riley was going to have to make a bit of a scene to make his part of the plan work.

Shortly after Billy arrived, he strolled to the center area of the space where he was sure that at he and Penny would both see him if he made some noise. Now was the time for him to set the show into motion.

"HEY! PENNY!!", Riley called out. Penny looked up and met Riley's eyes with a despondent face.

Out of the corner of Riley's eye he could see that Billy had noticed too.

"Good.", Riley thought to himself. "Just sit back and enjoy the show, you cheat."

Riley jogged over to Penny and struck up a quick conversation.

"Hey, Penny. How have you been?"

"Oh...hey Matt...I've been fine, I guess."

"You seem pretty down. Is...everything...okay?"

"Yeah...its just...today would have been my mother's birthday. Its the first one since..." -P

Riley took one more side glance in Billy's direction. He was still intently looking at their exchange. He then took one casual and seemingly unassuming step to the side to make sure that Billy would see what was about to happen next.

"Yeah, about that. A while back, I know that you were looking for that ribbon your mom left you." Riley dug a hand into one of his pockets, pulled out a hair ribbon and handed it to Penny. "I found this in some bushes a day ago. It seemed like it had been there for a while. I'm not sure if this is yours but..."

Almost immediately, Penny stood up grabbed the ribbon and began to inspect it. After a few short moments, tears began to trickle from her eyes as she tried to grasp her breath.

"Oh my...OH MY GOD!!! WHERE DID YOU...I CAN'T BELIEVE IT!! THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU!!!", Penny exclaimed as she jumped up and clutched Riley in the tightest bear hug with the entire lunch area – Billy included – watching on.

"Whoa, Whoa! Easy! Are you sure that's yours? I thought it might be, but I never got a good look at it when you had it."

"Yes, YES! It has to be! There aren't many like this! Thank you SOOOOOO MUCH MATT!" Penny said, clutching Riley again. "I need to put this somewhere safe and get it cleaned. Thank you!" Penny again exclaimed with tears in her eyes as she ran off.

Riley smiled and started to casually leave the area as Billy made a very agitated bee line for him.

"Uhhhh...hey Matty!", Billy said slightly intercepting Riley with a tense smile. "Uhh...what just happened there?"

"Oh, that?", Riley said trying to contain his excitement over having clearly hooked Billy. "I was just walking past some bushes yesterday and noticed a piece of that ribbon hanging out. Figured it might be Penny's."

Billy was clearly flustered. "But that...You couldn't ha...I remember that everyone was searching for it. Nobody found it."

"Look, I dunno man.", Riley said with a smile while patting Billy on the shoulder. "You know what they say: You usually find things when you're not looking for them."

With that, Riley casually disappeared through some doors into the school. He stopped just on the other side to see Billy still standing where he was, clenched fists and agitated face. After a moment. Billy huffed and ran off towards another set of doors.

Riley didn't have a lot of time if he was going to catch a show of his own. He ran up some stairs to the second floor. Rocketed down a hallway to a staircase on the other side of school, flew down them and made it to a corner to quickly catch his breath and peep around just in time to see Billy frantically fumbling at his locker.

"No way! NO WAY HE COULD HAVE...", He heard Billy exclaim to himself as he opened his locker, pushed on the inside of it a bit and then disappeared into it.

A few moments later, from off in the distance of his crawlspace, he could hear Billy exclaim: "I KNEW IT! I STILL HAVE IT!"

A few moments after that, the school's vice-principal, the janitor and two teaching assistants came from around another corner and descended on the area just in time to see Billy step clean from inside of his locker, covered in some patches of dirt and red brick dust, and holding a hair ribbon in his hand.

"WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?", The vice-principal boomed.

Billy stood at the sight of the four adults standing in from of him, dropped the hair ribbon, and after a brief moment of silence, wept very loudly.

Riley ran down the hall away from the scene. He stepped out of another door leading into the lunch area. And with an excited fist slammed on the door behind him, he slightly screamed a single word out into the open air:

"BUSTED!!!!"

* * *

"It all ACTUALLY WORKED?!?!", Jason asked with a wide smile, later on that ever when the two of them were back together in their mindscape.

"Hook, line AND SINKER", Riley triumphantly replied.

"But how were you so sure that either one of them would believe that what you had was her mom's actual ribbon and not that knockoff you found off of eBay?"

"Penny was so distraught over losing that actual ribbon. I figured that anything close enough to what she had would be enough to get a reaction out of her. As for Billy? He just needed to see it and buy it long enough to run back to his stash and be caught there. I'm just glad the admins took that drawing and anonymous note that I sent them as the real deal and not some prank. You've always been the artist between us."

"Its just a shame that nobody knows that you did it.", Jason sad with a disappointing tone.

"First of all, WE did it.", Riley said, correcting Jason while placing his hands on his shoulders. "Besides, there was no way I could of told them myself without having to explain how I actually knew about Billy's stash. I probably would have ended up looking like an accomplice or something."

"So, what's happening to Billy now?"

"He's been suspended. I hear there's talk of him being expelled and even having to deal with the cops. As for the stuff, the school admins are going through it all to see what belongs to whom."

"And the locker?"

"They're making plans to seal it up and go over all of the others to make sure that there are no other hidden passages in any of them. They might be closing the school down for it but they haven't decided yet.

"Sounds like this case is closed!", Jason said giving his friend a high-five. "We could be like a detective agency!"

"I don't know about that", Riley said as his mind returned to thoughts of the larger picture of the situation. "That would kinda depend on you staying where you are at. We got so caught

up in all of this business of busting Billy, I had forgotten about it. Are they still running tests on you and what not?"

"Nothing more than what they've been doing. I haven't been thinking much about it. You and this case kinda took my mind off of it."

"This case...you really are starting to think we are detectives."

"Well why not?!?! We did this 'case', we can do others!"

"Dude, whatever it is they're doing now, just running tests and talking about you. They can't be planning to do that forever. They must have some kind of plan for you. We need to at least figure that out. You want another case? That should be our next case."

"Alright, alright, but we can figure that out later. Right now, we need to celebrate!"

"What did you have in mind?"

Once again, with little if any warning, Jason snapped a finger and transported the two of them from what was the mental reconstruction of Riley's bedroom to the mental reconstruction of their strip-mall hangout; specifically, right in front of the arcade.

"Games?", Jason said looking at his friend.

"Games.", Riley smiled looking back.

Routine

The next few weeks following the events with Billy had seen Riley and Jason fall into a rather unusual routine...

'Unusual' in that – given the circumstances surrounding Jason's captivity and the manner in which he and Riley had been starting to keep in touch – it was all but downright normal. In a way, it was almost as if the two of them had never separated. Every evening, Riley would report to bed as his usual time, lie down to close his eyes, and in almost the span of an eye blink, he would awaken and see his friend waiting to catch up on the events of their days.

As suspected, shortly after the discovery of the stash space behind Billy's locker, he was expelled from school. There was talk of police visiting his house on at least three occasions to talk to his parents about what he had been doing, but the school administrators weren't speaking much on what had happened past him being expelled. Nobody, Riley included, could really finger whether or not they just didn't know or weren't talking about what they knew. All anybody had to go on were the rumors that had started to circulate.

* * *

"Couldn't you just connect to him again?", Riley had asked at one point.

"I've tried several times.", Jason has answered while shaking his head. "I know what to look and feel for now, but its like he's just dropped off of the radar."

* * *

Shortly past that, the school dance had descended upon the school. In the couple of weeks up until the event, Riley and Penny had begun to trade some small talk about various happenings and current events. At one point, it had occurred to Riley to ask her out to the dance, but he decided not to.

* * *

"What do you mean you didn't ask her?!?", Jason had asked during one of their later meets. "After what happened with Billy, you could have been a shoe in!"

"And that's why I didn't ask.", Riley replied. "It was his ides to use the ribbon to set Penny up for a dance date. It felt kinda wrong for me to be going through with it myself.

* * *

As for Jason's daily happenings: The tests and trials that his captors had been putting them through had reached more a point of tediousness than anything else.

* * *

"Man, its like they keep scanning my head and asking me to show some of their scientists the SAME places, or have me look into the heads of the SAME people.", Jason had complained on this particular night with a tone of visible exasperation. "Its almost like I wish they would start probing me or cutting me or something like that. At least that would be different."

"Hey, be careful what you wish for, man.", Riley replied. "As long as they have you in their weird holding pattern of tests, nothing is getting better, but its not getting worse either. Do you think they've caught onto us hanging out like this?"

"I dunno. I don't think so. If they do know something, they're doing a pretty good job of acting like they either don't know or just don't care. I've been thinking about what you said a few weeks back about us looking deeper into them and wherever I'm at."

"Oh?", Riley remarked with a raised eyebrow. "What have you been thinking?"

"Well...nothing really, I guess. I mean suppose we did the detective thing again and figured out where I'm at, or even who I'm with. Then what?"

It was a fair point, albeit a slightly disconcerting one. There was the very real possibility that they could ascertain more details regarding Jason's situation – or even all of them – just to be stuck in the position of not being able to do anything about it.

"Well, we shouldn't get too ahead of ourselves, especially to think of losing. Its like the gym teacher always says: No game is really over until its over. It doesn't feel as if we've really even started this one yet."

"Yeah, you right", Jason said, nodding his head. "Think we should start to get on the case tonight?"

And that's when Riley made a remark that he would spend at least the next week kicking himself over.

"Nah. Let's save it till tomorrow."

Disconnect

Over that next day, Riley had prepared a new set of questions for Jason to go into their latest detective foray regarding his friends situation.

Dealing with a single fellow classmate who had gotten the act of returning people's stolen property to them – after he had stolen it, mind you – down to a frighteningly elegant art form was one thing. Looking into some shadowy organization who was imprisoning people under at least the one guise of an art college was an entirely different matter.

It was strikingly similar to the many situations in which Riley's fictional spy hero – Dan Danger – had gone up against the criminal superpower VICTOR: "Virtuous Individuals Conspiring Towards Omnipotent Rule." Except, Dan Danger had his own superpower group behind him, SECRET: "Special Executive Cluster of Radical Emissaries for Truth."

Riley just had Jason. Jason just had Riley. It was the just the two of them against a group who, at the moment, was still nameless.

Later on that evening, after the day's events were largely over, Riley had retired to his bedroom and prepared himself to jump into bed and start to get to work with Jason.

He lied down, closed his eyes for a few seconds and started to address Jason as he sat up.

"Jason! Are you ready to-"

As his eyes completely opened and he looked around, he noticed that he was still in his room. His actual room. The faint sounds he heard from the other parts of his house indicated that he was very much awake and still in the real world. He looked around for a few moments and figured that maybe he was just a little bit too excited about this latest meet. He and Jason, after all, were endeavoring to perform a raid on their very own live version of VICTOR.

Riley lied back down took a few deep breaths and closed his eyes. This time, he kept himself still and calm for an entire minute.

When he opened his eyes....nothing. He was still awake, alone in his room and in the real world.

Now, Riley was getting a bit worried. For some reason, Jason wasn't connecting to him. And for the very first time since this entire ordeal began, it occurred to him that Jason had exclusively been the one connecting to him. As far as Riley knew, he had no way of even attempting to reach out to Jason or to let him know that he was available.

"I have to get to sleep.", Riley thought to himself, recalling the roughly scribbled message that Jason had once sent him a short while back when they had first found each other again. "If I can just do that, Jason will somehow take it from there. He always has."

He got up and paced about in his room for a few moments trying to figure out something. Finally, he got an idea.

He went out of his bedroom and carefully crept down the hall to his parents room. The door was opened just enough for Riley to peer in and see his mother passed out on her bed. On the other side of the room passing directly in front of the bed was the door that led to their master bedroom bathroom.

Riley got on his knees and ever so quickly but quietly, crept along the floor to the bathroom on the other side. He crawled into the bathroom and fully closed the door behind him. After a few moments of feeling around for the light switch and turning it on, He found himself in front of the medicine cabinet.

He opened it up and peered around for a few moments until he found what he was looking for: A light purple bottle with a crescent moon picture on it and the words "Nite-Nite" on the front. He took the bottle and quickly skimmed the instructions on the back:

TAKE ONE CAPSULE 1-2 HOURS PRIOR TO BEDTIME WITH WATER. DO NOT EXCEED THREE IN A SINGLE 24 HOUR PERIOD.

Riley opened the bottle, shook out two pills and quickly popped them into his mouth. He returned the bottle to the innards of the cabinet, drunk some water directly from the sink, turned off the bathroom light and carefully felt his way back to the floor before beginning to crawl back across his parents bedroom. As he just made it out of the door, he felt himself getting really drowsy and heavy.

"Good...good", Riley thought to himself as he continued to stumble towards his room. "The pills...are...working. Just...hang...on Jason. I'm...com...in..."

He had just barely made it back to his room and fell sideways on his bed before completely falling to sleep.

* * *

Riley eyes opened to a blinding light. As he rubbed his eyes and started to wake up he realized that his face had been in the direct path of the morning light that comes through his room window. He looked around until his eyes fell on his table clock that currently read a time of 6:15am.

He had slept through the entire night, without having had a single sight or sound of Jason.

Separation Anxiety

His heart was racing.

He was short of breath.

He felt as if he shouldn't be just standing there in his room...

...like he should be moving...

...going somewhere...

...doing something...

...but what?...

...WHAT?!?!...

"Hey Squir-"

"AAAHHHHHHGGGHHHH!!!", Riley screamed as he jumped back and planted himself against the window behind him. On the other side of the room, his sister, Paige was standing in the doorway just as shocked as he was.

"WHAAATTTTT!", She instantly replied, in just as much shock.

"PAIGE!", Riley exclaimed starting to calm down a bit. "What!...Where am I?" WHAT DAY IS IT?!?!"

"Its Saturday! And Calm Down! Whats wrong with you?"

"I...Its...I...uh..I...thought..I had a..test today", Riley drooled out trying to keep himself together.

"A test? On a Saturday? You would think up such a thing", Paige replied dismissively. "Well look, mom and dad went...well...somewhere about a half hour ago and I'm off to, well, somewhere of my own.", she said with a bit of a smirk. "So just do whatever it is you do when you have the place to yourself and don't break anything."

"Mom...Dad...You...Somewhere...", Riley was trying to piece together everything his sister had just said but he could feel himself falling apart inside. He tried to hold himself together for just a few more moments.

"Yeah...sure...", Riley said forcing a smile. "Ill be...fine. You...have...a good day, Paige."

Paige gave him a strange look as if she didn't quite believe that, but then turned and scurried off. A few moments later, Riley heard the front door open and then immediately close. From his window, he could see his sister scurry to the sidewalk to jump into the passenger seat of her friends car which then casually drove away.

Riley smiled for a moment. He was alone. He could more easily sort out what to do next.

And then, that very thought crossed his mind again...

...he was alone...

...and in that very moment, all he could think to do was fall to his hands and knees and cry

"Jaaasssoonnnn..."

...after a few moments, he slammed his fists on the ground, stood up on his knees, and screamed to the ceiling..

"WHERE ARE YOOOOOUUUUU!!!!!!!"

* * *

For the next few hours, Riley had switched between periods of just uncontrollably sobbing and then falling into a brief from sheer exhaustion of uncontrollably sobbing. When he was able to stop himself just enough to focus a little bit, he saw that it was close to 3 in the afternoon. He had been a wreck for the better part of the day. He got himself up from the floor, straightened himself up a bit and ventured out into the house.

From the look of things, whatever activities his other family members had ventured out to were still in progress. He wondered for a moment where they all had went, and why they had been away for so long, but then figured it was best to not question it. Had any of them been present, there would been a flurry of question regarding his state that he was in no condition to deal with. Especially given that he had more than a few question of his own regarding this current twist of events.

Why hadn't he and Jason made contact again?

Was Jason alright?

What if he had somehow lost his ability to do what he was doing?

Were the people he was with onto him?

What if they we're trying to interrogate him?

What if they knew about how they were hanging out?

What if they came after him...or mom...or dad...or Paige...well, Paige wouldn't be such a bad thing...but wh-

...and then, Riley caught himself.

"Calm down, man", He said, taking a bit of a breath. "This isn't getting you anywhere. You need to...need to...", Riley began to repeat as if he was just on the tip of an idea.

"You need to start from the beginning! Just as Dan Danger would do!" He quietly exclaimed to himself. "Start with what you do know and what you can do".

Riley looked about for a moment. Looked at his clothes and then the refrigerator.

"Okay. Its a little after 3pm and I haven't eaten or washed up yet today. Let's start there."

* * *

Three hours, two handmade hoagies, a cleaned room, a very long shower, and one change of clothes later, Riley was in his room sitting at his desk in about as deep a thought as someone of his age could be. At the very least, he no longer felt as if he wanted to cry. But, he was still very despondent and confused. He and Jason had been getting together in that mindspace of theirs so well it was almost as if it was a trip to the strip mall; when it still actually existed.

"Okay Riley, think.", he had started to himself. "We we're regularly visiting each other and there was no reason to see that either of us wanted to stop. The fact that it did stop means that something – or someone - on Jason's end got in his way last night."

"If that's the case...", Riley continued to himself, "...then Jason must be just as frantic as I am and trying to get back to me."

"He also mentioned once, that its easier for him to connect to people when they're relaxed. If he had been trying to get to me today, I was probably too much of a mess for him to really get through."

"So, whatever the deal is, its on his end. I've been leaving it up to him so far. That's all I can keep doing right now."

He looked at his bed, walked over to it, lied down and looked up at the ceiling with his hands behind his head.

"So I guess the only thing I can do now...is try to keep calm and wait."

Revelations

Sunday came and went...with no contact.

Monday came and went...with no contact.

Tuesday came and went...with no contact.

The days were turning into a blur that Riley was striving to just ride out waiting at least for the evening when he could sleep and give Jason at least another chance to connect.

School...home...lunchtime...the playground...it was all just blending into one big mess in Riley's head that was largely incoherent.

Wednesday evening, the family was at the table again. For all intents and purposes, it was about the same as the other dinners they'd had before.

Riley's dad was reading his paper; Or, at least, it looked like he was reading it. It was hard to tell since he had it fully opened in front of him.

Meanwhile his mom and sister were trading stories about the latest events on "The Fifth Estate" and the happenings at the mall with the boys.

"Goodness...", Riley had thought to himself in a brief respite from his larger concerns, "...the way those two talk, you'd think the world was about nothing but those soap operas and boys."

Seemingly out of nowhere, a voice gently boomed from a usually quiet end of the table.

"Matt...", Riley's father said as he turned a section of his paper down, "...how have things been with you finding a new study partner? Your mother and I noticed that your grades were improving so we figured that you had found someone new, but we weren't sure."

Riley was taken aback for a moment, not sure of how to respond. He had found a study partner, his old study partner, but how was he supposed to explain that?

"Uh, yeah dad. I did find someone." Riley figured that he would try a bit of truth while leaving out the more sci-fi'ish details. He didn't have much else to lose at this point. "We're getting together just fine, but I lost touch with him about a week ago."

"Oh?", His dad said with a bit of a smile "What's your new friend's name?"

He was hardly new, but Riley decided to put a little bit more of the situation out. "His name is Jason. He draws a lot."

"An artist? just like your old friend Rob, right?"

"Yeah dad", The open talk of his friend was beginning to get to him. He really wanted it to stop. "Could...could I be excused?"

"But honey?", His mother said with a tone of concern. "You've barely touched your food. Its the third night this week"

"He can take it with him tomorrow as lunch, same as he's been doing lately.", Riley's dad said. "It won't do any good to force it on him now if he's not really hungry."

The very next thing that happened send a bit of a chill of Riley's spine. His father looked directly at Riley with something of a sly face and said: "The boy may just need to relax. That could help him connect more with the thoughts in his head."

"Relax...Connect...?" Riley said to himself looking at his dad. Why did he say those words while giving him that look?

"Um, yeah, sure dad.", Riley said. And with that..he had went upstairs to bed.

* * *

Once again, Riley woke up the next morning to the realization that the evening and night had passed with no kind of contact from Jason. For his part, Riley had at least completely calmed down from the feelings of being cut off from his old friend. Not that he had felt any less saddened about it, but he felt that he could at least mask it to the point of not drawing attention to himself.

As Riley got downstairs to the kitchen that morning and looked around, he noticed that it was just him and his mother again; as usual.

His mother looked in his direction and seemingly read the question that was formulating in Riley's head: "Oh! Good Morning, Matt. Last night, your dad told me to tell you that he wouldn't be home for the next two days. There's some kind of major project going on at his job and they want him on for round-the-clock sessions."

Riley took the opportunity to see if his mom could help him get more to the bottom of another side-quest'ish mystery of sorts.

"Oh, that's cool, I guess. But speaking of that: Do you know anything about what dad does exactly?"

"Oh, I'm not quite sure exactly.", His mother started looking up at the ceiling while stroking her chin. "Its has something to do with virtual reality. He makes games or something. When he was working at his old job, prior to the one he has now, he used to talk more about his work. His new place doesn't like him talking too much about what he does at work outside of work. They made him sign papers and stuff.

That all was pretty accurate. When Riley was younger, he remembered his dad talking a lot more about office stuff – even if it was just people around the office – when he was at

another company. At one point, he was offered some kind of manager position at a new place and almost immediately after he took it, he became the more quiet and reserved person he is now.

"Did he ever tell you the name of the company?"

"I think its called...pera...para...oh, yes: ParaReals. Short for Parallel Realities."

"Parallel Realities?", Riley said with his eyes widening a bit. "That sounds a lot like Jason!"

"Jason?" His mom said. In his excitement, Riley has mouthed that part a bit too loud to himself. "Who is Ja-"

Thomas: But Ryan! She's your sister!!!

A voice boomed from above and behind them. Both Riley's and his mom's eyes shot in the direction of the television.

Ryan: Half! Sister! Thomas!!! And this pregnancy cannot continue any longer! If she has that baby, she will have a claim to my father's estate. I cannot allow that!. I need you to call...The Jackal!

Thomas: *GASP* - The Jackal?!?!

Ryan: THE JACKAL!!!

Narrator: Who is 'The Jackal'? And what plans will Ryan have for him and his pregnant half step-sister Brooke? Stay tuned and find out as we return to...THE FIFTH ESTATE!!!

Riley's mom snapped around and shot him a stern eye.

"Right, right, story-time, I'm leaving. See ya later."

* * *

Later on that day, after school, Riley was sitting in the park overlooking the Riverside part of town.

"The adult's place, Riley recalled Jason remarking at one point.

He had been doing some homework when he got a bit lost in his thoughts. At that point, Penny showed up.

"Hey, Matt!"

"Oh, Hi Penny. How are you doing today?"

"I'm alright. I just wanted to thank you again for your help a while back with finding my mom's ribbon."

"Oh, well, Its not like I actually found it. I thought the one I had was yours, but apparently Billy had it."

"I know, but the way things turned out was actually a good thing. Feeling the way I did when you handed me that one ribbon, and then feeling it again when I got the other ribbon back made me realize that I didn't need an object to keep her with me."

"Well, I'm glad I could help. As long as you're here would you like to si-"

As Riley looked down, he saw that he had again done something that, thus far, had only happened once before. Without realizing it, he had been unconsciously writing while talking to Penny:

IT TIME FOR US TO TALK

TONIGHT

JUST GO TO SLEEP

WE WILL MEET

This time, the message was crystal clear in perfect writing. There was no discerning even a single part of it.

"Is everything alright, Matt?"

"SORRY! I HAVE TO GO!!!"

and with that, Riley pulled all of his books and papers into a ball and ran off to home.

* * *

"He's back!" Riley thought to himself later on that evening as he got to his room. He had a lot of questions, but he figured that he would hold off on that until after he had given Jason a bunch of hugs"

As before, he dressed himself in some comfortable pajamas, turned off his lights, Took a few deep breaths and lied back in his bed while closing his eyes. He kept them closed for a few seconds. He wanted to make sure that he was giving himself a chance to really relax. After a few moments, the darkness he seemed to be staring into behind his eyelids brightened.

"ITS WORKING!", Riley thought. "JASON IS BACK!"

When Riley opened up his eyes. He found himself staring up at a partly cloudy, but otherwise clear blue sky. When he stood up, he looked around to see that he was on a roof...

...a VERY high roof...

...the top of the main skyscraper in the Riverview office complex.

Riley looked around, confused. "Jason?...Jason?!?!", He called out a couple of times.

"He's not here.", a voice called from behind him. "But you'll be seeing him again soon."

Riley turned around to see a man - not at all Jason - just across from him standing in khakis and a polo shirt. He was just able to make out the logo of the ParaReals company, the one his father worked for, on it. What shocked him all the more was the identity of the man himself.

"D...D...DAD?!?!"

"Hello Matt.", His father said with a smile. "Or, would you prefer I call you 'Riley' while we're here?"

The Briefing

"DAD!", Riley exclaimed, not sure if he should be more relieve or afraid to see that his dad was – somehow – in on all of this. "W...what's going...where's Jason?!?"

His dad shook his head and smirked a little bit. "And here I thought that maybe I had done you some justice. When you we're born, your mother wanted to name you Thaddieus."

"THADDIEUS!", Riley exclaimed. "That's sounds like someone from that soap she's always watching."

"The Fifth Estate? Yes, he was actually one of the show's original show-runners. If memory serves: Thaddieus was suppose to become the executor to the McCormick estate in lieu of Ryan, who was a bit younger then. However, Ryan, with the help of his sister Brooke orchestrated a hostile takeover of his company which I believe then led to..."

Riley's dad stopped when he noticed the look on his son's face signaling that he seemed to know way more about that show then he should have.

"Well...look...you mom used to make me watch that show with her all of the time. A few of our first dates were spent inside just watching episodes she had pre-recorded."

"You watched soaps with mom to get her to go out with you? That sounds stupid."

"We'll see just how 'stupid' the concept of doing weird things to get girls attention is in a couple more years. Anywho, we have a slightly more pressing matter to discuss."

Riley had all but forgotten in the levity of their brief father-and-son moment. "Oh, Jason! You know about all of this. And what happened to him?"

"Yes. The short version is that Jason is fine. He just ran himself down with the regular visits the two of you were apparently having. He was asleep for about four days straight. For a short while, we thought he was dead."

"What! He seemed just fine! We we're doing fine!", Riley countered.

"I know. It seems like that when you're in these places; sharing consciousness with others. The problem is that it completely disconnects you from your physical body on a certain level."

"What do you mean, 'completely disconnects'? I don't feel disconnected at all."

"Think of it like this: If your self is your soul and your body is a car your soul is driving, then when you and Jason have been doing this thing here, your essentially parking your car and stepping out of it. Your soul-self would feel perfectly fine but back in the real world, anything could be happening to your car-body, and you wouldn't know much about it until you

tried to actually go to it. In Jason's case – to follow the analogy – he simply left his body running one too many times while visiting you and ran it out of gas."

Riley thought for a moment back to the very first time Jason had snapped them from the virtual Red Dot to his virtual room. He distinctly recalled seeing himself lying in bed as he stood over himself. It was all starting to make a bit more sense now.

"Okay then, that actually makes some sense", Riley confirmed, "I do regularly see my body in bed when I'm hanging out with Jason at my place in his head. But if he ran himself down, then how is this happening? Are you able to do what he does too? "

"Well, yes and no.", Riley's dad started. "Again, without going too much into the details – there still only but so much of it that even I understand – Jason is able to do what he does because his body produces a special substance. Some other scientists I've been working with are still trying to figure out what it is, but we've taken some samples from Jason and learned how to reproduce it. It seems that if its administered it to other people, they can temporarily perform this trick too."

"So you took some yourself? Is that safe?", Riley asked with a wide eye and concerned tone.

"That's a good question. That's one of the reasons I'm currently not home. They're closely monitoring me right now as I do this myself."

"What? We're being WATCHED?!?!"

"Not directly. They know that I'm talking to you about all of this, but its not as if we're on some screen being viewed."

"And they're ok with you talking to me about all of this, Its not all 'Hush Hush'?"

"Again, that's a Yes and a No.", We're really pushing some boundaries on all of this and we're trying to keep it as under-the-radar as possible. Once we realized what you an Ro-er-Jason have been doing, I convinced them that we might be able to make more progress and still stay low-key if we more directly involved the two of you...pending your agreement to it all, of course."

Getting his friend back and spending more time with his dad? What wasn't there to agree to, Riley though?

"Of course I'm in! Especially if Jason is in!"

"I thought you'd say that.", Riley's dad said with a smile "Right on time too, we both need to get out of this. The time limit they gave me is about up."

"So, where do we start?"

"First things first", his dad said as he raised a hand in a manner similar to what he'd seen Jason do on so many occasions. "You need to wake up."

His dad snapped his fingers. Again, Riley found himself thrust into an absolute void of darkness.

Reunion

When Riley regained his vision and wits, he found himself in his room again lying in his bed. He sat up and looked about until his eyes fell on his alarm clock. It read 6:15am.

"Well, the day is starting off normally enough", he thought to himself.

He immediately got out of bed and got himself dressed. He wasn't sure of what he was supposed to be doing or where he was supposed to be – His dad had only said that the first step was for him to wake up – but he suspected that the next part would somehow happen on its own and he wanted to be ready for it.

A few moments later, he was making his way downstairs to the kitchen as his mother was still making breakfast.

"Oh! You're up early!", His mother pleasantly remarked. "Whats the occasion?"

"UGH! Knowing him, there's probably some test today that he's anxious about taking", his sister Paige remarked as she entered the kitchen wrapped in a bathrobe. "The way Matty gets a test or a project, you'd think that it was a present on Christmas day!"

For once, Riley appreciated his sister's snide, unsolicited commentary, as it saved him the trouble of coming up with a lie of his own. It was so much the better that his mom seemed to quietly go along with it.

"Well, that would explain him...", His mother said, nodding her head at Paige's remark, "...but now that I think of it, I'm just as unaccustomed to seeing you up and about this early, Paige. Whats your excuse?"

"I actually have a test of my own to get to this morning: The entry exam at the community college dad is making me go to in the fall. But believe me, I am NOT happy about it. As if the PSAT's, the SAT's, and the multiple interviews weren't enough!"

"Paige, you should be thankful that you're getting in somewhere. With your grades, your father mentioned having to pull some strings just to get you there. I'll be damned if I know how he convinced them to give you a scholarship on top of that, but I won't look a gift horse in the mouth. My baby is moving onward and upwards. That's what's important."

"So Matty...", Paige said turning her attention to him, "...just what test is it that has you up and at em, today?"

"Uh, its a computer test. My teacher didn't say why, but he wanted as many people in the class to take it first thing in the morning."

"Hmmm....Adults are so weird.", Paige said condescendingly.

"We'll see how weird they are when you become one in a couple of years.", Riley retorted.

Paige shot Riley a raised eyebrow. "Whoa! For a second there, you almost sounded like dad. Have you been talking to him more?"

"She's right.", Riley thought to himself. "That did kinda sound like dad". It felt weird.

At that moment, the phone started to ring. Riley's mom picked up.

"Hello?.....Oh, good morning honey! How are you?.....Oh things are just fine over here.....Matt? He's actually right here in the kitchen with me. Paige too. The entire house is up early this morning for some odd reason.....What?.....Well, yes, he looks dressed, why?.....You will?.....Are you sure? he said something about having a test today.....Well.....alright.....I'll tell him.....will you be back from work soon?.....REALLY!.....THAT'S GREAT!.....I CAN'T WAIT!.....Okay!.....Love you! Bye!"

"What was that all about, mom?" Riley, asked curiously

"Oh! Your dad is coming home tonight and he will be taking me out to that new fancy restaurant that opened over in the Riverside complex. I've heard such FANTASTIC things about it. Oh! I have to pick a dress and make an appointment with Barbara at the salon! Breakfast is almost done. You two can make your own plates." And with that, she scurried up the stairs and disappeared into her bedroom.

Riley and Paige looked at each other with confused faces for a moment before they heard their mom come out of the room and shout down the stairs.

"OH, ONE MORE THING, MATT!", his mom called out. "YOU'RE NOT GOING TO SCHOOL TODAY! YOUR DAD IS SENDING SOME MEN OVER FROM THE OFFICE TO PICK YOU UP AND TAKE YOU THERE TO SEE HIM. SOMETHING ABOUT A FATHER-SON DAY OVER THERE. THEY SHOULD BE JUST OUTSIDE IN ABOUT TEN MINUTES!"

Paige's mouth dropped and she let out a disgusted gasp. "WELL! Dad's never sent men for *me* to come spend the day with him at the office!"

"Why would you want that?", Riley inquired. "I thought that you thought that dad's work was lame and boring?"

"His work IS lame and boring! All suits and numbers and papers! I'd probably die of boredom within five minute of being wherever it is that he goes to over in that stuck-up office complex. But he STILL could have asked! Humph!"

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, Riley found himself sitting in the back of an unassuming car with a driver up front and one person sitting alongside him in the back. The trip initially started off with them heading in the direction of the Riverview office complex. Just before they got to the bridge that led straight in. The car pulled to a stop. The man sitting next to Riley turned to him and pulled out a blindfold.

"You need to put this on", The man said. "I have one too. The driver wont start back again until he sees that we can't see where he's going."

"This again?", Riley thought to himself. Thought, given the circumstances of what was happening with his friend and his dad, it wasn't surprising.

"Okay.", Riley said as he put the blindfold on. A few moments later, he felt the car slowly begin to move again.

Riley thought that he would try the same trick that he had used before when Jason was secretly leading him to the Red Dot. "One mississippi....Two mississippi....", he has began to mentally count to himself.

However, almost immediately after the car started moving, he heard noises similar to switches being flipped in front of him. Then the seat he was in started to sink down a little bit and vibrate. Riley hadn't thought much of this until he realized that he had counted up to ten 'Mississipis' but had yet to feel the car make any turns. It should have needed to make at least one right at the other side of the bridge as there was a T intersection at the end of it.

"Whoa.", Riley thought to himself, giving up on the counting. "This is something else. Almost on the level of VICTOR or SECRET."

After what felt like a short eternity. Riley felt the car come to a stop. After a few moments, the man sitting alongside him spoke: "Okay, we're here."

When Riley pulled off his blind fold, he found that the backseat area of the car they we're in was dark and lit only by some lights coming up from the side of the doors at the floor. Also, all of the windows seemed to be blacked out.

The man sitting next to Riley saw the expressions on his face and figured what he must have been thinking: "Yeah, the higher up are pretty particular about who knows what regarding the whats-where's-and-hows of this place."

"Where are we, exactly?" Riley asked

"I should probably let the people outside field those questions. I was just told to make sure that you got here."

Just then, a large clicking sound erupted from all around them signifying that their doors – once locked – we're now open.

"Okay, lets go.", The man said as he stepped out from his side of the car.

Riley stepped out of his side to see that they were now in some kind of all concrete room with just him, the guy he had been riding with, and the car. In front of them was a large door with the words B-3 on them. After a brief moment of silence, the doors started to slowly grind open. On the other side, Riley was able to make out two figures, One tall and one small one

sitting in a wheelchair. He instantly recognized both, but in that very instant, he was more excited to see the smaller one.

"J....JASON?!?!"

"RILEY!!!!"

The two immediately approached each other and locked into a deep hug.

"J..JASON....I...I thought you had..."

"I know...I know....apparently I didn't have the handle on this thing of my that I thought I did."

"Are you okay? Why are you in a wheelchair? You can't walk anymore?!?!"

"Dude! Calm down! My legs are fine. The doctor's here just want me to take things really easy for a while. They were really freaking out for those few days that I guess I fell asleep."

Riley started to laugh a bit, which turned into a hysterical cry as he buried his head into Jason's shoulder and hugged him. Jason hugged back even tighter and started crying himself.

Riley's chaperon, who was now standing next to his dad looked on with his dad before turning to him to ask about the scene.

"Should we...do something, Art?", the man asked Riley's dad.

"Just give them a moment, Aaron." Art replied. "They just found each other again. For real this time."

OpenSecret

The four of them: Riley; Jason, being pushed along in his wheelchair by Riley; Aaron, the man who had been with Riley for the ride to their current location; and last, but far from the least of them, Artemis, Riley's dad whom everyone called 'Art' for short, walked through a long corridor passing by various offices when people seemed to be doing different things. At one point, Riley noticed that off in a room down a side hall way someone seemed to be in a chair with what appeared to be a dentist standing over them.

"You have dentists here?", Riley asked his dad.

"...And some doctors", Art added in. "Given the nature of the work that we do here, we all try to stay on the premises for as long as possible when we come here. Its harder for security leaks to get out if nobody is getting out too often.

"But on the other side of that coin....", Aaron interjected, "...you have to make it so that the people that you're trying to keep in don't feel as if they're prisoners or something. To that end, we try to provide a lot of services down here that people may otherwise have to leave for. Medical facilities, stores, we even have a movie theater on the premises."

"Wow! Its like you have a real-world version of SECRET here."

"Secret?", Aaron asked looking at Riley with a raised eyebrow.

"Its the good guy group of spies in the – Dan Dangers – series of books that my son here loves to read.", Art responded. "They are to him what 'The Fifth Estate' is to my honey, Abby."

Aaron groaned and shook his head, "You mean all of our honeys. I love my girl, but if I have to hear one more thing about that damned McCormick Estate...."

"So, where are we going, Dad?", Riley asked.

"We're taking the two of you to a conference room. Well be meeting a scientist there who has been working with...well...now that I think of it, what should I be calling you two now that we're all here in the real world again?

"Let's stick to our regular names.", Jason insisted. "Just until we're sure that there are no double agents from VICTOR lurking about."

Riley looked at his dad and silently nodded in agreement.

"Well, in that case: We're taking the two of you – Matt and Rob – to a conference room where we will be sitting down with a scientist who will be helping me answer any of your questions. At this point, I'm sure the two of you have a few of them."

* * *

A few moments later: Riley and Jason were sitting on one side of a table with Art and a fourth person standing next to him. Aaron had left a few moments before to take care of some other business.

"Hello Matt. I'm Dr. Rivers", the man next to his father stated. "Rob and I are already acquainted, though I think he'll find this particular meeting far more enlightening than our previous ones. I've been officially cleared to answer any questions I can about what's been going on around here."

"Darn tootin!", Jason said with a grin over his face.

"Alright then, boys", Art said. "The floor is yours. Where should we begin?"

The two boys did a bit of a huddle whisper for a few seconds before getting up and looking at the two of them.

Riley started with the first question: "Well, for starters, what is this place? And why has Rob been brought here?"

"I can answer the 'what'.", Art began. "Essentially, this place is a co-op of different type of businesses and organizations that are in an agreement to share resources while still independently operating. We used to be pretty much out in the open until we started touching on matters that required us to quickly start covering ourselves up."

"So, this whole place isn't your gaming company?", Riley asked.

"This whole place? Heavens no.", Art replied. " My actual corner of this place is – well – literally a corner office space that's just enough for me and my seven employees and I'm just fine with that. I never actually left my old job. I became the manager, sized it down and moved it here."

"Does this place – like the whole place – have an actual name?", Jason quickly followed up.

"No, it currently doesn't", Art said as he directed his attention to Jason. "This space was thrown together so quickly that we barely had time to consider calling it anything. As you saw as we we're coming here, its still being thrown together as we speak. We're not entirely sure that we should even give it a name. All of us here would prefer this place not be found. Its kinda hard to find a place that you can't lookup."

The two boys looked at each other for a moment and nodded their heads, satisfied that the situation was starting to be clarified for the two of them.

"Alright then, what about me?", Jason continued, "What do I have to do with any of this?"

"Actually, Rob, you were largely the inspiration for all of this" Dr. Rivers replied. When Art and I learned of your abilities, we knew that you were essentially just ripe to be picked by some military brass types or other shadowy group to try and weaponize or militarize your for

their own benefits. We created this space so that we civilian types could have a place to work on and protect projects and assets such as yourself."

"That's not to say that we don't have some ideas of our own regarding tasks that you could potentially do for us", Art followed up, "But at the same time, we don't want to just rob you of your life and turn you into some tool."

"But isn't that what happened?", Riley countered. "You brought him here and then kept his parents from seeing him."

Art's face sunk and he became despondent: "No, Matt, that's not what happened at all. It's true that we didn't tell Rob's parents the entire truth about what was going on here, but we never made any attempts to keep them away. Once they got the money we promised them as a stipend for allowing us to move Rob here for his art scholarship, they just up and disappeared. All of the contact information they had left us with: numbers, emails, addresses. It all started to go bad.

"You're lying!", Jason pleaded. "You have to be! They wouldn't just leave me!"

Jason then turned to Riley with an unsure look on his face: "Right?"

Riley looked at Jason for a moment, then turned to his dad and Dr. Rivers. Now both men were silent and had solemn looks on their face.

"We have to show him, Art", Dr. Rivers said, "He's going to hate it, but we agreed that there would be full disclosure."

"Show me what?", Jason asked with a worried look on his face.

The two men stepped away from the screen behind them as Art pressed a few buttons on a remote. A video showed up of Jason sitting in a room talking to his parents.

"Jason, do you remember this meeting you had with your parents?", Art asked.

Jason looked at the video for a few moments before starting to nod his head slightly. "Yeah. I think it was a couple of weeks after I first got here. The last time I remember talking to them, I think."

Art nodded his own head and punched a couple of buttons on the remote. Now there was another image of an office with Art, Dr. Rivers, and Jason's parents. There was no audio, but in it Art appears to be sliding an envelope over to Jason's father. Jason's father opens the envelope and fingers through a small stack of bills in it while Jason's mother looks over his shoulder. He then writes on another piece of paper and hands it over to Art.

"This was a meeting we had with your parents after they left you that day. We gave them the money we had promised them, along with our contact information, and told them when it would be best for them to come by and see you. We also asked them to provide their contact information to us so that we could reach them in the event of an emergency."

"Okay...", Riley said, "...so what happened after that?"

"Nothing. Literally, nothing.", Art said. "They never showed for the next visit date. We spent the next two weeks trying to contact them using the information they gave us. At first, the phone number led to a voicemail whenever we tried to call it. Then it would just ring indefinitely. The last time we tried it, we got a message saying that the number was disconnected altogether."

"We were worried that someone else had found out about you and had maybe gotten to your parents to prepare for some kind of extortion scheme.", Dr. Rivers said. "I reached out to a colleague of mine who used to work for the government. I asked him if he could ascertain their whereabouts. After about a couple week of digging, he came to my office gave me a USB stick with a video on it. He said that the recording on it was taken about two weeks after Art and I last spoke to them."

Art then pushed another button on his remote. A third video started to play. It showed a busy intersection of an airport terminal with various people going to and from places. At first, Riley and Jason looked on confused, not sure of what they were being shown.

And then the two of them see it: An image that makes both of their mouths and hearts drop.

From the lower right of the screen, Jason's parents come into view wearing tropical clothing and pulling suitcases behind them. They approach the security station blocking the gantry for an airplane. Jason's dad pulls two tickets out of his pocket and hands them to the security guard. The security guard examines them for a moment, Tears a piece off of each, hands them back to the pair and they continue up the pathway to the airplane. The video automatically stops.

Art turned to Jason and began to speak: "That was the last sight or sound we ha-"

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!", Jason exclaimed as he stood from his chair and slammed his fists into the table in front of him. Tears immediately running down his eyes.

"NO! NO! NO! NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Jason slammed his fists into the table a few more times, picked up his chair, and threw it straight into the screen; just barely missing Dr. Rivers. Then he immediately ran out of the room and disappeared into the hallway.

Meet The Parents

Brooke: You! I know who you are! You're...The Jackal!!! The man that solves problems!!!

The Jackal: Very astute, Miss Brooke. Very astute.

Brooke: That cad Ryan sent you! He put you up to this, didn't he?!?! He sees me as so much of a problem that he would see an innocent child harmed just to 'solve' me?

The Jackal: The identity of my client is none of your concern. As for your unborn child: That is the very problem I've come to solve!!!

Brooke: You dare?!?! YOU DARE?!?! STAY BACK!!! STA-

"Dad?", Riley said as he stepped into Art's office.

"Matt!", Art said, stumbling out of his chair as he got up, fumbled for the remote and turned off the monitor he had been watching. "Um....hey....come in. Close the door. how are you doing, buddy?"

"Okay, I guess.", Riley said in a sullied voice as he stepped in and closed the door behind him. "So, you're actually watching that show now too?"

"Oh....That?...I.....uh....I just needed something to take my mind off of....what happened earlier. Your mom had an episode recorded that we started to watch last night after our date." Art said lowering his head and rubbing the back of his neck. "I mean....hell...its one thing for a kid to realize that just one of their parents, let alone BOTH, walked out on them. But then to watch them actually do it....."

"Yeah.", Riley said. " It wasn't even happening to me and I still feel depressed and sick about it."

"Oh, Matt.", Art got up, and hugged Riley. "That will NEVER happen to you! Your mother and I could never think of doing such a thing to you or Paige! The only way one or both of us would just up and disappear on you two is if we died or got killed in some car accident or something!"

Riley looked up at his dad and gave him a wide-eyed, horrified look. "What?!?!", he exclaimed.

"Well...I...I mean...I didn't mean...look, boy, you know what I mean!"

"Oh...um...okay.....", Riley answered, still a bit shook by his dad's remark.

"Well...look...how is Rob doing?"

"I think he's a little better now. When I left him, he was being taken to some recreation area around here. After he saw that video, he ran straight to his room and started to tear it apart."

"I heard about the damage. Its hard to believe that he did so much all by himself."

"Well...", Riley said as he lowered his head a bit. "He didn't. I was kinda helping him. He seemed so alone in that moment and I figured that maybe if I could do something to show him somehow him that he wasn't...."

Art put his hand on Riley's shoulder and nodded his head. "I get it. Don't worry about it."

"Is Dr. Rivers okay? Everything in that room happened so fast. I thought I saw that wheelchair hit him."

"It just missed him...and he's fine. He suspected that the news wouldn't go over well with Rob, to put it mildly. Let's go see if we can catch-up to Rob." Art said

* * *

After a stroll down some long corridors, and a short ride on a tram that left Riley wondering just how large this complex was, they entered into a lush green area that appeared to be under a dome with a warm bright light coming in from one side.

"Hey, are we outside again?", Riley asked.

"Looks and feels like it, doesn't it?", Art replied slightly nodding his head proudly. "We're still underground in the complex, but this area has been setup as a recreational space. There's special lights behind those panels overhead that mimic actual sunlight."

As the two of them started to look around, Riley noticed Jason standing at the edge of a fountain near the center of the park.

"There he is, Dad!" As the two of them jogged up to him, Jason was intermittently throwing rocks into the fountain while looking at his reflection in the water. After a moment, he turned around and saw the two of them standing behind him.

"Oh...Hey Matt and Mr. Art.." He said in a really sullen voice "Um...Mr. Art...I'm really sorry about the monitor and the wheelchair."

"No need to apologize, Rob" Art said with a smile. "Given what you saw, I think I would have been more surprised and concerned if you hadn't reacted the way that you did."

"Are you doing okay, buddy?", Riley asked.

"I guess.", Jason replied while taking a few short breaths. "I mean...I kinda knew that they were tired of me being around. They seemed just a little too happy about having to leave me

here in the beginning. I just thought that.....maybe.....they just wanted a bit of a vacation for themselves, y'know? Not to be completely rid of me."

"Well look Rob...", Art said kneeling down a bit and looking Jason in the eye. "I know that you haven't know any of us here for very long, and as Dr. Rivers said we do have our own reasons for wanting you around, but we DO want you here. You're not just a tool to us to be used and discarded. If there's anything we can do to start making you feel more at home here, just let me know.

Jason lower his eyes for a moment, looked at Riley and then at Art.

"Actually, Mr. Art, I've been thinking about what happened and...I'll understand if its asking too much, but there is something.....just one thing I was hoping you guys here could do for me. In return, I'll help with whatever you want from me.

Art gave Jason a small smile. "Just name it.", he said.

* * *

The woman stumbled her way up the walkway that connected the casino to the bar while counting a wad of money in her hand before stuffing it in her purse. She had been going deeper and deeper into the hole all day, but managed to just break shy of even on a roulette wheel hit.

"Ah! I always did love the color red! Lucky, lucky red!"

She sat herself down at the bar and began to look over the drink list to see what she might want. Just as she was about to get her usual – A Strawberry Cosmopolitan – the bartender walked up to her with that very drink and placed it in front of her.

"Oh!", The woman said gleefully. "You must have read my mind!"

"Not me.", The bartender said as he pointed in the direction of a man sitting at the end of the bar in a dark blazer and khakis "Compliments of that gentleman".

The man raised his glass and smiled.

The woman, got up and shimmied her way over to the man with her drink and sat down next to him

"My, my my!", The woman began grinning from ear to ear. "I like a man who knows how to get a girl's attention! My name is Ruby. And you are....", she said as she extended her hand.

"My friends call me Art", The man replied as he leaned forward to kiss her hand.

"And what brings you to this place, Art?", Ruby replied.

"Same as you, or anyone else here, I'd gather: Just trying to get away from things for a bit.", He replied.

"Oh! You have no idea!", Ruby smiled while taking a sip of her drink. "I just got away from one really big thing myself. Soon, I'll be getting away from another!"

"You traveling alone?"

"Oh, I have a traveling partner, but we're starting to cramp each other a bit. I think we're due to go our separate ways."

"...the 'big thing' you mentioned, I take it?"

"The very same. So tell me – Art – what is it that you do?"

"Oh, I make video games."

"Video games?", Ruby said with a slight tone of disappointment "Well..that..doesn't sound to be a very, um, lucrative career."

"Oh, you'd be surprised. Especially when you get into the made-to-order market. There's a lot of people in the world who will pay very well to be able to act out certain roles and fantasies from the privacy of their homes and offices. It at least keeps gas in the beamer."

In that instant, Art digs into his pocket and pulls out a car starter with a small LCD displaying a BMW logo on it to show Ruby.

"Oh, well, color me corrected!" Ruby exclaimed while inching herself closer to Art. "You know, this bar seems a bit...I dunno...loud? Perhaps we should head back to your room where we could talk with a bit more....privacy?"

"What about your....traveling partner? Will you need a moment to check in with him? Or her?"

"Oh, they will be fine", Ruby remarked coyly. "If I have to go missing for a night....or two...it won't be a big deal."

Art gave Ruby a devilish smirk and stood up from his seat. He pulled out a black shiny wallet and fingered through a small fold of bills inside. It was hanging open just enough for Ruby to see the few hundreds of cash, along with parts of all of the other cards inside.

"He has a *black* card!!!", Ruby mentally squealed to herself. "This man could probably buy anything in this hotel. Hell, he could probably buy the ENTIRE hotel!"

Art motioned to the bartender and when he showed up, handed him a single hundred dollar bill and told him to keep the change.

With that, he looked at ruby, and extended his hand. "Shall we?"

"Lead the way, good sir!", Ruby replied while placing her hand into his.

* * *

A few moments later. The two of them were riding on an elevator to one of the penthouse suites. It was all Ruby could do to contain herself over her apparent streak of luck.

"This is great!", she thought to herself. "This day would have been perfect enough to end with me just breaking even, but to land this cash cow too? If I can play this right, I can ditch that dead weight husband of mine, Marcus, and be on a private jet to who-knows-where by the end of the week!"

Apparently, Ruby had been beaming and jittering a bit too much as Art had taken noticed.

"You excited?", Art asked looking at Ruby.

"Of course! Who wouldn't be? I'm just looking forward to all of the fun we're about to have together tonight!"

"The feeling is mutual.", Art said with a beaming smile of his own

DING

The elevator stopped and the doors open to a lavish foyer with a window at the other end overlooking the city. As the two of them stepped in, Ruby began to get goosebumps over what she was seeing.

"Yes...Yes...YES!...YASSSSSS! This is a dream come true!", Ruby thought to herself.

Art pointed to an opening to another area of the penthouse on the left. "Just head in there and make yourself comfortable."

"Sure thing!"

Ruby gleefully shimmered towards the entryway, already going over in her head all of the ways she would begin to hustle this 'Art' guy out of his money. As soon as she reached the entryway, however, the scene before her brought all of the mental plotting and scheming in her head to a dead stop: The first thing she noticed, to her right was her husband – Marcus – tied up in a chair, bound, gagged and clearly frightened, with a man in a suit standing next to him.

The next thing she noticed directly in front of her – which could have made her heart drop clear from that point in the hotel to the ground floor – was the site of two heavily armed men standing to the sides of a young adolescence boy with clenched fists, an irritated look on his face, and deeply reddened eyes which suggested that he had been recently crying; a lot.

Ruby gasped and clutched her heard. "R...R...Robbie?", Ruby said in a startled, broken tone.

"Hi, mom.", Jason replied in a broken tone of his own.

Family Therapy

"R...R...Robbie! Baby!", Ruby said, stuttering into a fake smile. Quickly she started to step towards Jason with her arms stretched out for a hug. "Its soooo good to see you ag-"

Just as immediately, the two men flanking Jason stepped in front of Jason to block Ruby's path.

The clearly fake 'Happy' immediately turned into fake 'disgust'. "Um..uh..I don't know who you two think you are, or what all of this is about, but I DO know for sure that is my son behind you! You will step aside, or I-"

"...or you'll what, Miss Ruby?" Art – the real Art – challenged from Ruby's right, still standing next to her husband.

Ruby turned for a moment to more closely examine the gentleman standing along side her husband, still tied in his seat.

"You...You're...You're that guy that me and Marcus spoke with at that art university. You and that other nerd guy!

"Yes", Art replied with a bit of a smirk. "I'm Art. The other nerd guy that you are referring to is Dr. Rivers, and the gentleman who was gracious enough to lend his playboy capabilities to facilitating this meeting...", he said as he gestured behind Ruby.

"Aaron...", Aaron called as he stepped into the room, "...and just for the record, to everyone here, this evening did not happen! If my girl ever found up that I was chatting up someone other than her – even for work – she would have my head on a platter!" Aaron said with a nervous smile as he shook his head.

"So now that we're done with the introductions...", Art said as he looked back at Ruby, "...you still haven't answered my question: What do you think you're going to do about any of this?"

"Well...I...I...", Ruby stuttered for a bit. "...I...I'll call the Police!"

"And tell them what? Exactly?", Art inquired with a raised brow. "That you abandoned your son at our facility?"

"That's...That's not what happened!", Ruby said startled. "You were keeping him there as part of his scholarship! You said that he had to live there....with you...like on your weird campus!"

"We also said that you were free to come check up on him whenever you liked. The initial agreement was a minimum bi-weekly visit", Art added on. "When you missed the first one, we got worried and tried to contact you with the information your husband here provided.", He

said as he patted Marcus on the shoulder. "When that contact information started to go bad, we actually feared the worse for you two and did some digging to see if we could find you and...well..."

Art pulled a remote out of his pocket and pointed it at a nearby television. As it came on, it showed a still of the airport video he had shown to Jason a few days earlier. He pushed another button, and let it play, showing Ruby and Marcus the video of them boarding their flight.

"Well....", Ruby stuttered looking at all of them, rapidly building a defense, "...that...that...that doesn't prove anything! So you see us getting on a plane! So what? You've never seen people go on vacation before?!?!"

This is where Aaron interjected, while pulling out a piece of paper to show to Ruby: "We had some friends of ours get the flight manifest and cross check it against the tickets bought for the flight: Ruby Michaels – that's you – and Marcus Michaels – that's him. Two tickets, both one way. That's one helluva vacation the two of you were planning."

Ruby frantically looked around at the faces on her in the room. Finally, her eyes fell on Jason – what little of him she could see from between the two armed men standing in front of him.

"Baby", Ruby said, looking at Jason with a nervous smile and look in her eye. "You...you...really don't believe any of these men, do you? You know your mommy and daddy would never leave you, right?"

Jason, slightly trembling, looked at his mom for a moment, then looked at the video on the screen, and then back to his mother.

"Was I really THAT bad?!?!", He snapped with a raised voice. "I know I haven't been the best kid in the world...maybe I wasn't as smart or as well manner as any of the other kids around....but was I that much trouble? did the two of you hate me that much?"

Ruby looked at her son for a moment...then stood up straight, and with a turned up nose, gave Jason a condescending look.

"You know what?", Ruby said in a defiant tone. "No, Robbie. I never considered you all that bad at all. Truth of the matter is? I just never really *wanted* you."

Every mouth in the room that could have dropped, went straight to the floor.

"What? You wanted to hear the truth. That's the truth. Years back, when I first found out that you were inside of me, I would have made a beeline straight for the nearest abortion clinic, but 'ol Marcus over here was so hung up on playing "Daddy" and making "House". Me? I was younger and dumber and just wanted to make my MAN happy!" Ruby said with a sneer while looking at Marcus.

"Why do y'all have him tied up an...you know what? Nevermind." At this point, Ruby then turned to Art. "Well, Art – If that's even YOUR real name – you asked me once, now its my turn to ask you: What are you gonna do about all of this? What happens now?"

Art collected himself, trying to register all he has just heard. "Well...um...that...that's kinda up to Rob. He asked us if we could track you down and get him a chance to talk to you about the circumstances of your disappearance."

Everyone then turned to Jason. He looked at all of the eyes on him, looked down at the floor for a moment, and then as tears began to form in his eyes again, he took one last long look as the video on the screen which had been quietly looping the entire time.

Then he wiped his eyes as he turned and looked at his mother: "You said that you really didn't want me. Fine. These guys here said that they do want me. I don't really know what for exactly, but right now, I don't care. They still want me. That's all I need to know. I'm leaving with them and staying with them. You and dad can do whatever you two want. I won't be around to slow you down anymore."

Ruby looked at Jason for a second and then turned to Art: "So just like that? After all of this, you won't call the police or anything?"

"Under the circumstances, that would unnecessarily complicate things" Art said as he shook his head. "Just like Rob said: We'll quietly go our way with him. You and Marcus can quietly go your own way. What happened in this room can stay in this room. Hell, you can even keep the room. Its paid up for the next week."

Art turned to Jason: "You good?"

"I will be.", Jason replied. "Let's get out of here."

Art, Jason, Aaron and their two personal guards started to make their way out of the penthouse, leaving Ruby and Marcus to watch them leave.

Aaron stopped and turned around to briefly address Marcus: "Oh, Marcus! Just a heads up: Judging from the conversation your fine lady and I had at the bar downstairs, I wouldn't expect 'your way' to be following alongside 'her way' for too much longer." and with a wink and a smile he threw the room card into his lap and exited out.

Marcus with a wide eye, turned and looked at Ruby.

Ruby, looked at Marcus and gave him a nervous smile.

Mission Debriefing

"She just never really wanted you?", Riley said to Jason with a shocked look and face.

It was two days later and the two of them were sitting in another meeting room inside of the clandestine underground business co-op that Riley's father worked in....or built...ran...manged? That part was still somewhat unclear to the two of them.

"That's what she said.", Jason replied with a melancholy tone.

"How did you...what did you...what?", was all Riley could manage as a response.

"Yeah, I know. How do you think I felt? Honestly, the more I think about it, I'm still not sure how I feel about it."

"Well...I...um....", Riley tried to continue, not sure of what to say or even ask to try and help Jason cope with it. "Well, how do you think you feel about it? Are you okay?"

"Your dad asked me that...well...he asked if I was 'good' before we left that room. I said I would be." Jason replied. "Its just....I....I kinda knew that they had ditched me....that they didn't want me anymore. But I thought that maybe I was overthinking things. Like maybe they were on some kinda 'Adult' thing that I just didn't entirely understand. To hear my mom actually say that she didn't want me...." he trailed off as he looked at the floor.

"Well, what about your dad? What did he have to say about it?"

"He never got a chance to say much that I was around for. When we all first got to the hotel and they tracked my parents down to their room. They waited for them to separate and then your dad sent Aaron and those two bodyguards to their room while my dad was alone in it."

"Apparently...", Jason continued, "...when the three of them got there, my dad thought they were all cops. He never much cared for cops. There was some kind of really short fight and they just bound and gagged him."

"So, you never got to hear what he had to say about any of this?", Riley replied.

"Well...no...but I don't think it would have mattered much.", Jason said as he shook his head. "My dad was ok – in general – but it always seemed like he was taking orders from mom and following her lead. Even if he'd had a chance to say something for himself, I don't think it would have much changed things."

"So...", Riley said with a raised eyebrow "Basically, your parents 'Quit' on the job of being your parents. So, who does that make your parents, NOW?"

"On the way back, your dad was saying something about talking to some lawyers around here and making it so that this place is my parent, somehow. I didn't quite follow, but I didn't much care for the details. Its like I said back in that oversized hotel room: It seems like the people around here actually want me around. Whatever they do to make that happen, I can't see myself fighting it much even if I knew how to fight it."

"I'm glad to hear that, Rob", Art said as he and Dr. Rivers entered into the meeting room. "We have some lawyers working on making the organization here at least temporarily responsible for your care and guardianship. They're pretty confident that they will be able to all but handle it themselves, but one of them did mention that you might have to go on record to testify that you we're abandoned and that you at least feel safe and comfortable around here."

"Testify?", Jason said with his eyes widening "You mean like in a court? With a judge and jurors and what not?"

"Oh, I doubt it will be anything that elaborate. If it comes to that, it will be probably more like the way the four of us are talking here right now. There could be an actual judge present, but it will largely be a formality. "

"Formal – what?", Riley said confused

"Well...", Art began to rephrase. "He or she – the judge – will be there just so we can say that there was a judge there to see and hear all of it"

Jason then cautiously turned to Dr. Rivers "Um...Dr. Rivers...are you...."

Dr. Rivers put up a hand and intercepted Jason's thought: "I'm just fine, Rob, and there's no need to apologize for anything that happened a few days ago. I can only begin to imagine what must have been going on in your head as you saw that video. Art and I were back-and-forth with each other for a week over whether or not to show it to you.

"In the end", Art added in, " We concluded that the two of you would have somehow pushed to get to the bottom of it – and this place – on your own; especially given the feats that you are able to pull off with recreating people's thoughts. To that end, we thought it best to bring you together here and just tell you everything ourselves; in the hopes that it might convince you to see us more as...well...SECRET than VICTOR."

Jason and Riley looked at each other for a second, nodded their heads and turned to the two men on the other side of the table

"Well, its all spilled milk under the bridge now.", Jason said. "no sense crying over any of it that's already passed"

Riley turned to Jason: "Jason...that's....you mixed....never mind", he said as he turned to his father. "So, what happens now, Dad?"

"Well, the plan was to pick up where we left off before.", Art replied. "I'm sure the two of you have more questions."

"Well, for starters...." Jason said "You said that you want me to feel comfortable here. Its hard to feel much comfortable in a place that doesn't have a name. Even if it's one that not too many people know"

Riley shook his head in agreement, "Are the other people behind this place still set on not naming it?"

"They had some meetings about it, they're leaning towards: The Riverside Multi-Corporation Co-Operative Group", Art said in a very droll tone.

The two boys looked at Art with a very disapproving look

"I know, I know.", art said putting his hands up. "but that was the best the other group leaders could come up with after *three days* of deliberation"

"Well....", Dr. Rivers said, "...It is at least 'technically' accurate. This place is a group of different businesses; we're all working together; and we're in the Riverside office complex.

"I can't even remember half of that name and you just said it a few seconds ago" Jason said, shaking his head. "This place needs a cooler name."

"Well, do either of you have any suggestions?", art asked with a raised eyebrow.

The two boys got into a huddle on their side of the table and whispered incoherently in front of the two men for a few seconds. Then the two of them shot to their feet punched their hands in the air and shouted in unison:

"OPENSECRET!!!!"

Orientation

The rest of that day was an on-and-off, back-and-forth between the two boys – Riley and Jason - and the two men – Art and Dr. Rivers, who seemed to at least be somewhere in the main shot-caller structure of the tentatively named "OpenSecret" – as all unanswered questions and unambiguous matters we're cleared up.

The biggest reveal of the entire matter was just how much of a proverbial bullet Jason dodged when there was talk floating about regarding his newfound abilities.

* * *

"You mean the Military was after me?", Jason said with a wide eye and excited smile that only someone of his age could have after hearing that such a large group was after him. "Cool!"

"Hardly", Dr. Rivers said, shaking his head. "You would have been just as marginalized by them as you would have been by your parents, if not moreso. I'll reiterate: Yes, here at...um...open..secret...as you two have insisted, we have some ideas of our own for things that you could do for us, but we understand that you're still a minor and should be very much entitled to as much of a regular, minor life as you can have regardless."

"So, how did you two figure out that the military was after Jason?" Riley asked. At this point, the two boys had agreed to and requested a temporary deferment to their 'code' names, since they were now more satisfied that they were in friendly territory.

"Well...er...Riley....was it now?", Art said pointing to his son as he nodded his head. "One of the images that....Jason...drew when he first arrived, before his ability expanded into what it currently is, was of a military official in a place that officially doesn't exist. The specific image didn't have any sensitive information by itself, but just the very nature of it was enough to spook another officer who had just happened to be on the site."

"So how did you manage to get them to go away?", Jason asked.

"Ironically, we gave them what they asked for", Art began to explain. "Two days later, the officer returned with two other men insisting that they see all of the other images that you had been drawing. So we gave them *all* of your drawings. Even some of your random sketches that you had thrown away in your wastebaskets"

"We hoped that the deluge of artistic scratches would convince them that you were otherwise just an amateur artist with a very vivid imagination who just happened to sketch something that vaguely resembled an actual person and place in real life.", Dr. Rivers added in.

"And they bought that?", Jason asked.

"Just enough to go away, it seems.", Dr. Rivers answered. "From the look on their faces when they returned a week later with all of your art to dump back on us, they didn't seem satisfied that they hadn't found their 'smoking gun' evidence, but they weren't in a very good position to argue the point much further with so little proof."

"...and that's when we came up with the ruse to have your parents – somehow – agree to let us keep a more constant eye on you without making it seem as though we we're trying to kidnap or imprison you, Jason.", Art concluded.

* * *

Another interesting exchange between the four of them came when Riley and Jason we're talking about the detective work they did together at their school.

* * *

"So...the boy had a hidden panel, in his own locker that led to a secret crawlspace?", Art asked with a raised eyebrow and a shocked look

"Yep!", Riley started "Not sure when Billy first found it, but the way he had things set up in there, he clearly had it for a while."

"He had been doing what he was doing back when I was still going to that school!", Jason added in.

"And...just so I understand this scheme you two came up with....", Dr. Rivers said, scratching his chin: "Riley, you bought a hair ribbon that resembled the one that this....Penny....had and gave it to her while this Billy was watching to make him think that you had gotten access to his hideout, so that he would go back to it while the school officials were watching?"

"I think I've seen that ribbon you mentioned in Penny's hair once at a school function a while ago. Those things aren't cheap", Art inquired.

"Yeah.", Riley said, nodding his head and letting out a sigh "It was almost a month's worth of my allowance. But it was worth it."

"So you two have already been working together through this?" Art asked with an approving smile.

Each boy then moved to wrap an arm around the other's shoulder and smiled.

"Like I told you", Jason said. "Partners".

* * *

Later on that evening, Riley and his dad returned home together. As they entered the house, Abby and Paige were in the living room talking amongst ourselves.

"Oh!", Abby said with a start. "Our men are home!"

"So how was work, Mr. big grown man?", Paige asked Riley with a snarky tone and look

"Ha ha ha..." Riley said dejectedly.

"Funny you should mention that, Paige...", Art said as he turned and looked at Riley. "I was going to bring this up to you tomorrow, Matt, but since the topic is in the air: How would you feel about being an official intern at the office?"

Riley's eyes widened: "You mean like I'll actually be working there? With you?"

"That's essentially what you were going to be doing anyway. I could just make it more official. You would at least be able to get yourself to and from there"

"That sounds great! I'm really becoming a real live agent!"

"Calm down there, 'Dan Danger'..." Art said with a chuckle. "As long as I have some say in the matter, neither you nor you...well...co-worker will be doing anything even remotely close to what goes on in those spy novels of yours without my knowledge and close supervision."

"You said it yourself, Dad: You gotta start somewhere."

"Your enthusiasm is most admirable." Art said, nodding his head.

"Oh, Joy! Our little Matty is growing up! Tonight's dinner will be a celebratory one! Come everyone, the table is already set. Let's go!"

"Ha! We'll see just how much you celebrate when you see how much the 'man' takes out of your paycheck in taxes.", Paige sneered.

* * *

Later on, that evening. Riley was turning into bed thinking over the events of the past week

"Goodness", He thought to himself. "Jason being back...my dad leading a secret organization...me and Jason getting to name it...and now I work for it..."

Well, 'work' might have been a bit of a stretch, he relented. Riley has never had an actual 'job' before, but he had heard the term 'Intern' thrown around enough by adults or at least students older than him to understand that they weren't paid for their work. Though, he didn't quite know how that worked out.

"Well, that's something for another day at least", he thought as he genuinely laid his head down and closed his eyes.

"RILEY!!!" a voice shout out from the darkness.

Riley jumped out of bed startled. He noticed he was still in his room, but Jason was now with him. He looked to his bed to see himself still lying in it. He was back inside of Jason's head.

"Dude!", Riley said catching his breath. "What's going on?"

"Sorry, man. I just couldn't wait to tell you the good news!", Jason said with an ear-to-ear grin.

"What news?", Riley said with a confused look.

"We have our first mission!!!!"

Mad Money

"Well, I wouldn't call it a 'Mission', per se.", Dr. Rivers said as the group of four – Riley, Jason, Art and himself – were in the meeting room that next afternoon after school ended "The circumstances aren't quite that serious....I don't think...."

"Doc, let the boys have this.", Art pleaded. "They're living out childhood spy dreams here. I don't think it will hurt anything to refer to this matter as a 'Mission'; especially given that we do need them to take this matter seriously on some level, given its importance to us."

"Absolutely, Dad!" Riley exclaimed.

"A shot to do actual 'spy' stuff? We won't screw this up! No matter what!", Jason said with just as much enthusiasm.

"Very well.", Dr. Rivers relented. "This is your...um...mission...boys."

He stepped to the side of the screen behind him and pressed a button on a remote. A picture popped up on the screen of a man in a business suit walking out of a bank. His size, and facial features suggested that he might have been around Art's age; Perhaps younger.

"This is Edmond Walker", Dr. Rivers began to explain "He was one of the people responsible for helping to find the money to fund the creation of OpenSecret."

"Is that name for real now?", Riley asked. "Will this place really be called 'OpenSecret'? Nobody's going to try to change it later?"

"Technically, the motion regarding its official use is still on the table...", Art replied, "...but all signs point to it being approved. For all intents and purposes: We are OpenSecret."

"YEAH!", the two friends exclaimed while giving each other a high-five.

"Moving on....", Dr. Rivers said, "...Edmond here was responsible for securing the monies to fund the initial build and operation of this place. However, he got his hands on a sizable portion of our assets and then moved them into an account of his own without our knowledge."

"Wait a second....", Jason said, as he started to squint at the picture. "I think I've seen that guy walking around this place."

"Very astute of you, Jason.", Art said nodding his head. "He used to have an office here as part of our little collective. Though, he tended to keep to the matters of his own particular business. A month ago, he decided to move to another place in a nearby city."

"He stole from you guys and you just let him walk around this place free? And then walk out?", Jason said in a shocked tone. "Why didn't you head over to his office and bust him?"

"For starters: we had nothing to 'bust' him with.", Dr. Rivers said "We know what he did, but at the moment, we have no way to actually prove it. And even if we did have some solid evidence against him, an arrest would – at best – only put him behind bars and begin a very lengthy legal fight. We still wouldn't have the money he took and hid from us."

"At first..", Art further explained, "...it appeared that the money was lost in an gregariously incompetent investment purchase. The resulting shame and embarrassment from it is what Edmond cited as his reason for moving out of our co-op"

"After the fact, however, one of our other bean counters took a closer look at what Edmond had done and suggested that the investment Edmond made actually should have turned a sizable initial profit."

"So, he took the money, made it look as though he as lost it, but actually made MORE money with it?", Riley asked.

"Exactly", Art said nodding his head.

"But that don't make much sense", Jason said shaking his head. "Why would somebody make themselves look bad like that just for a some extra cash. Did he not care about his good name and reputation?"

"Our guess is that Edmond figured that his apparent folly wouldn't easily follow him outside of this place. Bear in mind, boys, when we were building this place, a good deal of effort went into making seem as if it didn't exist to begin with." Dr. Rivers said.

"Its hard to give someone who used to work here a bad review when you're trying to hide the fact that there's a 'here' to begin with.", Art added on.

"I think I get the gist of the situation...", Jason said with a bit a smile "....along with what you might want us to do about it, right?", he said as he turned to Riley?

"Right!", Riley said nodding his own head. "He stole the money from you guys, and you want to steal it back!"

"To clarify: He stole the money from *us*.", Art said. "That money belonged to OpenSecret. That now includes the two of you. That being said: That's the idea."

"So how exactly do we steal that much money from someone who is apparently better with money than we are?", Jason asked.

"Art and I were discussing the story the two of you told us about that trap you set for that Billy character at your school, Riley.", Dr. Rivers said. "We would like you to reprise your roles in that matter for this one."

"We figured that a perfect first job for the two of you would-be secret agents would be a job that you've technically already done", Art added in.

"But we only pulled that one off because I was able to get close to Billy and really look him over.", Riley said. "He was a student with me at my school. How do I get close to that Edmond guy to look him over?"

Art looked at his son and smiled: "I've already made arrangements that will take care of that"

Field Trip

The school bus finally pulled into the parking lot of the class' final destination: The Arch tower in Mayburg; one town over from his hometown, Percivalley. His teacher got out of the bus and spoke with a well dressed individual at the doors in front of them who seemed to have been awaiting their arrival. After a few minutes, she got back on the bus and greeted her class with a smile.

"Alright, everyone!", Miss Apple said with a smile. "One at a time; Left to right; Front to back. The tour guide is ready for us!"

Riley was at the very back of the bus, as instructed by his dad. Given what he needed to do for his part of the mission, he would have to spend the day trailing the group. As he finally stepped out of the bus, he looked up to see a shimmering blue windowed building reaching almost farther into a clear blue sky than he could look. In that very moment, the gravity of the situation started to hit him a little bit.

"That Edmond guy is in there somewhere.", Riley began to think to himself. "He has OpenSecret's money. And me and Jason are really going to help get it back?"

As he began to carefully walk towards his group while trying to take in the sheer size of the skyscraper, he started to think back to the deeper explanation of the plan, just to go over it one last time.

* * *

"As we said, you'll be doing just what you did before with Billy, Riley.", Art started to explain to himself and Jason. "Your school has been contacted and offered a small donation from our co-op here in exchange for their cooperation in setting up a trip to a nearby business building for a student tour. We sold it as an outreach program to get students interested in entrepreneurship."

"The building that Edmond has taken up his new professional residence in is called The Arch Tower over in Mayburg", Dr. Rivers continued. " Just try to imagine our city's office neighborhood of Riverview contained entirely in one building, and you'll have a pretty good idea of the place before you actually see it."

"The building normally offers tours to per-collegiate student groups only, but I was able to call in a favor with a friend I have over there in management to make a one-time exception for your class's visit.", Art continued. "I've asked him to also make arrangements to have the tour guide ensure that your group will pass near Edmond's office, but not actually go to it"

"Wait a sec.", Jason interrupted. "If that's the office that Riley has to get to so that I can get a mental picture of it and this Edmond guy out of him...why not have the tour group just go to his office as part of the tour?"

"That a fair question, Jason.", Art said, now directing his attention to him. "The short of it is that we can't make any of this look too obvious."Remember, Edmond will have just set up his office there and at this point, he must at least suspect that we know what he did with our money. To have a tour group of students from Percivalley make a beeline for his place so soon after he left ours would undoubtedly raise some alarms in his head."

"So Riley...", Dr. Rivers spoke, "...once you see where Edmond's office actually is, you will need to come up with a way to separate yourself from the group and head over to it. Once you get there, you will press the button on a small beacon box that we will give you and start to just look around. That is where Jason and Art will come in."

"Jason AND Dad?", Riley said.

"Remember a short while back when you woke up in my head thinking for a moment that I was Jason?" Art asked Riley "I told you that we had found a way to take a little bit of the stuff out of Jason's head that let's him do what he does, and administer it to others so that they could replicate the ability for a short while."

"Yeah, I remember all of that.", Riley said nodding his head.

"Well, this time around, me and one of our finance geeks are going to be with Jason on standby waiting for you signal. Once you send it, we'll all be put to sleep to get into his head and once he's able to make some kind of connection with you there and start to recreate the place himself, Jason will lead us to it so we can start to get some beads on what Edmond has and where."

"Man", Riley said. "Does it all have to happen that fast?"

"It really does, Riley.", Dr. Rivers confirmed. "Bank accounts are much more fluid than hair ribbons. And as Jason just allured to a few minutes ago: Edmond is *very* good with money. He can move it from one place to another very quickly with just a few keystrokes or phone calls. Once we figure out exactly where he has it at, we will need to move quickly to either drain those accounts or at least secure them so that he can no longer access the funds himself.

"It's like I said before", Art followed up. "This time, the trap has to be sprung in *real-time*."

* * *

"MATT!", Miss Apple shouted from just outside the building entrance. "C'mon! Keep up with the group"

As Riley began to jog forward, he dug into his pocket and pulled out a small black box with a yellow and red button on it. He pushed the yellow one which seemed to do nothing more but activate a light under it which now made the button glow in a slightly brighter shade of yellow.

"Okay", Riley said to himself while taking a deep breath. "If this thing is actually working, then they should know that I just arrived."

* * *

At that same moment, back at OpenSecret, a notification popped up on a screen that Art and Dr. Rivers were standing near while emitting a bell sound. They both turned to look at it, then looked at each other with determined faces.

"Alright, Riley is on stage. Its showtime!", Art said to Dr. Rivers.

The two of them ran a short ways down a hall to a room where Jason was lying partially upright in bed with a bunch of leads connected to his head. Near him, was Aaron holding a notepad and a pencil. Aside from the specific matter of the mission that was being ran, the scene was largely familiar to him.

"Matt just sent us the signal, Jason.", Dr. Rivers said. "He's entered the tower. Are you ready?"

"Sure", Jason replied in a calm tone. "To be honest, all of this don't feel much more like anything we already been doing."

"Don't knock it.", Art said. "Remember, none of us here are really spies or secret agents. This is just as new for us as it must have been for you and Riley when you were first tracking that Billy kid. Do you think that you can bring Aaron here inside with us?"

"Sure, but I thought that you were going to have some finance geek here?", Jason said.

"At the last minute, it occurred to us that any information we see in there we won't be able to just pull out. Aaron has the best memory of anyone here. What he sees, he'll be able to remember at least long enough to write it down as soon as he wakes up."

"Alright, let's do it."

Dr. Rivers pushed some buttons on a terminal that lowered Jason's bed all the way down. He then turned a vial from a drip bag that led into Jason's arm. In a few moments, he was asleep.

He then turned to Art and Aaron. "Alright boys, your turn."

The two men laid down on stretchers near Jason. Dr. Rivers slid a table next to Aaron's bed and sat his pencil and pad on it. Then Dr. Rivers quickly, but carefully pulled over two more drip bags, connected needles to them, and inserted one into each of their arms

"Godspeed, gentlemen.", he said as he opened the valves on the bags. Within moments, the two of them were asleep.

A few seconds later – or at least it felt like a few seconds to them – Art and Aaron woke up to find themselves on the floor of Riley's room. When they stood up, they saw Jason standing with them.

"Good, you're both here.", Jason said.

Aaron looked around a bit confused "Where are we?"

"This is Riley's room.", Art said looking just as confused, "Why are we here?"

"Its where we started from last time." Jason said. "You said that you wanted us to pretty much do everything that we did before to make this easy".

"Okay, Good.", Art said/ "So what happens now?"

" I can feel Riley already. I know where he's at. I also have an idea of what to look for in this Mason guy. As soon as he sees him, I'll be able to better feel him and get us into his head."

"And where exactly in his head are you going to take us?", Aaron asked

"Usually, I just get pulled into whatever place the person thinks about the most. I don't try to aim for any particular spot."

"Do you think that you could 'aim' for Edmond's office this time?"

"That shouldn't be a problem. Especially if Riley is going to be in it. We just need to wait on him now."

* * *

Nearly 45 minutes into the tour, Riley still had yet to see what he came to find. As instructed, he was keeping to the back of the group so that he could spend a little more time looking about his surroundings. He had all but zoned out the monotone script of their group's tour guide until he said something that caught his ear.

"...and as we turn this corner, just before we hit the lunch area where we will take our first break, you will see just above us the area that houses some of our building's newer tenants. The most recent one being 'Walker Securities'.

"Walker? Edmond Walker?!?!", Riley said as he looked up in the direction that the tour guide had noted.

On the level just above them, was an office that appeared to have been recently setup. There was a man out front on a small ladder who appeared to be installing the last letter of the word 'Securities' on the space over it. Inside, he could just make out the shape of an individual wearing something red just behind the main counter.

"That has to be the place!", Riley thought to himself. "But how do I get up there?"

After a few moments of deliberation, Riley decided that he would try to simply excuse himself to the bathroom and just make a scramble for the office. Once his group had settled into the break area he approached Miss Apple.

"Um, excuse me, Miss Ap-"

"Oh, Matt!", Miss Apple said with a grin. "Your father was so nice to set all of this up for us! I think we're all learning a lot today. When you next see him, could you send him my personal thanks?"

"Uh...Yeah...Sure..", Riley stuttered out. In that moment, he thought that this might be easier than he had anticipated. He took a gamble on a small change of tactics."

"Speaking of my Dad, Miss Apple...I noticed that one of his former buddies just opened up shop here...over at Walker Securities.", Riley said as he pointed in the direction of the office on the second floor, "Would it be alright if I just ran over and visited him really quick?"

Miss Apple looked up at the office for a few moments as if to be gauging the distance. "Well....I'm not supposed to let any of you get away from the group...but if its a friend of your fathers...and he did set all of this up. Sure, go on over, but don't linger too long. They probably doing some serious things in there and we'll be moving on soon."

"Thanks, Miss Apple", Riley said as he turned and immediately headed for his destination.

A few moments later, Riley stepped into the front of Walker Securities – making sure to carefully go around the erected step ladder – The front office still had plastic on some of the furniture and there were boxes of unopened tables and computers positioned in areas where they we're supposed to finally be. After a few moments of wondering what to do next, he remembered the small box he had been given by his dad.

He pulled it out and saw that the yellow button on it was still glowing a bright yellow. He pushed the red button it, which then turned off the light under the yellow one and now made the red button glow in a now brighter hue of yellow. Just as he put the box back in his pocket and started to look around more, he heard a high-pitched, almost childlike, voice come from behind him.

"Um...Like....what are YOU doing here, kid!"

Riley turned around to see a woman in front of him wearing a bright red blouse with a center opening that came halfway down her chest, a skirt that didn't seem to be much longer than his gym shorts, and heels with bottoms that were unusually thick. She had flowing blonde hair that rested and stopped just below her shoulders on each side, and red lipstick so glossy that it seemed to reflect some of the light in the room.

Riley was trying to register what was standing in from of him. By all accounts, it looked like a living, life-sized version of one of the dolls his sister Paige used to keep in her room, but a part of him was struggling to wrap his head around that.

"I....um...I'm....I was lookin...", Riley stuttered

"Look kid!", the woman said. "I don't know where you came from, but you need to get out of here bef-"

"CINDY!", came another voice from behind Riley. "Where are you? Its time for my noon blow-"

As Riley then turned around again, he saw a man step from a hallway leading deeper into the office. He was in a dark suit with a red tie. Riley immediately recognized him as Edmond Walker. The man he had come to inspect. He stopped and looked at Cindy for a moment before noticing the boy in front of him

"Oh! Mr. Walker!", Cindy said with a start. "I...I...just got here and I found this kid in your office. I was just about to...."

"Shush!", Edmond said as he raised a hand to Cindy's face while looking down and staring at Riley for a moment with thinned eyes and a bristled brow. After a few moments, a sly – almost insidious – grin grew on his face.

"Ha ha ha HA!", Edmond said with a start, clapping his hands together. "Field trip my FUCKING ASS!"

"Mr. Walker?", Cindy said, tilting her head to the side with a confused look on her face.

Edmond looked up at her. "Cindy, go back to whatever you were doing for another half hour or so. I'll take care of this."

"But Mr. Walker?", Cindy started to say with a dejected tone. "What about your blow-"

"CINDY!!!", Edmond said, cutting her off while raising a hand again. "Later. We'll talk about that later when you get back. Just go. Now!"

"Yes, Sir!", and with that, the woman immediately turned around and scurried out the door and down the walkway as quickly as her unusually shaped heels would allow her to move.

Edmond's and Riley's eyes met once again. Riley was still just at a loss for words in standing in front of Edmond as he was a few seconds ago standing in from of that woman.

"I....er....sir....I mean....". Riley stuttered again.

"Save it, *Matt!*", Edmond said with a smile.

Riley's eyes widened. "You...you know who I am?"

"I know who you are, I know who probably sent you, and I know what you're doing here!" Edmond said, maintaining his sly grin.

Confrontation

"WHOA! WHAT THE HE-", Aaron exclaimed as he turned his head to see Edmond standing next to him in the mental space of Riley's room that – just a moment ago – had only consisted of himself, Art and Jason.

Art and Jason turned to see the new fourth party that had joined them. Seemingly standing quietly and staring into space.

"What is this?", Art said with a bit of a bewildered look on his face.

"Oh man! Its Riley!", Jason said with a sense of shock in his voice. "He's somehow gotten to that Edmond guy. I can sense them both now! They're coming in loud and clear!"

"Oh...well..good!", Aaron said taking some steps back from the apparent doppelganger of their current adversary. "I mean...this is good...right?"

"Well....it is...but....", Jason started to say, sounding a bit shaken "...the way I'm feeling that guy....Its about as strong as I first felt Billy. But that was only because Riley was able to get right in front of him! They must be together, RIGHT now! You think he's in trouble?"

"If he is...", Art started to say, "...the sooner we do our part, the sooner we can get him out of it. Can you jump us into his head, Jason? Some part with his office?"

"Y...Yeah! I got it!", Jason said closing his eyes to ready himself.

"Office....office....office....", Jason started to whisper to himself as he snapped his fingers. As before the room started to spin into a whirlwind of random objects changing from one thing to another showing that they were on their way.

* * *

Edmond had grabbed Riley by his bag and dragged him down the hall he had came from into a large office in the back with a large glass desk. He goes behind his desk, fumbles around in one of his drawers and pulls out a large black stick with a switch on it. As he flips the switch, the stick begins to emit a small but noticeable hum. Edmond stands over Riley and waves the stick over his body a few times until he notices that it gets louder as it passes over his pocket.

He digs into Riley's pocket and pulls out the small box that was given to him by his dad back at OpenSecret. He examines it for a minute, drops it to the ground and forcefully stomps a foot over it, completely breaking it. Finally, He pushes Riley into a chair on one side of his desk and then takes a seat in a larger chair on the other side, continuing to grin from ear to ear.

"Well, this is just something!", Edmond said. "I figured that Art and the rest of his nerd buddies back at that wannabe conglomerate would try to follow behind me somehow, but

this? The man's sends his son to come – hidden inside of a 'special field trip' – to try and spy on me? I don't know if I should be more amused or insulted!"

Riley, clearly seeing that his cover has been at least halfway blown, decides to confront Mason on the matter, hoping that the conversation will at least keep him there for a bit longer while Jason and his dad do their thing.

"They know about what you did, y'know!", Riley shouted over the desk. "You took that money from them making it look like you lost it when you really didn't!"

"Oohhhhhh!", Edmond replied in a condescending tone. "Sherlock Holmes, junior, thinks he's gotten to the bottom of the case, huh? Tell me something, kid: Exactly how did this day – this particular moment – play out inside of the little fantasy world in your head, huh? Did you think that you were going to get me on that little recorder of yours incriminating myself? Or get into my computer here and find some 'smoking gun' that show that I did something? Would you even know what to look for?"

Little did Edmond know that – for Riley at least – his part of that day was playing out exactly as it needed to. He just needed to hope that his dad and friend back home were doing just as well

* * *

Once the spinning around the three of them had subsided, Jason, Art and Aaron found themselves in a large office area with a glass desk that had two chairs on either side of it and a computer sitting on top. The three started to visually skim the place to get their bearings.

"Is this his new office?", Aaron asked.

"It's gotta be.", Jason replied. "You said you wanted an office that he thinks about. I tried to home in on an office he thinks about."

"But there's hardly anything here. Nothing to look at", Aaron said disappointingly.

"It would make sense.", Art chimed in. "He's probably still getting himself setup over that at the arch tower."

"So what now?", Aaron asked.

"Jason....", Art said turning to him, "...Is there any way that you can read Edmond mind for information on bank accounts, anything he might have looked at or setup in the past few months?"

"Ill try", Jason said. He closed his eyes for a moment and stood silently. A few seconds later, a set of boxes materialized on the table in the room, seemingly out of thin air."

"Whoa!", Aaron said. "This is just too cool!"

"I just thought of the words 'Edmond' and 'Bank accounts'. That's what's currently in his head that he's recently thought about."

"Nice one, Jason", Art said patting him on the back "Aaron. We need to start searching. Fast!"

* * *

Meanwhile, back at the actual office, Riley was still trying to buy some extra time and perhaps still get Mason to – somehow – incriminate himself.

"But why?", Riley asked in a pleading tone. "My dad and everyone back at Ope...I mean...their company...they were just trying to help each other; to help people. They didn't deserve to be robbed!"

"I never said, nor implied, that they did.", Edmond replied. "I simply saw a chance to get some extra capital to turn a profit on and I took it. Plain and simple."

"Plain and simple?", Riley said.

"In my line of work: If you wanna win? you gotta be an animal. When animals get hungry, they look for food. When they find food, they EAT! They don't waste time wondering if their food deserves to be eaten. Even a youth such as yourself should know that much about the natural order and the food chain and all of that"

"So we're just animals? We're not people?", Riley challenged.

"People are nothing more than highly advanced animals, at the end of the day." Edmond responded "We come up with ways to sugarcoat our animal nature, but we still have it. Same as any other living animal you could find out in the wild"

Riley wanted to respond, but the more he thought about it, the more he had to admit that what Edmond said made a certain sense; if said sense was still perverse and dark in nature.

"I'll tell you what", Edmond said in a smug, triumphant tone. "You had to grow a pretty big pair to come here like this, and you shouldn't leave empty handed. *Allegedly*, you came on this trip to learn about business. I'm going to teach you something about business."

Edmond turned to his computer screen, typed away at some keys for a few minutes and then turned the screen around to Riley so that he could see it. What was in front of him was a bunch of letters and numbers and dates that all otherwise looked like alphabet soup to him. Though, there were three parts of it that seemed to make some sense to him: A company name: "AIX Holdings"; An account number that seemed to be longer than the alphabet itself; and a balance that read as \$250,000 with a deposit date that seemed to coincide with the time that Edmond would have left the newly minted OpenSecret.

"You see this, Matty boy?", Edmond said waving his hand under the screen. "This is what we in the finance biz call an: Off-shore....Bank....Account. It's where you put money when you want to hide it from lots of people."

"Offshore...bank....", Riley started to repeat, "....You mean like a Swiss bank account?"

"The Swiss get all of the press and attention, thanks to movies and what not, but they're not the only ones who can do it."

"Is that the money you took from the company?", Riley said while pointing to the balance.

Edmond again smiled a devilish grin. "They're funds that I recently...acquired...if you will...from a past engagement. I think I'm going to leave it at that."

and with that he turned off the computer monitor.

"....and now all of that juicy information is gone. And you can't find it or prove that its anywhere to be found!

* * *

Art and Aaron continued to scan and glean the pages in the boxes on the table. All they seemed to be finding were documents related to the creation and staging of Edmond's new private company. Nothing about the work he did on the behalf of OpenSecret.

"Its like we're looking for a needle in a stack of needles. Any one of these docs could be what we need!"

"Keep looking!", Art insisted. "There has to be something here we can use."

Just out of the corner of his eye, Jason noticed the screen on the computer near him brighten and come to life. As he turned his attention to it, he saw the very same information on it that Riley was looking at from within the actual office.

"What the hell?", Jason said while looking at the numbers and images appearing on the screen. "Hey! Mr. Art, Mr. Aaron! Come check this out!"

Art ran over and looked at the screen. He examined it for a moment and then started to smile.

"Yes....YES....this is what we need! Jason, are you doing this?"

"Me? No!", Jason said shaking his head. "Edmond must have just recently looked at that information or is looking at it right now while he is with Riley, for some reason."

"Aaron! get over here and start studying this. Memorize as much as you can while its here."

Aaron jumped over to the screen and started to run a finger along it while murmuring to himself a bit "Okay...lets see...AIX....22365....Routing....Transfer code....YES! I have everything we should need to at least bring up the record on the outside."

"Alright then!", Art said as he raised a hand to snap his own finger. "We're all outta here!"

* * *

"MATT! There you are!", Miss Apple said coming into the front door of Walker Securities at the same time that Edmond was leading Riley out. "Oh! I told you not to linger too much!". She then directed her attention to Edmond. "Sir, I'm really sorry about this! I hope he didn't cause you any trouble."

Edmond continued to beam a sick grin. "Oh, he was no trouble at all! He had some very enthusiastic questions about how businesses operate and I was just too happy to enlighten him on the matter! I wish he could stay longer. I'm sure there's a lot more I could teach him."

"Oh, thank goodness! Come now, Matt! We need to get back to the tour!", she said as she directed Riley out of the office.

Edmond stood there for a moment before turning his attention to Cindy who had been sitting behind her desk, quietly watching on.

"Cindy? Please secure this front area and meet me in the back in 10 minutes. I think its time now for our daily meeting".

Family Affair

As soon as school ended that day, Riley rushed from the bus to the courier car that had regularly awaited him now to take him straight to his new job.

"Driver! Step on it. Please!", he said as he blindfolded himself and buckled up into the back.

"My word!", The driver replied. "Might I ask what the rush is today?"

"I just finished my first job, but I don't know if it's actually finished! We have to get to the office!"

* * *

Riley honestly couldn't tell if the car had been moving any faster than it normally did, but somehow it seemed as if the trip had taken a little less time than usual. As soon as he heard the notification that the car had stopped in the elevator well, he immediately jumped out to see the open door into the main hallway with his dad, Jason, Aaron and Dr. Rivers waiting for him.

"Guys!", He said as he ran to them. "Did we do it?!?"

"We did!", Aaron said, enthusiastically patting Riley's shoulder. "We all did! Good show, man!"

"I felt that Edmond guy, loud and clear!", Jason added in. "Were you actually with him?!?"

"Yeah!", Riley exclaimed. "I saw his office!.....And I went into it!.....and I saw this *really* weird looking woman!....And then he caught me!....And I got searched!....And it was kinda scary, but then it was cool!.....and...."

"Alright! Alright! Everybody calm down!", Art said raising his hands in front of everyone. "It looks like we all had a good day and a solid 'Mission Accomplished'. We need to sit down and get our stories straight on what happened and when. Let's all head to the meeting room"

* * *

The rest of that afternoon was spent with the group of five carefully going over the past events of the day, one hour at a time and starting from when Riley got to the Arch tower. Riley recounted his arrival at Edmond's office, which started with him meeting Edmond's assistant Cindy and then subsequently being dragged into the back where he and Edmond himself had their exchange. Then Jason, Art and Aaron went back over their part of the events where they had jumped into Edmond's head and then began to search through the files that represented

his mental memories of his bank accounts until they hit upon the information that showed up on that screen near them

"So, he actually showed you that account information on his computer screen.", Dr. Rivers asked Riley.

"Yep! He pretty much shoved it right in my face.", Riley excitedly responded. "I guessed he figured that I wouldn't be able to make heads-or-tails of it myself. Well...now that I think of it...I guess he was right since looking back I didn't really know what I was looking at, but it looked like what we we're all looking for so I just focused on it as hard as I could and tried to keep him talking about it for a bit. I hoped that you guys would see it and be able to do something with it."

"Oh boy! Did we EVER do something with that information!", Aaron said. "As soon as your dad and I woke up...I scribbled that information down as fast as I could and took it over to the boys in finance. Apparently, We weren't Edmond's first mark. He had ran the same hustle on about five other organizations before he got to ours. Its a wonder that nobody else caught on to him."

Art then chimed in. "That dummy company he made – AIX Holdings – It was tied to several bank accounts that he was apparently using to hide his ill gotten assets."

"But WE have the money now, right?", Jason asked "It all ours?"

"We have access to it, yes.", Art responded. "A backdoor of sorts was made so that we can easily get to it ourselves without Edmond knowing. Also, if he tries to move it again, we'll be able to see where he sends it. That being said, we're not going to claim all of it for ourselves. In fact, we won't even be taking back the whole of the portion that he stole from us."

"WHAT?!?!", both Riley and Jason said in unison.

"Calm down. Let me explain", Art said "Riley, remember when you said that you had all but completely spent a month's worth of your savings on that duplicate ribbon to fool that Billy kid into thinking that you had gotten access to his hidden space? But you still felt that the loss was worth it because it served the bigger purpose of making sure that Billy got caught?"

"Yeah?", Riley said.

"Well, we're going to be doing something similar to Edmond. We'll take back enough of our money to make sure that we stay solvent for a good while, but the boys in Finance have a plan to make sure that the right people know to take a look at AIX holdings, see where all of its money came from, and – most importantly – that "Walker Securities" is the company behind the company.

"The more money that Edmond is caught with, The more trouble he gets brought down on his head!" Aaron said while punching his fist into his hand.

"Its as Art said earlier, boys", Dr. Rivers concluded. "Mission Accomplished."

"YES!", the two of them again said in unison while giving each other a high-five.

At that moment, a brief knock came at the meeting room door.

"Come in?" Art said.

The door opened and three men entered into the room all wearing similar suits.

"Mr. Art? We are from Percivalley Child Protective Services. We're here to discuss the matter of one Robert Michaels?

"You're right on time. We all were just wrapping up. Aaron, Dr. Rivers, could you excuse us?"

"Of course", Dr. Rivers said. With that, he and Aaron began to make their way out of the room.

Riley started to get up and follow them. "I guess I'd better head out myself."

"Actually, Matt...", Art said stopping him. "You should stay. This conversation actually concerns you as well.

Riley turned to look at the three men in the room, and then his dad.

"It does?", He said with a perplexed face.

* * *

Later on that evening, Riley and Art returned home to Abby sitting in the living room, quietly reading a magazine.

"Honey! We're home!". Art yelled.

"Art! Matt! How was your latest father-son day at work?"

Riley and his dad looked at each other and smiled

"It was exciting!", Riley said looking at his mom. "Dad and I got to work on a project together!"

"Its hush-hush, though.", Art added in. "You know how they are at the office"

"Well, I'm glad to hear that your day went so well. I have everything ready for our usual family dinner for us!

"Yeah...about that....", Art said. "Where's Paige?"

"Right here!", Paige said appearing from around a corner. "Whats going on with you two?"

Again, Riley and Art looked at each other for a moment and smiled. "Well, Matt and I have a question we'd like to ask the two of you."

"You two have something to ask us?", Abby said as she looked at Paige. "Well, what's that?"

Art turned around and stepped outside for a moment. After a couple of minutes, Jason entered through the door with Art right behind him. Abby and Paige looked at him for a few moments before the resemblance started to kick in.

"Heyyy, I remember you!", Paige started. "You're that weirdo who used to live nearby and always weird -it-up with Matty."

"Yes...YES. I remember too!", Abby chimed in. "You we're Ruby and Marcus' boy. You all went on that vacation a few months ago. Are you finally back?"

"Not quite", Art said "The 'vacation' was a bit of a cover story concocted by Rob's now former parents. They abandoned him and disappeared to parts unknown. There's a warrant out for their arrest, but nobody expects to find them. Its presumed that they have left the country."

"Oh my!", Abby said with a shock.

"Well, that sucks!", Paige added in, "You may be an oddball, but you shouldn't have been ditched like that."

"Well, Art honey, who is taking care of him now?"

"Well that's the question: Matt and I wanted to know how the two of you would feel about him becoming a part of our family?"

"Our family?", Abby said "You mean as in tonight?"

"Well, he wouldn't be moving in tonight." Art said "The legal procedures in this matter say that he needs to stay in the custody of CPS until all of the paperwork and procedures are finalized, but I have some friends in the system who say that all of that won't be a problem for us if we're really willing to take him in"

"Oh! You poor boy! I never was sure about those parents of yours! Of course we'll take you in! You'll be loved just as much as Matty. Our *two* sons!"

"Wait a second.....", Paige inquired with a raised eye and skeptical tone. "Where exactly is he going to sleep when he actually moves in? Last I counted, this was a three bedroom house and Matt's bedroom is basically a box!"

"I thought you'd ask that Paige.", Art said with a smile. "I've decided to relent to your repeated requests to have an apartment of your own when you start at the community college in the fall. Even with the adoption process being expedited for us, it will still take a few months

anyway. Once you head out, Robbie here would take your room. For your first two years at college, your rent and utilities – even your cable and internet – will be on me."

At that point: Paige smiled, kneeled down and wrapped her arms tightly around Jason.

"WELCOME TO THE FAMILY, ROBBIE!!!!", Paige said emphatically.

* * *

A few evenings later, Riley's newly expanded family of five was settling in front of the TV for the family movie night. Jason was setup for a one-weekend sleepover with Riley in his room. As they all circled around the large tub of popcorn, and snacks on the coffee table, Abby scooted to the TV and cued up what looked to be a saved episode of "The Fifth Estate"

"No movie tonight, dear?", Art said in a confused tone.

"I've picked the movie...but we'll get to that afterwards. I HAVE to see the end of this episode I saved!!!"

She took her place on the couch beside Art and pushed play. The saved episode roared into action

Riley and Jason looked at each other, shook their heads and silently said in unison:

"Oh, Brother."

Epilogue - Estate Dispute

"Enough!!!" Ryan said in a thunderous tone that echoed through the main hall of the mansion. "You and your fledgling unborn hellspawn that you call a child will not darken this place with your shadows any longer!!!" Ryan drew his rapier from his side and pointed it at Brooke.

"Hellspawn?!?! Shadows?!?! HOW. DARE. YOU!!! ARTHUR!!!" She exclaimed to the butler as she held out her hand.

The butler stepped forward and handed Brooke a rapier of her own. As he stepped back, She brandished the weapon with a few twirls in one hand while carefully securing her belly with her other. Finally she pointed it at Ryan with a hateful look

Thompson, the legal representative of the McCormick estate looked on at the scene of the two half -siblings – swords drawn – seeming to await some cue to begin their efforts to dispatch one another.

"So, I take it that the two of you wish to engage in an expulsion duel?" Thompson said, looking at them both

"YES! First Royal Blood!" Ryan shouted towards Thompson before directing his attention to Brooke "and don't you think for one second that I will give EITHER of you over there any quarter, WOMAN!"

"Oh, PLEASE!!!" Brooke exclaimed "You're about to see, just as I showed your 'Jackal' that I may be WITH child but I am NOT without the ability to defend myself!!!"

"Then it is decided..." Thompson said "The boundaries of this duel shall be the diameter of the McCormick crest the two of you currently stand in. As the legal representative of the estate, I shall referee. My two assistants and the house butler, Arthur, shall bear witness. The first to be wounded by the other will be immediately dismissed from the McCormick estate and have all McCormick related assets, finances and holdings seized. Agreed?"

"AGREED!!!", the two of them shouted.

Thompson and his assistants stepped backwards beyond the inner area of the crest. He raised his arm, looked at the two combatants for a moment, and then swiftly dropped it

"BEGIN!", He exclaimed.

"DIIIIIEEEEE!!!!", exclaimed Ryan.

"KNAAAAAVE!!!!", shouted Brooke.

The two lunged at each other, but stopped just at the ends of their weapons overlapped. For the next few minutes, they tapped and teased at each other waiting to find an opening in

the others defense. As they both had formal weapons training at the same finishing school, by all accounts they were otherwise evenly matched. The fact that Brook was managing to keep such pace with Ryan at all – even in the term of a pregnancy – was no small testament to her resolve to outdo her half-brother.

"HA! Ill bet you thought you we're just going to have your way with me, huh?" Brooke gleefully chided.

Ryan lowered his rapier and turned his nose up at Brook "Dear woman, I have FAAARRR to much respect for myself to tolerate...Sloppy Sevenths!"

Brooke's mouth dropped and her face became red with rage.

"RYYYYAAANNNN!!!" She screamed at she just threw herself and her weapon forward at Ryan.

"BROOOKKKEEEEE!!!" Ryan screamed as he also lunges into a kamikaze attack of his own almost a split second later.

The two of them – blades pulled back – came within striking distance of each other and swung at one another with all of the strength they could muster.

The two then fell to the floor each sliding just to the opposite edge of the crest playing field on the floor. Almost immediately, they both got up turned around and repositioned themselves in their original stalemate positions they had initially started the fight with, but gasping heavily for breath. As they each began to reassess their positions to look for another attack to make on one another....it happen.

A small tear opened on the side of Ryan suit, which then became slightly red with blood.

At the exact same time, a slit of red ran alongside Brooke's left face and started to drip with blood.

The wounds were hardly mortal – or even serious for that matter – but they were clearly enough for Thompson to bring the duel to a close.

"STOP!" Thompson chided. "This expulsion duel has ended.

Brooke put a hand up to her scar and examined the blot of blood that it left in her hand.

"My face! MY FACE! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!?! Brooke shouted at Ryan.

"Less than I would, if only I could!" Ryan exclaimed. "You heard Thompson! This duel is OVER!!!"

"What?!?! What of you? You are struck as well!"

One of Thompson's assistants stepped forward and spoke: "I bear witness that they were both struck and injured; at once and the same!"

Then Thompson's second assistant stepped forward and spoke: "I concur!"

Thompson looked at both of his witnessed and nodded his head: "I concur as well. I also witnessed both injuries showing at the same. Each of you has drawn first royal blood from the other!"

"What?" Ryan said looking at Brooke as they both shared a brief moment of solidarity, if in confusion "That...that cant be! There has to be a winner here!"

Thompson shook his head "I am sorry, Master Ryan and Miss Brooke, but the terms of this contest were clear: The first to be wounded by the other would be immediately dismissed from the McCormick estate and have all of their related assets, finances and holdings seized. As myself and my associates have borne witness to each of you being wounded in equal time by the other, It is my judgment as the referee that both of you have lost this duel. As such, both of you shall be expelled from the estate. Immediately.

Again, both Ryan and Brooke share in a moment of equal shock and dismay as they look at each other, wondering what just happened, and what comes next.

Narrator: Oh no! Ryan's plan backfires! He gets Brooke kicked out of the estate, but now he is also kicked out as well? What happens now? Find out! Next Time! As we ask you...our lovely viewers to join us once again at....THE FIFTH ESTATE!!!!

* * *

"DAMN! THAT! BROOKE!!!!" Abby screams as she jumps to her feet and flips the table with the snacks on it and throws the remote at the screen, causing it to crack; much to the shock of everyone at the couch "I swear to go----I HATE HER!!! I have to call Peggy!", she exclaims as she races upstairs to her bedroom

"I better call Anita.", Paige says as she gets up and starts to head to her room. "I can just here her going nuclear over this as well"

Riley, Jason and Art look at the carnage left before them in the front room.

"That....was....kinda...halfway cool!", Jason said.

"Yeah", Riley said while nodding his head. "I think I could get into this "Fifth Estate" stuff.

sigh "I'm surrounded", Art says as he buries his face into his hands and shakes his head.

About The Author



Yardell Perkins is a freelance web and software developer who currently lives in Philadelphia, PA, USA. He spends most of his time managing and working in his private development studio, Perkitech (<https://perkitech.com>). In the moments when he can actually drag himself away from his work, he likes to read, exercise, and inspire others to become the best versions of themselves by striving to be the best version of himself and serving as a living example.

If you're interested in following along on his occasional mis-adventures, he usually floats about on Instagram ([instagram.com/perkitech](https://www.instagram.com/perkitech)). Facebook ([facebook.com/perkitech](https://www.facebook.com/perkitech)) and Twitter (twitter.com/perkitech)? Not as much as he probably could stand to, but he's increasing his presence in those places as well.

Comments / Donations

If you've made it this far, I'd just like to say thank you for taking the time you managed to find from your own world to explore the one I created in these pages. I really enjoyed the process of creating this from start to finish and I hope that I was able to make the end product worth your time.

If you would like to share any thoughts you may have on what you liked, or perhaps *didn't* like, about the book. You can send your comments directly to me at:

aboutthatbook@fastmail.com

I'm planning on doing more of this and would like to get a sense of what I should respectively consider doing more, or less, of in the future.

If you found any interest or value in this book, a small donation of even just \$1USD would be appreciated at the following link:

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Again: Thanks for reading.