

*Jumpst*r*

22½

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In the year 2000, a devastating U.S. market crash occurred; a black market crash. Many had predicted that security systems would malfunction during the transition to the millennium, thereby providing easy access to valuable items; this would not be the case. On the eve of the second millennium, over a thousand thieves across America were arrested, injured, or left for dead. With so many out of work, the product availability on the black market nearly vanished. After the crash, the leaders of organized crime realized they would need to unite in order to survive. Thus, the Grand Larceny League or the GLL was formed. This underground league would feature teams of professional thieves competing with each other to see who could steal the most items. This story is about the greatest thief ever to compete in that league.

Every thief ends up stealing from himself

-unknown

Chapter 1

I cannot believe you got caught.

“What do you mean?”

Phyllis glared at Cort. “You got caught. You’ve been a pro thief for nine years and you got caught. For *jaywalking*.”

“It was a mistake,” Cort said. “I’m not allowed to make mistakes?”

“If you got caught shoplifting or carjacking, I could understand, but jaywalking? And on top of that, you’re in a jail cell at the police station.”

“Um, I hate to point out the obvious, but you’re in here with me.”

Phyllis Jamison had seen the inside of a jail cell over a hundred times but never for a jaywalking charge. Cort still had much to learn at thirty-six years old, but Phyllis had turned fifty-

three this past week. She should have been more careful.

Jaywalking is generally considered harmless; unless it causes a seven car pileup. Hours earlier, Cort completely ignored the cluster of cars racing down Madison Avenue. One of those cars happened to belong to a police officer. Phyllis had the unfortunate luck of walking right beside Cort. They were now sitting in a jail cell with twenty other unlucky patrons.

A beam of moonlight shined through the cell's barred window, reminding Phyllis how much time had passed. Of all the days to get arrested, today was the worst. The Chicago based police station was presently having their annual party at a downtown hotel. The station only had half a dozen backup officers operating inside the building. Processing Cort and Phyllis into the legal system was not a high priority at the moment.

“What should we do?” Cort asked. “If I get another conviction on my record, I'll be put away for at least a year.”

“We have bigger problems than that,” Phyllis replied. “We can’t miss the midnight meeting for the GLL. If we’re going to make it, we have to leave soon.”

“I agree, but we’re not exactly in a flexible situation,” Cort said. He scratched his neatly trimmed beard as he tried to figure out a plan. “If the cops didn’t take my tools, we would have been out of here twenty minutes ago.”

Phyllis took out a small piece of black stationary. “Everyone has probably arrived at the Hancock Center,” she said. “We can’t let the quality prospects leave Chicago. This year has to be different.”

“We’re going to be limited salary-wise,” Cort pointed out. “I doubt we can sign any guaranteed contracts tonight. Even if we do, we’d have to restructure the budget. I don’t know how much room we have left with our salary cap.”

The idea of cheap spending did not appeal to Phyllis.

“Considering that we need to recruit three more thieves, we’re already behind schedule,” she said. “New York, LA, and Detroit are all actively seeking new recruits with high paying contracts. We should be doing the same.”

“Either way, we first have to find a way out of here,” Cort said, leaning against the cell wall. “If we’re processed, the lawyers will get involved. We can’t get into this kind of trouble before the season even starts.”

“Then we leave before then,” Phyllis said. “We’ll get out of this police station before they send us to court.”

“How?” Cort asked. “If we bust out, all these other guys will leave too. It’ll be a madhouse.”

“We don’t have a choice,” Phyllis said. “When the next person opens our cell, we’ll make a run for it. We have to attend that meeting.”

“That’s not a very graceful plan.”

“All right, then what do you—”

“What is wrong with your fingers?”

Phyllis and Cort stopped their conversation and looked out of their cell. They overheard an officer voicing his frustration. In front of the desk sergeant, a young man barely out of high school was sitting down with his hands on the table. The police sergeant tried placing ink on the young man’s fingers but something wasn’t right.

“You have tattoos on your fingertips,” the sergeant muttered. “Why do you have tattoos on your fingertips?”

“So I don’t have to wear gloves.”

The sergeant frowned. "Your fingertips are covered in red circles. How am I supposed to record your fingerprints?"

The young man shrugged. "I don't see the problem. That's a good thing. Less work."

"What's your name?" the desk sergeant asked.

"Emerson Jay."

"Do you have any identification?"

"Nope," Emerson said. "Do you?"

"Stop that," the sergeant said. "I'm the one asking questions."

"Sorry."

The desk sergeant looked over Emerson, trying to get a read on him. Emerson didn't particularly have the look of a hardened criminal. The desk sergeant thumbed through the police report

for Emerson. Phyllis leaned into the bars of the jail cell and listened in.

“You were brought in for public urination,” the sergeant said, reading over a clipboard. “This report says you peed on a police officer.”

“To be fair, he urinated on me first,” Emerson said.

“You peed on a police dog,” the desk sergeant growled.

“That would be a true statement.”

“This might be a little harsh, but you’re going to stay in our jail cell for tonight,” the sergeant said. “You need to straighten up.”

“Can’t this wait? I have a meeting to get to. I promise I’ll come back later.”

“A meeting at this hour? It’s eleven o’clock at night.”

“My meeting’s at midnight,” Emerson said. “I really can’t miss it.”

“Well, you don’t have a choice,” the sergeant replied. “You’re going to spend time in a cell until a lawyer shows up for you.”

“You’re making a mistake,” Emerson said.

“We’ll see.”

The desk sergeant guided Emerson into the same cell containing Phyllis and Cort. The barred door closed and Emerson walked to the center of the crowded cell. He bent over and brushed the dust off his green shoes. Both shoes had a black star stitched into the side. No brand name or logo appeared to be anywhere on the shoes. Emerson Jay examined everyone in the cell and sniffed the air.

“So, I have to leave this police station and get to a meeting,” Emerson said loudly. “Who wants to come with me?”

A brief pause. Then, laughter. The inmates spent the next minute laughing uncontrollably at Emerson.

“Nice try, kid.”

“If you want to sound tough, find another place to do it.”

“That was a pretty good joke.”

Phyllis and Cort sat uncomfortably in front of Emerson. They needed to attend the same meeting. Even if they volunteered to join Emerson, what could he do for them? They were all trapped inside the same jail cell. No reasonably intelligent person would fall for this ridiculous offer.

“I’ll go with you,” a voice said.

Phyllis turned around. The voice belonged to a tall black man sitting on the floor. He wore a sleeveless shirt, revealing a

solid physique. He towered over the other cellmates, dwarfing them with his massive build. The man stood up and approached Emerson.

“If you can get me out, I’ll do whatever you want. The name’s Boden Campbell.”

“I’m Emerson. What’d you do to get in here?”

“It’s what I didn’t do,” Boden replied. “I have about two thousand unpaid parking tickets on my record. The cops won’t let me go until I pay them off.”

“Rough,” Emerson commented. “If I get you out, will you join my team?”

“Sure,” Boden replied. “I have to get my guitar case first, but I’ll definitely join you.”

“Great,” Emerson said. He turned to the rest of the room.

“Anyone else?”

In the far corner, a small girl with red hair fumbled in her seat. She wore a tattered shirt and jeans, unwashed and torn. She raised her hand before speaking. "Um, can I come with you? I should be able to join your team."

"That's fine," Emerson said. "What are you in jail for?"

"I was caught spending the night inside a furniture store," the girl answered. "Actually, I slept there every night for a month. I had nowhere else to stay."

"I can't believe they locked you up for that," Emerson said. "What's your name?"

"Rose Delane. Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise," Emerson said. "All I need is two more."

Phyllis let out a laugh. She couldn't stay silent anymore. "How do you plan on leaving?" she asked. "What can you do that we can't?"

“Don't compare yourself with me, lady,” Emerson sneered.
“You and I aren't on the same level.”

Phyllis scoffed at the remark. She had trouble believing this kid was even half as tough as he sounded. However, Cort seemed more receptive.

“What meeting do you have to attend?” Cort asked.

“It's a meeting for the Grand Larceny League,” Emerson replied. “I'm going to become a pro thief.”

Cort smiled through his beard. “You're an amateur. What makes you think you have a chance of making it?”

Emerson shrugged. “I have nothing to lose by trying.”

“The GLL isn't that easy,” Cort said. “You need a determined team to back you up. In the past ten years, no one from Chicago has even made the league playoffs.”

“My team will,” Emerson said. “Any team that follows me will win a championship. All I need is the opportunity.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Phyllis said to Cort. “We need to find a real way of getting out of here.”

“Will you two join me if I get us all out?” Emerson asked. “A full team needs five members.”

Considering the desperate situation, Cort had to admit the offer was tempting. Normally he would try to escape himself, but there was a time restriction. Emerson was their only option now. “Fine, it’s a deal,” he said. “Do your thing, but do it now. We have less than an hour till the meeting kicks off.”

“Got it,” Emerson said. “Remember, I expect you to keep your promise.”

“I’ll remember when you get us out.”

Emerson reached into his back pocket. "I'll need something before I begin," he said. Emerson pulled out a folded orange baseball cap from his back pocket. He flexed the white-striped bill several times before putting it on. "Now I'm ready."

"What a joke," Phyllis muttered.

Emerson stepped back and tapped his shoes on the ground. He bounced up and down on his toes, jumping in a smooth fashion. The soles of his shoes tapped the jail cell floor lightly and in rhythm. Phyllis was about to turn away but noticed something. Emerson's green shoes were *changing*. At first Phyllis thought it was a strange angle, but the shoes had a flicker of light to them. The black stars on the side of the shoes turned into a hot white glare. Emerson jumped higher and higher until his baseball cap grazed the ceiling of the cell. With each successive jump, the green shoes shined brighter with a blazing light.

"An imbued item," Phyllis whispered.

Emerson took a final jump into the air and landed—with a stomp. The cement floor completely shattered, collapsing under Emerson's shoes. The foundation of the police station rumbled from the force of impact. Electrical sparks and shattered lights sprayed across the entire building. The concrete walls of the jail cell broke apart and opened up a path for the prisoners. Of course, most of the inmates were unconscious from the damage.

“Not bad at all,” Emerson said, looking around rubble. “For how little room I had, that was a pretty solid jump.”

Boden stood up and lifted a slab of concrete off his shoulder. The walls that imprisoned them a moment ago no longer existed. Boden reached through the debris and helped Rose get on her feet. He realized that Emerson getting arrested actually resulted with their escape. Boden wondered if he should thank Emerson or the dog that urinated on him.

“I knew you had a plan,” Boden said. “But I would have appreciated a warning.”

“Sorry,” Emerson said, adjusting his baseball cap. “That bearded guy said to do it quickly.”

Cort pushed through the wreckage and gasped for air. He almost regretted telling Emerson what to do.

“Pick up the old lady and let’s move,” Emerson ordered. “Cops are coming.”

Phyllis spit out a piece of concrete. “My name is Phyllis,” she grunted. “And your shoes are imbued. They’re black market items.”

“Of course, they’re jump shoes,” Emerson said, dusting off his shoes. “My friends call me Emerson the Jumpstar. Great to meet you, team.”

Chapter 2

Boden Campbell ran down the hall of the police station, looking for the evidence room. He needed to find his guitar case. Emerson left the jail cell and sprinted after him.

“Do you really need a guitar right now?” Emerson shouted.

“The cops are everywhere.”

“I don’t play the guitar, Emerson,” Boden said back.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that this is important,” Boden replied.

Emerson fumbled with his hat and followed Boden to the back of the station. They ran down the empty hallways, hoping to avoid any trigger happy cops that were still on duty. They turned a corner and found the evidence room. Boden opened up the door and scanned the room. The guitar case had to be here.

“Is that it?” Emerson asked.

Boden turned around. He saw Emerson pointing to a dark purple guitar case that sat beneath an office chair. Boden dashed in and grabbed it. He gave it a kiss before he opened the clasps. Emerson leaned over to see what was inside. He was definitely surprised.

“It’s empty,” Emerson murmured. “There’s nothing in there.”

“Only to the untrained eye,” Boden said. He put both hands in and clenched his fists. Boden seemed to be lifting something, but Emerson only saw air. Boden strapped the guitar case on his back and went to the door. Just then, three police officers burst in and lifted their guns.

“Hold it!” an officer shouted. “Put your hands on your head and get down.”

Emerson was about to react, but Boden beat him to it. Boden swung both arms horizontally in one smooth motion. The three police officers blinked, not sure what had happened. The officers tried to raise their guns, but the barrels tumbled off like crumbs.

“You’re not the only one with an imbued item, Emerson,” Boden said, smiling.

“I don’t see anything,” Emerson whispered. “Is that weapon invisible?”

“Yes,” Boden answered. “A stealth sword only I can see.”

“Amazing!”

“Now let’s get out of here.”

Emerson laughed and jumped high into the air. He landed on the policemen, knocking them down hard. Before the officers could recuperate, Emerson and Boden bolted to the stairs. They

raced down two flights of steps, racing each other to the exit. Emerson and Boden kicked the door down together and ran out of the crumbling building. Thanks to Emerson Jay, the city of Chicago now had a police station to repair.

Emerson and Boden ran across the street and joined up with the rest of the team. Rose, Cort, and Phyllis were waiting for them at the corner of South Michigan Avenue and 35th street.

“We only have twenty minutes until the GLL meeting starts,” Phyllis said, breathing heavily. “Not much time and no way of getting there. We need to decide how to get there.”

“Where is the meeting being held?” Emerson asked.

“The John Hancock Center,” Cort said. “The 11 o’clock wind is over, so we’ll be safe. We can get there in fifteen if we sprint.”

“Sprint?” Rose said. “You mean run? I’m really not in the best of shape.”

“Quit complaining,” Phyllis snapped. “You’re going to do what we tell you.”

“Come on, Rose,” Emerson urged. “You’re part of my team now. You can make it.”

Rose bit her lip. Could she really trust Emerson? Did she even have a choice? “All right,” she finally said. “Let’s go.”

Fourteen minutes and fifty seven seconds later...

Emerson jumped clear into the air from Michigan Avenue and landed a foot from the John Hancock Center. He easily reached it before everyone else did. Emerson ran up to the front door. It was locked. He heard Phyllis yell something, but couldn’t make it out. It didn’t matter. He needed to get inside. Emerson

kicked his green shoes through the glass door. Alarms immediately sounded off.

“You idiot!” Phyllis shouted as she reached the center.

“There’s a backdoor entrance for the pro thieves. You just set off the alarm.”

“Interesting,” Emerson murmured.

Boden walked up to another door and kicked it down. Glass shattered all over.

“What did you do that for?” Phyllis screamed.

“I thought breaking one more door would stop the alarm,” Boden said, scratching his head.

“That’s sound logic,” Emerson remarked. “Very smart.”

Phyllis was about to yell again, but the alarm stopped blaring. Footsteps on broken glass approached them. A black

man in a yellow jacket came from the inside the building. His bright jacket had purple stripes marked across the back.

“You must be quite insane to just charge into a locked building,” the man said. “I suppose that takes guts as well.”

“Who are you?” Emerson demanded. “And where can I get a jacket like that?”

Phyllis slapped Emerson on the back of the head. “You want to be a pro thief and you don’t know this guy? This is Marcus the Magician. He’s a three-time GLL champion and two-time league MVP. Know your history, kid.”

Emerson narrowed his eyes. “You’re the West Coast Magician?”

“That would be me,” Marcus answered.

“You don’t seem very scary,” Emerson said, observing him. “A real pro should be a little more intimidating.”

Marcus smiled. His wide grin instantly cut through the tension between them. "I'm sorry I don't fit the bill," he replied. "If you survive the season, maybe you'll have a different opinion." He turned to Phyllis. "It's been a while, coach. You should visit Los Angeles more often."

"I don't like to travel," Phyllis said. "I have enough trouble getting around Chicago."

Marcus nodded. "Well, the meeting hasn't started yet. We delayed it for another ten minutes."

Phyllis blinked. "Delayed?" she said. "These pre-season meetings are usually on time. The league has some weird rules, but at least they're punctual."

"True, but something has come up," Marcus said. "Some people think it's the Roster Expansion issue, but I'm not sure."

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Phyllis said. “Either way, thanks for turning off the alarm.”

“Not a problem,” Marcus said. He wiped his nose for a second. “Is Cort here?”

“Yeah, he should be right behind us,” Phyllis said. She looked to Boden. “Where is he?”

Marcus raised his hand. “Forget about it,” he said. “We’ll meet up later. Good seeing you again, Phyllis.” He stepped away and headed back inside the building.

Emerson rotated his neck. “So he’s one of the top pro’s in the league,” he said. “I wonder what makes him so good.”

“Marcus has been in the league since the beginning,” Phyllis said. “You’re not even close to his level.”

“We’ll see,” Emerson said. “It’s a new season. His past accomplishments mean nothing right now.”

“I suppose people call him the Magician for a reason,” Boden said. He reached down to Emerson’s green shoes. He pulled out a playing card from the brown laces.

“What the...?” Emerson muttered. He grabbed the card. It was the Jack of Diamonds, but with a unique design; it had yellow and purple markings. “When did he put this in my shoe?”

Before anyone could answer, Cort and Rose finally arrived at the John Hancock entrance. Rose appeared to be breathing heavily.

“Rose had to puke in the alley,” Cort said, sighing. “She really isn’t the best athlete.”

“Sorry everyone,” Rose panted. “I didn’t mean to hold anyone back.”

“It’s okay, we have time,” Emerson said. “We were just talking to a new rival of mine.”

Phyllis shook her head. "Stop talking," she growled. "Let's go inside."

The team entered into the John Hancock center and went to the bottom floor. The basement level contained a large auditorium, filled with theater seats. Dozens of men and women were discussing various issues about the Grand Larceny League. They sat in divided groups according to their respective teams and organizations. Boden never saw so many thieves in one concentrated location.

"So all of these people are professional thieves?" Boden asked. "They're part of the GLL?"

"Yes, but they're from all over the country," Phyllis said. "Technically this meeting is only for Chicago teams."

"So why are they here?"

“They’re here to recruit,” Cort answered. “They’re looking for free agents to join their teams.”

“Clever,” Boden said.

“Save me a seat, I have to go the bathroom,” Emerson said.

“Get seats close to the stage.”

Emerson left the group and went on his own. The rest of the team found a row of seats near the center. Boden examined their surroundings and felt a heavy pressure in the room.

“How many teams are in Chicago?” Boden asked.

“Only two,” Cort replied. “Most cities only have one team. The more established cities like Chicago and New York tend to have two teams. Of course, that always depends on the sponsorship.”

Boden’s face tightened. “What kind of sponsorship?”

“Each team requires the support of a legitimate crime boss,” Phyllis answered. “Not everyone has those connections.”

“Wait, what about our team?” Boden asked. “I don’t think Emerson has those kinds of resources.”

“Probably not, but we do,” Cort replied. “Phyllis and I have been working as pro thieves for nine seasons.”

“Oh.”

“What did you expect?” Phyllis said. “You thought any group of five could just waltz into the GLL?”

Boden shrugged. “I didn’t know what to expect.”

“So does that mean we can’t join?” Rose asked. “Emerson sounded like he knew what he was doing.”

“Emerson’s an idiot,” Phyllis muttered.

“But you promised you would join his team,” Rose protested.

“I didn’t promise anything,” Phyllis said. “Cort did all the negotiating. I just sat by and listened.”

Boden rubbed his forehead. Becoming a pro thief was getting complicated.

Inside the men’s restroom, Emerson Jay zipped up his pants and went to the sink. He quickly washed his hands and looked for something to dry them. He walked over to the wall and pulled out a brown paper towel. From the opposing sink, an elderly man in a white suit approached him.

“Excuse me, young man,” he said. “Can you hand me one of those?”

Emerson turned around. “I’m sorry, but this is the last paper towel.”

“Is it now?” the elderly man said. “Then can you give me that piece in your hands?”

Emerson frowned. “Just use the air dryer.”

“I don’t like those things,” the older man replied. “They never get my hands completely dry.”

“I can’t help you,” Emerson said. “I had it first.”

“I see,” the man said. He turned to walk away, but then suddenly yanked the paper towel from Emerson’s hand. The movement was a swift blur, faster than Emerson could react. The elderly man snickered as he dried his hands with the towel. “For a thief, you’re pretty slow,” he said slyly.

Emerson looked down at his hands and realized what happened. “You old geezer,” he yelled. “You just stole my towel.”

“What I take becomes mine,” the man replied.

“What happened to honor among thieves?” Emerson demanded.

“I’m not a thief. At least not in the general sense.”

Emerson gritted his teeth. He couldn’t accept this. He took a running start and jumped with his feet out. Emerson slammed both of his shoes into the elderly man’s face. The man went flying into the opposite wall, his body hitting the bathroom tiles. He landed on the ground unconscious and out cold. Emerson walked over and dried his hands on the old man’s white suit.

“Stealing is one thing,” Emerson said firmly, “being a jerk is another.”

Emerson walked out of the bathroom proudly, satisfied with what he did. He returned to the auditorium and met up with the rest of his teammates.

“Did I miss anything?” Emerson asked as he sat down.

“Emerson, we have a problem,” Rose began. “Did you know that the police regulate the Grand Larceny League?”

“No,” Emerson said. “Why is that a problem?”

“The cops act as referees,” Rose explained. “Each GLL team pays the police department of every city a yearly fee. In return, they help the league and make sure everyone is stealing fairly.”

“So?”

“We have to get a crime boss to support us in order to pay that fee,” Rose said.

“That shouldn’t be too big of a problem. I say we—”

“Emergency!”

Emerson and his team looked up. A woman with a microphone ran onto the stage.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have an emergency!” the woman shouted into the microphone. “The reason why our meeting started late was because our league representative could not make it tonight. Instead, the Chief of the Chicago Police Department arrived here as a substitute to run the meeting. However, someone just assaulted the chief in the men’s restroom! The assailant is reportedly a young male wearing bright green shoes and an orange baseball hat. If anyone recognizes this person, please report him immediately. I repeat; the police chief has been attacked!”

Phyllis, Cort, Rose, and Boden all stared at Emerson Jay. This was not a good way to start the season.

Chapter 3

“That’s strange, I didn’t see a police chief in there,” Emerson said to himself.

Boden swallowed hard. “Emerson, did you attack someone in the bathroom?”

“Not exactly,” Emerson replied, trying to retain his innocence. “Someone stole my paper towel and I defended myself.”

Phyllis cringed in her seat. She covered her face, trying to separate herself from Emerson. She didn't have any idea what to do. Neither did Cort.

“You attacked the police chief over a paper towel?” Cort said. “What were you thinking?”

“Huh?” Emerson said. “I just hit some old guy in a suit.”

“That was the chief,” Cort hissed.

“Interesting,” Emerson said. “Either way, he deserved it. He tried stealing from me.”

“What do we do?” Rose asked. “They’ll ban Emerson from the league.”

Boden looked around. “Maybe they won’t notice him.”

“They’ll notice,” Cort said. “We need to get Emerson out of here.”

“I don’t feel like it,” Emerson said, folding his arms. “I’m the leader of the team. I have to lead.”

“Emerson, just hide out for now,” Cort urged. “I’ll get all the paperwork for you. We’ll fill you in on whatever you miss.”

Phyllis shot Cort an angry look. She assumed Cort gave up on the idea of including Emerson on their team.

“It’s a good idea,” Boden said. “Let’s play it safe for now.”

Emerson sighed. "Fine," he conceded. "I'll get some fresh air." With that, Emerson got up from his seat and left the auditorium. The rest of the crowd didn't seem to notice.

"Do you really plan on letting him join?" Phyllis asked Cort.

"We'll have to run it past the Dwarf."

"Who's the Dwarf?" Rose asked.

"He's the crime boss that owns our team," Cort replied. "The Rising Dwarf of Chicago. After last season, only Phyllis and I were left on his team. We needed to come here and find free agents to complete our team. Still, I didn't expect a person like Emerson to turn up."

"You promised Emerson that you would join his team," Rose reminded Cort. "At the very least, you should ask your boss if we can join."

“You’re right, I did make a promise,” Cort admitted. “But it’s not like I signed a binding contract. Even if we weren’t there, Emerson would have tried to escape from the police station on his own. We just went along with the process.”

Rose shook her head. “You’re only here because Emerson did you a favor,” she argued. “You owe him.”

“Don’t worry, Emerson’s spot on our team is secure,” Cort said. “With his jump shoes, he’s quite an asset. It’s you two I’m worried about.”

Boden and Rose looked at each other.

“You think we’re unqualified.”

“Yes,” Cort said, rubbing his beard. “However, Emerson will want both of you on the team. I’m not sure how this will play out until later.”

“Quiet, the meeting is starting,” Phyllis hissed.

In the center of the podium, an elderly man in a white suit walked up to a wooden lectern and waved to the crowd. Scattered claps echoed throughout the hall. Everyone in the auditorium noticed that the elderly man had heavy bruises on his face.

“Good evening,” the man said weakly. “I’m Chief Thompson of the Chicago Police. It’s an honor to host the first meeting of the Grand Larceny League. Tonight started out fine until an ill mannered thief assaulted me in the bathroom. He attempted to steal my wallet and I had to fight him off. These injuries are the result. Hopefully the culprit is found soon.”

Boden stifled a laugh. Even a police chief had pride.

“This year marks the tenth year of the Grand Larceny League,” Chief Thompson went on. “Our first decade. After this meeting ends, we’ll hand out the registration forms for your teams. They’ll be due before the first week of the season. The first

issue at hand is the inclusion of Miami into the league. The length of the GLL season will still be sixteen weeks, so that should end most of your worries.”

“What is he talking about?” Boden asked Cort.

“I forgot, you don’t know anything about the GLL,” Cort said.

“As the chief said, there’s sixteen weeks in a season. With the addition of San Francisco, there are now ten Thievery Zones.”

“Thievery Zones?”

“The zones are the cities that teams can steal from,” Cort replied. “Every team in the league is from one of those ten cities.”

“So you can you steal from any of those zones?”

“Yes, but with conditions,” Cort said. “Each visit to a city has to last the entire week. You also have to register with the police agency of each respective city.”

“How does the season schedule work?” Boden asked.

Cort smiled. “That’s probably the best part of the GLL,” he said. “Each team can basically determine their own schedule throughout those sixteen weeks. You can visit anywhere you want.”

“If we let the league know beforehand where we go,” Boden said, “then other teams could try to follow and challenge us. They can track your destinations, right?”

“Correct,” Cort said. “This is how our league operates. Some teams win by stealing as much as possible, but you can also win by making sure your opponents steal less.”

“How many teams are there?” Rose asked.

“Historically we’ve had about sixteen teams.”

“Why do you say historically?”

“Well, the league has expanded and contracted over the years,” Cort answered. “Last year, we had a lot of teams for nine available cities. We had room to choose which city we wanted, but that didn’t necessarily give us an advantage. Teams would often gravitate towards cities like Phoenix or Los Angeles because of the warm weather. Even with an open slot, a specific city could have more value.”

“I see,” Boden said. “So planning a season schedule plays a major role.”

“How does the league tell who is winning and losing?” Rose asked. “I don’t get how this is a competition.”

“At the end of every week, you turn in what you’ve stolen and the league measures its value,” Cort explained. “As such, the league ranks the teams from top to bottom. After the sixteen weeks, the top eight teams in the entire league enter a playoff tournament.”

“Do certain items have more value than others?” Rose asked. “Can you steal anything you want?”

“Anything and everything,” Cort said with a grin. “Of course, there are certain targets that the league puts a higher price tag on. Those are usually the targets we go after.”

“Sounds competitive,” Boden commented. “Teams must battle each other all the time.”

Cort nodded. “With all of that said, the GLL isn’t overly regulated. Teams have plenty of ways to steal with creative freedom.”

Chief Thompson cleared his throat to get the audience’s attention. “Secondly, the Roster Expansion Act will not take place this year,” he said through the microphone. “We will consider the issue over this season and give it more thought.” The crowd instantly gave out mixed noises and reactions.

“Can you explain that?” Boden asked.

“Each team is only allowed five thieves,” Cort said. “Five made sense in the beginning because there weren’t that many pros around. Nowadays, some people want bigger rosters of seven or more. It takes a while to make changes but we’re getting there.”

“This might sound obvious, but this police chief is corrupt, right?” Rose asked. “It’s illegal for a cop to be helping out thieves for money. He’s basically a criminal too.”

“Money always corrupts,” Phyllis murmured. Rose and Boden both turned their heads towards Phyllis’s seat down the aisle. Phyllis had kept quiet for most of the meeting. “People will do anything for money. A cop like Thompson is no different.”

Outside of the John Hancock center, Emerson lay down on a wooden bench. He tried taking a nap, but thoughts about the GLL rushed through his mind. He desperately wanted to start his thievery career as soon as possible. Just then, he heard a door open from the back. Emerson turned around and saw someone in a purple striped jacket; it was Marcus the West Coast Magician. Unaware of Emerson, Marcus walked to the side of building and stretched out his legs. After nine seasons, the opening meeting of the Grand Larceny League didn't peak his interest anymore.

"Magician?" Emerson said, sitting up. "Shouldn't you be inside?"

The Magician turned his head and spotted Emerson. "Call me Marcus," he said back. "And I could say the same about you, kid. That meeting is important for rookies like you."

“I got kicked out,” Emerson grumbled. “I hit that police chief guy so I have to avoid getting caught.”

“That was you?” Marcus said. He couldn’t tell if Emerson was serious. “You really do have guts, attacking a cop like that.”

“It’s what he gets for stealing my towel.”

“What?”

“Never mind,” Emerson said.

Marcus scratched his head. Emerson’s words confused him. Perhaps “towel” served as a code word for an object of priceless value. He let the idea pass and joined Emerson on the bench. Emerson silently examined Marcus as he sat down. There was a strange quality to Marcus, a familiarity to his presence. Did all champions give off this feeling? What personality traits did a championship caliber thief possess anyway? Emerson continued to look over Marcus, hoping to find some way to peer into his

thoughts. Emerson knew that his eyes couldn't reveal anything substantial about Marcus, but he felt compelled to stare.

“What do you think of our league?” Marcus asked. “What are your first impressions?”

“There seem to be a lot of rules,” Emerson observed. “I guess rules set up the way a sport works, but I don't feel like listening to them. I just want to steal stuff.”

“I suppose that's fair,” Marcus replied. “When I was a rookie, I didn't like following the rules either. We're supposed to be thieves. A rebellious spirit is a basic job requirement.”

“It's a little hard to imagine you as a rookie,” Emerson said. “You're basically a living legend now.”

Marcus chuckled. “I wasn't always viewed like that,” he said. “It's possible I'm not a legend even now. It's hard to tell.”

“You don't know?”

Marcus shrugged. "There's a fundamental difference between how a person is perceived by others, and the actual success of their career. Working from a city like LA, an image tends to form. That doesn't make it real though."

"I don't understand," Emerson said. "Are you saying that you're unsuccessful? Do you think your career has been a bust?"

"Maybe not a bust," Marcus said. "But part of me wonders if my career could've been different. Perhaps I could have won a title here in Chicago. It would have been interesting to work in a different city with a different team."

"But you've already won three titles for LA," Emerson pointed out. "Many people consider you to be the greatest thief the league has ever seen. What more do you want to accomplish?"

“I’ve asked myself that question over and over for the past ten years,” Marcus said softly. “I’m no closer to finding the answer now than when I was a rookie. All I know is that there’s another level to reach. Looking back, I’ve realized that greatness is an evolutionary path. I didn’t enter the league as a legend; no one ever does. Someday, there will be thieves much stronger than me. The path to greatness only leads to more roads.” Marcus paused as he leaned back on the bench. “But as encouraging as that is, it scares me. It’s scary to imagine that the rookies of today could be standing on top of me tomorrow.”

Emerson saw the genuine fear inside of Marcus. Every thief in the league wanted a shot at taking him down. To sustain a high level of thievery for almost a decade took more will power than Emerson could imagine. But even with all the championships and awards, Marcus didn’t seem any more satisfied with his life than Emerson did. Perhaps success could not

insert happiness into your life; maybe the two had nothing to do with each other.

“I can understand your position,” Emerson said calmly. “But that evolution is part of any league, of any sport. As your career starts to wind down, mine is just starting. I have to climb my way up, while you have to fight to keep your spot. And that battle will never end. It will go on even after we retire. And it’s a fight I won’t back away from. If you want to keep your place on the mountain, you’ll have to fight me for it.”

“Those are bold words coming from a rookie,” Marcus said. “You’re a little weirder than I expected.”

“You think *I’m* weird?” Emerson said. “You’re the one who is having an identity crisis. I seem pretty normal compared to you.”

Marcus laughed. He had the strangest difficulty trying to figure out Emerson. At first, he assumed Emerson just wasn’t that

bright. Now, he could only speculate if Emerson possessed something special.

“Well, I hope you become a great thief, kid,” Marcus said.

“It might be a waste of talent if you didn’t.”

“Please don’t use a cheap word like ‘talent’ on me,”

Emerson insisted. “It takes real guts to behave the way I do.”

“Then you should join my team,” Marcus suggested. “This city has nothing for you. Come with me to LA and I’ll teach you the right way to steal.”

“Sorry, no can do,” Emerson said. “I have promises to keep. My team is already set up.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Marcus said. “We would have made great teammates.”

“I think we’ll make better rivals,” Emerson said. “You’ll be a good opponent.”

Marcus shook his head. "You have no idea what you're getting into," he said. "You're teaming up with Cort and Phyllis, the two biggest losers in the league. You won't go anywhere with them. Why do you think they're the only two members left on their team every year?"

"No idea," Emerson answered. "It doesn't matter. With me, they're going to start winning."

Nothing Marcus could say would dissuade Emerson. Even if he explained everything, Emerson would refuse to listen. The kid wanted to win on his own terms.

"Then all I can do is wish you the best," Marcus finally said.

"Thanks," Emerson said back. He flipped the Jack of Diamonds card that Marcus had put in his shoe earlier. "There will be a day when I'm standing on top of you. On that day, I'm going to give you back this card."

Marcus grinned and stood up from the bench. He walked away from Emerson and headed to the backdoor entrance of the Hancock Center. Marcus envied Emerson's inexperience and lack of knowledge. His own rookie season coincided with the GLL's first year of operation. After years of trial and error, the present day era of thievery stood on the foundation that he helped develop. Emerson recognized that but treated him as a peer. In past seasons, most rookies would try to impress Marcus with fake praise or reverence. But Emerson remained true to himself. He didn't even act like a thief. Maybe that's why he seemed so honest. Marcus was about to go inside when he saw a figure in the shadows.

"You shouldn't be out here," Cort said flatly. "It's bad luck to work magic outdoors."

Marcus looked over his shoulder. Apparently Cort had been listening to the conversation between him and Emerson.

“Hello Cort,” Marcus greeted. “That Emerson kid is quite a find. You should feel lucky.”

“I should report you to the league,” Cort snapped. “You want Emerson because he’s with me. You don’t care about him or his ability. You’re just trying to screw me over.”

“It’s not always about you,” Marcus replied. “You’re just not meant to win, Cort. I don’t have to try to screw you over.”

“When we go to LA this year, you better be out of town,” Cort warned. “You’ll regret it if you see us.”

“You know, this league is funny sometimes,” Marcus said, scratching his eyebrow. “Under the rules, taking someone’s life constitutes as theft, not murder. The argument is that a person’s life has value, so it can be stolen. I think it’s just a reason for thieves to kill each other. Either way, you’re not a very good thief, Cort. I hope you understand that before I have to kill you.”

Marcus walked away and left Cort to himself. No one saw it, but Cort's right hand was shaking uncontrollably. As always, the upcoming season could be his last.

Chapter 4

“That meeting was so boring,” Rose grumbled. “I have less respect for cops now.”

“Agreed,” Boden said, yawning. The team walked out of the John Hancock center and onto the streets. “Where are Emerson and Cort?”

“I’m right here.”

Boden looked over his shoulder. It was Cort. “There you are. Why’d you leave early?”

“I had to get some air,” Cort muttered. “Boden, go find Emerson. Rose and I will get a cab ready. We need to meet with our owner at his home.”

Boden nodded and went ahead. Emerson appeared to be waiting on a park bench. Boden walked through the crowd and reached him.

“Emerson, we need to go,” Boden said loudly. “We have to see the boss.”

Emerson turned around and exhaled. “Finally,” he said. “I was about to take a nap.”

Boden hoisted his guitar case over his shoulder. Unknown to Boden, the side of the case hit someone walking behind him. The case thudded as it struck the man on the side of his head. The man stopped in his tracks and instantly grabbed Boden by the shoulder.

“What do you think you’re doing, friend?”

Boden glanced behind him. “Oh, I’m sorry,” he said. “Did my case hit you?”

“Yeah, it hit me in the head. I think we may have a problem.”

The person Boden accidentally hit was a short man with a clean shaven head. There was a distinct shine glistening off the top of his hairless head. He stood in front of a group of people all dressed in blue and silver jump suits. Each team member had a badge with individual numbers patched onto the shoulder.

“I’m really sorry,” Boden said, trying to express his apology. “It was an accident.”

“What’s going on?” Emerson asked, stepping in.

“I’m Zed from Detroit,” the clean shaven man said. “And your friend here just hit me in the face.”

“So?” Emerson said.

“You don’t know who I am?” Zed asked.

“No idea.”

“Stupid rookies,” Zed grunted. “I’m from the Detroit Demons, last year’s champions.”

Zed and his teammates circled around Emerson and Boden. The Detroit Demons cut them off from leaving the area. Unlike Marcus, Zed didn't intend to welcome in the rookies with polite manners.

"Last year means nothing," Emerson said flatly. "We're bringing the title to Chicago."

"Chicago?" Zed blurted out. "You're worse than a rookie; you're a clueless idiot. The thieves in this town are an inferior breed. They're bottom feeding bums. No team from Chicago will ever win a title while we're in the league."

Boden tightened his jaw. "If you're going to start a fight, then we have no choice but to defend ourselves." He put down his case and unfastened the clasps.

"Forget defense," Emerson yelled. "Let's end this."

Emerson jumped clear into the air. The dozens of thieves in the area all looked up, staring at the airborne Emerson. A gust of air rushed past everyone in the surrounding area. Emerson focused all his energy into his shoes. He hit the ground with a stomp and crushed the pavement beneath him. The wave of impact sent everyone tumbling to the ground. Even the John Hancock Center shook from the stomp. Even the giant skyscraper appeared to buckle from Emerson's foot power. A cloud of dust and debris floated across the area.

Emerson looked down at his feet. His shoeprints were drilled into the concrete walkway. "I hope I didn't kill anyone," he said to himself. "It wouldn't be fun if all my competition was dead."

"Is that all you got?"

Emerson turned around. Zed waved his hand through the cloud of dust. His blue and silver jump suit was untouched.

“If you think those pretty shoes will get you to the top, then you’re very wrong,” Zed snarled. He was about to take a step towards Emerson when something sliced through the air. A metallic sound sliced through the cloudy dust. Zed jumped back holding his cheek. “Blood?” he whispered. “I got cut?”

Boden stepped through the debris with his invisible sword in hand. “That was a warning. Next time, you’ll be losing body parts.”

Zed scowled. He couldn’t see Boden’s sword at all. “Detroit will be waiting for you,” he warned. Zed wiped his bloody cheek and retreated back to his team.

“Nice support,” Emerson said.

Boden grinned. “Another nice stomp. Good work.”

“You two are morons.”

It was Phyllis. Somehow she had found them. “You just showed everyone your abilities,” she growled. “Now they all know what you can do.”

Emerson looked around. The dust had cleared and all the thieves from the meeting were staring at him. They all had blank expressions, cold faces with no emotion.

“Not a problem,” Emerson replied. “I’m not afraid of people that are weaker than me.”

“Take a taxi to this address,” Phyllis ordered, handing Boden a piece of paper. “Our owner is waiting for us on the top floor. Cort and Rose are heading over right now. I’m going to stay and smooth things over with the other teams.”

Emerson went off looking for a cab. Before Boden could walk away, Phyllis grabbed his arm.

“Boden,” Phyllis said. “Don’t be fooled by the way the boss looks. It’s not worth trying to warn Emerson, so try to be careful. The boss is not what he seems.”

Boden wanted to ask more, but held back. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

He left Phyllis and caught up with Emerson. They hailed a cab on Pearson Street, nearby Loyola University. Inside, the taxi driver examined the address on the piece of paper. He had heard stories about this place, but never drove anyone there. As Boden and Emerson entered the cab, the driver quietly turned off the meter.

The cab headed towards the north side of the city near the lake front. The city lamps made Chicago glow in the darkness. The lights of the city seemed to pulsate like a heartbeat, completely in rhythm with the night. To Emerson, this was not just a home, but a kingdom he was part of. And he had some

conquering to do. Next to him in the back seat, Boden gently rapped his fingers on his guitar case.

“I should be more afraid,” Boden said.

Emerson shifted in his seat. “Afraid of what?”

“Of what we’re doing,” Boden said. “In less than six hours, I’ve busted out of jail, become a thief, and now I’m meeting up with a crime boss. Somehow I don’t feel the slightest bit of fear.”

“Of course not, you’re with me,” Emerson said.

Boden chuckled. “I guess that helps,” he said. “I just didn’t expect to be here.”

“What were you doing in Chicago?” Emerson asked.

“I was working as a bodyguard,” Boden replied. “People would hire me to do random security work. The money didn’t always come through, but the job was never boring.”

“Did you enjoy it?” Emerson asked.

Boden gave a slight shrug. “Not all the time, but you learn things when you protect people and their secrets. You always end up learning more than you expect to.”

“That invisible sword probably came in handy.”

“It did,” Boden said. “What were you doing before we met?”

“I was dropping out of high school,” Emerson said, smiling. “I had three months left till graduation.”

“And I thought I was young,” Boden said. “You dropped out just to join the GLL?”

“I already knew what I wanted to do with my life,” Emerson said. “There wasn’t any sense in wasting time.”

“I see,” Boden replied. He shifted in his seat to face his new friend. “Look, Emerson, I’m not a real thief. I appreciate you

getting me out of jail, but maybe it's best if you find another teammate. I can handle myself in a fight, but I don't know how to steal. It's not something I'm gifted at."

"Neither am I," Emerson admitted. "You think I have any clue how to pull off heists or break into buildings?"

"Then why do you want to be a pro thief? Of all the ways to make money, why the GLL?"

Emerson laughed. "I'll give you my reasons if we make the playoffs. But for now, I just want you on the team. I can already tell you're going to be pretty good thief."

"Well, we have to meet with our new employer first," Boden said. "I've heard of this Dwarf guy before. He's one of the biggest gangsters in Chicago. He's got a reputation for brutal violence."

“My kind of owner,” Emerson said. “I would hate to have a boss who’s weak.”

Their taxi arrived shortly after in front of a high rise hotel. The entire building was a bright yellow-orange, lit up like a giant candle. The large building had a slight twist to it, marking its progressive style architecture. The building was beautiful, but strangely haunting. Boden felt as if he was marching into a lion's den, unsure if he would live or die.

Emerson and Boden exited their taxi and approached the building. As they entered through a revolving door, a group of men in black suits ran across the lobby area. One of them bumped into Emerson.

“Watch out,” the man barked. “Get out of the way.”

Emerson stepped back. “What's the rush?”

“I’m a cop,” the man said, showing Emerson his badge.

“Something happened back at our headquarters. We had to end our party up at the penthouse and now we’re leaving.”

“Don’t let me stop you,” Emerson said. “Take care.”

“Thanks.”

Boden held his breath as the police officers left the hotel. He glanced over at Emerson, wondering if he even knew what happened. Boden decided to keep quiet, realizing anything said would spoil the moment.

As instructed, Boden and Emerson headed to the top floor of the hotel. They stepped out of the elevator and saw Cort waiting for them.

“You guys are late,” Cort said. “The boss is waiting.”

“What is this place?” Emerson asked. “Who owns this building?”

“This is the Hotel Mango,” Cort said. “It’s one of the many luxury hotels that belong to the Rising Dwarf.”

“Where’s Rose?”

“She’s already talked to the boss so she’s taking a nap,” Cort said. “The Dwarf’s office is down the hall and to the right. He’ll see you two separately. Emerson’s first.”

Emerson walked down the hallway to a large black door. He warmed up his hands and grasped the chrome doorknob. He exhaled and entered the office swiftly. The corner office was spacious, but dimly lit. Emerson could barely make out what was inside. He closed the door and approached the middle of the room. He noticed a small figure staring out the window.

“Sit down,” the figure said.

Emerson went to the desk chair and cautiously sat down. There was something off about the situation.

“Excuse me, are you the Rising Dwarf?” Emerson asked.

“Are you the owner?”

The person turned around and faced Emerson. “Yes, that would be me.”

Emerson couldn't believe his eyes. The Rising Dwarf appeared to be nothing but a boy—a young boy around the age of ten. Even sitting down, Emerson was taller than him. The Rising Dwarf wore red sweater vest and khakis, perfectly tailored and fitted for his tiny body. Emerson looked around the room, sincerely hoping an adult would appear to explain the situation to him.

“Who are you?” Emerson demanded. “Is this some kind of joke?”

The young boy smiled. “My name is Ronald Dorf. In case you were wondering, I'm much older than I look.”

“Somehow I doubt that.”

“I heard you met Phyllis,” Ronald Dorf said. “It might sound strange, but I’m about two years older than her.”

“What?” Emerson said. “You’re older than that hag?”

“I really am.”

“And you’re a crime boss?”

“Yes.”

“Wow,” Emerson said. “You’re really something.”

“Perhaps,” Ronald said with a steady voice. He walked behind the desk and planted his small frame in a leather chair.

“Cort has told me a few things about you. It seems that you want to join our team.”

“Sort of,” Emerson said. “I was under the impression that Cort and Phyllis would join my team, not the other way around.”

“You need a legit crime boss to sponsor you.”

“Yeah, that is a problem.”

“And apparently you’ve already started a few fights with the league,” Ronald said.

“To be fair, some of those guys aren’t very nice.”

“You’re a Chicago kid and Cort thinks you have some talent,” Ronald continued. “Maybe you should join us.”

Emerson nodded. Regardless of Ronald’s appearance, he had the attitude of a business owner. Emerson slowly absorbed the situation, realizing that this discussion wasn’t just a meet and greet; it was a job interview.

“I want to join your team, but my friends will have to be part of the deal,” Emerson said. “Boden and Rose have to be part of the team.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Ronald said.

“Oh,” Emerson said. “Are you sure? We don’t have a lot of experience.”

Ronald picked up a piece of a paper. He slid it across the desk. “This is a standard contract for members on my team.”

“Standard contract? What does it say?”

“A lot of things. But basically, it says you’re going to work under me for absolutely nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Not a dime,” Ronald said. “If you sign this, it means I don’t have to pay you anything. In return, I’ll provide you with membership in the Grand Larceny League. As a bonus, I’ll let you stay in this hotel. Traveling costs, food expenses, supplies will all be covered.”

“But I won’t get paid. I won’t get to spend any money on myself.”

“Precisely,” Ronald confirmed. “I just offered this to Rose. She’s already accepted. Boden will be given the same option.”

“I see,” Emerson said. “What about Phyllis and Cort?”

“Phyllis is under a slightly different agreement,” Ronald replied. “I keep Phyllis on the team because I can trust her. We met over thirty years ago, when we both started our careers. I give her a small salary, but she’s not under any written contract. I pay her a little money, and in return she doesn’t try to kill me.”

“Why would she want to kill you?”

“There are a number of reasons, but don’t worry about that.”

“And Cort?”

“Cort’s my younger brother,” Ronald replied. “I keep him on the team and give him a little money when he needs it. That way, I can keep the salary costs off the books.”

“Brother?” Emerson blurted. “You're related?”

“Technically he's my half brother,” Ronald said. “On my dad's side. As a thief, Cort is an average player. Normally I would have killed or fired him by now, but he's family. I can control him and he won't betray me. It's actually a good situation.”

“So that's why you keep those two on the team,” Emerson said. “They work cheap and they'll follow your orders.”

“You've got it,” Ronald said. “The contract I'm offering you is for one season. If you want to stay longer, we'll have to negotiate a deal during the off season.”

“But isn't this bad for your team?” Emerson asked. “Not many good thieves will work for free. Doesn't this hurt your chances of winning?”

Ronald chuckled. “Having a team in the GLL is extremely profitable,” he explained. “The average team takes in a million

dollars per week. A good performance will bring in around five to ten million. I get 75% of everything the team takes in. The rest goes to the league and paying off the cops.”

“And you save a lot by not having to pay for our salaries.”

Ronald nodded. “Even if the team does poorly, I still make plenty.”

“Makes sense,” Emerson remarked. He picked up a pen and signed the contract. He handed it back to Ronald. “There you go.”

“You didn’t even read it,” Ronald pointed out.

“No need,” Emerson said. “Your motives actually match up with mine.”

“My motives?”

“All you want is money,” Emerson said. “All I want is to win. We can help each other.”

“I suppose that’s one way of putting it,” Ronald said. “By the way, we’ll need a list of all your immediate family members and at least two close friends.”

“Why?”

“The contract states that if you break our agreement, we’ll murder your family and friends. Obviously you’ll be killed too.”

“Scary.”

“Congratulations,” Ronald said. He reached over and shook Emerson’s hand. “You’re an official member of the Chicago Ballers.”

“Ballers?”

“The Ballers have been part of the league since the beginning. We may not have a great legacy, but you’re now in an organization of professional thieves.”

The words resonated heavily within Emerson. He really made it into the league. One moment he was sitting inside a jail cell, and now his signature was on a pro contract.

Ronald tossed a white circular badge at Emerson. "You'll need a squad number," he said. "We'll have it stitched onto that badge. You can basically choose any number between 0 and 100."

"Why do I need a number?"

"In the field, the team communicates on a number to number basis," Ronald explained. "We arrange it that way in order to avoid our names being leaked to the public. Plus it's easier to work with numbers as opposed to full names."

"That sounds interesting," Emerson said. "Is 22½ taken? It's an important number to me."

Ronald narrowed his eyes. "Did you just say 22½?"

“Yeah,” Emerson replied. “You said any number between 0 and 100. Technically that should include decimals or fractions.”

“I guess that’s true but why $22\frac{1}{2}$?”

“When I played high school ball, my jersey number used to be 45,” Emerson answered. “But by the time I joined Varsity, someone else had my number. So I divided 45 by half, resulting in $22\frac{1}{2}$. I was the only kid in the state with a fraction on my jersey.”

Ronald almost lost focus trying to listen to Emerson. His new prospect had some strange qualities to him. “The rules don’t explicitly say anything about excluding fractions. It’s possible that $22\frac{1}{2}$ can work.”

“Sounds great,” Emerson said. “Can you have the badge stitched onto my hat?”

“Consider it done,” Ronald replied. “If you have any more questions, Cort can give you more information about us. He’ll help you get settled in.”

“Thanks,” Emerson said. “I don’t feel like I earned a spot on your team, but I’m glad to be here. I won’t let you down.”

Ronald grinned widely. Behind the child-like face, Emerson saw a strange mixture of emotions. Emerson still couldn’t tell if Ronald really was that old or even a crime boss. But he recognized something very intense about him—a heavy amount of greed.

Emerson walked out of the room and closed the door behind him. Strangely enough, he felt the same. He was officially a pro thief, but not much had changed. Cort approached Emerson and saw his expression. He instantly knew that Emerson made the team.

“What did you think of our employer?” Cort asked.

“He’s different, but we see eye to eye,” Emerson answered.

“He’s actually a pretty simple kid.”

“Try not to call him a kid,” Cort advised. “He tends to get annoyed by that term.”

“I’ll probably forget.”

Boden came up to Emerson and Cort. “I guess it’s my turn,” he said. “What did he offer you?”

“Everything I wanted,” Emerson replied. “You better take the same deal, Boden. You owe me.”

Boden sighed. “I suppose I do.” He walked down the hallway towards Ronald’s office. “If I don’t come back alive, you’re in trouble.”

Cort handed Emerson a key. “This is to your room in the hotel,” he said. “You’ll find everything you need there.”

“When’s opening day?” Emerson asked. “When does the season start?”

“One week from now.”

“Good,” Emerson said. “I want to start working.”

“By the way, Phyllis just gave me a call,” Cort said.

“Apparently, Zed Harper from Detroit says he’s going to hunt you down. He wants the league to notify him whenever you travel to a city. He’s also going to bring his team to Chicago as soon as possible.”

“Who’s Zed Harper?”

“Zed is the lead thief on the Detroit Demons,” Cort said.

“They’re the defending champs. Phyllis said you two have already met.”

Emerson scratched his head. “I don’t remember,” he said.

“When did I meet him?”

“Probably after the meeting,” Cort said. “You don’t remember this?”

“Doesn’t seem like it.”

“Zed has a temper, but he’s still a professional. You must have done something to provoke his anger.”

“Well, I guess that means I’m inside his head,” Emerson noted. “If I can play mind games with a former champ, I’m already making progress.”

“Emerson, he wants to...” Cort began, “forget about it. Just watch out for guys like Zed. You don’t want to make your debut with a target on your back.”

“What about the Magician?” Emerson asked. “Did Phyllis mention anything about him?”

“No.”

“There are a lot of strong guys out there,” Emerson said softly.
“I want to challenge them all.”

“You will,” Cort said.

Emerson smiled. “That’s nice to know. Before I forget, the boss said that all food expenses are covered. Is that the same as unlimited meals?”

Chapter 5

“Week one will be in Chicago,” Phyllis stated firmly.

The Chicago Ballers had gathered together and were planning their first score of the season. They were using the lobby of the Hotel Mango as their command center. The past four days consisted of registering with the league, finalizing contracts, and settling into the hotel. Although the Ballers had three rookies on the team, not much planning or instruction occurred. The team sat across a leather couch and a few lounge chairs surrounding a glass coffee table. Two days were left till opening week.

Emerson raised his hand. “Why stay in Chicago?” he asked. “I thought we could go to any city we want to. We should go to LA.”

“Chicago can get pretty windy during the fall,” Boden noted. “Maybe LA is a better choice.”

“No, week one is always in your home city,” Cort said. “It’s not a rule, but it’s something every team does.”

“Why?”

“It’s tradition,” Cort answered. “It’s our way of taunting the city. It shows that we have the guts to challenge them.”

“Interesting,” Boden said. “So every team is stealing in their own city?”

“Exactly,” Phyllis confirmed. “Stealing from your home city can provide an early spark. We’re on home turf and there’s no need to travel.”

“There’s only one other team in Chicago this season,” Cort added. “And our score is pretty unique.”

“What are we stealing?” Rose asked. “Cash? Jewels? Paintings?”

“We’re going to steal traffic lights.”

Emerson, Boden, and Rose looked at each other.

“You’re joking,” Rose said.

Cort placed several papers over the coffee table. The papers mapped out the location of a group of specific traffic lights in downtown Chicago.

“These aren’t your typical red, yellow, and greens,” Phyllis explained. “These are brand new, state of the art traffic lights. To begin with, they have cameras, microprocessors, and advanced infrared sensors. Each one is connected to a satellite and use multimode fiber optics. They were designed as a way to monitor crime patterns all day and night. As city property, the cops can use them to catch criminals all over the city. The cameras are embedded into the traffic signals themselves. We’ll need to take the whole thing. It costs nine hundred thousand U.S. dollars to make and install each one. Although we won’t get nearly that amount for stealing them, the fence tax won’t be too severe.”

“What’s the fence tax?”

“Since we’re not stealing cash, we need a fence to buy and resell the traffic lights,” Cort said. “The league acts as a fence and will buy the items we steal, but they charge us a tax. The severity of the tax depends on the item.”

Boden took a glance over the traffic light schematics. He was puzzled over the choice of target.

“Do we absolutely have to steal these lights?” Boden asked. “I assumed we could steal whatever we want. What made you choose these items?”

Cort reached into his jacket pocket. He revealed a small black stationary pamphlet. He handed it over to Boden.

“The traffic lights are BB book items,” Cort explained. “For every city and for every week, there are special items that are worth more to the league than most others. If we can get the

lights down, not only will the league give us a high payout, but the fence tax vanishes.”

“What’s BB stand for?” Rose asked. “Also do we know get to know these items ahead of time?”

“It stands for Black Bonus,” Cort answered. “And yes, we are informed every week about them.”

“It’s true that you can steal whatever you want,” Phyllis said. “But BB book items are in very high demand from the league. They’re worth the score.”

“I’m assuming the other teams know about these items as well,” Boden said, looking over the pamphlet. “Even if they’re in high demand, it’s safe to assume that other visiting teams will want to steal them. In other words, competition will ensue.”

Phyllis and Cort both nodded in unison. Boden had come to that natural conclusion very quickly. Despite going after

countless BB items, the Chicago Ballers had limited success. After all, visiting teams from other cities knew less about the landscape than the home teams. For the sake of fairness, the league gave high priority to the black book items so they could do less research and go after valuable items.

“Each traffic light should bring in an estimated five hundred grand,” Phyllis said. “Almost all of the internal parts are reusable and can be sold on the black market.”

“That’s not a bad price,” Emerson said. “But how do we steal them? Traffic lights look heavy.”

“We’re not going to steal the poles they’re attached to,” Phyllis said. “They’re super lightweight compared to past models. We will be relying on Cort to take them off.”

“I’ve looked over the schematics,” Cort said. “It’s not too bad. They’re built to last, but their design is simple and efficient. Taking them apart won’t be complicated.”

“Cort is the entry thief on the team,” Phyllis added. “As the point man, it’s his job to give us access to whatever we are stealing. He usually runs the point and we follow after.”

Cort nodded at Phyllis’ description. “My squad number is 11, by the way,” he said.

“So what are we?” Boden asked.

“The rest of you are garbage rookies right now,” Phyllis said flatly. She picked up a small clipboard. “To make a good team, we need to experiment. For now, Emerson is the primary wing thief.”

Emerson jumped up. “Very nice.”

“Emerson Jay, number 22½, you’re going to be our first option for thievery,” Phyllis said, reading over her clipboard.

“Once Cort takes the traffic lights apart, you need to move them immediately.”

“That’s going to be difficult,” Cort said, warning Emerson.

“We need to find a way to move the lights without getting noticed. It has to be done quickly.”

“Boden Campbell, number 33, you’re the secondary wing,” Phyllis said. “You have similar responsibilities as Emerson, but you follow his lead. The wings on a thievery team are considered to be the most versatile with the most opportunities to contribute. Your fighting skills will definitely come into play as a wingman. In case other thieves or cops try to intervene, you need to protect Emerson and Cort.”

“That’s probably the best position for me,” Boden said. “If there’s going to be a brawl, I should be in it.”

“Rose Delane, number 5, you're the exit thief,” Phyllis continued. “You have no experience and no apparent talents so this the only option we have for you. The exit thief has the responsibility of getting the team out of scene. You'll also be relied on to transport our items to various locations. This is a support position, but it's also where a lot of teams mess up. How are you at driving?”

“Not bad,” Rose answered. “No tickets on my record.”

Phyllis frowned. “That won't help when people are chasing you down. Can you drive a truck?”

“Actually, I can. Double clutching is pretty easy for me.”

“Good. You might be able to contribute after all.”

Cort handed each member a piece of paper. “These papers are descriptions of your specific position, but they're fairly vague. The GLL does not enforce these positions at all. They're

just helpful in arranging a team. Obviously, each person should contribute to the team even if it's out of the parameters of the job description. It's hard to predict how certain jobs will play out, so the positions will often blend together."

"Phyllis, what's your job?" Emerson asked. "You seem to be giving a lot of orders but doing nothing."

"I'm the coach, number 0," Phyllis replied. "I make sure everyone is doing their job. I have to keep you idiots in line."

"That sounds easy," Emerson said. "You don't have much to do."

"It's actually the hardest job, Emerson," Cort said. "Phyllis has to plan everything and come up with a target every week. She also manages the season schedule."

Emerson shrugged. "Sounds even easier."

“Our goal is two traffic lights,” Phyllis said, ignoring Emerson.

“We get two down and we’re set.”

Cort pointed to a large calendar pasted on the east wall of the lobby. “Today is Thursday. Our goal is to get the traffic lights down by Saturday night. We have to turn our items in by noon every Sunday.”

“During these next nine days, we have to do our research carefully,” Phyllis said. “The traffic lights have cameras so they’ll notice a bunch of thieves trying to observe them. It’ll lead the cops straight to us.”

“I thought cops were paid off,” Rose said. “Why do we have to avoid them?”

“Only the higher up members of the police know about the league,” Cort replied. “A regular street cop isn’t going to know the difference between us and any other criminal.”

“One more thing,” Phyllis said. She looked carefully over her new teammates. The obvious inexperience and raw immaturity flashed across their faces. “The acts of thievery we will commit are no joke. Not only are they highly illegal, they can result in a massive amount of jail time. Becoming a thief is about finding ways to deliberately avoid the law and break the rules. It’s just like any other game.”

“Some game,” Rose remarked. “I thought playing a game meant abiding by the rules, not breaking them. I think that would be called cheating.”

Phyllis shook her head. “Not at all. It’s not cheating if you don’t get caught. It’s not a crime if the cops can’t catch you. Until the moment you get thrown into the slammer, you haven’t done anything wrong. That’s the principle in which the Grand Larceny League lives by. Even at the amateur level, our profession carries dangerous risks and consequences. But if you

never risk anything, then you'll never accomplish your goals. I don't know much about your pasts, but leave them behind. Your lives belong to the game now. Let's get to it."

The Chicago Police Department. Police Chief Thompson stamped his name on a document and looked over his desk. His division was getting more work every week. Part of him preferred working with thieves over his fellow cops. Thieves were easy to understand; they just wanted quick money in a quick way. A red buzzer on his desk sounded off and his assistant's voice came through.

"Chief, there's someone here demanding to see you."

Thompson jerked his head back. "Demanding? Who is it?"

"It's someone from the government."

Thompson rubbed his cheek. He put a bandage on the bruise he got from the GLL meeting last week, but it was not healing as fast as he wanted. The swelling had gone down, but the bruise continued to cause pain in his jaw. "Tell him I'm out," he said. "Make an appointment for him later in the week."

"Chief, it's not—"

Thompson's office door slammed open. A leather boot kicked the door open and cracked the wood. The walls shook heavily and a person walked through.

"Chief Thompson, I presume?"

Thompson looked over his guest. It was a woman; a government employed woman. Her glossy black hair was tied back in a pony tail, matching her business suit. She also sported a yellow necktie, vibrant and sharp. She was young, but Thompson instantly could tell she was a professional.

“I’m special agent Tessa Narini, US Treasury Department,” she stated firmly. She tilted her head and looked at Thompson’s face. “Nice bruise. I hope the other guy is hurting more than you are.”

Thompson instinctively reached and touched his cheek. “What is going on here?”

Agent Narini crossed her arms. “You were supposed to get a fax about my arrival.”

Thompson cleared his throat. “I didn’t get it,” he replied. “What’s this about?”

Agent Narini walked over and put down ten sheets of paper on Thompson’s desk. “This is about your department. These letters are from people who have direct authority over your city. The last two are from the Treasury Secretary and your governor. You can read them, but they essentially say the same thing.”

“Which is?”

“You’re going to do whatever I say.”

Chief Thompson rubbed his jaw. “Let’s slow this down,” he said. “Why don’t you have a seat?”

Tessa Narini nodded and pulled out a chair. She sat down with perfect posture, as if the government had trained her how to work a chair. “Being polite will help, but it won’t change anything,” she said. “My authority is here to stay.”

“All right, but perhaps you can explain why you’re here.”

“I’m here to investigate the theft rate in this city,” Tessa replied. “It’s too low.”

“Too low? I don’t get it.”

“The statistics sent to our office say the theft rate in Chicago has been declining,” she said. “And apparently your subordinates are the ones responsible for this ‘official’ numbers.”

“What are you implying?”

“I’m not implying anything,” Tessa said. “I’m here on a federal investigation.”

Thompson studied the signed papers. Government insignias, official stationary, sloppy signatures; Tessa Narini was legit. “Look, you can throw around all the papers you want, but I’m still the police chief,” Thompson said. “My cops only listen to me. Each one of them will quit the force before they have to work for anyone else. Let’s just put it all on the table; what are you looking for?”

Tessa’s face tightened. She stood up and closed the office door. “I’m looking for thieves.”

“What kind of thieves?”

“Thieves connected to the leaders of organized crime,” Tessa replied. “There’s some kind of relationship between the

crime bosses and the rise of theft across the country. FBI investigation has discovered this much. The only problem is that there is no evidence, no illegal sources of revenue flowing through crime organizations. My job is to bring proof to the government so they can investigate more thoroughly.”

“And what’s your theory?” Thompson asked. “What do you think the crime bosses are doing?”

“It’s obvious that many crime bosses hire professional thieves; that’s not new,” Tessa said. “My theory is that crime bosses across the nation are working together. I think that they’re using thieves in a unique way that the government has never seen before. If my theory is true, that can only mean the police are helping them.”

“Police corruption has gone down in the last ten years,” Thompson said. “Not just in Chicago, but in the whole country. There’s no evidence that proves otherwise.”

Tessa shook her head. "That's only according to the police themselves. I'm here as an outside opinion."

"But why Chicago?" Thompson asked. "What's so special about us?"

"Chicago is a good central location," Tessa explained. "I'm going to be traveling across the country so Chicago makes sense as a home base. The government has given me authority that reaches every state and jurisdiction. I'll be personally visiting police headquarters in every major city across the country."

"And what happens if those cops are corrupt?" Thompson asked. "How are you going to work with cops that might be paid off by the crime bosses? They won't do anything you ask. Trust me, dirty cops won't do you any good."

Tessa smiled. Typical meathead cop, she thought. Simpleminded and easily startled. "Perhaps," she replied. "Your

cops might be loyal, but I can strip them of their pensions and paychecks. They'll listen to me. Even loyalty has a selling price."

Chief Thompson folded his hands. This special agent Narini had done her homework. His own options were limited. All he could hope for is that Narini didn't suspect him of any wrongdoing. But part of him knew this day was coming. For almost ten years Thompson had helped run the GLL. They were good years too; the league paid him well for his services and protection. Now, his own government wanted to shut him down. And that was the moment when Thompson realized it; working with thieves made him a thief too.

"By the way, I'll need a desk," Tessa said. "Nothing fancy, just somewhere I can do my work."

"We'll set you up."

“Great,” Tessa said. “If you work with me, I can make sure you get compensated for it. Work against me, and you’ll go to prison. I hope you make the right choice.”

With that warning, Tessa walked out of the office. Thompson had no idea what to do. If he told the GLL about Tessa, what would happen if he got caught? A convicted police chief wouldn’t last ten seconds in a prison. But if he helped Tessa out, he could be killed by the crime bosses. Thompson had to choose between a professional league of thieves and the government of the United States; money versus morality. There was no middle ground.

Chapter 6

“I don’t feel like doing this,” Emerson grunted. “How are we supposed to win a championship by just sitting around?”

“We’re planning,” Cort said. “Calm down.”

Emerson and the rest of the team were standing around the lobby of the Hotel Mango. The beautifully carved green marble floor shined brightly as the team stood around a large metal pole near the center. The thieves set up the pole as practice. Stealing the cameras and the lights would require a simple, but swift touch. Emerson did not exactly approve.

“Let me just jump up there,” Emerson said. “I’ll rip the lights off, and then throw them at Boden. He can use a net or something.”

Boden frowned. “No.”

“Then let me crush the ground with my shoes,” Emerson said, throwing out another idea. “I’ll crush the ground and then we can rip the pole out.”

“You would destroy an entire street, Emerson,” Phyllis growled. “Not only would you let every cop in the city know we are stealing, but you’d probably destroy the lights in the process.”

Emerson sank into a cushy chair. “It could work if you guys weren’t so boring.”

Boden walked up to the pole. He looked straight up and tried playing out the scenario in his head. Phyllis had a point. The thieves could easily take down the pole and steal the cameras, but it would be too out in the open. On top of that, the cameras inside the lights would lead the cops to them. But then again, there was a slight glimmer of hope. Boden realized they did not to take down the giant, just pluck out its eyes.

“We can take out the cameras and just run,” Boden realized. “If we do it fast enough, we don’t have to worry about the cops at all.”

“What do you mean?” Cort asked.

“If we take out the cameras and bolt, the cops won’t have enough time to react,” Boden said. “It might be a tight window, but we can make a run for it right away. Once we take out the lights, the cops won’t be able to track us. If we blind them, they cannot see us.”

“Simple, but true,” Cort remarked. “The cameras record high quality video streams 24/7, but according to the BB book, the police servers aren’t equipped to handle the constant stream of video. They upload every twelve hours, at midnight and noon. If we hit them before or in between, we should be safe.”

“We also have a man on the inside,” Phyllis added.

“Although we haven’t heard from him recently, we got someone who can stall the cops from coming after us. He might be able to buy us an extra five to ten minutes.”

“We have someone we can trust in the police force?”

Boden asked. “I thought the cops aren’t supposed to interfere.”

“Money can change how a man thinks,” Phyllis said with a grin. “Other than Thompson, we got a few moles in the force.”

“Part of the game,” Cort said in agreement. “But something strange has been going on in the Chicago police ranks. Usually Chief Thompson or someone else is in daily contact with our boss and updates us often as possible. We haven’t been getting a lot of info lately.”

Boden rubbed his chin. It seemed like even the veteran thieves did not know everything about the league. Although

secrecy is part of the thievery world, something seemed to be missing from the big picture. If the police are involved with keeping the GLL a secret, then people's jobs were at risk. There seemed to be bigger powers in play within the shadows of the Grand Larceny League.

“Well, what do we do for now?” Rose asked, sipping a cup of tea. “How do we take down the lights?”

Phyllis turned to Emerson. He started dozing off in the lounge chair. Emerson's focus seemed to be shrinking by the moment.

“Emerson will jump on top of the traffic signal,” Phyllis began, “with Cort. Emerson won't be able to disassemble the lights so we'll need Cort up there.”

Emerson's ears perked up as he heard his name. “What am I going to do, put Cort on my back?” he asked, waking up for his semi sleep state. “I'm a jumper, not a piggy back service.”

“Fair point actually,” Boden remarked. “I doubt Emerson can control his jump with Cort on top of him.”

Rose looked up at the pole. She too was imagining what it would be like with Emerson jumping up on top of it.

“Why don’t we do a pulley jump?” Rose said, cutting in.

The team turned and looked at Rose. They weren’t sure what she had meant.

“Emerson should jump up on top with a rope attached to a pulley,” Rose said, pointing to the top of the pole. “He’ll grab one side of the rope and Cort will hang onto the other side. As Emerson jumps down to the ground, it should pull Cort up to the lights. Emerson’s weight will hold Cort up there as he takes out the lights.”

Boden was impressed. He took a look at both sides of the pole. He then took a look at Emerson and his shoes. It was

impossible to fully understand Emerson's jump shoes, but they should provide enough slack to pull Cort up to the lights. Rose's plan was elegant, simple, and fast.

"I like it," Emerson said, throwing a thumbs up. "I approve of this plan."

"Good idea, Rosie," Cort said, smiling through his beard.

Phyllis nodded. The rookies were growing right in front of her eyes. At first, Phyllis assumed that the rookies would have to overcome their natural limitations and weaknesses. But now, she felt as if these new thieves were unveiling how much talent they really had. They weren't overcoming limits, they were letting go of them.

"Practice time," Phyllis said loudly. "We'll hit a hardware store and get the necessary ropes and pulleys. Measure

Emerson's body length and we'll get a harness that will attach to his torso."

Boden stood up, ready to buy the items. "Can I get some spending money?" he asked. "It might cost a bit."

Phyllis and Cort smiled at him. "You're a thief now, Boden," Phyllis said, almost with a sneer. "Go steal them yourself."

Two days later.

Emerson walked into McGee's Tavern, hoping to catch the last quarter of a Saturday night ball game. He only had about an hour until he was supposed to meet up with the rest of the team. Emerson went to the lounge hoping to be the only one using the TV. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

Emerson saw a woman with a yellow necktie watching a hockey match. He was immensely disappointed.

“Are you going to keep on watching that?” Emerson asked the woman. “I need to watch something.”

The woman looked up. She shifted her position in the chair. “What do you want to watch?” she asked.

“The Bulls are playing the Lakers right now,” Emerson replied. “The second half should be starting.”

“Sorry, the Rangers are playing the Kings,” the woman said. “I have to see this.”

“Why are you watching hockey?” Emerson asked. “Watch a real sport.”

“You’re kidding,” she said, leaning back in her chair. “Hockey is the toughest sport out there. It takes a real athlete to play hockey.”

“Eating rocks is tough too, but that doesn’t make it a sport,” Emerson replied.

The woman shook her head. “A sport is what you make it,” she said. “It doesn’t matter what play, as long as you compete.”

“Tell that to pro golfers,” Emerson said, reaching for the remote.

The woman grabbed Emerson’s wrist. “The Rangers are up one and third period is about to end,” she said. “Wait a couple minutes and I’ll change the channel.”

Emerson looked down at his arm. The woman had a solid grip on his wrist; part of him liked it. “That’s fair,” he said. “My name’s Emerson.”

“I’m Tessa.” She let go of Emerson. “Nice to meet you.”

Emerson sat down in an opposing chair. “Are you a Rangers fan?”

“Nah, I’m a Kings fan,” Tessa said. “They haven’t done well for a few years, but I grew up watching them.”

“The only hockey player I know is Wayne Gretzky,” Emerson said. “And he’s been retired for years.”

“Gretzky was the reason I watched the Kings,” Tessa said. “In his prime, he was unstoppable.”

“True,” Emerson replied. “To be honest, I don’t know much about hockey. I’m not a real fan.”

“Hockey helps me unwind after work,” Tessa said, stretching her arms. “Unfortunately, I’ve learned Chicago isn’t much of a hockey town.”

“Agreed,” Emerson said. “Where are you from?”

“I’m from Washington D.C.,” Tessa replied. “You?”

“Chicago, born and raised,” Emerson said, smiling.

“Considering the size of Chicago, we really don’t have any amazing sports teams. We’ve gone down the drain.”

“At least in recent years,” Tessa said. She looked down at Emerson’s green shoes. “Nice kicks. Where’d you get the footwear?”

Emerson instinctively touched his shoes. “They were a gift,” he said. “From an old friend.”

“They look custom made. Did your friend design them?”

“You could say that,” Emerson replied. “Then again, I’m not too sure how they work.”

“What do they do?”

“They’re jump shoes,” Emerson answered. “When I wear them, I can jump really high.”

“What do you consider really high? Five feet?”

“More like two hundred.”

Tessa was about dispute the claim, but then realized it.

“They’re imbued, aren’t they?” she said. “You’re saying those shoes are imbued with a jump function.”

“That’s right,” Emerson replied.

“If that’s true, those shoes are worth quite a bit,” Tessa said.

“Do you know how imbued items are made?”

“Not a clue.”

“The rumors say imbued items are the product of someone’s passion,” Tessa said softly. “All the hate, love, rage, desire inside a person is put into an object and a special ability comes out. Of course, not many people are capable of that.”

“That sounds like something my friend could do,” Emerson replied. “She has passion like no one else.”

“Sounds like she’s more than a friend.”

Emerson paused. "Not right now. Not anymore."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Tessa said.

"So is she," Emerson replied.

"Either way, she made a quality product. If they're real, they must be worth a few million."

"I'm not really interested in that," Emerson said.

"You're not interested in money?"

"Why should I be?" Emerson said. "If you can put a price tag on something, then it's not that valuable. I'm interested in things that go beyond dollars and cents."

"I wish there were more people like that," Tessa said. "You should see the people I have to deal with at work."

"Do you mean your co-workers?"

“Well, not exactly,” Tessa said. She pulled out her badge. “I’m a government agent. At the Treasury Department, it’s all about the money. The criminals we try to catch will lie, steal, and cheat for even the smallest bit of cash. Money finds its way into everything and ruins it.”

“I don’t believe that,” Emerson said. “Money doesn’t always change people. There are some people who can’t be affected by money.”

“Come on, do you really believe that?” Tessa asked. She pointed at the TV. “Look at all the pro athletes out there. If they didn’t get paid millions they wouldn’t be in the sport.”

“But among those pro’s, there are only a few great ones,” Emerson argued. “The people who sit at the top are always the ones who want glory. For them, it’s about being the best.”

“That just means the rest are out for money,” Tessa said.

“They treat sports like it’s a job. Money has turned sports into a cash machine for people with talent. No matter how you look at it, money defines professional sports.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Emerson said. “But you can’t buy victory. You can’t buy a championship. You can’t buy a legacy of greatness. You can only earn those things. That’s what I’m going to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m a pro thief,” Emerson replied. “And I’m going to win a title for this city.”

Tessa Narini stared at him. “You’re a thief?”

“Yeah,” Emerson said. “In fact, I have a job today.”

“You do realize that I work for the government, right?” Tessa said. “I arrest thieves on a regular basis.”

“Oh,” Emerson said. “You’re not paid off?”

“What? Why would I be paid off?”

Emerson shrugged. “I figured the league would have covered that.”

“What league?”

“Maybe I should stop talking,” Emerson murmured. “You don’t seem to be one of the good cops.”

“I *am* one of the good cops,” Tessa snapped.

“Before you freak out, can you change the channel?”

Emerson asked. “Your game is over.”

“Shut up,” Tessa barked. “You’re coming with me.”

“I guess I should’ve expected this from a hockey fan,”

Emerson said, sighing. “Sorry, lady. Can’t do it.”

Emerson jumped from his lounge chair. A flash of green raced from his shoes. He flew through the air and landed by the door. He burst through the exit, trying to escape. He was about to take another jump but a sharp elbow slammed into his back. Emerson was sent sprawling down the street. Tessa walked calmly out of the tavern.

“So those shoes are real,” Tessa said, cracking her knuckles. “It doesn’t matter. It’ll take more than that to stop me.”

Emerson stood up and rubbed his back. He was starting to see Tessa was serious about her job.

“I thought we’re becoming friends,” Emerson said. “I guess that won’t happen now.”

“Put your hands on your head and get on the ground,” Tessa ordered.

“No.”

Tessa loosened her yellow necktie. The necktie started to get longer and longer, extending to the length of a bullwhip. Tessa wrapped part of the long yellow tie around her hand and gripped it tightly.

“You have an imbued item too,” Emerson murmured.

Tessa whipped the yellow necktie at Emerson. The tie extended to twenty feet and slashed the street pavement. A sharp crack of the whiplash echoed throughout the street. It cut pieces of concrete, barely missing Emerson.

“You’re trying to kill me,” Emerson shrieked. “At least read me my rights.”

Tessa did not respond. Her yellow tie had strange properties; it could extend incredibly or shorten itself to a normal tie length. Not only that, it had sharp edges. Emerson never saw an imbued item like this.

“Not good,” Emerson said to himself.

Tessa whipped the tie once more, streaming it through the air. Emerson raised his forearm and the yellow necktie wrapped around him like a rope. The sharp edges began to cut his skin.

“All your talk about money was just a lie, wasn’t it?” Tessa said. “Thieves like you are all the same. Instead of earning money, you take it from good people.”

“It wasn’t a lie,” Emerson said, blood running down his arm. “Everything I told you was true. All I want is glory. Money will never have anything to do with me being a thief.”

“Then why are you stealing?” Tessa demanded. “Why are you a thief?”

“Because of her,” Emerson whispered.

Tessa loosened the grip on her necktie. “What?”

“I left her,” Emerson replied. “I left her and said I would come back a better man. I said I would come back as a winner. This is for her.”

Emerson pulled the necktie off his arm and jumped away. His green shoes shined brightly as he disappeared into the city. Tessa was left alone on the street. She touched her yellow tie and made it shrink to its normal size. She gave it a simple tug to adjust it to her slender neck.

Meeting Emerson was the biggest break Tessa had so far. Emerson might have escaped, but at least she was now aware of the league. It all started to come together. The case only needed the evidence to support her cause. Moves needed to be made.

“A league of thieves,” Tessa murmured to herself. “I must find it.”

Chapter 7

Emerson rocketed into the air from the jump. He leaped off rooftop after rooftop, slamming his shoes hard into the tops of the buildings across downtown Chicago. He could hear Chicagoans peek outside their windows and complain about the loud crushing sounds of brick and mortar. Emerson took a hard jump and headed towards Adams Street. He rubbed the bleeding cut on his arm.

“Tessa Narini,” Emerson muttered, wincing at the cut. “Even government agents have imbued items. I wonder where she got hers.”

Emerson jumped down to the street. He saw Boden hiding behind a green dumpster. He was waiting for him.

“You’re late,” Boden said in a low voice.

“I have a good reason for that,” Emerson said, showing the cut on his arm.

“A fight?” Boden hissed. “Right before a score?”

“I’ll explain later.”

“Remember the steps of the plan,” Boden whispered. “Cort is already by the light.” He pointed across the street.

Emerson turned his head. He saw Cort in an alley near the traffic light. He had a thick leather belt across his waist. The belt had hooks ready to be fastened for a rope.

Boden put a hand on Emerson’s shoulder. “Emerson, you’re up. The moment you hit the lights, we’ll have five minutes. Get ready on red.”

Emerson nodded. He hooked on a harness with a rope connected to the back. He took a running start and jumped into the air. He smiled as he flew into the air. His green shoes blazed

through the dark night. He went up and landed on the top of the traffic light pole. He hooked the pulley to the pole and looked behind him. Cort dashed in and hooked Emerson's rope to his belt.

"Let's do it," Cort shouted.

Dozens of Chicago drivers saw Emerson jump into the air. Emerson landed on the pole with a thud. He had done this dozens of times back at the Hotel Mango. But more than that, jumping was a natural feat for Emerson even without the shoes. He always felt at home in the air.

Emerson jumped down and pulled Cort up as he went down. Cort zoomed up as Emerson pulled him onto the pole. Cort hung up on the pole like a cliffhanger, ready to climb a mountain. Cort pulled out his tools and started his job. Sweat started to flow. Cort's gloves were soaked after ten seconds. He unscrewed the lights in smooth motion, just like he had done in

the Hotel Mango's lobby. Cort had practiced hours upon hours in his room, unscrewing and unhinging the lights as fast as he could. The lights were right in front of him, he could see the cameras inside the red, green, and yellow lights zooming in on him. The cops could see him.

Cort smiled to himself. How many years had passed since he felt such a rush from a job? The past teams were all so empty, so uninspired and unmotivated. But here and now, there was a real chance to win. Not only win, but win big.

"I got it!" Cort yelled. He grappled with the traffic signal and looked down.

Boden dashed in and weaved through the cars on the street. At this point, all the drivers were honking and yelling at the Ballers, screaming that their drive was interrupted. Cort let go of the lights and let them fall down. Boden caught the traffic signal, surprised at the lightness of the device. For a moment, Boden

realized that the traffic light was the most expensive thing he had ever laid hands on. He couldn't remember the last time he had stolen something, but he would always remember when he stole this traffic light.

Cort signaled his hand to Emerson. They were still both connected by their harnesses. Emerson's body acted as a counterweight. Emerson jumped back up to the pole while Cort's body went down. Emerson was back on top of the pole. Emerson took a second to balance himself.

Cort landed on the street and unhooked his harness. He looked up and saw Emerson was still up there. What was he doing?

Emerson gazed out and stared into the street. The flashing headlights and honking flooded Emerson's senses. The wind started to pick up, a scent of wet leaves passed by Emerson. The 11 o'clock wind was about to hit the great city of Chicago.

“What are you doing, you crazy freak?” a driver shouted.

“You’re killing traffic here!”

“That guy just stole a traffic light!”

“Did you see how he jumped?”

“Someone call the police. This can’t be legal.”

Emerson turned his orange cap over and had the bill face the side of his head. He gazed out and looked for the most parked expensive car he could see on the street. There, a current model BMW 740i was sitting pretty one lane over. It was parked by a meter about a hundred feet away from the intersection. Emerson smiled. He balanced himself on the pole for a moment, and then leaped. All of the drivers stared at Emerson in unison as he soared through the air with a single jump.

Emerson slammed into the parked BMW, crushing the roof completely. Sound alarms, shattered glass, it was a completely

wreck. The Chicago drivers all stared at Emerson, wondering what in the world was this man thinking.

On top of the car, Emerson took the deepest and biggest breath of his life. "Hey Chicago!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. "It's me, Emerson Jay!"

Boden and Cort gaped at him, completely take aback by Emerson's outburst. This was *not* part of the plan.

"We are going to steal from you," Emerson went on, yelling loudly over the car alarm. "We are going to take things that you treasure. But when we do, it will be for our city. When we win, we will win together. This city deserves more than anything I could ever give, but my team and I will deliver you glory. Victory will be stolen!"

Emerson jumped down and hit the concrete street. His shoes slammed into the road, creating a shockwave that rippled

across the pavement. The impact made the cars on the street shake and rumble. The honking and shouts only increased.

Emerson, Boden, and Cort ran to the side alley where Rose had parked their getaway van.

“What were you thinking?” Cort screamed at Emerson. He loaded the traffic light into the back of the van. “You completely exposed us! The entire plan was to keep hidden, keep away from getting noticed.”

The three of them crouched in the backseats of the van. Rose hit the gas pedal and maneuvered their way out of the dark alley. They had another intersection to go to. Rose tilted her head slightly to hear what had happened.

Emerson folded his arms. “You said that we stole from our home city out of tradition,” he said calmly. “That it was a way for us to show that we are brave enough to taunt the city.”

Cort eyes narrowed hard at Emerson. He did not like where this was going.

“I’m more than brave enough,” Emerson continued. “But bravery won’t win us anything. It’s not enough.”

“So you added a cup full of stupidity to your winning recipe?” Cort snarled.

Emerson glared hard at Cort. He put his hands on his knees and threw his body up. The top of his head reamed into the roof of the van. The van echoed with the sound of metal and skull bouncing off each other. The sound made Rose jump in the driver’s seat. Emerson’s orange cap and team badge flew off his head.

“Nope, I added a million gallons of stupidity!” Emerson shouted.

Cort rolled his eyes. He sighed and started rubbing his beard. He instantly started calculating how the team should adjust for Emerson's actions. But suddenly he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Cort, I want to win," Emerson said, crouching down next to him. "I'm willing to risk my life for this team. I wanted to show the city that I'm willing to even steal from myself in order to win."

Sitting across, Boden smiled. Despite the recklessness, Emerson had put more thought into his career than anyone in the van. He had goals to achieve and nothing would stop him. Strategy and analysis could only take you so far; sometimes you need a crazy dreamer to get the dream.

"I admire that," Cort said, half trying to be encouraging while the other half wanted to choke Emerson. "I admire your feelings about thievery and about our league. But you need to

learn how to control yourself. You jeopardized the team with your actions. Think before you do something like that again.”

“I can’t promise I’ll think,” Emerson said with a smile. “I can only promise I’ll be myself.”

On the other side of Chicago, Chief Thompson went into the control room of his police station. He had been alerted of some suspicious activity.

“What’s happening on Adams Street?” Thompson demanded.

“Sir, one of the city’s traffic lights has been taken down. I think it’s one of the new ones.”

Agent Tessa Narini walked in slowly. She observed the computer screens.

“Is there a problem, chief?”

Thompson turned around. "Yeah, a traffic light is down. We use them to monitor crime and take pictures of the area. They're incredibly expensive."

"Chief, we have teams on standby ready to secure the scene."

"Good," Thompson said.

"Send only regular squad cars to the scene," Tessa cut in. "The thieves will be long gone by the time we get there. Send the rest of our patrolmen to the other traffic lights that have the same technology. Make sure they aren't compromised."

Thompson grimaced. He would have to comply for now. He nodded and made the order.

As Thompson worked the phone, Tessa leaned in close to the computer screen. "Show me some images of the thieves. Someone must have been caught on camera."

The technician in front of Tessa hesitated. "Actually, ma'am," he started, nervous already. "The cameras send the video feed into a locked storage drive every twelve hours. If the camera gets damaged or removed, the storage drive erases itself automatically. It's a safety precaution."

Tessa's face turned into a snarl. She had made the biggest breakthrough this night and suddenly she had no evidence. Tessa grabbed the technician by his sweat soaked collar. "What kind of safety precaution is that?" she screamed. "We need evidence, you fool."

Thompson dropped his phone and grabbed Tessa's wrist. "Let him go, Agent Narini," he said firmly. "Now."

Tessa shoved the technician back into his seat. She left the surveillance room in anger. She was half tempted to whip out her imbued tie and slash Thompson across his face. For now, she would need these Chicago cops.

Thompson looked over his shoulder to make sure Tessa was gone. She was a dangerous and smart government agent. Workers like Tessa Narini were a pain to work with and ruthless to oppose. Thompson wanted nothing to do with her. He reached into his pocket and took out an envelope. The technician in front was panting, gasping to get some air. With a swift motion, Thompson handed the manila envelope to the technician.

“Take the next week off, officer,” Thompson said, sliding the envelope under the table. “A break from this place would do you good.”

Rose hit the brake hard. The van's acceleration was terrific, but they would have to replace the break pads soon. Chicago streets were not kind to tires.

The van screeched and hit their next intersection. "One more, boys," Rose said from the driver's seat. "Go get them."

"Rose, give Phyllis a call on a secure line," Boden said. "Tell her we're half done."

Rose nodded and dialed a number on her GLL issued phone. Emerson, Boden, and Cort ran down the street to the second traffic light. One more and they were home free. The only problem was that the traffic light they had targeted was already gone.

"Where did it go?" Emerson said.

All that was left was a small metal stump where the traffic pole should have been. Boden and Cort tried looking around but saw nothing.

"Sorry, but you guys are a little late."

Emerson turned around. In the alley, a young man with black spiky hair stood next to a wooden barrel. The barrel was no bigger than a trashcan, simple and plain. However, Emerson felt something emanating from the barrel. Whatever purpose it served, it was not just a regular object. The stranger leaned on the barrel and waved casually.

“Who’s there?” Emerson yelled. “Are you from the GLL?”

“That’s right,” the boy said. “I’m Ken Koala from the Chicago Razorbacks. The traffic light’s already mine. You might want to go find another one.”

“The Razorbacks?” Cort said. “I’ve never seen you on that team.”

“I’m a rookie,” Ken said. “I was thinking of joining the Ballers but I heard the owner doesn’t pay his thieves. I’m pretty sure I made the right decision.”

“You know us?” Boden asked.

“Is that so surprising?” Ken asked. “The Razorbacks and Ballers are the only teams in Chicago. Plus, Emerson made quite a scene at the first meeting. I’d recognize him anywhere.”

“Give us the traffic light and no one will get hurt,” Cort said.

“Not much I can do about that,” Ken said. He patted the barrel next to him. “I’ve already fit three whole traffic lights into this thing.”

Emerson gritted his teeth. “Another imbued item.”

“Right again,” Ken said. “I can put anything I want into this barrel up to one day. Size, shape, or quantity doesn’t matter.”

“Then we’ll take the barrel,” Emerson said. “Hand it over.”

“Wrong this time,” Ken said with a grin. “I suppose you guys forgot what time it is in this city.”

Boden hesitated, but he glanced at his watch. It was fifteen minutes past eleven. That meant the eleven o'clock wind should have started hitting the city hard.

"No, it can't be," Boden murmured. He turned his eyes to the barrel. "He couldn't have."

Ken tilted his barrel and tapped it on the side. "Release," he whispered.

Boden grabbed Cort and leapt to the nearest corner. He would have grabbed Emerson if he was closer to him, but he didn't have time. Wind was coming.

Emerson folded his arms. "What is going—"

A blast of old wind rushed out of the barrel and hit Emerson straight on. Wet brown leaves spiraled out and splashed all over Emerson. The gust hit Emerson so hard that he started to lose his footing. Emerson lifted his arms, covering his face and neck. The

cold air enveloped him like a blanket, covering Emerson completely. Seventeen years of Chicago fall seasons flooded back into Emerson's mind. Fall was always Emerson's favorite season. Chicago winters were always bitter, but fall always gave him hope. Despite Chicago's cold and harsh weather, the brief fall season always helped Emerson appreciate his city. But right now, he was eating more wind than he ever wanted.

Emerson's body was lifted off the ground from the wind. The wind blew him across the alley, sending him flying. Emerson twisted his body, unsure of how to control his body. Midair, Emerson shifted his feet as he flew toward a brick wall. His green shoes hit the wall hard, crushing the bricks as he landed. He continued to shield himself, wondering when the wind would stop.

Ken smiled and tapped the barrel once more. The wind stopped and Emerson dropped down to the ground. Emerson

panted hard as he tried to recover from the damage. His face and upper body had dozens of tiny cuts. The wind had sliced him up hard. Emerson shivered from the cold. He just realized where the 11 o'clock wind had gone into; the barrel of his newly found opponent.

“Hope you don’t catch a cold,” Ken said, still smiling. “Not many can take a full blast of 11 o'clock wind to the face like you just did.”

“I’m Chicagoan,” Emerson replied as he stood up. “That felt like a tiny fart compared to a real 11 o'clock breeze.”

“So you’re from this town as well,” Ken said. “I’m from South side. Born and bred there.”

“I’m North side,” Emerson said back, dusting off his clothes. He picked up his orange cap and put it back on his head. “I’ve been all over this city. Don’t think I’ve ever seen you before.”

“I just graduated high school,” Ken replied. “I was going to go to college, but I decided against it. Turning pro was way more profitable.”

“Profitable?” Emerson said. “You became a pro thief for the money?”

“It is all about the money,” Ken said. “If you know Chicago, you know what South side is like, Emerson. You know what people like me had to go through.”

Emerson knew all too well. The South side of Chicago was not only crime filled and dangerous, it housed thousands of citizens who couldn't afford the high taxes the city demanded. Even worse, all sorts of criminals worked in the south. One could never be too careful in that area. Ken and his people could only dream about the money that the GLL team owners have. Compared to paying four years of college tuition or earning millions from thievery, the choice seemed very simple.

“You know what the biggest killer in history is, Emerson?” Ken said. He started to button up his black leather jacket. “It’s poverty, being poor. The poor can’t afford to take care of themselves and they end up dying because of it. People like us grew up with nothing. We still have nothing. But after I win the title and the GLL Championship money, my people in South side won’t have to suffer. With enough money, we can save this town.”

Emerson leaned over and stretched his legs. He tightened the brown laces on his shoes to make sure they were on straight. “You can have the money, kid,” he said. “I don’t want it. But you won’t win the title, at least not before me. I’m going to win championships for the glory, not the money. In fact, after I win I’ll give you my earnings. I don’t care.”

Ken couldn't believe it. "You'd give someone like me your money?" he exclaimed. "You're insane. What kind of thief are you?"

Emerson shifted his legs. He spread his feet and widened his stance to make his footing solid. "I'm the Jumpstar," he said in a low voice. "And I'm going to be the best thief this league has ever seen."

Emerson crouched and charged up his shoes. The green shoes blazed once again, turning the black stars white hot. He launched himself at Ken with a powerful jump. Ken ducked under his barrel. Although his imbued barrel was powerful, he already used up his one attack. The barrel can only store items for one day. With the daily 11 o'clock wind, he could only store one wind blast a day.

Emerson jumped over the barrel and kicked the opposing brick wall. The wall was thick, but it was no match for Emerson's

shoes. The wall completely shattered and the bricks began to fall over Ken and his barrel. A deep rumble sounded off and dust from the mortar spread across the alley. Ken had no choice; he would have to catch all the bricks in the barrel.

“Koala barrel, swallow,” Ken shouted, panicking as he tapped the side of the barrel. The falling bricks instantly were sucked into the opening of the barrel. Ken gripped the side of his imbued item hard, trying to focus on collecting the bricks so he wouldn’t get crushed. But just then, he saw something come at his side.

Emerson short hopped through the dust and slammed his foot into Ken’s ribs. Ken cried out as he felt his rib cage cave in. He heard a heavy crack echo throughout his body as the kick instantly crushed three of his ribs. Despite the opening wind attack, Emerson definitely had an advantage in fighting.

Ken leaned over his barrel, trying his best not to cry tears or vomit out his guts. He was a thief, not a warrior. Emerson on the other hand, was both.

Before Emerson could press his advantage, police sirens sounded off in the distance. Rose drove the truck into the alley.

“Guys, the police are on the way,” Rose shouted. “I heard on the police scanner that they’re chasing someone.”

“I suppose that would be me,” Ken gasped. He held the side of his rib cage tenderly. “They’ve been after me ever since I took the first traffic light. You guys avoided the police, but I got here faster.”

Boden and Cort both came running back to support Emerson. Boden was about to draw his sword but Cort held him back.

“We don’t have any more time,” Cort said. “We’ll cut our losses for tonight.”

Boden nodded and went to the truck. Cort ran after him. Emerson stood still, staring at Ken in the alleyway.

“Why did you tell us about your imbued item?” Emerson asked. “You just gave away its secret.”

“It’s only fair,” Ken said, holding his side. “I saw your jumping ability at the intro meeting. Now we’re on an even playing field.”

“You know, I’m a rookie too,” Emerson said.

“I figured you were,” Ken replied. “Only a rookie would be crazy enough to act like you do.”

“Probably,” Emerson said. “But crazy or not, I’m going to bring a championship to Chicago.”

Ken laughed. He stood up and faced Emerson. “Normally I would claim that role for myself, but we both want the same

thing," he said. "I'd rather one of us win the championship than some scrub from another city."

"I agree," Emerson said. "So let's do it."

"Sure," Ken replied. "May the better man bring the title to great city of Chicago."

They both shook hands and smiled. This rivalry felt strange to Emerson, but it was just another challenge for him to meet head on. And a hometown rivalry was even better. The strength of his adversary would force him to become a better thief. The ferocity of competition was designed to make him stronger. Emerson said goodbye and ran back to his teammates. This season was only getting better and better.

Chapter 8

“That job was a massive failure,” Phyllis barked. “One of the worst I’ve ever been a part of.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Boden said. “We did get a solid \$510,000 for one traffic light.”

“Solid?” Phyllis said. “We’re in second to last place.”

It was Sunday evening at the Hotel Mango and the results for week one just came in. Out of the sixteen teams, the Chicago Ballers were in 15th place. The only team that collected less was the newly inducted San Francisco team. Phyllis distributed their single traffic light to the regional league office. Since it was a BB book item, the Ballers got a solid price for their item. However, the Razorbacks stole the other three traffic lights which gave them triple the value. The Ballers were already lagging behind.

“Who’s in first place?” Rose asked.

Phyllis looked at her sheet. “The Detroit Demons,” she muttered. “Apparently they stole an entire shipment of X-Ray machines from a hospital. They were worth \$6,100,000.”

“Impressive,” Boden said. “That Zed Harper must be good.”

“Who’s Zed?” Emerson asked. “That name sounds like it should mean something.”

“Forget Zed,” Cort said. “We’re in trouble. The average this past week was \$1,250,000. With only a half a million, we were seriously below that. If we continue being below the league average, we’re done. From now on, a million has to be our bottom line.”

“Cort’s right,” Phyllis said. “A million bucks has to be the minimum. It was our first week as a new team, so there’s room for

improvement. Regardless of that, you all need to act faster and smarter.”

“If it weren’t for the Razorbacks, we would have done great,” Rose said. “We executed the plan perfectly.”

“It was bad luck,” Boden said, agreeing with Rose. “The idea was good. It was just bad timing.”

“That happens a lot in the GLL,” Cort said. “It’s a competition for a reason. We’re going to encounter tougher teams ahead. Each city has thieves that are going to challenge us. That’s why creativity and quick thinking are both required.”

“So where is the next score?” Emerson asked. “What’s the plan for week two?”

Phyllis handed each member a shiny black folder. “We’re going to Miami,” she said firmly. “There are plane tickets and

some travel info inside your folders. We've registered with the city and they know we're coming."

Rose and Emerson squealed in unison. "Yes!" they screamed. "Warm weather!"

Even Phyllis was relieved to leave the Midwest. As the regular season went on, many teams had to compensate for the approaching cold spells of winter. The GLL season started in the fall, but the winter defined how the team would succeed or fail. Chicago, Detroit, New York; these cities have some of the harshest winters in America. Even the best of thieves could get taken down by the elements. The coldest parts of the season had yet to arrive, so a warm weather city might be the best idea for a fledgling team that was struggling. Emerson and Rose started discussing what swimsuits to bring to Miami.

"What are we stealing?" Boden asked. "What's the target?"

“We’re going to hijack a wedding,” Phyllis said.

Cort looked to the three rookies on the team. They were less surprised and more focused this week. Although opening week was not a complete success, Cort definitely saw the potential in his team. The three rookies had provided a solid base for them to work around. If they kept on developing, the Chicago Ballers could become dangerous.

“Wedding cake is my favorite,” Emerson said, licking his lips.

“I want to get married,” Rose sighed.

“I can’t stand weddings,” Boden muttered.

“Tim Jamison, a businessman is getting married to a Florida senator’s daughter,” Cort explained. “The entire wedding is expected to cost 9.5 million dollars, with both families chipping in. The ceremony is going to be on a 750 foot luxury yacht near the Miami coastline.”

“Our plan is to steal the wedding gifts and anything that can be fenced,” Phyllis added.

“So the ceremony will be out in the ocean,” Boden realized. “I suppose the timing will have to be precise.”

“You’re right,” Cort confirmed. “We’ll have to figure out different methods of entry and escape out in the water.”

“Jamison has a brother who got married last year,” Phyllis said. “The gifts alone were estimated to be worth \$2,000,000. Tim Jamison himself is even wealthier and more connected. This wedding is going to be gigantic.”

“What’s the fence tax going to be like?” Rose asked. “Were the wedding gifts in the BB book?”

“They weren’t,” Phyllis answered. “This group of items is what we call a pile-on; that’s when the things we steal are completely

random. We'll be stealing a lot of different types of items. It'll be up to the league to sort that out and figure out the tax."

"This is going to be great," Emerson said, grinning widely.

"This is our first week in an outside city. It's fun terrorizing your home city, but it's time to tear up a new one. It's going to be a good week."

Boden had to smile himself. With week one behind them, the rest of the season looked incredibly open from their position. Even better, the thrill of thievery had a grip on them. Taking objects that did not belong to them gave them a strange energy boost, a powerful motivation that urged them to perform better as pro thieves. And they wanted more.

"We fly out tomorrow morning at 6 a.m.," Phyllis said. "Since this is our first time away from Chicago, we have to be careful. It's not easy to move around in a city you're not familiar with.

Miami is a good place to steal from. We have had success there in the past.”

“What about the Miami team?” Emerson asked. “What do we know about them?”

Phyllis cleared her throat. “The Miami Stormbreakers have kept the same roster for the past three years. They were always a fringe contender team; strong enough to make the playoffs but rarely ever winning past round one. They also have a couple of wild veterans that lead that team.”

Boden raised an eyebrow. “Miami did pretty badly last week,” he noted. “If the home team can’t even succeed, we might have even more trouble.”

“We didn’t do that well either,” Rose said. She turned to Cort and Phyllis. “How are the other teams doing overall?”

“We can find that out now,” Cort said. “*Scoreline* should be on.”

“What’s *Scoreline*?”

“It’s a TV show, part of the underground network,” Cort answered. “The black market has over one hundred thousand unlicensed TV channels that the world doesn’t know about. You need a special television and subscription to view these channels. As part of the GLL, we get both for free.”

“*Scoreline* basically shows the week’s results and highlights,” Phyllis said. “They keep us up to date with any developments with the league.”

Cort pointed to a rectangular piece of glass on the coffee table. It was completely transparent and razor thin. With a 50 inch diagonal screen, the large thin glass sat upright like a large mirror. Cort clicked the remote and the glass lit up instantly.

“Welcome to the evening edition of Scoreline. I’m Michael Paul Williams.”

“And I’m Andrew Scott Johnson. The new season of the GLL has kicked off and the Demons are starting it up again.”

“That’s right, Andrew. The one and only team from Detroit looks they want to repeat.”

The two Scoreline anchors both wore bright orange suits with numbers on the breast pocket. The background appeared to be a dull gray wall made of stone.

Boden rubbed his chin. “Who are these guys?”

“They’re two inmates at Bristol Prison in Connecticut,” Cort said. “Prisons are the media networks of the underground. You’d be surprised how much information passes through.”

Boden wasn’t sure, but his gut told him that these “TV anchors” were former GLL thieves. If an imprisoned thief couldn’t

be part of the league, the next best thing would be to join the media. He hoped he could avoid that occupation for as long as possible.

“The New York Knights and the Los Angeles Showtimers are tied for second place at \$3,000,000 a piece,” Andrew Scott Johnson reported. “These two classic teams just keep on making big scores. Once again, the Knights were led by Saga Sally and the Showtimers followed Marcus the Magician. The east coast—west coast rivalry lives on.”

“Sure does,” Michael Paul Williams said. “The newly signed San Fran Goldeners made headlines by bringing in a lowly \$460,000 this past week. Looks like San Francisco is still unknown territory as a Thievery Zone.”

“In the Midwest, we have the breakout performances of Ken Koala and Emerson Jay, the two promising rookies of the Windy City,” Andrew Scott Johnson reported. “Both the Ballers

and the Razorbacks have revamped their teams for the better. The two teams clashed together with the Razorbacks coming out on top. The Razorbacks will be heading to San Fran this week while the Ballers will be hitting a savvy Miami team in the south."

"Gutsy move, Michael," Andrew Scott Johnson noted. "Then again, the Ballers are in second to last place."

"Very true, Andrew," Michael Paul Williams said. "The oldest team in Chicago has continued to underperform so far. Hopefully one day they make the playoffs."

Cort turned off the TV. Although useful, Scoreline could affect a team's perspective. The black market media did not always have positive opinions.

"Is Miami that tough?" Rose asked.

"I hope so," Emerson said. "I want a real challenge this week."

“I think this week will be pretty interesting,” Boden replied. “A change in scenery will definitely do us good. Also, Scoreline seemed to notice our potential. The Miami team will have to be on their guard.”

Cort nodded. “Good point,” he said. “You three rest up tonight. We have a long day tomorrow.”

The three rookies stood up and went up to their rooms. Cort and Phyllis were left to themselves in the hotel lobby.

“Boden has a cool head,” Cort remarked, rubbing his beard. “He has a calming effect on the team. I think he could be a good team leader one day, maybe even a coach.”

“He’s definitely a bright spot on the team,” Phyllis said. “And he doesn’t annoy me; unlike Emerson.”

“Emerson is a good discovery too,” Cort said. “It’s tough to describe, but he has that ‘franchise feel’. We might be able to build a solid team around him.”

“Maybe, but it’s all potential,” Phyllis said. “Rose isn’t bad either. Turns out she can drive almost anything.”

“That’ll be useful,” Cort said. “Normally this wouldn’t bother me, but why did you pick Miami? We haven’t beaten the Stormbreakers in five years. They’re strong.”

“We needed to make a strong move,” Phyllis said. “Miami was the most logical choice.”

“It’s still going to be tough,” Cort replied. “Is there another reason I should know about?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” Cort asked. “If it’s possible, we should—”

Phyllis walked out of the lobby before he could finish. Cort shook his head. Even after all the years of being teammates, Phyllis was still a closed book to him.

Miami International Airport. The Chicago Ballers stepped out of the main terminal and went to a black limousine. Before Emerson got in, he took another look at the Miami sun. The difference in weather was simply amazing. The light around them made everything glow and shimmer so brightly. Compared to so many other cities, the dull gray of fall didn't exist in Miami. Emerson could feel the moisture in the air as he breathed it in. Chicago's lake front contributed to the humidity there, but Miami had an entire ocean. The humidity levels would be extra high out here near South Beach.

The black limousine, arranged by their owner, took them down to the small town of Miami Springs. Emerson looked out of the windows, slightly confused.

“So what are we doing here?” Emerson asked. “I thought the wedding is on a boat.”

“We’re only twenty minutes from the beach,” Phyllis said. “This town is going to be our temporary headquarters.”

“We’re in the suburbs,” Boden remarked. “What place can we use as a headquarters out here?”

Phyllis did not respond. The limo stopped abruptly on a small intersection. The team exited and looked around. Houses were neatly positioned by each other like dominos. The small beach town didn’t even have traffic lights for several miles. The beach houses were beautifully designed for the sunny weather. Despite their simplicity, these houses appeared to be summer homes for

the rich. Boden saw luxury cars littered across the entire area. The limousine slowed down and approached the last home on the street. The pink painted wood glistened in the Miami sun. Phyllis carried her luggage to the large five-story house and opened the door.

“Get inside,” Phyllis said. “The door should be unlocked.”

The team stepped into the house, unsure of the situation. Emerson dropped his luggage and looked around the house. Above the fireplace, a dozen golf trophies lined up above the mantle. In the corner of the living room, a bucket of golf balls and spare clubs lined up next to the wall. Emerson walked up and picked up a golf ball.

“Are we inside of someone's home?” Emerson asked, golf ball in his hands.

“Yes,” Phyllis said, closing the door.

“Who lives here?” Boden asked. “Whose house is this?”

“Mr. Thomas Wilson, age forty-eight, father of two, and one of the top three golf pros in the world,” Phyllis replied. “Mr. Wilson is a Detroit native and travels between Michigan and Florida to train for golf tournaments.”

“Does Mr. Wilson know we’re using his place?” Rose asked.

“He has no idea,” Cort answered. “This is usually what we do when we visit other cities. We try to find convenient locations that cost us nothing.”

“The Miami police suggested this place,” Phyllis explained.

“This home will help us stay under the radar from the police. As a Thievery Zone, there aren’t a lot of free locations for thieves.”

“This feels strange,” Emerson said. “We’re in someone else’s house, their home residence. I don’t really like it.”

“We’re only borrowing it,” Cort said. “We’re thieves, Emerson. We can’t hesitate on the job.”

“I have no problem with it,” Boden said, putting down his suitcase. “This is a nice place, but it’s not like we’re going to steal from Mr. Wilson. He won’t lose anything from this.”

“This house smells a little stale,” Rose said, pinching her nose. “He probably stopped cleaning once his wife left him.”

“You can see the loneliness painted on the walls,” Emerson murmured.

“Enough,” Phyllis said. “Unpack and get to it. There are four bedrooms on the first floor and five on the second floor. You guys have one hour to get settled and unwind.”

“I call the master bedroom,” Emerson shouted.

“Get out, it’s mine,” Rose yelled.

The team dispersed and bolted to the bedrooms. Even Boden hurried his steps. Cort sat down on the yellow couch.

“They’re like kids,” Cort said, stretching his arms. “I wish I had that energy.”

“They need to be ready in five days,” Phyllis said. “Like every other year with Miami, Kane Jones and Ralph Mason will give us some trouble. That wing duo remains solid as ever.”

“They’re couple of crazy cowboys,” Cort grunted. “I really want to beat them this year. Emerson and Boden have a solid shot. I believe they can hold their own ground.”

Phyllis nodded. The Miami Stormbreakers would be a solid test for them. If they could beat them on their home ground, it would show that the Ballers have the potential to compete in the playoffs. If they failed, it meant their progress was only fool’s gold; shiny but worthless.

“That reminds me, the Miami police sent us an email,” Phyllis said. “Apparently the Treasury agent that Emerson told us about is in Miami. I think her name is Tessa Narini.”

“She won’t be a problem,” Cort said. “You know how the league deals with people like that. Not an issue.”

“Still, it doesn’t make sense,” Phyllis said.

“What?”

“The local cops said Tessa Narini arrived in Miami three days before us,” Phyllis said. “Even if she knows Emerson, how’d she know we were coming here?”

Cort shrugged. He relaxed on the couch while Phyllis looked over Tessa’s profile picture. Phyllis recognized a strong determination in Tessa’s eyes. She had seen this before. It was the same look Emerson had the first day they had met in that jail cell.

Chapter 9

“Weddings and boats don’t mix,” Rose remarked. “The whole ceremony is too out in the open.”

“I think it’s a smart idea,” Emerson said. “The bride can’t run away.”

“Well, it’s a 750 foot yacht,” Boden said. “She has plenty of space.”

The Chicago Ballers were sitting at the veranda of a small Miami café. They were observing the gigantic yacht from their table. The café overlooked the harbor, giving them a broad view of the coastline. Their target, the Diamond Flush, was easily the largest boat in the area. It was being docked for preparations until the wedding. The nearby harbor contained some of the best luxury boats in the state, if not the country.

“Who’s covering the expenses for the yacht?” Rose asked.

“Jamison’s paying for the yacht,” Phyllis said. “The bride’s family is paying for the rest of the wedding.”

“There are big problems with this job,” Cort said. “A boat out at sea is tough to escape from.”

“We can bring a boat of our own,” Rose suggested.

“They’ll just chase us down,” Boden said. “We won’t be that far from the harbor.”

“I’m not even sure if we can get on,” Cort said. “We haven’t secured a way to actually board the boat.”

“So our only problems are getting on the boat and leaving?” Emerson asked.

“No, we also have to deal with these pretty faces,” Phyllis said. She put down four photos. “Ballers, meet the Miami Stormbreakers.

Boden picked up a photo. “I know this man.”

“You know this guy?” Emerson asked. “Who is he?”

“Ralph Mason,” Boden replied. “He wasn’t a pro thief the last time we met.”

“What was he doing then?”

“He’s a former soldier,” Boden replied. “Just like me.”

A moist breeze passed by the Miami café. Cort and Phyllis eyed each other with silent apprehension. Although Boden was a solid and dependable thief, they did not do know anything about his past. Concerning backgrounds, the unspoken rules with GLL thieves was ‘don’t ask and don’t say anything that could get you in trouble’.

“Is he good?” Emerson asked. He looked over Ralph Mason’s background sheet. Ralph had been in the league for three seasons, not accomplishing much but was noted for fighting ability. He seemed like a support role player.

“Ralph’s unorthodox, but he’s solid,” Boden said. “He’s tough, hard to knock out, and has a lot of battle experience. He’s your basic rumble and tumble tough guy. Lucky for us, he’s dumb as rocks.”

“Can you beat him?” Emerson asked.

“One-on-one, I could take him,” Boden said. “But that probably won’t be the case.”

“Ralph has been on the team for a few years, giving the Stormbreakers a boost on defense,” Cort described. “But the real problem is this guy.” He passed another photo to Emerson.

“Kane Jones,” Emerson murmured, reading over the papers.

“He’s been in the league for five years?”

“Kane has led the Stormbreakers for a while and has been an All-Stud thief in the past,” Phyllis said. “He’s an aggressive thief.

Not only is he a strong fighter, but he's very cunning. He doesn't have many weaknesses."

"But what's so good about him?" Rose asked. "I looked over the standings and Miami hasn't done that well so far. They're in the middle of the pack."

Cort smiled. Rose had done a little research on their league. "Kane's biggest problem is his laziness," he answered. "He was rookie of the year when he debuted, but has struggled to be consistent. Because of his early success, he got paid way too much way too soon. Talented and strong, but not very determined. He's coasted for a long time in this league."

"He used to be different," Phyllis mentioned. "Four seasons back, I wanted Ronald to make to a push to sign and trade for Kane. Kane was a promising young thief. In fact, back then he boasted that he'd own a team one day. He really wanted to make it big in this league."

Emerson looked over the photo. Kane's picture showed a hardened face with years of experience behind it. Wild dark hair and a solid body, Kane seemed just as tough as Cort had described him. But Kane's dark eyes seemed oddly hollow to Emerson. They weren't the eyes of a thief; they were the eyes of someone who had lost something.

"Kane and his team are the gatekeepers," Phyllis said. "The job isn't done until we get away from them." Boden agreed, but something was bothering him. "You're right, but why did you pick this job?" he asked. "This is very high risk, especially with Ralph involved. I don't think the team is ready for this. The Stormbreakers are a team we should be facing in week four or five, not week two."

Cort smirked. Boden had a sharp intuition. As usual, Phyllis was not amused.

“It’s not your place to question my decisions,” Phyllis said flatly.

“It doesn’t matter, we’re here,” Emerson said, interjecting. “Easy jobs are boring. Anyone can do them. I want to accomplish something special in this town.”

Cort scratched his beard. Oddly enough, Emerson was right. They were stuck in sunny Miami. They could either do nothing or steal some wedding gifts.

“I already have an idea on how to get inside the boat,” Phyllis said. “We’re only going to smuggle one person onto the boat.”

“I call it,” Emerson said, raising his hand. “I want to be that person.”

“No, it can’t be you,” Phyllis said. “You’re stupid and loud. Not only that, you’re dumb and you make a lot of noise.”

Rose blinked. "Aren't those the same things?"

"Let me guess, Phyllis," Boden said, folding his arms. "It's going to be you on that boat."

Phyllis turned her head. "You like to assume things, Boden, I've noticed that," she said. "That kind of assumption is the basis of thievery. Regular people assume things aren't going to be stolen. If they did, they wouldn't buy anything. They can get insurance or hire security, but they assume those methods will work. No one thinks their possessions will be taken because they can't imagine someone else having them."

"Your point?"

"Someone else will be sneaking on the yacht," Phyllis replied. "And it's going to be..."

Five days later...

Tim Jamison straightened out his tuxedo. He was supposed to dress on the boat, but he was behind schedule. Tim Jamison had been planning this wedding for over a year, and in less than two hours, he was going to be a husband. Jamison combed his hair quickly and took one last look in the bathroom mirror.

“Nice monkey suit, Timmy. Your brother’s tux wasn’t even half the price of that one.”

Tim turned around. Phyllis stood smiling in the doorway.

“Mom?” Tim said. “Is that you?”

Phyllis walked up to Tim and hugged him warmly. “Yeah, it’s me.”

“What are you doing here?” Tim asked, still shocked by his mother’s cameo. “How’d you know about the wedding?”

“Your brother gave you up,” Phyllis said, patting him on the head. His hair hadn’t been styled yet. It smelled fresh from shower. “I was going to figure it out anyway.”

“Dan told you?” Tim said. He took a step back. “So you know.”

“Daniel pulled the same trick last year with his wife,” Phyllis said. “I guess she’s his ex-wife now.”

“Mom, it’s just a con,” Tim said. “Dan and I know what we’re doing.”

“You’re lying to your fiancé and marrying her for money,” Phyllis said back. “I thought I taught you better than that.”

“This is why I didn’t invite you,” Tim said, rubbing his head. “I knew you’d bring this up.”

“I raised you to become a pro thief, not some grimy confidence man,” Phyllis said. “Anyone can lie and deceive a

person. It takes real talent to steal something with your own hands.”

“Mom, we can’t all be pro thieves,” Tim said. “Besides, you con and deceive people too. You act like I’m the only one lying here.”

“The principle is different,” Phyllis said. “You’re trying to commit fraud, a deliberate and cheap trick. You’re going to marry the girl, convince her to give you money, and then run off. Your crime is against a human being, not an object of value.”

“Jenny will be fine,” Tim replied. “Her dad’s the richest senator in the country. Even if I took half of that family fortune, she’d still be set for life.”

“What you’re doing isn’t real work,” Phyllis said. “I didn’t teach you to cheat and cut corners. A real thief is a hunter, a sportsman. A real thief uses creative thinking to break down

security, steal the target, and then escape properly. I tried teaching you this from the day you were born, but you never followed it. Neither did your brother.”

Tim winced from the comment. He had done so much in the past five years, working as a con man and learning the tricks of the trade. He learned how to cheat at the poker table, hustle people at pool, even learned how to convince women that he loved them. But it would never be enough for his pro thief mother. To Phyllis, he was just a trickster, a sneaky boy with sneaky moves. Phyllis always wanted him to follow in her footsteps and join the Grand Larceny League. She wanted him to build a career and earn his place in the underground arena. On the other hand, Tim always wanted money but would never take the same risks like his mother did. He could never understand how winning and money went hand in hand.

“Mom, it's just money,” Tim said softly. “This isn't about pride or the thrill of victory. I'm not doing this because I enjoy hurting people.”

“No, but that is precisely what's going to happen,” Phyllis said. “Your fiancé is going to be crushed and ruined. Is that really worth it?”

Tim was about to say something, but he held back. He grabbed his black bow tie and headed out. “I need to go,” he muttered. “I'm already late.”

“There's more to thievery than the money, boy,” Phyllis said. “You might not be able to see it, but it's there. You're going to learn that someday; even if I'm not around to teach you.”

Tim looked back at his mother. “If you're here to crash the wedding, it's not going to be easy. Jenny's family is paranoid

about security. They've hired bodyguards and they'll be on the boat."

"I know."

"You're still going to do it, aren't you?" Tim asked.

"Yes."

"You're crazy."

"I'm a mother denied access to her son's wedding," Phyllis said. "Are you that surprised?"

"Wait, has the GLL season started?" Tim asked. "Is that why you're here?"

Phyllis laughed. To a parent, their own child always seems so underdeveloped, but full of potential. She wanted to explain, but her son wouldn't understand. "Tim, I've decided not to rat you out," she said firmly. "I just hope you give me the same courtesy."

Phyllis patted her son on the head and walked out. Tim swallowed hard. Phyllis had such resolve, an unshakable tunnel-vision mentality that couldn't be broken by anything. He almost hated her for that.

At eleven o' clock, a crowd of two hundred people stood waiting at the harbor. They were all waiting to board the Diamond Flush. The wedding ceremony for Timothy Jamison and Jennifer Sellers was scheduled for noon. The ship's charter crew was already inside. The captain was looking over a small clipboard. He hadn't worked with this crew before but it wouldn't be a problem. It was just a wedding and they wouldn't be going that far out to sea. If anything, the food catering staff was going to be doing most of the work. The captain noticed a small crew member walking slowly towards the engine room.

"Hey, what are you doing?" the captain asked.

The crew member turned around. "Oh, I'm looking over the engines. Is there a problem?"

"What's wrong with the engines?" the captain asked.

"Nothing, I'm just checking them."

"Aren't you supposed to be at the helm?"

"Yeah, of course. Well, I mean, do you want me there?"

The captain frowned. "Do you even know how to pilot a yacht? Why are you even here?"

The crew member paused. She shifted and looked hard at the captain. "Look, if I don't check these engines, the saltwater is going to eat them alive. The fasteners, the manifold, and the exhaust hoses need to be in place. You want this wedding ruined because we didn't do a routine check up?"

The captain blinked. "Fine, I'll do it myself. Just get up to the helm. By the way, what's your name?"

“I’m Rose Delane, filling in for Johnson.”

“All right, Rose. Take care of the wheel and don’t mess up. The guests will be arriving shortly.”

Rose Delane nodded. The captain left her and went inside the engine room. Rose tightened up her white suit and took a deep breath. Phyllis had arranged for Rose to sneak on as part of the crew, but she wasn’t given any details. Rose was chosen because she was the only member of the Ballers that could pilot a yacht. Of course, that didn’t mean she would blend in.

Rose went to the helm, or the steering wheel of the yacht. Despite the size of the boat, it was actually quite simple to pilot. It was reminiscent of driving a car, but it was still an acquired skill. Rose looked over the controls and gripped the steering wheel.

Tim Jamison stepped onto the upper deck and looked around for Phyllis. If his mother was going to board the yacht, it would be on the upper deck.

The ship captain walked up to Tim and showed him a chart.

“Sir, the boat is ready to leave when you’re ready.”

“Good,” Tim said. “Is your entire crew on board?”

“Yes, sir,” the captain said. “The hired bodyguards should be on board as well. I believe they’re doing a security check of the entire yacht.”

“Is Jenny getting ready?”

“Yes, the bride and her family are preparing her dress,” the captain said. “All we need wait for are the guests.”

“They’re probably ready to get on,” Tim said. “We should hurry it up.”

“Very well, sir,” the captain said. “Can I also recommend—”

The yacht engines suddenly began to grind and rumble; the boat was moving. The guests hadn't boarded, but someone was already launching the boat. The Diamond Flush revved up and swiftly left the harbor. The guests were left standing at the dock.

Tim Jamison gripped the railing of the deck. The Diamond Flush was leaving the harbor without his guests. The giant yacht sped out into the Atlantic Ocean faster with every second.

“Did you authorize this?” Tim demanded.

“No, I swear,” the captain said. “The pilot should be waiting for my signal.”

“Get to the helm,” Tim yelled. “Stop whoever's driving this thing.”

“Sir, calm down,” the captain said. “Whoever is trying to steal the yacht won't get far.”

“You idiot, they’re not stealing the yacht,” Tim shouted.

“What?”

“They’re trying to separate us,” Tim said. “They’re going to leave us out here and rob the guests!”

The captain finally realized it. He jumped off the upper deck and ran to the helm. No one was there; someone set the boat to auto-pilot. The captain tried moving the steering wheel, but it wouldn’t budge. Someone had already jammed the controls.

Rose Delane hoisted a jet boat off the lower deck. The ropes burned her hands as she let the small jet ski splash into the water. She winced at the pain, but she had done enough. She fastened her orange life vest and prepared to go into the water. She took a deep breath and jumped down. She splashed in as well, a rush of cold washing over her entire body. A mouthful of water, she climbed onto the jet ski and started up the engine.

She revved hard and started to head back to shore. Her job at sea was done.

Back on the dock, the guests were getting anxious. They didn't understand what was happening.

Phyllis walked up to the crowd and bowed. "Ladies and gentlemen, please direct your attention to me," she said. "I'm Tim Jamison's mother, Phyllis. I wasn't supposed to attend the wedding today, but last minute changes allowed me to come. You may have noticed the yacht has left the harbor. Don't worry, it'll be coming back. However, due to a recent coast guard warning about thieves in the area, the crew is taking a test drive. We suggest that you leave your wedding gifts to in the harbor so that they will remain in safe hands."

"Why would we leave the gifts here?" a man asked. "The ceremony is on the boat."

Phyllis glared. "Sir, do you even know how weddings work? The bride and groom won't be opening the gifts today or anytime soon. They won't even think about them until after their honeymoon. This isn't a toddler's birthday party; you're at a first class wedding."

"Sorry."

"My assistants will secure your generous gifts," Phyllis continued. "They'll be in good hands."

Cort, Boden, and Emerson walked onto the dock. Without any hesitation, the guests began handing off their presents. The Ballers collected dozens of gifts, all of them completely different from each other. Emerson was trying hard not to laugh. These people were giving them valuable items without resistance.

"Thank you," Phyllis said to the crowd. "The Diamond Flush will be back, so don't go anywhere."

A woman walked up to Phyllis. "Congratulations on your son getting married," she said. "You must be really proud."

Phyllis smiled. "Married or not, he's my kid. I'll always be proud of him."

The Ballers loaded the gifts into a pickup truck. Phyllis continued to talk to the guests, acting as if everything was routine. The team struggled to fit everything in the truck, but they managed to fit everything in the back. The suspension of the truck wheezed and creaked from the sudden increase in the weight load.

Phyllis motioned a finger at Cort. She would stay for a few minutes and distract the guests, assuring them that everything was normal. Cort nodded and followed the Ballers back to the truck. They would head out and meet up with Phyllis later.

In the driver's seat, Cort sat there instead of Rose. For now, he'd be taking the wheel and leading the team to the Miami's league office.

"That was really easy," Emerson said. "I feel like a con man."

"Same here," Boden said. "They just gave the gifts to us."

"Wrong," Cort said. "We played by the rules of the league. We made a good plan and didn't cheat. The fact that people were deceived does not matter."

"Maybe according to the GLL," Boden replied. "I don't think society as a whole would agree with you."

Cort smiled at Boden. "I don't think Phyllis would ever care about what society thinks. That's what makes her so great."

Boden silently agreed. Emerson just snickered. Their coach was tougher than all of them combined.

“I hope Rose is all right,” Emerson said from the back seat.

“She can drive anything, but I’m not sure if she can swim.”

“She’ll be fine,” Boden said. “If anything, she’ll—”

Cort hit the brakes. The truck stopped instantly. The Ballers still had not left Miami’s large dock area. The coastline was just to the east. In front of them, two men stood waiting for the Ballers.

“It’s Kane Jones,” Cort said grimly. “He found us.”

“Ralph,” Boden murmured.

Emerson smiled slyly to himself. He knew leaving Miami without a proper fight would leave him unsatisfied. It was time to wet his appetite.

“Cort, me and Boden will handle this,” Emerson said sharply.

Boden hoisted his guitar case over his shoulder. “Is there another way to the Miami league office?”

Cort nodded. "I can backtrack and go towards the intersection," he said.

"Then do it," Boden said. "We'll hold them off here."

Cort gripped the steering wheel hard. He did not have much of a choice. He'd have to rely on the two rookies for a defense involving offense. He did not particularly trust Emerson, but Boden was more than reliable.

Boden strapped on his guitar case and stepped out. Emerson followed him. Cort put the car in reverse and turned the car around. He sped back towards the highway towards the other side of the beach.

Under an early afternoon sun, the dock area was simply stunning. A vibrant sun shined down on water, giving it a flowing glow. It was perfect for a showdown between thieves.

Kane Jones grinned as the two Baller wings approached him. Kane wore a sleeveless vest made out of dark brown leather. He brushed back his mangy black hair with a glove covered hand. His work gloves were colored in a deep and dark red, almost maroon. He had come prepared for a fight.

“Emerson Jay, Boden Campbell,” Kane started, “great to meet you two. I’ve heard a lot about you, boys. The Ballers have rebuilt their team again, right?”

Ralph Mason stepped to Kane’s side. “Boden,” he said harshly. Ralph’s hair was a short flattop of gray and white hair. A scar ran down the side of his left cheek and went down to his neck. It looked like a long blade had done a number on his face.

“Long time, Ralph,” Boden said. “You should be on the yacht.”

“Two our teammates are on that boat,” Kane said, cutting in. “We had a similar idea as you, actually. We wanted to steal the entire boat. Too bad it went off track.”

“We thought your target was the yacht, not the wedding gifts,” Ralph added. “Either way, I wanted to face you alone, Boden. We have unfinished business.”

“I have my primary wing with me,” Boden said. “You might want to reconsider.”

“I don’t care about the gifts,” Ralph said. “Besides, fighting you will be worth more than some score. I’ve never scrapped with a dead man before.”

Emerson looked at Boden. “What’s he talking about?”

“Mr. Boden Campbell here is supposed to be dead,” Ralph said, cracking his knuckles. “Like myself, he’s ex-military. Of course, I never killed any of my comrades.”

Emerson raised his eyebrows. What kind of past did Boden have?

“Boden is the lone survivor of a failed U.S. special forces operation,” Ralph explained. “It was a black operations mission in Panama, but everyone in the military knows about it. The night before the mission, Boden murdered three teams of his own men. The mission failed, thirty-six U.S. soldiers died, and Boden was reported to be killed trying to flee Panama. I thought he was dead too, until I got a glance of him a few years back.”

“A glance?” Boden said. “I suppose you’re referring to the beating I gave you. I’m surprised you’re still able to walk.”

“I’ve gotten a little smarter,” Ralph replied. “I have a few tricks that you haven’t seen before.”

Emerson wanted to look to Boden, but he felt a heavy pressure from in front of him. Ralph seemed strong, but Kane was

the bigger obstacle. He could feel a strong aura coming from the cagey veteran. Emerson was about to say something, but he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Emerson, go,” Boden whispered harshly. “You have Kane to yourself. Ralph is my responsibility.”

“What?” Emerson said, barely hearing his teammate. “Do what now?”

Boden rolled his eyes. He took a second to close his eyes. A cloud was passing over by, shielding them from the sun. One second passed, then two. A third second with half a beat went on. Boden opened his eyes to the sun.

“Go!” Boden shouted. He dashed to his right and pulled on his sword. Within the same second, Ralph revealed a pair of steel gloves, large and thick. Ralph clasped them on and clenched

his fists. Emerson scratched his nose. He still didn't understand what was going on around him.

"You're mine, rookie," Kane grinned as he ran towards Emerson. He cocked back his red glove and launched it at Emerson.

"Huh?" Emerson blurted out. He turned his head and saw Kane's body dash in. He instinctively jumped back, not sure what attack Kane had in store.

Kane's right fist stretched out far, but it was not even close to touching Emerson. The red glove sank low, heading towards the concrete driveway. Emerson looked hard as he jumped back; there was a heavy glow emanating from the glove.

"Another one," Emerson murmured. "His gloves are imbued as well."

Kane's fist hit the ground before Emerson could even see it. Not that it mattered because the ground exploded from the impact and shattered the ground around him. Emerson landed on his feet, stumbling as he tried to get stable footing. He had felt this sensation before.

“His gloves hit like my shoes do,” Emerson realized. “They’re strong!”

The dust settled and Kane stood with his arms up. He held up his arms like a boxer, standing on the balls of his feet. This man Kane knew how to fight and utilize his imbued items at the same time

Emerson had no time to slouch. He powered his shoes and jumped at Kane. He landed a step away from Kane, but at the last moment he side stepped Emerson's stomp. Another impact shook the docks. These hits were destroying the area around them.

“So you have a similar ability,” Kane muttered. “I had heard that you could jump around like a little frog. I didn’t know you could destroy things like I could.”

“I can do a lot with these shoes,” Emerson said back. “The person that made them means a lot to me.”

“So is the person that made my gloves,” Kane retorted. “My older brother sacrificed a lot for me to have these imbued items.”

Emerson was surprised. There were some scary people in the GLL. Although imbued items were the result of a rare and special type of sacrifice, there were many of them out there. Every single one of them had a story behind their design.

“I heard you were once a golden rookie,” Emerson said, standing up from the rubble. “I heard you boasted you were going to own a team one day.”

Kane raised his eyebrows. "Where did you hear that?" he asked softly.

Emerson faced and looked at Kane straight on. "You wanted to own a team," he repeated. "What happened to your dream?"

Kane couldn't believe it. This rookie was mentioning something he had forgotten long ago.

"I don't have any clue what you're talking about," Kane whispered.

Emerson shook his head. "I looked you up," he said. "You were born and raised in Chicago. You came out of the same high school as I did."

"You're from Northside high?" Kane exclaimed, raising his voice. "You're from there as well?"

Emerson did not reply. He stared hard at Kane, trying to examine this person as well as he could. Kane was different from Marcus the Magician or Ken Koala; Kane had lost something as a professional thief.

“What happened to your dream?” Emerson demanded.

“Why don’t you try anymore?”

Kane’s face twitched from Emerson’s words. “I’m a professional, Emerson,” he said flatly. “Dreams aren’t part of that deal.”

“I don’t believe you,” Emerson shouted back. “You had so much potential. You could have been one of the greats.”

“That’s not true,” Kane whispered. “That wasn’t me.”

“We could have been teammates,” Emerson said, lowering his head. “We could have been on the same team if you went with the Ballers. Phyllis and Cort both wanted you on the team.

But with your huge rookie salary, there was no way to fit you in. If you had stayed with the Ballers for five years, we could have dominated this league.”

Kane was completely stunned. He had spent the last five years forgetting the Chicago scene, and now there was a kid who had dreamed of working with him. No, working was the wrong term. This boy-thief wanted to be his teammate and accomplish the dreams that he had lost long, long ago.

“I’m different from you,” Kane replied. “I don’t want the same things you want, kid. The job matters more than the dream.”

Emerson pulled down his orange hat over his face. It was his turn to be moved by his opponent’s words. “I will never be like you,” he said, trying to hold back his emotions. “I will win no matter what it takes. Whatever it takes, I will win her back.”

Kane eyed him, confused and bewildered. “Who or what are you trying to win over?”

Emerson did not hear him. He crouched down and jumped at Kane hard. Kane blinked before he rolled to the side. Emerson was done debating with him; it was time to fight. He stomped one more time and shattered the concrete around his foot.

Kane felt the shockwave from the ground as well. He regained his footing and went back at Emerson. After practicing boxing since he was a child, he had developed footwork which gave him strong balance. He slid his pivot foot and threw a left jab at Emerson’s head. Emerson raised his arms to block, but it was useless; Kane’s jab sent him flying.

Emerson crossed his forearms to block, but he underestimated the power of Kane’s imbued items. His whole body was lifted and he flew back hard on the concrete. He

rolled backwards, the impact powering him towards the ocean water.

Emerson's body hit the ground hard. On his back, he looked up towards the Miami sky. He took a breath of humid and moist air. He sighed as he exhaled. "This is pointless," he muttered. "Using our items, we're not going to get anywhere. I can't beat him this way."

Emerson sat up. He saw Kane standing about thirty feet away from him. Boden was the person who had warned him about Kane's ability. Fists or feet, Emerson and Kane would end up beating each other to a standstill. However, Boden had inspired him to find a solution against people with imbued items like theirs.

"Remember, Emerson," Boden had said five days earlier, "your imbued items only work on your feet. It must be the same with Kane's hands. Even though the power is incredible, every

other part of your body is just as susceptible to an attack like any other normal person. Other than his hands, Kane is just like any other human. Take them down and he's yours."

Emerson remembered Boden's words vividly. He reached into his back pocket, going for an item that Boden had stolen for him.

Kane saw Emerson pull something out from behind him. He had been concealing some kind of weapon this entire time. Emerson grinned as he pulled out his new toy; a six foot silver chain.

Kane didn't like the look of it. Although he could use red gloves quicker than Emerson could use his jump shoes, he couldn't use his hands for other weapons or tricks. But for Emerson, his hands were free to do or use anything.

Emerson jump-dashed in once more. He needed to get closer to Kane without getting punched. Kane ran in as well. There was no way he was going to let a rookie beat him a close in-fight. He had battled with the best the GLL could offer; Kane was going to stop Emerson here and now.

The two Chicago natives bolted straight at each other. Emerson had the speed advantage with his shoes. He took another short hop with the silver chain in his hands. This would be his best chance to get inside of Kane's range.

Kane was an orthodox right handed boxer, which meant his left hand was out in front to jab. In a boxing match, the jabs always came out first. But on the street, power and precision mattered more. Every fighter needed at least one knock out move to end the fight quickly. For Kane, it was his right counter punch. Kane looked carefully at Emerson's legs. He would let Emerson throw out his chain first and then slam a right-handed

glove into Emerson's legs. It would crush his bones and cripple him for the fight.

As the microseconds ticked by, Emerson whipped out his chain. He had practiced with Boden earlier, but still wasn't sure how to use the chain properly. He flicked his wrist and the chain went at Kane's head.

"There it is," Kane said to himself. He stepped in and ducked under Emerson's chain. He cocked back his right fist like a red missile ready to be launched. He aimed his fist at Emerson's lower body. Goodbye, Emerson Jay, he thought. Your thievery days are over.

Emerson grinned as he saw Kane's expression changed. With a twitch of his toes, his green shoes pushed him back another six inches behind. Kane's fist hit nothing but air as Emerson dashed backwards. Kane stared at Emerson with his mouth open. In the ring, there was no way a boxer could avoid

a perfect counter-punch setup. But Emerson was no boxer; his jump shoes gave him agility that no normal human could ever achieve. Despite his aggressive style, Emerson's jumping ability actually made him mobile enough to avoid any hit Kane could throw at him. Too bad it wasn't the same for Kane.

Emerson flicked his wrist again and slammed the chain over Kane. It wrapped around his arms and tightened around his body. Kane felt cold metal wrap around his torso, wrapping around him like a snake.

"No, not like this," Kane grunted as he tried to break through the chain. It wrapped around his arms, but not his gloves. He was trapped. Kane tried to step back and dash away, but it was too late, Emerson had jumped.

"Kane!" Emerson screamed as he through the air. "You're mine!"

Green shoes pointed out, Emerson launched himself at Kane. In the air, Emerson slammed both shoes into Kane's face and neck. The shoes blazed a hot glowing green, powerful enough to crush anything. Kane's body went soaring across the docks and into the water.

Emerson stood, facing the ocean. He saw Kane's unconscious body float in the shallow water. He took a deep breath and looked out at the ocean. "You may have let go of the dream," he murmured softly. "But you can bring it back, Kane. I know you can."

As he was about to walk away, Emerson felt something moist land on his neck. He looked up to the sky and saw gray clouds gathering over the coastline. Rain started to come down like needles, heavy and fast. The raindrops made hundreds of tiny splashes in the warm ocean. A Miami rainstorm was coming.

On the other side of the dock, Boden had led Ralph to the edge of the water. Although Boden had beaten Ralph before, there was something different about him. As a soldier, Ralph was a straightforward brawler. But becoming a GLL thief had changed him somehow. He was putting his thoughts before his fists.

Boden looked over Ralph's large body. His physical presence hadn't changed much, but the metal gloves that covered his hands worried him a little.

"Imbued items," Boden muttered. He had remembered reading about Kane's power gloves. "There must be some trick to Ralph's as well."

Ralph grinned. He slammed his gauntlets together. "You're mine, Campbell."

Boden swiftly raised his sword. He needed to make the first move. Boden dashed in and swung his invisible blade. He was aiming for Ralph's head, but without warning he felt something pull at his blade. Ralph Mason raised his arms and without even aiming he caught Boden's sword with his steel gloves. Boden tried pulling back, but Ralph's grip was too strong.

"What is happening?" Boden murmured.

"After last time, I searched for an imbued item to counter your invisible sword," Ralph said. "Of course, finding one of those is hard. So I decided to use something a little more scientific."

"Wait, these gloves aren't imbued?"

"Not at all," Ralph said, smiling. "They're metal gloves with electric powered magnets inside."

Sweat streamed over Boden's face. With a strong magnet, Ralph could clamp down on his sword without having to see it.

The gloves would invisibly attract Boden's sword. For the past three years, Ralph prepared for this moment. Boden spent those years trying to forget.

"What a cheap move," Boden grunted, trying pull back his sword.

"You're the one using a sword no one can see," Ralph said. "You can't cut through these gloves and I'm not going to let go."

Ralph started pushing the sword towards Boden. The unseen blade awkwardly moved towards Boden, slowly approaching his shoulder. Boden tried fighting back, but Ralph's leverage was too strong. The tip of his own sword sliced into his left shoulder and drew blood. Suddenly, Boden's sword began to materialize.

"So that's your secret," Ralph said. "If your own sword cuts you, it becomes visible."

Boden fell to the ground and gripped his bleeding shoulder. He hadn't been cut by his sword in years. Ralph held onto the sword. He gazed at its beautiful long blade. The sword was long, much longer than he expected. The hilt had a beautiful ruby at the end, shiny and bright. The blade had been polished to a shiny glow. Considering he had been cut by this blade across the face, Ralph was happy to finally see its beauty.

Ralph Mason looked down at Boden. "Why did you do it?" he asked. "Why did you kill your soldiers? Why betray them like that?"

"They died because of me," Boden said. "But I'm not the one responsible for the betrayal."

"Are you saying there was corruption in the military?"

"Whenever there is money, there is corruption," Boden said.

“And what about now?” Ralph asked. “You’re working with a team of thieves. What’s your purpose?”

“I finally found someone who wasn’t corrupt, someone who was straightforward and honest,” Boden answered. He gripped his wounded shoulder as he stood up. “I wanted to see if he was the real thing. I’m going to work with him until I see otherwise.”

“You’re an idiot,” Ralph replied.

“I know.”

“Either way, this is your second death,” Ralph said, pointing the blade towards Boden. “I’ve won.”

Rain started to come down on both Ralph and Boden. Ralph hesitated for a millisecond and looked up. Without warning, Boden reached out with his hand and grabbed the sword. Both sides of the blade cut deep into his hand. The sword instantly became invisible and disappeared.

“What did you just—” Ralph began.

Boden didn't let him finish. He kicked the invisible blade out of his hands. Boden clapped both hands on the sword and stabbed Ralph through his right knee. The point of the blade pierced cleanly into Ralph's knee, cutting through soft muscle and tissue. Ralph hit the ground clutching at his leg.

“What did you do?” Ralph cried out. “How did that sword become invisible again?”

Boden stood up. “If the owner is cut once, then the sword turns back to normal,” he explained. “But then the sword is free without an owner. If someone's blood touches the sword again, then that person becomes the owner and can see the blade.”

“So what's why you grabbed it,” Ralph muttered. “Your blood touched it again.”

Boden put the sword into his guitar case. The rain was falling harder on them now. He took out a small rag and wrapped his bleeding hand. "I'm letting you go, Ralph," he said calmly. "You won't be able to walk for a while anyway."

"There will be others," Ralph said angrily. "I won't be the only one after you."

"And you won't be the only one I defeat," Boden replied.

With that, Boden started jogging away from the docks. Boden wiped his face as the rain continued to fall. He could feel the rain hit his wounded shoulder, causing a slight sting with every drop. Ralph had almost beaten him, which meant that he was getting rusty. The opponents down the line would be much stronger. If he wanted to protect himself and his teammates, he needed to prepare.

Chapter 10

“Not a bad week,” Phyllis said. “If we keep this up, there’s a chance we could make the top eight.”

The Ballers arrived in Chicago a few hours ago and were back at the Hotel Mango. The team was waiting for the results to show up on Scoreline.

“Some of those wedding gifts were ridiculous,” Cort described. “I think I saw a tube of five thousand dollar face lotion in that pile.”

“One box contained a bottle of wine that cost twenty grand,” Boden said. “I think that might have been the most expensive one.”

“Nope,” Emerson said. He held up a pair of car keys. “One of the gifts was a key to a new sports car. That thing had to be worth at least fifty grand.”

Cort eyed him oddly. "Wait, we didn't steal any cars," he said. "Did you only take the keys?"

"Yeah."

"So the keys are worthless."

"I agree."

"Wow, you're dumb," Boden said, shaking his head.

"Actually, the jet boat I used to get back to shore was worth quite a bit," Rose said, chiming in. "It had a terrific engine build and drove smoothly. The people from the league said it might be valued at thirty thousand since it was a new model."

"It was a good haul," Phyllis said. "We took care of the Stormbreakers and got the job done. We'll see how it turns out after the tax."

"Here comes Scoreline," Cort said.

The razor thin TV lit up and the intro to Scoreline began.

“Hello, I’m Michael Paul Williams, back with my sidekick Andrew Scott Johnson.”

“Yes sir,” Andrew Scott Johnson said. “The second week of the Grand Larceny League was quite a stunner.”

“Stunning indeed,” Michael Paul Williams said. “The Detroit Demons absolutely wrecked the New York Knights in a showdown in the Big Apple. The two teams both targeted a shipment of rare Mountain Ash trees going through New York City. The Demons got away with most of the wooden logs, leaving the Knights with only a handful of bark.”

“In other news, the Los Angeles Showtimers taught the new San Francisco Goldeners an intro course on thievery,” Andrew Scott Johnson reported. “The two teams both targeted the musical instruments belonging to an orchestra in San Francisco.

The Showtimers not only stole the instruments, they stole the sheet music as well. No notes or instruments were spared."

"Also, an interesting three team tango occurred in Seattle," Michael Paul Williams said. "The Dallas Blue Blades, Seattle Sentinels, and the Chicago Razorbacks all competed to steal a massive delivery of workout equipment. The brand new gym products were supposed to reach five different fitness centers but it never happened. The Chicago Razorbacks, led by the rookie Ken Koala, snatched up everything. There are a lot of out of shape people that are going to stay out of shape."

"Definitely," Andrew Scott Johnson said. "And of course, the biggest surprise would be the Chicago Ballers, raking in a gigantic pile-on of wedding gifts from Miami. Reports are saying the bride is crying, the groom is gone, and the guests are punching holes in their wallets. The Ballers, a perennial disappointment, brought in a stellar \$5,400,820 this week. The

Ballers turned the city of Miami into a joke and the punch line delivered. The Ballers are now in second place behind the Detroit Demons.”

Emerson and Rose jumped up and screamed in celebration. They danced around the TV, yelling out in victory. Boden rubbed his injured shoulder. Cort and Phyllis sighed with relief. They had an extremely successful week in Miami.

“A big surprise indeed,” Michael Paul Williams said. “Well, this wraps up your Scoreline report for Sunday evening. Andrew and I will stay warm in our Bristol prison cell while strong winds hit the east coast. A last reminder, there are still two teams out there that haven’t reported the next city of choice for this week. You have one hour until the league office closes. Steal on, stealers.”

Cort turned off the TV. “We’re one of the teams that haven’t decided on a city,” he said. “Phyllis and I aren’t sure how to handle this.”

“Handle what?” Emerson asked. “We can go wherever we want, right?”

“Yes, but that’s not the problem,” Phyllis said. She pointed to a map on the wall with all the thievery zones. “There’s a cold front coming from the north. I wanted to take the team to the South or the West where the weather will be dry and sunny.”

“And I think that’s a bad idea,” Cort said. “Everyone else is going to be doing the same thing. Phoenix, Los Angeles, and San Francisco will have heavy traffic. We should go out to the East Division.”

“The East Division?” Rose asked. “Is that the group of east coast teams?”

Cort nodded. “The two New York teams, the Philadelphia Fangers, and the Boston Bombsoldiers make up the East Division,” he explained. “Since the beginning, the East has been

the toughest division in the GLL. Those four teams are pretty stacked.”

“The South Division is more appealing right now,” Phyllis said.

“We should head out to Dallas or Houston.”

“Is Miami part of the South as well?” Boden asked.

“That’s right,” Phyllis answered. “There used to be four full teams in Texas alone. After last season, the San Antonio team fell apart. Five years back, the league had to find a suitable replacement for the South and found a team in Miami. But in terms of location, Miami sticks out pretty badly. They’re not really close to any other city.”

“In case you were wondering, we’re part the Midwest Division,” Cort added. “The Razorbacks, the Detroit Demons, and the Cleveland Vagabonds make up the other teams. The

Midwest hasn't done that well in the past, but the Demons won the title last year. They're on a hot streak right now."

Phyllis stood up in front of the team. "We need to build upon our success in Miami," she said firmly. "If we can make an early season push, our momentum can carry up to the playoffs."

"We have to go out east at some point, Phyllis," Cort argued. "Plus the big money will be out on the east coast. We can get some experience and make a big score."

"Let's calm down," Rose said. "How do we decide this?"

"We go to Boston."

The team looked at Boden. He stood up and circled the city of Boston on the map.

"Why there?" Rose asked.

Boden pointed to the weather forecast papers the league had sent over. "It's the best choice," Boden answered. "During

the fall, Boston's weather is noticeably better than the other east coast cities. And if you look at the weather forecast, the cold front will sweep in from the north. Boston may be spared."

"I guess that's not bad," Cort said. "Detroit and Chicago are pretty cold until late February. Excluding the West and South Divisions, Boston might be the best city for us."

"Why can't we go back to Miami?" Emerson asked. "We had success there."

"It's probably not smart to do repeat visits," Boden replied. "We might have tapped Miami out."

Cort nodded. "Consecutive visits to an opposing city are bad luck," he said. "We already did a great job there. It'll be wiser to stay away for now."

"Then it's settled," Boden said. "Boston is the next destination."

Phyllis tightened her jaw. "I'm still the coach," she snapped. "You're still a rookie, Boden. You don't get to settle on anything."

"Maybe we should vote together," Cort suggested. "Let's see where we all stand."

"I really don't want to go to Boston," Rose said, folding her arms. "I was raised in Southie. I would definitely prefer a different city."

"Who is on the Boston team?" Emerson asked. "How good are they?"

"The Bombsoldiers have rebuilt their team this year," Cort said. "Their new lead thief is a woman named Frida Calhoun. In the early years, she was the backup thief on the New York Knights. She won a title with that team in year two. After a few years as a journeyman, she signed on with the Bombsoldiers. She's a tough veteran thief."

“Veteran?” Rose said. “She must be old.”

Phyllis grimaced. “Frida’s not that old.”

“So she’s won a title,” Emerson murmured. “I hope she’s strong.”

“My shoulder is still injured,” Boden mentioned. “If we go head to head with them, Emerson will have to do most of the fighting.”

“Sounds perfect,” Emerson said. “Then I choose Boston.”

“Wait, maybe we should do what Phyllis suggested,” Rose said. “Another warm weather city sounds good right about now.”

“Rose, it’ll be fine,” Emerson said. “We’ll make this trip a good memory for you.”

Rose sighed. As usual, Emerson convinced her to join his side. “I can do Boston,” she finally said.

“Phyllis, what do you say?” Cort asked.

“Boston is acceptable, but I’m still in charge,” Phyllis said. “I don’t want my coaching strategies challenged like this.”

“Fair enough,” Cort said. “Can you explain what the BB book has for Boston?”

Phyllis cleared her throat. “We’re going to search for the ‘Silver Tomb of Boston’.”

Emerson and Rose were about to react, but Boden shook his head. He wanted to hear what Phyllis had to say.

“In the late 1800’s, there was a movement in the monetary policies of the US,” Phyllis said, handing out black folders to everyone. “Before paper money, gold and silver were the standards for US currency. At the time, there was a movement for ‘free silver’ which would push for using silver as a more valuable currency. In 1893, a group of pro-silver protesters in

Boston had a coffin made out of silver and filled it with gold coins. It was a symbolic act for the 'death of gold'."

"What happened to the coffin?" Boden asked.

"The coffin was stolen," Cort answered. "The history books say that the coffin was going to be on display as a public sign of protest, but it was stolen before it could happen. No one knows exactly for sure, but people think it was stolen by a Boston thief named Willy Bryant. When the coffin was stolen, there was incredible outrage from the public. It sparked panic and started a severe economic recession."

"In the end, no one ever found the coffin," Phyllis said. "It was lost in the history books for over a hundred years. The underground legends and myths say that the coffin is buried somewhere in Boston's old graveyards where Bryant's ghost haunts over it."

Boden looked through the folder. It had papers filled with information on the coffin. "This item has been a BB book item for a while, hasn't it?" he said. "It says that no GLL team has ever been able to find it."

"That's correct," Cort said. "The coffin has become a myth, a legend for thieves in the GLL. Since there has been no real success finding the Silver Tomb, the GLL is expiring its BB book status. After this season, the Silver Tomb won't be in the BB book anymore."

"The league is offering a 'one plus one' this year, Phyllis added. "If any team finds the coffin, the league will double its cash value."

Boden let out a low whistle. Emerson was already struggling to stay awake, drifting in and out of consciousness. Rose looked at the current cash value of the coffin.

“Double?” Rose said disbelievingly. “So the league’s offering eight million? Eight million US dollars for this silver coffin?”

Cort and Phyllis both nodded. They did not want to tell the rookies, but they had never actually accomplished a score that high before. Although many other GLL teams reached eight million or higher in the span of a week, the Chicago Ballers never came close to that high of a number.

“Coffins are fine, but dead bodies are no good,” Emerson said, yawning and stretching.

“Grave robbing,” Boden muttered. “This is not what I signed up for.”

“This is going to be a bad week,” Rose said to herself.

“This job might be a gamble, but we trust you three,” Phyllis said, trying to reach her rookies. “We wouldn’t have picked this

item if we did not have faith in you. We want you to have faith in us as well.”

“We head out tomorrow,” Cort said. “Get some rest, guys.”

The team disbanded and went up to their rooms. Cort looked over his shoulder as the three rookies went their separate ways. Cort stayed behind in the lobby with Phyllis.

“So what did you think of their reactions?” Cort asked quietly.

“Pretty normal,” Phyllis replied. “None of them seemed like they would leak information.”

“You were supposed to act angrier in front of them,” Cort said dryly. “That fake argument wasn't very convincing.”

“It wouldn't have done any good,” Phyllis said. “The only person I think that acted suspicious was Boden. He's very smart, but I've noticed that he has authority issues.”

“But Boden figured out the right choice,” Cort said. “Boston was the best city for our team. He looked at every possible city and made the safest decision. It’s unlikely a traitor would want to do that.”

“And we can rule out Emerson,” Phyllis said. “He’s too dumb to betray us.”

“Emerson’s the one who told us about Tessa Narini.”

“Rose didn’t want to go to Boston, but she’s actually been very useful to the team,” Phyllis said. “I think we’re missing something.”

“Maybe another team is feeding Tessa Narini information,” Cort said. “Emerson did make a few enemies on that first day.”

“It’s possible,” Phyllis said. “It’s been done before.”

“I’ll ask my brother to help,” Cort said. “Ronald has a lot of connections inside the government. He might be able to discover how Tessa is figuring out our schedule.”

“Good idea,” Phyllis said. “I just hope we don’t meet up with her this week.”

Logan International Airport in East Boston. The Chicago Ballers stepped out of the main terminal and entered a black limousine. The weather in Boston was warmer than Chicago, but not nearly as nice as Miami. And even stranger, the darkness of fall was starting to cover Boston. With the fall season in full swing, the nights were starting earlier. Even with their flight arriving at five o’clock, a heavy darkness covered all of Boston. Their black limousine drove swiftly out of the airport and headed north.

Twenty minutes later, the limo dropped them off on Blue Hill Avenue. Emerson could barely believe his eyes.

“We’re staying at a zoo?” Emerson cried out.

The team stood at the gate at the zoo entrance. The large metal gate stood in front of them. The well-polished metal bars were still shiny in the dark. The entrance sign read: “Franklin Park Zoo—New England’s home for the wild”.

“I haven’t been here in years,” Rose murmured.

“Out of one cage and into another,” Boden remarked.

“Come on, we have keys to the back,” Phyllis said.

The team followed Phyllis through the back entrance and entered the zoo. With no lights and the zoo covered in shadows, it was hard to see. But despite limited lighting, no one else seemed to be in the zoo. In fact, there were no *animals* either.

“Where are all the animals?” Rose asked, looking around.

“The zoo is undergoing massive remodeling,” Phyllis replied.

“The animals can’t handle the construction noise so the zoo keepers moved them to a different facility. We’re going to be sleeping here for the rest of the week.”

“Won’t people notice we’re here?” Emerson asked.

“We will be gone during the day,” Cort said. “Plus the construction workers haven’t started yet.”

“Plenty of room, but no beds,” Boden noticed. “Are we sleeping in the bear caves?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Phyllis growled. “There’s a cabin for the zoo keepers and guests.”

“I bet they have a swimming pool for the dolphins,” Emerson said. “I want to check it out.”

“My favorite animal here was the Siberian tiger,” Rose said.

“Without the animals, this place is kind of lame.”

“There should be food somewhere around here,” Phyllis said. “Eat up and we’ll meet at the visitor’s center in one hour.”

Emerson walked ahead, eager to eat some food. He walked by himself towards the cabin as a silent breeze passed over him. Emerson looked around for a moment, observing the zoo area. He didn’t see anyone but he knew he was not alone. A tree near the zookeeper’s cabin moved from something. Emerson’s ear twitched and he instantly turned his head. A shiny object flew through the air and straight at his head. Emerson instinctively jumped backwards, dodging the flying object. A sharp knife hit the grass near Emerson’s feet.

A figure jumped down from the trees, landing silently on the ground. The figure dashed at Emerson and threw another knife at him. Though accurately thrown, Emerson was able to dodge it easily.

“Who is this guy?” Emerson said to himself. He jumped at his opponent and slammed his feet into the ground. The ground rumbled from the impact but the assailant jumped into the air with acrobatic movement. Emerson was impressed by the smooth body control of his opponent.

The figure landed and stepped into a clearer view in front of Emerson. He was short and had a slim build. He had on a rugged blue denim jacket with a gray shirt underneath. He pulled out another throwing dagger and approached Emerson slowly. He was young, possibly even younger than Emerson.

“So you're the Jumpstar,” the boy said. “Sorry for the knives, I just wanted to see if you were the real thing.” He looked down at Emerson's shoes. “I see those are the shoes that made you so famous. I'll have to get a pair myself one day.”

“Who are you?” Emerson demanded. “What are you doing here?”

The boy grinned widely at Emerson. He turned around and saw Boden and Cort coming up behind Emerson. They had heard the fighting and came to back up Emerson. The stranger twirled his knife elegantly and pointed it at himself.

“I’m Roger Bryant, great-great grandson of the legendary hunter William Bryant,” he said loudly. “I’d like to help you find the silver my ancestor stole from this country.”

Chapter 11

“Hey, teach me how to throw this knife,” Emerson said.

Emerson fiddled with one of Roger’s throwing daggers. He tried to get a good grip on it, but couldn’t find the balance. “I can’t get to it to fly straight.”

Roger laughed at Emerson. “It takes practice, Emerson,” he said. “You also need a gentle touch. I don’t think you’re meant to be using a knife.”

The Chicago Ballers sat a table inside the zoo cafeteria. They were eating a late dinner with an uninvited guest; treasure hunter Roger Bryant. Boden poured some clam chowder soup into bowls and passed them across the table. Rose gave everyone some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on the side. Although Emerson and Roger seemed to be getting along, Phyllis did not want this unlicensed player in their circle.

“You can’t work with us,” Phyllis said sharply at Roger. “If you know anything about the GLL, we can only have five people on our team.”

Roger smiled and shook his finger. “Correction: you can only have five people *under contract*,” he said firmly. “Any person can help out a GLL team if they wanted to. I just won’t get paid.”

“We don’t get paid either,” Emerson said, slurping his soup. “But we get free food.”

“That’s a good deal,” Roger said, rubbing his chin. “I would sign that contract in a heartbeat.”

“That’s what I did!” Emerson shouted, laughing with food in his mouth. “I didn’t even read it!”

Roger roared with laughter. “You’re awesome, Emerson.”

Emerson and Roger continued erupting with laughs and giggles. Phyllis rubbed her forehead in frustration. The stupidity levels in the zoo were going off the charts. Boden cracked a smile from watching these two young men. They seemed so carefree and happy.

“But the truth is that I don’t really want to join your team,” Roger said, lowering his voice. “I don’t want to be a thief. I’m only here because I heard rumors about the Silver Tomb being targeted this week. I just want to help out.”

“How did you know about the GLL going after the coffin?” Cort asked.

“The Boston Bombsoldiers are going after it hard,” Roger explained. “They’re putting out reward money for anyone who knows anything about its secret location. The streets of Boston are in chaos right now. People are getting arrested people trying

to digging up graves all over town. Everyone in Southie is looking for it.”

Rose nodded her head. There were many desperate people in South Boston willing to do anything for money in that area. Times were tough for her hometown.

“Why not help the Bombsoldiers?” Boden asked. “Why help us?”

“I don’t like their methods,” Roger said, grimacing at mention of the Bombsoldiers. “Frida Calhoun has been known to steal items from her own scores. Instead of putting in everything to be measured by the league, she takes some items and keeps them for herself. She’s a dirty thief.”

Phyllis wasn’t surprised. Many thieves in the league withheld all their stolen items to keep them on the side. Even if they went down in the standings, they could keep money on the side.

Phyllis had heard rumors about Frida's greed before. Frida was definitely a thief who stole for money.

“My dream is to become a pro treasure hunter,” Roger said. He put his food down and looked at the Ballers. “One day, I’m going to open up a museum and display all the treasures I find. But to start to up my dream, I need a target that will put my name on the map. A legendary family treasure is a good place start.”

“What information do you have on the Silver Tomb?” Cort asked. “What makes you think you can find it?”

Roger smiled. He reached under his neck and pulled out a blue string necklace. It had a large gold coin tied to the end of it. The markings were etched in a unique style. The year 1893 was printed boldly on it. Roger beamed proudly as he showed it to the Ballers.

“This gold coin has been a family heirloom for a long time,” Roger said. “After I turned sixteen, my dad gave it to me as a present. I didn’t think much of it then, but I stumbled upon a book in my dad’s study. It matches the coins from the Silver Tomb that Willy Bryant had stolen in 1893. It proves that he’s the one who found it.”

Roger pulled out a small book from his back pocket and put it down on the table. “This book contains all the notes I have on the Silver Tomb. In the end, Willy Bryant never was caught with the coffin or gold coins. He never wrote down where he hid the treasure, but he must have kept some of the gold. It passed down through my family and gave us great wealth over the years. But I don’t care about the silver or gold. I just want to find it and prove that I’m a great treasure hunter.”

Boden grinned. Roger was just as determined about accomplishing his goals as Emerson was. Though different

dreams, the two of them had the same determination. Boden could see it clearly in both their eyes.

“I’ll strike you a deal,” Roger said, closing his book. “The truth is I can’t beat the Bombsoldiers on my own. On top of that, I need help digging up that coffin. My research shows that the silver coffin has a metal plate on the cover. It has all the names of the ‘free silver’ protesters inscribed on it. I’ll share all the information I have with you about the Silver Tomb in exchange for the plate and half the gold coins. Since the GLL doesn’t know how many coins there are anyway, they wouldn’t mind me keeping half of them. You can keep the rest as long as I get the credit for finding the coffin.”

Phyllis thought it over carefully. It was clear that Roger knew more about the Silver Tomb than the Ballers did. Even if they gave up half the coins, they would still be able to retain its BB book value. If they could increase their chances of finding the

coffin increase by even a little, it would be worth dealing with Roger Bryant.

“You’ve got a deal,” Phyllis said to Roger. She walked over and reached out her hand. “We’ll be teammates for this week.”

Roger smiled and shook Phyllis’ hand. Emerson laughed happily with food spilling out of his mouth. Boden and Rose joined in welcoming Roger. The game would be in for a change this week.

The next day, the Ballers began to prepare. The team split up to address the separate issues of the Silver Tomb job. Rose headed to the prisons to find out as much as information about the Boston underground scene. Prisons were the information centers for criminals. Rose’s job was to scout the Bombsoldiers and scope them out. Emerson and Roger would hit the streets of

Boston and see what they could find. Cort, Phyllis, and Boden stayed behind in the Franklin Zoo to study the history and clues that Roger had provided for them.

“Roger’s done a lot of research,” Boden said, going over the notes. “With all of this information, I think we can safely say that the Silver Tomb does in fact exist.”

“It’s somewhere out there,” Cort said, agreeing. “According to these notes, witnesses say that they saw Willy Bryant carry several shovels with him the day after the coffin was stolen. We also see evidence that Bryant owned several plots of land back in the 1800’s. Those plots of land still exist today in Boston.”

“Bryant was very secretive as a treasure hunter,” Phyllis said, observing the notes. She put on a pair of glasses. “He worked alone and disappeared after the coffin was stolen.”

“Roger’s research seems to indicate that there are two likely locations for the coffin to be buried,” Boden said. “Forest Hills or King’s Chapel cemetery. Only Roger’s family knows that Willy Bryant owned land there in the 1800’s.”

“Then we look there,” Phyllis said. “I just hope Frida and the Bombsoldiers don’t figure it out as well.”

Massachusetts Correctional Institution in Cedar Junction. Rose walked into the lobby entrance and sat down at a small desk. A prison guard handed Rose a sign in sheet for visitors.

“Who are you looking to visit?” the prison guard asked.

“Harry Delane,” Rose replied.

“Your relationship with him?”

“He’s my dad,” Rose said.

“Have you visited him before?”

“Once or twice.”

“Is he expecting you?”

“No.”

“Are you planning to stay for longer than an hour?”

“I don’t want to stay here any longer than I have to,” Rose answered.

The prison guard guided Rose to the visitors’ area. A row of glass windows separating the prisoners and the guests lined up across the room. Rose saw dozens of other prisoners conversing with visitors, a palpable desperation shining through the plated glass. The prisoners weren’t the only ones that suffered for their crimes; their loved ones carried part of the burden.

Rose sat down in front of a glass window with a speaker embedded into the center. A guard on the other side of the

window guided a middle aged man to a chair. The man sat down in front of the glass opposite of Rose. He stared through the window with a crooked grin on his face.

“Rosie,” the man said warmly. “You look great. I’m glad you came to visit.”

“I’m not,” Rose said firmly. “I hate coming here.”

“You hate visiting your father?”

“Come on, you know what I mean,” Rose said, trying to avoid squirming in front her dad. “This place drains the hope out of the visitors.”

Harry Delane chuckled deeply. “I know, Rosie,” he said.

“Hopefully you never become a regular here.”

Rose forced a smile. Her dad understood her feelings, but there wasn’t much he could do. He wasn’t going to be leaving jail anytime soon. “Look dad, I need some help. I heard that the

Bombsoldiers are looking for the Silver Tomb. I was wondering if you heard anything through the prison networks. Anything can help.”

Rose’s father nodded. “I’ve heard whispers,” he replied.

“The Bombsoldiers are a tough team, Rosie. Frida is very dangerous. Her team owner, ‘Mr. Greenblood’ owns the Big Bomber Casino on Girard Avenue. Avoid that place if you can.”

Rose took out a pen and pad. “What can you tell me about them?”

“Frida wears a trademark green cowboy hat,” Rose’s father said. “She’s greedy and values money above everything else. She’s been a lot of different GLL teams because she just looks for the highest paying contract. There are also two other players to watch out for, Taylor and Lawson. They’re strong brawlers. They mesh well with Frida. Every team so far has lost against their

brawlers. Instead of having two wing thieves, they use three. It's pretty effective."

Rose wrote down all the details. She would feed this information to Boden and see if he could come up with a good defensive strategy.

"I still can't believe you're a pro now," Harry said, scratching his red hair. "You said you hated what I did for a living. Now you're basically doing the same job."

Rose swallowed hard. "I know," she said softly. "I'm sorry, dad. I only did it get out of jail."

"You were in jail?"

Rose nodded, her embarrassment starting to swell. "It wasn't a proud moment. But now I have protection from the cops and I have a place to sleep. I even get free breakfast every morning."

Harry scoffed. "We never had that in my day. The thieves committed the crimes and the cops put them in jail. It used to be so simple."

Rose felt a tinge of guilt. Her father was in one of the worst prisons in the country, while she was free to steal anything she wanted. "I don't really like my job, but my teammates are amazing," she said. "They're so strong and talented compared to anyone I've ever met. Their determination makes me want to work harder too."

Harry listened carefully to his daughter. Even with regular visits, Rose's life was nearly a blank book to him. He always paid extra attention during their conversations.

"I tried hard to avoid getting in trouble, dad," Rose said, a slight tremble in her voice. "Without you around, I wasn't sure if I could find a new home. I don't know if I made the right choice in becoming a thief, but I believe in my teammates. They've given

me a purpose I've never had before. This might sound strange, but I really think I can accomplish something as a professional thief." She looked up at her dad. "I want to be part of this team for as long as I can."

Harry smiled at his daughter. He had spent years as a criminal but never once considered himself part of a team. With Rose, he always felt guilty as a father. He let her down more than once, but she still loved him as a dad. He had tried his best to provide a home for Rose. Now she had found one on her own.

Emerson and Roger were inside a taxi. They were going to head towards Forest Hills Cemetery to find any clues about the Silver Tomb. As the rode the cab, a slight mist started to brew over Boston. With the fall weather, Boston seemed to be under a constant gray cloud. Although the temperature was fine, something about the cloudy weather made Emerson miss home.

“Where do you live at, Roger?” Emerson asked in the back seat. “Do you live here in Boston?”

Roger shook his head. “Nah, not really,” he said. “My family has a house here, but I grew up all over the place. I’ve lived in China, Brazil, France, and Morocco; if you can think of a place chances are I’ve been there.”

“What were you doing in all those countries?”

“Mom and dad insisted I had an international education,” Roger answered. “Like I said, my family always had money. Me and my brothers always had everything provided for us when we were growing up. But in the end, I never had what I really wanted.”

“What’d you want?”

Roger smiled. “I wanted to chase after something.”

Emerson nodded. He could relate.

Roger looked out the window of the cab. "I could have easily lived out a simple, wealthy life-style like my brothers, but that's not me, Emerson. Why spend time going after something you don't want? After we find the Silver Tomb, I'll have a lot of chances to travel the world and discover all sorts of things. I'll be able to prove myself to him."

"To who?" Emerson asked.

"My dad," Roger answered, smiling. "My dad said if I can find at least three high-level items before this year is over, he'll let me join his team of treasure hunters."

"Wow," Emerson said. "Your dad must be pretty good at his job."

Roger laughed. "He's the best," he replied. "But he's a tough one. No way he'll let me or my brothers join without going

through the fire. All my brothers tried as well, but they all failed. I'm the last one try to join the treasure hunting business."

"Good luck, kid," Emerson said. "You going to need it."

Roger grinned. Not the slightest fear or doubt appeared on his face. Emerson felt fortunate to have met Roger. Unlike him, Emerson lucked out and simply walked onto a pro GLL team. Roger had to prove himself to a dad who had some pretty high standards.

Emerson was about to say something more, but he looked at the clock on the taxi dashboard. A drop of panic went through his body. The Chicago Bulls were playing the Boston Celtics, but there wasn't a working TV at the zoo. Emerson planned on watching the game somewhere, but he had forgotten about it.

“Hey, driver,” Emerson said, leaning in from the back seat. “If you had to watch a ball game, where’s the closest place you would go to?”

The driver thought for a moment. “Well, there’s a nice sports pub in the Big Bomber Casino I like to go to,” he answered. “Girard Avenue is coming up on your right in a few minutes. I can drop you guys off there if you want.”

Roger wasn’t sure. “Aren’t we supposed to check out the cemeteries? Your coach will get angry for sure, Emerson.”

Emerson laughed. “She can’t get angry at what she doesn’t know.”

The taxi took Emerson and Roger to Girard and 25th street towards a remote area just outside of the Boston downtown area. There they saw bright lights covering a strange rounded

building. They lit up even brighter than the Hotel Mango. Neon flashes scattered into the sky. The casino lights were upon them.

Emerson grinned as he ran up to the front entrance. The sign said, "Big Bomber Casino, Boston's finest place to enjoy your money" in glowing yellow neon. Emerson and Roger shielded their eyes from the lights as they ran inside in. They were about to step into the gaming floor when a man in a green suit stepped in front of him. He stood in front of the game floor and the lobby.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," the man said. "Do you have identification?"

Emerson had a flashback to his time in jail. "Nope," he said.

Roger said nothing. There was no way this guy was going to let them in without ID.

"Then you can't come in, sir," the man said in a low voice.

Emerson thought for a moment. "I don't have ID," he began, "but we're part of a team that can vouch for it." He reached on top of his hat and pulled down his team badge number. "Would this work?"

The man had seen these types of badges before. He stared at the number 22 ½ and fiddled with the badge, looking it over. He took out a scanner and rolled it over the badge. A bell tone sounded off from the device.

The man cleared his throat. He took a second and smiled as widely as he possibly could. "Please enjoy your stay, Mr. Emerson Jay," he said, changing his tone completely. He looked at Emerson and Roger. "Good luck to you both."

Emerson smiled back and took back his badge.

"Wow, Emerson," Roger said. "Your league takes care of its thieves."

Emerson nodded. He had to admit being in the GLL was pretty sweet.

They took a stroll down the tables and saw hundreds of people gaming at the tables. Money and chips were overflowing on green velvet. People screamed at each roll of a dice. Sunken faces and downcast expressions were littered all over the casino. But Emerson had no interest in any of it. He needed to watch a game.

“Give me a second,” Roger said. “I’m going to make a phone call. I’ll meet you at the lounge.”

Emerson nodded and hurried off. Tipoff was about to start.

At the roulette table, Frida Calhoun was debating what number to throw money on. She had lost the last fifty spins and felt like her luck was dwindling. In fact, dwindling was an understatement. This whole entire month was just one bad luck

spiral. Frida pulled on her green cowboy hat and wrestled with the thought. She needed a sign from the heavens for this next roll. Frida lifted her head and saw a flash of green coming from the corner of her eye. A man, no, a boy with an orange hat and green shoes was walking towards her. She thought she recognized the shoes from somewhere. The kid seemed completely oblivious to his surroundings.

“Hey kid,” Frida shouted, trying to make sure Emerson heard her over the slot machines. “Come here.”

Emerson twitched his head. He was completely surprised by the stranger calling for him. “Huh?” he said. “What do you want?”

Frida motioned her hand at Emerson. Her left ring finger had the biggest diamond Emerson had ever seen. “Your shoes are green,” she said in a low voice, trying to keep it quiet. “My favorite color just happens to be green. In fact, green is the color

of money, right? I think this is a sign from lady luck. Give me a number to put five hundred dollars on."

Emerson raised his eyebrows. "You're weird, lady," he said. "I don't want to gamble. Plus, I'm broke."

Frida waved her hand. "You don't need to put money down yourself," she said quickly. "You just need to help me pick a number."

"Ok," Emerson said. "45."

Frida frowned. "The table only goes up to 36," she grunted. "Why did you pick 45?"

Emerson shrugged. "I saw your face and I thought you looked 45 years old."

Frida's face turned hot red. "Pick a proper number, kid," she growled.

Emerson looked at the roulette wheel. He didn't even know how this game even worked.

"What for?" Emerson asked. "So you can win money?"

"Of course, what else?" Frida said. She was just as confused as Emerson. "Don't you want money?"

Emerson shook his head, not really interested.

"What do you want then?"

Emerson grinned. "I want to win."

Frida slapped the table. "Then let's win here," she said, energy filling her voice. "You want to win, and I want to win with you, kiddo," she said. "Pick a number."

Emerson never gambled on roulette before but if all he had to do was pick numbers then even he could do that.

“Put it on 22 and $\frac{1}{2}$,” Emerson said loudly. “You can put money between numbers, right?”

Frida instantly smiled. She reached over and put it on the line between black 22 and red 23. “Hope you’re right, kid.”

Emerson didn’t really care, but he took a look at the spinning roulette wheel. The white plastic ball bounced around and finally landed on a number: 23.

Frida jumped up and kissed the diamond on her ring finger. “Yes!” she exclaimed. “My first win of the night!”

The dealer gathered the chips and pushed them towards Frida. With five hundred dollars on the line between 22 and 23, it meant that she had put money on both numbers. With the ball hitting 23, she had won seventeen times her money; eight and a half thousand dollars.

Frida smiled at Emerson. "You seem to be my good luck charm, my friend. I owe you one."

"Don't mention it," Emerson said, still not really caring. "You can pay me back by telling me where I can watch a TV."

"I'll take you up to my personal lounge," Frida said. She flicked a ten dollar chip towards the dealer as a tip.

"Thank you, Ms. Frida," the dealer said, giving a slight bow. "Your luck has changed."

Frida roared with laughter. "I come to this casino all the time, but I have the worst luck."

"Your name is Frida?" Emerson asked.

"Indeed it is," Frida said, grinning. She was still basking in the glow of her win. "I live here at the Big Bomber Hotel and Casino."

“It’s a person with that same name that’s been giving me trouble,” Emerson said, folding his arms. “That’s why I’m sneaking around the city; I can’t get caught by that chick.”

“What’s so bad about her?”

“I hear she’s a dirty and greedy thief,” Emerson explained. “That’s the worst kind in my opinion.”

“Are you scared of her?”

Emerson scoffed. “I’m not scared of anything,” he insisted. “But if Frida Calhoun ever comes after me, I’ll have to teach her a lesson.”

“Interesting,” Frida said. She motioned for her money chips to be stacked away. The dealer eyed Emerson carefully, unsure if he was aware of the situation. “You might get your chance sooner than you expect, kid.”

Emerson shrugged. "Maybe," he replied. "By the way, I'm Emerson Jay. I'm a pro thief from Chicago. I'm visiting Boston with my team."

"So you're a GLL member?"

Emerson nodded. "It's my first year."

"That's great," Frida said, smiling. "I'm in the GLL as well."

"You're a fellow thief?"

"Yes" she said. "And my full name is Frida Samantha Calhoun."

Emerson burst out laughing. "Your name is Frida Calhoun too?" he said. "Wow, what are the chances I'd find two thieves in Boston with the same name."

Frida looked over her shoulder. She motioned a hand to two people at the blackjack table. "Lawson, Taylor; both of you get over here. We got a straggler."

Two men from the tables behind them approached Emerson and Frida. The one named Lawson was a broad-shouldered man with a deep scar over his left eye. The number 28 was patched onto his jacket. The other man, Taylor, had a tall and sinewy figure. He wore a dark blue headband with the number 9 stitched on. They looked over Emerson with narrowed eyes.

“This is Emerson Jay,” Frida said, a little too sweetly. “He’s visiting us from dear old Chicago.”

“Chicago?” Taylor said. “Nice pizza over there. I’m a big fan.”

“I think the hotdogs are better,” Lawson commented. “No ketchup of course.”

Emerson raised his hand. “Um, does this mean there are two Frida Calhouns on the same team?”

Lawson and Taylor gaped at Emerson. Was it even possible for a person to be this stupid?

“Before we continue,” Frida said, her sweet voice starting to disappear, “tell me why you don’t care about money. This is a casino. You win, you get money. Those are the rules.”

Emerson looked around. He saw hundreds of guests throwing down their money across the tables. Obsessed faces and lost souls were spread out all over the casino floor. He could hear desperation and hope squeeze out of the building by the second.

“My dream can’t be bought with money,” Emerson said plainly. He waved his hand to the other players in the casino. “These people will always end up losing. Even if they end up winning here, they end up stealing from themselves.”

Frida and her Bombsoldier teammates stared at Emerson. They took a moment to blink. Then they erupted in laughter.

“What kind of thief doesn’t care about money?” Lawson sneered.

“Only an idiot thinks he can live off his dreams,” Taylor cackled, laughing hard.

Frida joined in on the laughs. “The legends of the GLL are practically dead, kid,” she said. “Marcus the Magician and Sally Saga won’t be here forever, they’re nearly out the door. The rich will rule this league while the poor will starve off and die. Keep dreaming, Jumpstar. Thieves like your make my job even easier.”

Frida motioned her hands at Lawson and Taylor. They instantly grabbed Emerson by the arms. Emerson tried to move, but the Bombsoldiers held him tight. They kept him pinned to his chair. The other roulette players didn’t even flinch. They wanted

no part of this fight. Frida touched a glass next to her hand. She softly tapped the glass with her diamond ring. A heavy hum resonated from the glowing ring. The glass cup changed its shape and split apart. It morphed into a short blade in Frida's hands.

Frida pulled off her green cowboy hat. "I guess I have to show you how tough the GLL can be, kid," she said to Emerson. She pointed the glass blade at his face. "I'm going to enjoy teaching you this lesson."

Emerson stopped struggling and looked directly at Frida. "I don't care what you have teach," Emerson said, "because my dream is stronger than your greed. So before you start your lesson, do you mind if borrow one of your TV's? I really want to see the end of the Bulls game. I'll bring it back before I leave this city."

Frida scowled. She raised her glass blade and aimed it at Emerson's face. Just then, a sharp object hit Frida's hand, cutting it open deeply. Frida jumped back in her seat from the pain; someone had thrown a knife at her.

Taylor and Lawson looked around and loosened their grip on Emerson for just a moment, but that was all he needed. Emerson powered his shoes and jumped over the roulette table. The two Bombsoldiers were blown back as Emerson landed near the exit. Emerson looked to his right and saw Roger with a dagger in his hand.

"You're late," Emerson shouted. "I needed that back up five minutes ago."

Roger grinned. "Timing does cost, buddy. And last time I remember, you're broke."

Frida got back up and slammed her diamond ring into the roulette table. She pointed a bloody hand at Emerson and Roger. "Ten thousand dollars to anyone who captures those two," she screamed. Frida looked around, but no one reacted. "And if you owe me money, your debts are wiped clean and free."

Over a hundred people bolted out of their chairs and went after Emerson and Roger. Tables were turned over and chairs flipped over to their sides. A mob of people charged after them with a lot of sound and plenty of fury.

Emerson and Roger ran through the casino, hooting and yelping as they ran. Emerson couldn't help but laugh his head off.

"This is great," Emerson yelled, wind whipping through his hair. He put a hand on his hat to keep it from flying off.

“What is?” Roger shouted, running faster to keep up with Emerson’s sprint.

“I almost died because of a ball game,” Emerson said, giggling. “If I die this week, I might need to use that silver coffin, Roger.”

The two friends kept on laughing as a mob of Bostonians were chasing them down. They ran through the exit, kicking down the doors of the casino. They didn’t get any money, but they won tonight. They kept on running to avoid the mob, laughing and cheering about the events that unfolded.

Chapter 12

“Frida is more dangerous than I expected,” Boden remarked. “She gave Emerson a run for his money.”

“Frida’s ring allows her to control any glass object,” Phyllis explained. “It’s a very powerful imbued item. She’s quite the fighter.”

Boden, Phyllis, and Cort were eating lunch inside of the Boston Zoo cafeteria. A few hours ago, Emerson informed them about the fight with the Bombsoldiers at the casino. Both teams were now aware of each other. But despite the strange encounter, Emerson and Roger embarrassed the Bombsoldiers on their home ground. However, Emerson dragged them both to the casino without permission. Now he had to serve a punishment; cleaning the lion cages with a toothbrush.

“Frida had a solid track record in the GLL, Boden,” Cort said. “Even before she led the Bombsoldiers she did great work in New York with Sally Saga.”

“By the way, who is Sally Saga?” Boden asked. “I’ve heard her name, but no one’s told me why she’s important.”

“Sally Saga is the lead thief on the New York Knights,” Phyllis replied. “Along with Marcus the Magician, Sally was largely responsible for the initial development of the league. Marcus won three championships and two MVP awards, while Sally won two championships and three MVP’s. Even today they still continue to dominate the east and west coasts. Many thieves grew up admiring them.”

“I suppose that’s one opinion,” Cort said. “There were only six cities in the early years. There weren’t that many pros back then.”

“Frida Calhoun used to be Sally’s backup on the Knights,” Phyllis went on, seemingly ignoring Cort. “Sally mentored her for several years. Whatever is driving Frida, she must have her reasons.”

“Well, we still need a solid plan to handle Frida,” Boden said. “We can’t afford to stumble in the league standings. We need to get our hands on the silver coffin.”

Cort wiped some soup off his mouth. He pulled out a map of Boston cemeteries. “King’s Chapel is where we think the coffin is buried,” he said. “We cross-referenced the buried people in the cemetery with all of Willy Bryant’s associates. Unfortunately, we didn’t find anyone connected to Bryant.”

Phyllis pulled out a small photo. “We did find one thing though,” she said. “In the northeast corner, there’s a white marble angel statue in front. It was erected the same year Willy Bryant disappeared with the silver coffin.”

“Who is buried in there?” Boden asked.

“That’s the thing; no one’s buried in that spot,” Phyllis said.

“It was made in 1893, but never used. The cemetery kept it because of its design.”

“So why do you think the coffin might be there?”

Cort handed Boden a document from the King’s Chapel Cemetery. “Willy Bryant owned that spot of land for an entire year before the silver vanished. We only know this because of Roger’s records.”

Boden took a heavy bite of his sandwich. “Then that’s where we dig,” he said between chews. “But I also think that Frida is willing to pull anything this week. We could be running into a trap.”

“That’s part of the job, Boden,” Phyllis said firmly. “We never know what to expect in the GLL. All we can do is go forward and

fight our way in. It's not what I want, but believing in Emerson's ability gives us the best chance of winning this week."

On the other side of the Zoo, Emerson gripped his nose as he scrubbed the inside of a cage. He was on his hands and knees trying to clean the barred cage. He concluded that the lion occupying the cage must have had an unbalanced diet. Rose approached the cage and leaned on the bars.

"How long do you have to clean this cage for?" Rose asked.

Emerson shrugged. "Until it's clean."

"I bet you wish we stayed at a hotel."

"It's not so bad," Emerson replied. "It's like washing dishes, except I'm cleaning feces instead of food."

"Gross."

“Why aren't you with the rest of the team?” Emerson asked, wiping his forehead. “We need to be ready for the job this week. We're going to be digging up some graves.”

“Yeah, I know,” Rose said. “I just feel guilty for being a part of this. A cemetery is a little out there though. I don't know if I feel comfortable stealing from one.”

“We can't hesitate, Rose,” Emerson said. “You can't be a thief if you feel guilty about stealing.”

“True,” Rose admitted. “Have you had a family member pass away?”

“Nope. You?”

“Yeah, one or two,” Rose replied. “It always makes you think about your own life, about how short life is in general. But sometimes death can remind you how life is unfair.”

Emerson stepped out of the cage and dried off his hands. He looked at Rose blankly with no response.

“If a person leaves, there’s nothing you can do about it,” Rose said. Different shades of emotion filled her voice. “You can’t be angry at them because they’re gone. You can’t hate them because they’re gone. What’s the point? It’s not like they can hear you. In fact, you can’t even apologize if you wanted to. When people get put away, it’s like they steal something from you and keep it forever. They steal every future conversation, memory, or moment from you.”

Emerson quietly folded his arms and looked down at his feet.

“He’s the one committed crimes,” Rose said angrily. “But if that’s true, why am I the one who feels guilty? I feel like I should have spent more time with him. I feel like I owe him. I wish I could change things, but he’s trapped somewhere I can’t go.”

Rose fell to her knees. Her red hair covered her face as the tears began to flow out. Emerson didn't have the slightest idea of what was happening. He didn't want to know. He kneeled down and put his arm over Rose. Sometimes things just needed to be said, even if it's to the wrong person.

Early Saturday morning, the Ballers prepared to leave Franklin Park Zoo for the cemetery. There was a slight drop in temperature as they walked outside. The night before, Emerson and Roger picked up black suits and ties. For the first time, Emerson went without his trademark orange cap. Roger wore a slim black suit and thin tie. Boden brought along his guitar case and tied a black ribbon on the case handle. This week, they'd have three wings to fly with.

Emerson looked back at the zoo. He glanced over the empty cages, the tanks, the poorly drawn cartoon animals

painted across the buildings. He didn't particularly enjoy his time in Boston. Compared to Chicago, it wasn't his kind of city. But Emerson realized he would rather keep the memories of this city than forget them. He was glad that it was his last day in Boston, but found himself wondering when he'd be back. He tightened his black tie and looked towards the city center. A dark fog started to form. It matched the gray sky that covered Boston this morning. There would be no sunshine for the Ballers today.

Emerson, Boden, and Roger took a cab to the King's Chapel Cemetery in downtown Boston. They walked up to the black gates that led to burial grounds. A guard in a gray jump suit came out from behind the gate and stared at them.

"Visiting hours haven't started yet, boys," the guard said. "You still got an hour till I can open these gates."

Roger approached the guard. He pulled out an envelope overflowing with cash and put it through the bars of the gate.

“We know that time is money,” he said with a grin. “And we can give you a lot for that extra hour.”

The guard did not hesitate. He took the envelope and opened the gate. The Ballers went in, sneaking into the empty burial grounds. As they went in, the guard pulled out a phone.

“Hey, it’s me,” the guard said quietly into the phone. “I don’t know where they’re going in the cemetery, but they’re here.” The guard paused for a moment. “You’re going to give me that reward money, right?”

Emerson and his crew reached the white marble statue mentioned in Roger’s notes. Emerson ran his hand over the statue. It was strangely haunting, looking into the stone angel’s eyes. The pale white marble had faded over the past hundred years. Roger looked to Emerson. “This statue is called the ‘Angelus Lumen’, or Angel’s Light in Latin,” he said. “Guessing

from my research, my great-great grandfather probably made this thing.”

“Interesting,” Emerson said, observing the stone.

Boden opened up his guitar case. He pulled out three small shovels and tossed them to Emerson and Roger.

“Let’s start the digging,” Boden said.

Before Emerson and Roger could reply, they heard a car engine from the gravel road near them.

“Boden,” Emerson whispered. “I don’t think that’s our team.”

Emerson ran to the small road and saw a car drive up to the front of the angel statue. Frida stepped out of the car. She wore a lime-green jacket and brown boots. She had a bandage wrapped around her hand from Roger’s throwing knife. Her diamond ring sparkled brighter than ever.

“I said I would teach you a lesson, Emerson,” Frida said. Her eyes were dark. Shadows covered her face, outlining her anger. “And I’ll take that coffin now as well. After I toss the coffin to the league, I’ll keep the gold for myself.”

Boden and Roger came out to join Emerson. They saw Frida Calhoun standing by a car. Taylor and Lawson stepped out of the back seats, ready for action.

“Ambitious,” Emerson sneered. “But it’s a pointless gesture. We’re not leaving this place empty handed. I told you that your era is over. No thief from Boston, dead or alive, is going to win today.”

Instead of responding, Frida raised her diamond ring. Trading words with Emerson would lead to nowhere. Without warning, Frida threw her fist into one of the glass windows of the car. The clear glass shattered and dropped to the carpeted floor. Emerson had seen this move before.

“Boden, take Frida out!” Emerson shouted. “Get her before she makes a weapon!”

Boden instantly rushed in with his stealth sword. He was about to swing, when Taylor and Lawson dashed in from behind. They made their way in to protect Frida. Boden stopped his attack and rolled to the side. The glass on the floor changed shape and morphed into two sets of weapons. Frida picked them up and handed them over to her teammates.

“You can play with those two,” Emerson said to Boden, loosening his black necktie. “I’m taking on this glass granny by myself.”

“Terrific,” Boden grumbled. “Not only am I injured, I get to fight two guys by myself.”

“Nope,” Roger said, pulling out a knife in each hand. “You got a treasure hunter in your corner, Boden.”

Emerson gave his friends a quick wink and then ran towards the other sides of the cemetery. Frida Calhoun sprinted after him. Boden and Roger were left with Taylor and Lawson.

“Gentlemen,” Boden said, addressing his opponents.

“Would either one of you care to roll over and play dead?”

Taylor and Lawson didn't crack a smile. It was Boden's first joke in a long time and it failed. It was no time to fool around. The two Bombsoldiers each had a sword and shield in hand. Lawson gripped his glass weapons tightly and began approaching Roger. Lawson fastened his headband and pulled out a glass sword. Although made of glass, the Bombsoldiers could use Frida's weapons dangerously.

Roger flipped the knives in his hand. He dashed in and threw one knife at Lawson. The knife curved in the air and aimed towards Lawson's head. Lawson raised his shield over his face to block the knife. The knife bounced off the glass shield but Roger

crouched in low. He used his other knife and stabbed Lawson in the foot. Lawson cried out in pain. First blood was to Roger.

With Taylor, Boden had to adjust his fighting style with his injured shoulder. He adjusted his grip on his stealth sword, trying to make the sword look different than it really was. The best attribute of his invisible blade was that his opponents could not measure its reach. And with a shifty grip, his opponents had trouble seeing the direction of the swings. He could even pretend to switch hands and force the enemy to guess the location of the sword.

Boden spun around and swung his sword, clanking with Taylor's glass blade. Taylor's skill with a sword seemed to rival his own. Boden needed to figure out how to beat Taylor before his shoulder gave out. Taylor grinned slyly at Boden. He reached into his back pocket.

“Catch this, Baller,” Taylor yelled, throwing a small glass container at Boden.

Boden flinched and sliced the glass container swiftly. It shattered instantly, spilling green paint all over his sword. Boden wiped his eyes from the paint splatter. When he opened his eyes, he saw his sword's shape was easily seeable from the paint.

“Oh no,” Boden murmured. “He can see it.”

Taylor laughed and approached Boden. The battle was about to turn.

On the other side, Emerson ran to the east side of the cemetery grounds. He looked over his shoulder and saw Frida coming after him. He needed to get to an area with no glass. Frida's imbued ring would be limited and he could take control of the environment. After a quick sprint, Emerson reached a grassy hill littered with concrete monuments.

Frida caught up with him, calmly walking up the hill. She ran her hand over the gravestones in the area as she approached Emerson. She cracked the knuckles of her ring hand, prepping her imbued item for Emerson.

“I’m going to enjoy this little fight of ours,” Frida said slyly. “I don’t get to bust up rookies as much I used to. I’ll take my time ripping you apart.”

“Answer me this,” Emerson shouted. “Why did you leave the New York Knights? You won a title with them. With your power, you could have kept that team at the top of the league for years. You worked with Sally Saga, one of the best thieves in this league. Why leave?”

Frida face darkened from mention of her old mentor. Sally spent years training Frida, helping her understand the how thievery worked at the highest level in this country. After a few

seasons, Frida knew she could never surpass her teacher. Sally was just too good.

“In our league, the rankings are determined by how much you steal,” Frida said. “Victory and money go hand in hand. But good thieves don’t always get money. And sometimes bad thieves can get too much. There’s no point in competing with people like Marcus or Sally. No one in this age can beat them. I’d rather take the money and live my life.”

Emerson felt pity for Frida. Despite all her power and experience, she was defeated as a thief. She could steal, but had no desire to win.

“Let’s finish this,” Emerson said.

Frida held up her ring. “Show me that jumping ability that you’re so proud of.”

Emerson gathered up power in his green shoes. He jumped high into the air and aimed to land directly on Frida.

“Impressive,” Frida remarked.

Frida lifted her ring and pointed it across the area. What Emerson didn't notice was the number of lampposts with glass light bulbs. The bulbs exploded and shattered under Frida's power. She then sent the tiny glass shards into the side of Emerson's body, cutting up his flesh. Emerson lost his balance in the air. He landed painfully on the ground, shards of glass sticking out of his skin.

“I didn't see that one coming,” Emerson said, gritting his teeth in pain.

Frida closed in and raised her right fist. She slammed the diamond ring into Emerson's face, sending him sprawling to the

grass. She continued to pummel Emerson, hitting him with the solid diamond ring.

Emerson pushed Frida away and then stomped his right shoe into the earth. Although not a full powered stomp, the ground trembled for a moment. Frida stumbled to the ground, the impact making her fall on her knees. Emerson jumped with a flying elbow into the middle of Frida's back. She cried out from the hit. Combined with a jump, Emerson's attacks were incredibly powerful.

Frida gathered herself and attempted to recuperate. "You can't beat me," she snarled. "Not today."

Emerson grabbed Frida's green jacket and pulled her close to him. "I'm going to win a championship on my own terms," he yelled. "It might have been a while since you were a rookie, but I'm different. I'll beat you, Marcus and Sally, Tessa Narini, even the cops if I have to. This is my era!"

Emerson wrapped his arms around Frida's body. She tried pulling away, but she couldn't summon any glass weapons at such close range. Emerson held her tightly and gathered all his jumping power. He blasted into the sky, higher than any jump he did before. Emerson hung onto Frida as they soared. When they reached the apex of the jump, Emerson shifted Frida's body upside down. With the full force of gravity, Emerson drove Frida's head directly into the earth. They hit the ground hard with an explosive crash into the grass. Emerson tumbled down the grass hill, his body almost numb from the landing. Frida came rolling after him with her entire body limp from the extreme pain.

Emerson hit the bottom of the mound and trembled as he tried to stand up. He fought through the pain and pulled off his suit jacket. Slowly and painfully, he yanked pieces of glass out of his side. He looked up and saw that Frida was still conscious. She was flat on her back, trying to stand up.

“You crazy bastard,” Frida coughed. “You nearly killed us both with that pile driver.”

Emerson forced a chuckle. “It was worth it. I was able to beat an old lady.”

Frida glared fiercely at him. It was basically the only action she could do. Emerson had beaten her straight up; a *rookie* had beaten her.

Deep inside, Emerson knew that the Grand Larceny League was a business. Money defined their league. But despite the success of the Bombsoldiers, they had no ambition. Frida thought she could steal enough to become rich, and never have to try hard enough to actually compete for a title. Emerson proved her wrong.

“Leave me,” Frida murmured. “You’ve won. Take the coffin and get out of Boston.”

Emerson was about to oblige, but paused. "What was it like?" he whispered.

Frida looked up. "What?"

"Winning that championship," Emerson said quietly. "Was it just as amazing as you dreamed?"

Frida trembled. Emerson had just beaten her and now was wondering about her past. She thought he was crazy from the start. Now she knew for sure. Frida covered her eyes with her hand. Tears ran under her fingers, her diamond ring dimming slowly.

"It was..." Frida said between sobs, "like a dream."

Emerson nodded. He left Frida there on the grass to herself. The battle with her was over.

On the other side of the cemetery, Boden breathed heavily as he tried to drive back Taylor's attacks. The two swordsmen were drawing blood from each other, slicing each other up to a standstill. Boden's sword was covered in blood and green paint, making its invisibility useless. Taylor could clearly see the shape of the sword. Boden backed away towards the wall, losing strength with every step. Taylor hoisted his glass shield like a disc and threw it across the room. Boden raised his sword to block it, but the shield knocked his sword to the ground.

Boden cursed at himself as the sword flew away from his hands. Taylor jumped in ready to stab Boden with the tip of his blade. Despite the sharpness of the glass sword, it was not very durable. It was about crack open from all the swordplay.

"Catch, Boden!" a voice boomed.

Boden looked up and saw a flying glass sword coming at him. Roger had just cut down Lawson and defeated him. He

threw Lawson's glass sword across the grass to Boden. Taylor looked up as Boden caught the sword by the hilt. Boden grabbed the sword with an unfamiliar grip and slashed Taylor hard across the chest. Taylor gasped as the sword spit him open. He hit the ground, unconscious from the pain.

Roger went over to Boden. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Boden winced in pain. "I'll live," he said. Boden touched his shoulder and felt blood seeping out. He had reopened his wound from the Miami job last week.

As Roger helped Boden stand up, Emerson came running through the grounds. Roger immediately noticed the cuts all over his face and neck.

"Come on, let's dig up the coffin and go home," Emerson shouted. "The gravestone is right outside."

“You beat Frida?” Roger said. He wasn’t sure if Emerson could have handled her on his own. Roger was going to back him up after his own fight.

“Of course!” Emerson bellowed. He thumped his chest hard. His dress shirt was stained all over with blood spots. “The taste of victory was too sweet to avoid my lips! Superior thieves have superior results! A man like me can’t lose to a—”

A sudden wave of numbness washed over Emerson’s entire body. He tried to control his legs, but they suddenly felt like melted jelly. Roger had to catch him before he landed face first into the floor.

“You might have won, but you’re a mess,” Roger snickered. “Let’s call up Rose and Cort to load up the items.”

Emerson nodded feebly. For the first time this season, his injuries had taken over him. He wanted to rest, but the job was not over. Digging needed to be done.

Roger dialed up Cort and Rose to come in and help bring in the items. Meanwhile, Emerson and Boden picked up their shovels and started to dig. After half an hour of furious digging, Boden's shovel hit something. A metal pang echoed in the stone room.

"It's here," Boden whispered. "The coffin is here."

Roger joined in and helped the Ballers dig. They went faster and faster, unearthing the heavy and metallic item underneath. Roger was a little worried. Clearly, his great-great grandfather Willy Bryant had kept some of the gold coins. But how much? Roger felt indebted to his new thief friends. He hoped there was enough gold to share.

The ground opened up and Boden pulled out a flashlight. He shined the light down into the hole they had dug. There he saw it; the metal plate on top of a shiny silver coffin.

“We found it!” Boden shouted.

Emerson yelled and screamed as loud as he could. “Yes!” he bellowed.

Roger sighed with incredible relief. He had found the treasure he was looking for. He silently thanked his family for this opportunity.

“Let’s bring this bad boy up,” Roger said eagerly.

They continued to dig, revealing more and more of the coffin. The silver was in fantastic condition, still shiny after a hundred years. Although solid, the coffin was smaller than a regular funeral casket. After they dug out a mountain full of dirt, they finally saw the top cover. Boden tapped the coffin, hoping

to hear if it was hollow or not. Instead, a solid clank echoed off. Emerson and Roger smiled at each other. They knew what each other was thinking. At the exact same moment they pulled open the cover and looked inside.

“Gold!” Emerson shouted gleefully.

The coffin nearly packed with gold coins. The grayness of Boston's fall weather was pierced by glowing gold from inside. The Ballers were overjoyed, ridiculously delighted by their find. Despite Willy Bryant taking several sacks of coins, there was plenty left over.

Boden called up Phyllis to give her the great news. Emerson and Roger hugged each other and cheered. It was a great haul.

“Thanks for the help, Roger,” Emerson said, his smile getting bigger by the second. “It was great working with you this week. I'm glad we met.”

Roger smiled back. He looked over and saw Boden was still on his phone. "I'm glad too," he said softly. "But we didn't meet by random chance, Emerson."

Emerson raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"A friend of yours contacted me," Roger said. He looked directly into Emerson's eyes. "To be honest, I didn't know much about the Grand Larceny League until she called me. She explained the situation about the BB book status of the coffin. She even told me about you. Apparently you have a history with this girl."

Emerson swallowed hard. He knew who Roger was talking about.

Roger gave a small grin. "You should appreciate what you have, Emerson," he said. "Next time you see her, thank her for me."

Roger patted Emerson on the shoulder and went over to help Boden. Emerson exhaled deeply. Although he had struggled this week, his plan was still in motion. Piece by piece, week by week, the road to the championship was being built. The Ballers were on their way.

Chapter 13

“Greetings from Bristol Prison, this is Scoreline. I’m Andrew Scott Johnson with my partner in crime Michael Paul Williams.”

“Glad to be here, Andrew,” Michael Paul Williams began. “The Grand Larceny League has heated up in the past couple of weeks with interesting game play from several teams.”

The two Scoreline anchors wore their signature orange jumpsuits with prison numbers written on their chests. This week they had somehow added a desk to their cell. The prisoners were adding a bit of professionalism to their show.

“We start out with a brawl in LA. The Los Angeles Showtimers took on the Phoenix Foxes and the Chicago Razorbacks,” Andrew Scott Johnson said. “The three teams competed for two different targets. The first was a shipment of gold medals for a

national track meet. The second target was a cargo of coffee beans flown in from Colombia.”

“The Showtimers demolished the Foxes in a battle for the medals and took the gold,” Michael Paul Williams reported.

“Interestingly enough, the Showtimers also attempted to steal the coffee beans from the Razorbacks. However, rookie Ken Koala protected his team. He fought Marcus the Magician in a one-on-one battle and was able to survive. Pretty good for a rookie.”

“The league might look back at this fight as the beginning of a great thief,” Andrew Scott Williams commented. “In New York, we saw the Knights battle the San Francisco Goldeners. It was a strange outcome with both teams coming away with a decent score. The new San Fran team performed well, stealing platinum wiring from a science lab. The Knights had the biggest take with

a bundle of newly designed Karaoke machines. Their value came out to an impressive \$2.6 million.”

“In Boston, the Chicago Ballers competed against the revamped Bombsoldiers led by Frida Calhoun,” Michael Paul Williams said. “The Ballers came out with a season high 8 million dollars when they stole the legendary Silver Tomb of Boston. Although the nameplate on the coffin was somehow taken off, the silver coffin is legit and had gold coins printed in 1893. Truly an amazing score by the Chicago team.”

“The Ballers have done well this year and continue to defy expectations,” Andrew Scott Johnson said. “As a reminder to the rest of the league, the voting period for the All-Studs this year will begin tomorrow. Cast your ballots as soon as possible.”

“The All-Stud ceremony will take place in San Francisco this year,” Michael Paul Williams added. “This concludes our broadcast for tonight. Steal on, stealers.”

Cort turned off the TV. He looked to the rest of the team. The Ballers had arrived back at the Hotel Mango only a few hours earlier. They had taken down the biggest score of any team this season, raking in the 8 million dollars from a legendary BB book item. But all the travel and work was starting to wear them down. Compared to opening week, they had lost so much energy traveling from city to city. Even Emerson the Jumpstar was exhausted and out of gas.

“We did it, team,” Emerson murmured from his lounge chair. He pumped his fist in the air with half enthusiasm.

Boden snickered. “Feeling tired, Mr. Jumpstar?”

Emerson was too tired to even reply. The injuries he had sustained from his fight with Frida had taken their toll. But with the upcoming weeks of travel he would have little time to heal.

“You guys have been doing great so far,” Cort said, looking over his rookies. “Everyone deserves a solid break. In a few weeks, the All-Stud break will give us some time to rest.”

Emerson lifted his head. “What’s the All-Stud break?”

“The All-Studs are elected thieves representing the top performances of the year,” Phyllis replied. “Every GLL member is supposed to vote for who they think are the best thieves. Sometimes it becomes a popularity contest, but it’s actually a fairly accurate list of the top performers.”

“There are twelve spots on the All-Stud team,” Cort said. “You can vote for whoever you want, including yourself. The All-Stud break is towards the end of the season. It’s a full week of inactivity; it’s basically a vacation for us. The ceremony is just a small party for the voted-in members.”

“Have either of you ever been voted in?” Boden asked.

Cort and Phyllis eyed one another. “No,” they both answered.

“Twelve spots,” Emerson murmured. “That’s not a lot, but I think I could get in.”

“A rookie on the roster is rare,” Phyllis pointed out. “That being said, I think you have a chance. People have noticed your impact.”

Emerson smiled. It was comforting to hear compliments from Phyllis. They were rare and small.

“Ken Koala from the Chicago Razorbacks also appears to have a chance,” Cort noted. “He uses that weird barrel effectively.”

Emerson stood up. He walked to the wall that had a large map of the all the Thievery Zones. “There’s something that bothers me,” he said. “Marcus and Sally are two legends that will

get automatically voted in, right? Then there are the popular veteran thieves. That doesn't leave a lot of spots for rookies. I wonder if that's really fair."

Cort cleared his throat. "You shouldn't look at the All-Stud team in that way," he said. "The All-Stud selection is just ceremonial; it doesn't mean much. You should focus on winning a title."

"But if I don't get picked as an All-Stud and win a title, people will still criticize me. I really want both."

Phyllis had to admit, she was impressed with Emerson's resolve. The kid wanted to be the best, period.

"Can we do whatever we want during the All-Stud break?" Rose asked. "This constant traveling is killing me."

"Same here," Boden said. "We barely have time to ourselves."

Cort grinned. "Yeah, we can probably arrange some down time."

"You can do whatever you want within Chicago," Phyllis said. "When the break comes, I suggest you make the most of it. It's an uneventful week. It will pass by quickly."

Detroit, Michigan. A black and white police car escorted agent Tessa Narini inside the Michigan State Prison. Tessa adjusted her yellow necktie as she entered the building. For the past three weeks, she had traveled to twenty different cities in thirteen different states. Her agenda was moving smoothly for now. Inside, Tessa stepped into a small interrogation room and waited for her guest.

A prison guard opened up the back door of the room and brought in a massively sized prisoner. The top of the man's head

grazed the ceiling as he walked to the table. The chains covering the prisoner rustled with every movement. The guard guided the man to a chair and exited the room. Tessa was left alone with the enormous man.

“I’m special agent Tessa Narini from the Treasury Department. What is your name and number?”

The huge man cleared his throat. “My number is 78954.”

“And your name?”

The man paused. He looked over Tessa for a couple seconds. “My given name hasn’t been used in over a decade,” he finally said. “In here, I’m known as Dark Rain.”

Tessa raised an eyebrow. “Well, it looks like you’re the man I’ve been looking for.”

“You sure about that?”

“According to these records, you’ve served eleven years of a ninety-nine year sentence,” Tessa said. “You have one of the thickest criminal records since paper was invented. However, I’m only interested in your record as a thief.”

“I see,” Dark Rain said. “What do you want to know?”

Tessa put her elbows on the table. She leaned in close to Dark Rain. “Have you ever been part of a professional league of thieves? Have you ever heard of one?”

“No.”

Tessa blinked. “That’s all you have to say?”

“That’s my only answer,” Dark Rain replied, his voice completely level. “Never heard of any league.”

Tessa sighed. Disappointment lined her face. “Another dead end,” she muttered. “I guess you don’t know anything either.”

“Sorry,” Dark Rain said plainly. “In my day, thieves were just thieves. We competed against each other, but not in any organized league.”

Tessa pulled out another folder and looked over her papers. “I’ve talked to other prisoners across the country. You’ve done almost twelve years inside. If there is a league of thieves out there, is it logical to say that it’s only existed ten or less years?”

Dark Rain took a moment to think. “It’s possible,” he replied. “When I was out in the real world, I had connections that ran deep across the country. It’s unlikely that a league would have existed under my nose.”

“That’s what I hypothesized as well.”

Dark Rain stretched his neck for a moment. His chains shook heavily all over his body. “In solitary most of the time in here,” he said. “On top of that, my connections mostly ran around the

Midwest. If you want to information about thieves, go to California. There's a man named Silent Spectre in northern California. He's the one you should be talking to."

Tessa looked over another sheet of paper. She thumbed through her folders on notable thieves. "Found him," she said. She took a moment to read his history. "This Silent Spectre guy doesn't seem so special. It says he's served almost nine years of a ten year sentence. His record doesn't reflect anything unique."

"Trust me, Silent Spectre is the most dangerous man in any American prison," Dark said. "He might not look like much, but he's incredibly powerful. He might know about this league you're looking for."

"Have you met him?"

Dark Rain nodded. "I knew him when he was a rookie," he replied. "Back in my day, thievery was a different game. Killing

and stealing were basically intertwined with each other. All you needed to do was kill someone and steal something from their dead hands. Not only that, you would try to kill other thieves that competed against you.”

“Violent, but that seems logical,” Tessa said. “If the competition is eliminated, you have a better chance at success.”

“That’s what we used to think,” Dark said. “Eventually, people realized that killing was a counterproductive idea.”

“Why?”

“First of all, you could never get rid of all your competition,” Dark began. “Every following generation produced more and more thieves. Secondly, if you let everyone live, new concepts on how to steal would develop. We could basically learn from each other.”

“So thieves evolved,” Tessa noted. “Not bad for a bunch of criminals.”

“Silent Spectre is a different story,” Dark said. An uneasy sound filled his voice. “He didn’t care what era he was part of. He just killed everyone. In his first year, he murdered every fellow rookie thief he met. The only ones who survived were these two kids Marcus and Sally. Of course, that was over ten years ago.”

Tessa smiled. She had visited the right man. “I have a business proposition for you,” she said. “I’m trying to gather evidence against this league of thieves. I want you to work for me and hunt down every pro thief you can find. In exchange, I’ll get you out of this jail.”

Dark Rain’s face twitched. His interest instantly peaked. “Continue, please.”

“I want you to listen carefully to this offer,” Tessa said.

“Freedom in the outside world is just part of the deal. You’ll have to hunt down every thief you can find and give me every piece of info. If you can’t catch a thief, I want you put a bounty on them. That way I can assess which thieves are the most dangerous.”

“You want me to be a bounty hunter?”

“Sure, if that’s what you want to be called,” Tessa replied.

“Will I be working with the police?” Dark asked.

“Not exactly,” Tessa said. “I want you to work the Midwest region of the country. I already know that Chicago and Detroit are hotspots for thieves.”

“I know both cities very well,” Dark said.

“Times have changed since you’ve been out,” Tessa said.

“You’ll need to catch up.”

“I suggest that you also offer this deal to Silent Spectre as well,” Dark said. “He’s probably more qualified than me.”

“I don’t need a killer, I need evidence,” Tessa said. “If he murders everyone, I get nothing.”

Dark chuckled. His laughter made his body convulse and his chains rattle. “If you want to uncover this league, Spectre is the best man for the job. Thieves will tell you anything you want if Spectre is involved. On top of that, he can handle the California region easily.”

Tessa had trouble believing it. “Will he follow orders?”

“For the right incentive, he’ll obey,” Dark said.

“Good,” Tessa replied. “Look, I want you to keep a low profile when you’re out. Outside of the prison, you can do anything that’s legal. Emphasis on the legal.”

“I can accept that,” Dark said.

“I’ll want daily progress reports,” Tessa added. “I want every detail, no matter how small. I want to know everything about this league.”

Dark Rain nodded. “Consider it done, Agent Narini.”

Chapter 14

Another week, another score. The Chicago Ballers continued to grind through the season with this mentality. The weeks passed by, quickly without any regard for rest. In the past month, the team had traveled to Dallas, Phoenix, and Cleveland. They competed against relatively lesser teams and had little trouble stealing their targets. Ronald Dorf, the team owner profited the most from their success. The current Ballers had stolen more than any other previous roster since the inception of the league.

Emerson and Boden's development contributed the most to the team. Of course, Rose's abilities as the exit thief anchored the team to safety quite often. The rest of the league reluctantly took notice. The other cities had never seen a team with three rookies take part in such success. The top five teams consisted of the Detroit Demons in first, followed by the Chicago Ballers, the

LA Showtimers, the New York Knights, and finally the Chicago Razorbacks in fifth place. These five teams were all in contention for a top seed in the playoffs.

The Ballers went directly to the Hotel Mango after their flight landed from Cleveland. The continuous traveling heavily drained their endurance and stamina. The All-Stud break was in a couple weeks which meant they had an entire week of rest to look forward to. As the team walked into the lobby, Phyllis saw a black envelope on the front counter. She picked it up and examined it. It was addressed to Emerson.

“A league notice,” Phyllis said. “Emerson, you have a letter.”

Emerson picked it up. “What’s this for?”

“I have an idea, but go ahead and open it,” Phyllis said.

Emerson shrugged and proceeded to open the envelope. He pulled out a small black piece of paper with white letters. The letter read:

The Grand Larceny League invites Emerson Jay of the Chicago Ballers to San Francisco where he will be honored as part of this year's All-Stud team. Formal attire is recommended for this event. A league representative will arrange for proper transportation. As a first year thief, the league recommends you leave behind any imbued items. Congratulations. We look forward to seeing you at the event.

"I'm an All-Stud," Emerson whispered. "I made the selection."

Phyllis smiled. "Congrats, kid. You deserve it."

Cort, Rose, and Boden clapped at the news.

"We knew you could do it."

"You're amazing, Emerson."

"Don't embarrass us while you're there."

Emerson laughed, accepting the praise. He was happy that the league noticed him. Still, there was an unfulfilled feeling inside of him. It was reminiscent of when he first became a professional thief. He wanted the recognition, but could hardly believe he had it.

"San Francisco," Emerson muttered. "Why did it have to be there?"

"The location for the All-Stud ceremony rotates every year," Phyllis said, unsure of the question. "It's San Fran's turn this year."

"I see," Emerson said. "I suppose if it's in the city it won't be a problem."

"Why does it say Emerson should leave behind his imbued item?" Rose asked.

"The league wants to prevent fights between thieves," Cort answered. "In a room full of competitive freaks, someone could get hurt."

"I should have been voted in," Boden grunted, looking over the black letter. "I put up ideas and plans for the team. Emerson just beat people up."

"What about me?" Rose asked. "My driving skills are top tier. You guys would have died a long time ago without me."

"Don't forget your coach," Phyllis said. "I had to put up with so much with you rookies."

The team continued to argue with each other over whose contributions were the most important. Emerson walked away from the hotel lobby quietly. He rode the elevator to his floor. When the elevator doors opened, he saw a small person standing in front of him.

“Mr. Dorf?” Emerson said. “You’re here.”

Ronald Dorf stood at the elevator door with his hands folded. He wore a pair of slacks and a blue sweater. “Hello, Emerson,” he said softly. Ronald’s childlike appearance always surprised Emerson. The team owner had so much money and power, but he was less than five feet tall.

“The league informed me about your All-Stud selection,” Ronald said. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Emerson said. “Without your help, I wouldn’t even be in the league.”

Ronald smiled. "I didn't do much," he said. "Your hard work and talent impressed a lot of people."

"Am I the first All-Stud ever on your team?"

"The second," Ronald replied.

"Who was the first?"

"Me," Ronald replied. "In year one, I was the lead thief of the team. I couldn't find anyone else to do the job, so I had to do it. Back then, I was one of the top three thieves in the country."

"Wow," Emerson said. "What was it like being an All-Stud?"

"It's a mixed bag," Ronald replied. "Especially the first time. You're happy that you were selected, but the feeling soon passes. Not every All-Stud is created equal. Some are one hit wonders, and others are true champions. Once you're in that room, you'll instantly feel the difference."

Emerson rubbed his chin. "I love being a pro thief; it's exactly what I always wanted to do. But I never thought I would get to this level so quickly. Even though I haven't won a championship, I'm worried that I'll lose sight of my goals. I'm worried that success in the present will take away from my future."

"It happens," Ronald said plainly. "Success, fame, money can all make a good thief into a bad one. But you shouldn't limit yourself. You should go beyond the standards of other people and create your own definition of success. It's all you can do anyway."

Emerson smiled. His boss was right. To become great, he needed to go beyond the standards and create his own.

"Well, I got what I wanted," Emerson said. "Now I just have to see what happens."

Ronald nodded. "Emerson, there is one more thing I wanted to tell you. The Los Angeles Showtimers offered me a deal. They offered me 2 million in cash for you."

"For me?" Emerson said, completely shocked. "I don't understand. I'm already under your contract."

"Yes, but they wanted you to join their team," Ronald replied. "Because you're not under a long term deal, they can sign you. Of course, that's if I decide I want to release the rights to your contract. The trade deadline for the league is at the end of the All-Star break. I have until then to decide."

Emerson didn't realize that trades were possible. Thieves, much like money, seemed to be commodities. And commodities can always be dealt.

"So what's your decision?" Emerson asked.

“Their offer was quite strange,” Ronald said, almost ignoring the question. “They first offered me \$500,000. When I declined, they raised it to two million. They really want you on their team.”

“Two million is a lot,” Emerson noted. “Especially since I’m being paid nothing.”

Ronald grinned. “Indeed. However, it might be worth keeping you on the team.”

Emerson scratched his head. “Is this some kind of trick?” he asked. “Do you want me to sign with you again?”

“I do,” Ronald said, “but for a certain amount of money. We can discuss it more at the end of the season. For now, you should enjoy the break.”

Three weeks later.

Emerson's flight landed at San Francisco Airport promptly and swiftly. Emerson was taken by limo to his bay area hotel. He had about three hours until the All-Stud ceremony started, and nothing to do until then. The league had warned him not to bring his imbued shoes, but he did so anyway. He wanted to keep it safe, especially in an unknown city.

Inside his room, Emerson heard a rapping at the door. He wasn't expecting anyone. He casually walked to the door and opened it. In front of Emerson stood the last person in the world he wanted to see.

"Oh no," Emerson groaned. "How did you know I was here?"

A young girl with strawberry blond hair smiled at Emerson. She looked up at him with green eyes and a familiar face. She had a calming beauty, subtle and comforting. Her presence instantly made the rest of the room fade away.

“My dad told me,” the girl replied. “I knew you’d avoid me so I came here.”

“Marissa,” Emerson said softly. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I belong here more than you do,” Marissa said back. “My school is half an hour from here.”

It was true; Stanford University was located less than twenty five miles away. Marissa Simmons was in her freshman year at the school. She was seventeen years old, a full year younger than most of the college freshmen across the country. She had known Emerson all her life.

“Just let me in the room,” Marissa said. “You can’t keep me out forever.”

“I can lock you out.”

“I already have a key.”

“I’ll call hotel security.”

“They won’t listen to a thief.”

Emerson sighed. “I knew coming here would be bad.”

Marissa patted Emerson on the head. “I do what I want,” she said. “Not much you can do about it.”

Emerson stared blankly as Marissa walked into his hotel room. She hopped onto the bed and looked around.

“Nice digs,” Marissa remarked. “The GLL really takes care of its stars.”

“You mean studs,” Emerson corrected.

“Right,” Marissa said. “I hear the ceremony is pretty boring. You’re probably better off not going. Just hang out with me for the weekend.”

“No thanks,” Emerson replied. “This is my first All-Stud appearance. I have to go.”

“There will be others,” Marissa said. “You’ll have other chances.”

“The first ones are always the most important,” Emerson said. “That includes All-Stud appearances.”

Marissa grinned. “I guess you’re right,” she said. “My dad says you shouldn’t have made the team this year. He said it’s too soon for you.”

Emerson shrugged. He lay down on the bed beside Marissa. “To be honest, I think I got lucky. Boden is just important to the team as I am. The league could have just as easily voted him in.”

“He’s good,” Marissa remarked, “for a dead soldier. Records say he shouldn’t be alive.”

“I’ve heard,” Emerson said. “I wanted to ask about it, but there’s no point. Boden’s my teammate. As long as he’s a good thief, that’s all that matters.”

“You should have joined the Razorbacks,” Marissa said.

“They actually spend money on their players. You’re getting paid zero dollars this season.”

Emerson laughed. “Looking back, I had no idea what I was doing. I was just happy to be on a team. But it’s not like I’m disappointed. We’re doing well.”

“You forgot to thank me by the way,” Marissa said. “I sent Roger Bryant to you help, remember? If I didn’t send him to you, the Ballers wouldn’t have gotten that huge score.”

Emerson nodded. Marissa was the one who informed Roger about the Silver Tomb job. Without Roger, they would have never have found the silver coffin.

“How did you know about Roger anyway?” Emerson asked.

“He’s a great guy. He’d make an awesome thief.”

“My dad knows his dad,” Marissa said. “They run in the same circles.”

Emerson remembered that Roger’s father was a professional treasure hunter. Roger was working hard to join his team.

Marissa stretched out her arms on the bed sheets. “I’m starting to get hungry. If you had some money, you could buy me dinner.”

Emerson frowned. “Buy it yourself.”

“All I’ve been eating is the food at Stanford,” Marissa said. “It’s actually not too bad. We’ve had lobster and steak a few times this semester.”

“I see.”

“You should have just gone to college,” Marissa said, yawning. “You’re going to get killed as a thief.”

“Winning a championship is my dream,” Emerson said. “I’d rather risk my life trying to accomplish something than do nothing at school.”

“It’s a dream for a lot of other people,” Marissa said. “Some thieves never end up winning. Do you really think you can do it?”

“I do,” Emerson said, “and I will.”

“Then do it in a few years,” Marissa said. “You’re young, you have time. You can make money later.”

“The time is now. It’s not about the money for me. All I want is glory.”

Marissa shook her head. “It’s still the same thing,” she said. “Your desire for success will consume you. A dream like yours can only end up in crushed hopes and shattered expectations. Your dream might not include money, but it’s still a form of greed. That kind of greed can only hurt you.”

Emerson sat up on the bed. "You're right," he replied. "But I'm a thief. Even if I end up stealing from myself, I can't hesitate. I set out to accomplish something, and I won't stop until I do."

Marissa looked up at Emerson. "What about us?" she asked. "What about our future together? Every moment you're out there, you're losing another chance to be with me."

Emerson sighed. "Your dad won't let us be together until I earn his respect. If I can win a championship, he'll have to acknowledge me. He won't have a choice."

"Winning won't solve everything," Marissa argued. "By the time you win a title, I might be in love with someone else. What then?"

"Then I'll win you back too," Emerson answered. "I'm not afraid of competition."

“You know nothing about women,” Marissa muttered. “A woman’s heart isn’t something that can be won over so easily.”

“And the dreams of men don’t go away so easily. My ambition is just too heavy.”

Marissa slowly stood up from the bed. “While you’re in San Francisco, you should be careful,” she said, lowering her voice. “There are rumors of an internal investigation in the police department. They might not be able to protect you while you’re here. Use the shoes if you have to.”

“Good to know,” Emerson said. He saw Marissa head to the door. “You know, I still have a few hours to kill. We can go do something, if you want.”

Marissa flashed him a smile. “No thanks,” she said. “We’ll wait to do something until you can afford to buy me dinner.”

Hours later, a personal driver arrived at the hotel to pick Emerson up. Emerson was escorted north on Bayshore Freeway towards the Richmond District of San Francisco. The city atmosphere seemed so foreign to Emerson, so completely different than Chicago. The climate, the ocean shoreline, and the urban neighborhoods displayed a different world to him. San Francisco seemed like a bright new city compared to Chicago. As the sun was setting, Emerson realized that every city seemed to have a different feel. Everything from the sunlight to the air seemed so unique to each city. Part of him wondered what it would have been like to be thief in San Francisco or any other city. How different would his life be right now?

Emerson's driver took to towards the coast. A salty breeze passed by as Emerson opened the window. Up ahead, he saw a building made out of glass and white painted wood. He looked to the limo driver.

“You sure this is the place?”

The driver looked down at a white invitation card. Emerson noticed it wasn't the usual black stationary the league uses. “The letter I got says this is the spot, guy,” the limo driver replied. “You know how the GLL works. They like secret meetings in the dark.”

Emerson stepped out of the car and headed towards the building. The large white building was set up on a grassy hill. Flowers and trees started to come up as he strolled on up. Past a small hill, he saw a wooden sign planted in the ground.

“The Conservatory of Flowers of Golden Gate Park,” Emerson said, reading the sign. “Is this where the ceremony is supposed to be?”

Emerson cautiously opened the front door. Inside, he saw a dozens of bright floral arrangements decorated across the atrium. In the center of the hall, he saw a group of people

standing around a table. Unsure how to approach, Emerson slowly walked down the atrium.

“Emerson!”

Emerson turned around. Ken Koala, the star rookie from the Chicago Razorbacks greeted him energetically.

“Been a while, Ken,” Emerson said, smiling. “You made the team, too?”

“You know it,” Ken said, winking slyly. His black hair spikes had lengthened since they had last met. “It looks like we’re the only two All-Stud rookies. Everyone else has at least three years in the league.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of intimidating,” Emerson remarked. “So I heard that you took on the Magician and his team a month ago. What was that like?”

“That guy is a real pro,” Ken replied. His voice had a slight aversion to it. “I couldn’t beat him. He’s stronger than I expected.”

“But Scoreline said you held him off. You must have done fairly well against him.”

“Yeah, but the media never tells the whole truth,” Ken pointed out. “Marcus is incredible. He might be the most powerful man in the league.”

Emerson raised an eyebrow. It was a bold statement.

“Two weeks ago, we took on Sally Saga’s team as well,” Ken added. “We actually did okay. I think Marcus is the stronger fighter, but Sally might be the better thief.”

“Interesting. I’ll have to take them on sometime.”

“It wasn’t on Scoreline, but I heard you defeated Frida Calhoun, the glass queen,” Ken said. “That couldn’t have been easy.”

“She’s tough,” Emerson admitted. “It’s possible that she’s stronger than me, but I still won.”

“Most of the All-Studs actually haven’t arrived yet,” Ken said. “We’ve just been waiting.”

“What about Marcus and Sally?”

“No sign of them,” Ken replied. “My coach said the veteran All-Studs tend to show up late. I’m guessing they don’t really care.”

“Or they just want to look cool,” Emerson said.

“Come on, let’s go meet the rest of the team.”

Emerson followed Ken’s lead. Three other people were sitting down at a large dining table covered with flowers.

A woman with curly brown hair sat the end of the table. “The flowers are nice, but it’s a little too much,” she said. She wore a bright shirt with a red flame across the chest. “It smells like a jungle in here.”

“Where is everyone?” said a middle aged man with long silvery hair. “If I knew all the vets were going to come late, I would have done the same.”

Next to him, a short man with a black tattoo of a diamond on his cheek waved his hand. “Calm down,” he said in a rusty voice. “We’re still All-Studs. Even if the Scions don’t respect us, the rest of the league knows our power.”

Emerson cleared his throat. “Hi, I’m Emerson from Chicago. Who are you guys?”

The three thieves turned their heads. They looked up and down over Emerson. Their eyes quietly measured his appearance.

“So you’re the Chicago kid that’s been killing us in the rankings,” the woman said. “I’m Carrie Lebeau. I work for the Phoenix Foxes.”

The man with silver hair saluted Emerson. “The name’s Howard, Philadelphia Fangers.”

The face tattooed man lifted his head. “Jackson, entry man for the Cleveland Vagabonds.”

It was the first time Emerson was meeting these thieves. He loved spending time with his teammates, but it was interesting to meet with his competition. These three thieves were among the elite players of the league.

“There’s one more guy, Luke from Dallas,” Carrie said. “He’s somewhere in the bathroom.”

“Are you guys first time All-Studs?” Emerson asked.

They all nodded.

“Even though we’re supposed to be the league’s best, it looks like we’re still second rate,” Howard said flatly. “Not every thief here is considered to be on the same level.”

“Why are we in a garden?” Emerson asked. “I thought we’d be in a banquet hall or something.”

Carrie laughed. “We’re pro thieves, kid. We can’t be acknowledged in public.”

Jackson nodded. “This place is good enough,” he said in a low voice. “I just want the food to come out. The catering staff still hasn’t arrived.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of weird,” Ken said. He took off his leather jacket. “We’ve been here for half an hour and no one has come to start the ceremony.”

“The league is usually punctual,” Howard said. “I’m not sure why we haven’t started.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Carrie said. She pointed at Emerson. “People say you took down Frida. Is that true?”

Emerson smirked. “Maybe it was me.”

“If you did, then good job,” Carrie said. “A lot of these veteran thieves pretend to own the league. It’s good to see some new blood around the GLL.”

“Marcus and Sally are worse,” Howard muttered. “You can’t even touch them. They’re treated like royalty.”

“The Demons are in first place, I’d say they’re the toughest,” Jackson remarked. He then sharpened his eyes at Emerson.

“Then there are the Ballers.”

Emerson shrugged. “We’re pretty good, but there’s still the second half of the season. Our schedule will probably get harder.”

“Once spring comes, traveling will be easier,” Jackson said. “The rankings may change in ways unforeseen.”

“I just want my team to make the playoffs,” Carrie said. “We’re hanging on to the eighth spot by only a few thousand.”

“Be thankful you’re not in the bottom half,” Jackson said. “The lower ranked teams are all competing to take our spots.”

“I feel bad for the San Fran team,” Carrie said, leaning back in her chair. “They’re so wet behind the ears it’s not even funny. They can barely afford to be in the league.”

“They’ll improve,” Howard said. “This is a warm weather city with a diverse economy. I can see them developing into a playoff team in the future.”

“I don’t see it,” Carrie said. “It’s too hard to compete with the top teams doing so well. They’ll get trapped in these spin cycles of losing. It’ll be hard for them to contend for a playoff spot.”

“How do the playoffs even work?” Emerson asked. “Can we choose what city to steal from?”

Howard snickered. “You don’t know?”

Jackson shook his head. “And this guy is in second place.”

“The top eight teams enter a playoff tournament,” Carrie explained. “The top four teams pair up with the bottom four. They battle head to head in the city belonging to the higher seeded team. The league assigns the target for each pairing.”

“Sounds fun,” Emerson said.

“My team is ninth,” Howard said, “at the moment. We still have a solid chance of making the playoffs.”

“Luke’s team used to be seventh, until the Showtimers mugged them last week,” Carrie said. “Speaking of Luke, where is he? He’s been in the bathroom since we got here.”

Jackson stood up. “Something’s not right. I thought this feeling would go away, but no one else is here.”

The thieves looked around the flower decorated hall. The sound of their breathing created small echoes across the area.

“What’s happening?” Ken whispered.

Emerson motioned everyone to be quiet. He walked silently to the other side of the forum. He turned a corner and headed towards the bathroom. When he reached the door, he saw a

body on the white tiled floor. It was Luke from the Detroit Blue Blades.

Emerson ran over and grabbed Luke by the shoulders. "Hey, are you okay?"

Luke had heavy gash on his forehead, blood seeping out. "Run," he gasped. "He's here."

"Who is here?"

"Silent Spectre," Luke whispered. "He's going to kill us all."

Emerson turned around. At the rear exit door, a figure dressed in green silk sat on a plastic chair. On his head, he wore a black helmet with a visor covering his eyes. A heavy trench coat wrapped around his body. The unknown man said nothing.

"Did you do this to him?" Emerson demanded. "Who are you?"

The other All-Studs came after Emerson. They saw Luke's ravaged body and helped him up. Jackson and Howard noticed the man near the exit.

"Is he the guy who attacked Luke?" Jackson asked.

"Looks like it," Emerson replied. "But he's not talking. I'm not sure what he wants."

Howard tied back his long silver hair. "If this fool thinks he can kill us, he's seriously mistaken." He dashed towards the unknown man.

"Howard, wait!" Jackson shouted.

Howard rushed the unknown man, charging in directly. In a blur, the stranger got up and swiped his hand across Howard's body. Howard trembled for a moment, then streams of blood surged from his chest. He hit the floor clutching his wounds.

"Impossible," Emerson murmured.

“What do you want?” Carrie screamed. “Who are you?”

The man in the cape knelt down and put one finger in a pool of Howard’s blood. He went over to the wall and wrote “SS” in blood.

“Silent Spectre,” Jackson gasped. “I thought he was in jail.”

“Who is this guy?” Emerson asked Jackson.

“A remnant of the past,” Jackson answered. “Ten years ago, this guy used to be a thief. He’s also a mute. We shouldn’t expect any answers from him.”

“He must have been waiting for us,” Ken realized. “This wasn’t on the fly, he planned this out.”

“Luke needs a doctor,” Carrie said, her voice shaking. “He could die if we don’t get him out of here. Same with Howard.”

Jackson stepped in between Emerson and Ken. "All of you can leave," he said firmly. "I'll do you a favor and take on Spectre. You're not needed here."

Emerson and Ken both instantly scowled.

"Spectre is mine," Emerson grunted. "I was here first."

"I'm the strongest here," Ken snapped. "This is my fight."

Jackson shook his head. "Look, I've been in the league for five years. You rookies don't have the battle experience. I'll handle this one."

Emerson, Ken, and Jackson continued arguing who was to fight Spectre while Carrie tended to Luke's wounds.

"Weakness. Too much weakness."

Emerson and the other All-Studs stopped talking. The Silent Spectre had said something.

“The generation of today is falling apart,” Spectre’s raspy voice said. “There is no hope for the thieves of new. Your limitations disgust me to the core. I don’t care if I return to prison; I will end all of your lives tonight.”

Emerson blinked. “I thought you said he couldn’t talk, Jackson.”

“That’s what I was told,” Jackson whispered. “I wish it was true.”

“We can take him together,” Ken said. “That’s the only way we’ll survive.”

“Fine by me,” Jackson replied. He widened his stance.

“All right,” Emerson said quickly, “but I go first!”

Before Ken and Jackson could protest, Emerson jumped straight at Silent Spectre. He aimed his shining green shoes at Spectre’s body.

“Idiot,” Jackson growled. “He just went in directly.”

Silent Spectre side stepped the attack, letting Emerson hit the opposing wall. Emerson jumped back onto the floor and picked up Howard’s injured body. He leaped back over to the other All-Studs.

“Someone take care of Howard!” Emerson shouted.

“You brought your imbued item,” Jackson remarked. “So did I.”

Jackson reached over to his waist, grabbing his white leather belt. He unbuckled it and loosened it by five notches. Suddenly, his entire body started to expand. His body’s frame increased, his muscles widening and bulging. His white belt expanded a long with him. His body had increased tenfold, changing him into a twenty foot giant.

“Whoa,” Emerson gasped. “Big belt, big guy.”

Jackson's colossal body could barely fit inside the floral garden. He threw a long armed punch at Spectre.

"Big body, big target," Spectre whispered.

Silent Spectre easily dodged the large fist and jammed his elbow into Jackson's midsection. Jackson cried out from the hit. Spectre then grabbed a handful of flowers and threw them into Jackson's eyes, blinding him. Spectre jumped into the air to reach Jackson's elevated head. Spectre spun in the air and then kneed him in the face. Jackson was sent crashing into the wall. The conservatory buckled under Jackson's gigantic body.

"My turn," Ken said. He reached behind Emerson and knocked over a vase of flowers. Behind it was Ken's signature wooden barrel. Emerson remembered that an infinite amount of objects could be fit into the imbued barrel. Ken had hidden it among the flowers in case of an emergency.

“Do you have a tank in there?” Emerson asked. “I’m pretty sure that’s the only thing that can stop this guy.”

“Maybe next time,” Ken said grinning. He pointed the open end at Spectre and tapped the side of the barrel twice. “Koala Barrel, release.”

The wooden barrel vibrated with a deep pulse. A second later, a massive stream of water blasted out of the barrel. A thousand gallons of water poured out with fierce power. Even Spectre was slightly surprised.

“Where did you get all that water?” Emerson shouted over the sound of the rushing water.

“It’s from the ocean,” Ken yelled, trying to hold onto the barrel. “I probably got half of the Pacific in here!”

Silent Spectre widened his legs and reinforced his stance. He let the water run over him and took the attack. His dark coat

flapped around as the water poured onto him. He didn't budge at all.

"What a monster," Ken Koala whispered. "Even mountains would wear out from this attack."

Silent Spectre pushed through the water and threw his fist into the floor. His punch cracked the ground and created a massive hole. The water started moving into the hole in the floor, avoiding Silent Spectre. Emerson was astonished.

"I don't believe it," Emerson muttered. "His strength is godlike."

Spectre wiped water off his mask. "How foolish," he rasped, "comparing me to a mere god."

The water from Ken's barrel stopped flowing, finally running out. Ken and Emerson were both left frightened from what they

saw. Jackson's giant body was unconscious. Howard and Luke were losing life by the second.

"I really didn't want to have to do this," Carrie sighed, brushing back her curly hair. "This was supposed to be a relaxing weekend."

Emerson and Ken both looked over to Carrie. They had forgotten about her.

"What is she doing?" Emerson muttered.

Carrie Lebeau reached into her jacket and revealed a bouquet of flowers. She pulled out a bright red flower and pointed the flower straight at Silent Spectre. Carrie blew heavily on the flower and blazing flames erupted from the petals. The fire caught Spectre's coat, lighting up his body. Spectre dropped to the ground, trying to put the flames out.

"I got you now," Carrie snickered.

Out of the bouquet, she pulled out another flower, this time a cactus flower with spikes covering the exterior. She blew on it and dozens of red spikes were sent flying off. The needles were propelled at bullet speed, embedding into the walls of the building. Silent Spectre could barely follow the movement of the needles. Carrie blew on the cactus flower once more and a cluster of red needles struck Spectre's left leg, piercing his flesh.

“Spitting hot fire and cactus spikes,” Emerson said in disbelief. “I've never seen imbued items like those before.”

“She got him,” Ken said. “We can attack Spectre now.”

Without hesitation or sound, Silent Spectre grabbed the red needles and ripped them out of his leg muscles. Before the other thieves could attack, Spectre threw back the needles at Carrie, hitting her in the shoulder. She screamed loudly from the pain.

“Carrie!” Emerson yelled.

Emerson went to help her, but Spectre threw another needle into his back. Emerson hit the ground clutching at the needle. Ken ran over and pulled the needle out. Silent Spectre marched towards them, eager to end this battle. But before he could attack once more, the front door of the building swung wide open.

“Looks like we made it just in time.”

Marcus the Magician, wearing his bright yellow jacket with purple and white stripes, burst into the Conservatory of Flowers. A woman wearing a white cape stood beside him. She had a slender figure, sinewy and lean. She was observing the battle scene.

“So the Spectre is really back,” Sally Saga remarked. “What a crafty guy. He gave these first time All-Studs the wrong address and led them here.”

“Give it up, SS,” Marcus said firmly. “You can’t beat both us in your condition. This fight is over.”

Under his mask, Silent Spectre glared fiercely. He was outnumbered and outmatched—for now. He flung back his cloak and ran out towards the back entrance. Sprawled on the ground, Emerson sighed with relief when he saw Spectre running away.

Marcus ran over and helped Emerson sit up. “You all right, rookie?”

Emerson grinned. “No, I’m really not,” he replied. “But it’s nice you asked.”

Marcus chuckled. “Not a problem.”

“Luke and Howard need immediate medical attention,” Ken panted. “They might be dying.”

“They’ll be taken care of,” Marcus said. “The league will make sure they’re okay.”

“That Spectre guy was waiting for us,” Emerson said. “He had this whole thing planned.”

“The list for the All-Studs was leaked to the prison network,” Sally Saga explained. “Spectre must have hired fake drivers to pick you guys up. They delivered you to the wrong place.”

“He wanted to split us up,” Ken realized. “He figured he could capture the first time All-Studs by himself.”

“Spectre wasn’t playing around,” Emerson remarked. “That guy really wanted to kill us.”

“It’s worse than that,” Marcus said grimly. “GLL intelligence says he’s working for the government now. It was part of his deal to get out of jail.”

“What does that mean?” Emerson asked.

“It means no thief in this country is safe,” Marcus replied.

“Not while Silent Spectre is out there.”

Chapter 15

“I’m going out for a few hours,” Boden shouted from the lobby floor. He wasn’t sure if anyone heard him in the Hotel Mango, but he didn’t care. It was his first day off in ages and he was going to enjoy it. Boden put a warm pair of earmuffs and wrapped a sweater around his neck. It was a nice weekday afternoon in Chicago and the Ballers had the day off from the All-Stud Break. Emerson hadn’t returned yet from San Francisco and the rest of the Ballers were resting. The weather was changing every day and it was time for Boden to dress warmly. He brought along his purple guitar case, just in case he had to play with some people.

Boden walked out of the Hotel Mango and headed south. Although Boden had lived in Chicago for about a year, it still felt unfamiliar to him. Aside from the cold, Chicago was unique from the other cities he had lived in. Compared to New York or LA, the

pace of life was much slower and gave him a sense of peace despite the high rise buildings. Emerson had told him about McGee's Tavern on West Hubbard. He took the "L", or the elevated transit train on the red line near Jackson street.

Boden boarded the train and stared out of the window of the moving cars. It felt strange to be without Emerson and his team. Boden was a soldier, a natural warrior. Peaceful afternoons made him feel restless. Boden exited on Hubbard with his guitar case. He walked a few dozen yards and spotted McGee's sports pub. He hoped to catch a ball game and enjoy a quiet drink to himself.

Boden walked into McGee's, expecting it to be quiet during the afternoon. He saw a few people at the bar watching a sports pregame show. Boden walked into the small tavern and picked a small isolated seat in the corner. He looked around the dusty and dimly lit bar. He expected it to be better. He forgot

why Emerson recommended this place to him. He couldn't be sure, but something weird happened to Emerson here that he couldn't remember.

The customers at the bar had on black suits and were discussing business matters.

"Tessa Narini has way too much power over us," one man said. "We're cops, not workhorses. We should have freedom to investigate other cases. We're not built to be doing long term investigations like these."

"But crime is out of control in this city. We need a stopgap before it gets out of control. Someone needs to make a plan to catch these thieves."

"We're just cops," another said. "We can't make decisions like that."

Boden overheard the conversation from the bar. He pulled his winter hat a little further down over his face. Of all the places Emerson could recommend to him, it was a cop bar.

“We’re still doing repairs to our police headquarters because of that one incident,” one policeman said.

“My office is still wrecked from that time. I can’t believe we still don’t really know what happened back then.”

“Chief Thompson closed that case without briefing us at all. It was a ridiculous situation. I don’t want to talk about it.”

The cops continued to talk about police matters, raising their voices with every sentence. Boden wasn’t sure what to do. He could easily leave, but listening in on this conversation gave him some insight on how the police department worked. He decided to stay, hoping to hear something more about the inner workings of the Chicago police.

“The thieves are clearly being protected by someone,” the cop went on. “We have to find out how they’re avoiding us.”

“That doesn’t matter. We need to catch thieves so Tessa Narini will leave us alone. She won’t give up until we catch them. At least the ones in Chicago.”

The cop pulled out a thick white binder. The four-ring binder had hundreds of papers inside. The cop put it on the bar counter and opened it. He pointed to the section labeled “Chicago”.

“If we can get one of these thieves,” the cop said, “not only will we get promoted, but we should be eligible to get these bounty rewards. Tessa is really pushing for these bounties.”

Boden flinched. This was the first time he heard about any bounties. What was Tessa Narini thinking?

“We can become instant millionaires,” one cop said. “Forget cop salaries, we can get this money and set for life.”

Boden eyed the white binder on the counter. He needed to see what was inside. If there was information about himself or the other Ballers, that binder could be invaluable. There were only three cops at the counter. With his sword, he could easily take them down and grab the binder. Boden examined his surroundings carefully. There were a couple of customers at the side table. They were old men, drinking and debating about the mysteries of the universe. The only other customer was in the opposite corner from Boden. Shadows from the dim light covered him in the corner. Boden saw that he wore a sharp blue blazer, but could barely make out his physical features. It didn't matter; he needed to get that binder. Boden unclasped his guitar case and reached inside. He was about to make his move when the stranger in the blue suit jacket walked up and approached the counter.

“I’ll be taking that white binder,” the man said, in a low voice. “You can give it to me now.”

The cops gaped at him from the counter. Boden froze. Someone had beaten him to the counter.

“Do you know we are?” one policeman said. “We’re cops. I’m Lieutenant Davis. This is Sergeant Mills and Detective Sanders. You’re about one word from getting arrested, big guy. Back off.”

Under the barroom light, Boden could see the man much clearer. Boden could see he had a large muscular build. His arms were nearly bursting through his blue blazer. He had a head full of gray hairs, curly and cut short. The man towered over the cops. He didn’t care about getting arrested at all.

“Hand it over.”

Lieutenant Davis stood up and glared at the man. "You're one brazen fool, aren't you?" he said, sneering. "You're coming with me to the station. I'm going to enjoy seeing you locked up."

Davis pulled out a pair of handcuffs. He grabbed the man by the arm roughly and slapped the handcuffs on him. The man smiled. With his other hand, he reached over and tugged on a button on his blue suit jacket.

"Armor mode," the man whispered.

The man's blue suit jacket burst in a flash of light. The jacket changed, unfolding itself into a full suit of medieval knight armor. His whole body became covered in hard blue metal armor, shining brightly in the room. His head was covered in a helmet of solid metal. Blue spikes sprouted around the shoulder plates and heavy metal gauntlets covered his hands. The handcuffs snapped off his wrist and dropped to the floor. The cops' eyes widened and their jaws dropped.

“You’re the ‘Bluebird Knight’ Jimmy Robinson,” Detective Sanders gasped. “You work with Ken Koala!”

Lieutenant Davis shifted his eyes to the white binder. Jimmy Robinson was listed as a thief that worked in Chicago. On the street, Davis had heard about the Razorbacks and their thievery all across the city. There weren’t any investigations that yielded any proof, but everyone knew about the Razorbacks.

Still sitting on his barstool, Sergeant Mills reached for the gun inside his jacket. He cared less about words than his fellow cops. He un-holstered his gun and raised it at Jimmy Robinson. Before he could pull the trigger, a blur zoomed past the policemen. Mills looked at his hand. He still gripped the handle of the gun, but the barrel slid off and fell to the ground. The gun barrel had been sliced off without even seeing a blade.

Boden instantly appeared by Jimmy Robinson’s side. He held his blade firmly. He didn’t want to help Jimmy, or any other

opposing thief, but he wanted that white four-ring binder. Boden pulled off his ear-muffs and faced the policemen.

Detective Sanders recognized Boden's attack. "It's 'Shadow Blade' Boden Campbell," he whispered, panic filling his voice. "He destroyed the police station along with Emerson the Jumpstar!"

Boden raised an eyebrow. He didn't know that he had a nickname among the police. Lieutenant Davis raised his own gun and was about to pull on Boden. Jimmy reached out and launched his armored fist into Davis's face, sending him flying across the room. Before Mills could react, Boden spun and slashed Mills across the chest. He fell down and hit the floor in an instant.

Jimmy Robinson crossed his arms. His blue armor rustled and clanked as his arms moved. "You're in the way," he said to Boden in a low voice.

Boden stood up. He pointed his invisible blade at Jimmy. "This was my day off," he said. "You're lucky I helped you."

Jimmy stared at Boden through his helmet. "You're the Jumpstar's teammate," he murmured. "That idiot is your primary thief."

"And Ken Koala is yours," Boden said back. "If this was any other week, I'd be using this blade on you, Razorback."

"I'm here for the white binder book," Jimmy said. "It has all the information Tessa has been spreading across the Chicago police department. I was tracking these cops all day. They know about the league now. They're onto us."

Boden grimaced. He figured that Tessa Narini was making changes, but he didn't know to what extent. The power of the GLL lied in its protection from the police. If that was undermined, the GLL would crumble.

Boden then remembered something. "Where'd that white binder go?" he said.

Boden and Jimmy both blinked and turned around. There were only two wounded policemen left on the ground. The bar was empty, the customers and workers had left. In fact, Detective Sanders and the white binder book were gone as well.

"That other cop must have taken it," Jimmy realized. "He snuck out."

Boden dashed to the exit. Through the door window, he could see flashes of blue and red. He winced as the lights flashed into his eyes. Tire screeches and car engines filled the street leading to McGee's. Backup had arrived.

"This is the Chicago Police department," a static-filled voice blared over a speaker. "Bluebird Jimmy and Shadow Blade

Boden, come out with your hands up. Leave your weapons and come out before someone gets hurt.”

Boden scowled. Of all the days to get into a fight with the cops, it had to be on a day where he didn't even steal anything. He made a mental note to hit Emerson in the head for sending him here.

Jimmy's heavy armor rustled as he approached the exit door. “So we have more cops here,” he remarked. “Lucky us.”

Boden nodded. “I don't think we can get that book this time,” he said. “And I'd rather not fight another thief during the All-Stud break.”

Jimmy grinned. He knew where Boden was going.

“Let's show these cops the power of Chicago thieves,” Boden said to Jimmy. “Let's make them regret messing with the GLL's best fighters.”

Four police squads with almost a dozen police officers waited outside of McGee's tavern. They had their guns ready and loaded for the two thieves inside. Detective Sanders waited in one of the squad cars. He gripped the white book in his hands tightly until his fingers turned red. He was scared. He was just a regular detective; he didn't want to risk his life for this. Sweat started to come off his face. He prayed the thieves inside of McGee's would surrender peacefully.

Just then, the wooden door from the exit flew off its hinges and soared through the air. It flipped and rotated mid-air until it landed on one of the police cars. The windshield shattered and burst into a storm of glass. The cops pointed their guns at the exit. Bluebird Knight Jimmy walked through, not even close to raising his hands. He took a simple step and started approaching the police.

"Fire!" a lone cop voice screamed.

Jimmy snickered. They wouldn't even offer him a warning. He shrugged and kept on walking. Bullets erupted from the police guns, a swarm of hot metal and gun smoke filled the street. Jimmy's blue armor didn't even move. Bullets bounced off the hard metal and fell to the ground. Sparks and clanking sounds flew off the armor, but nothing else. The cops stopped firing to see if they actually did anything damage. Jimmy waved his arm through the gun smoke. Not a single dent was made on him.

Jimmy looked over his shoulder. "Your turn now, Boden."

From behind Jimmy's body, a silent blur zoomed past and went at the cops. The sound of sharp metal slicing the through the barrels of guns rang out. Boden's movement was too fast for the cops to even notice. He dashed in and sliced apart the guns. He got in close to the cops and began cutting them down.

Jimmy's role was to play defense, while Boden went hard on offense.

"Clear a path!" Boden shouted to Jimmy, swinging his sword.

"Get us out of here!"

Jimmy nodded. He ran through the middle and knocked down the cops near him. Though big and slow, Jimmy could hustle. His body was moving fast like a heavy cannonball, tossing the cops to the side like toys. Boden saw Detective Sanders in one of the cars. He was tempted to go after him, but there was no time. He needed to get back home to the Ballers.

"Next time," Boden muttered to himself. He sliced his blade into another cop and joined Jimmy. The two thieves ran out and went through the street. Their plan had worked.

“Thanks for the support,” Jimmy said through his helmet. “I never expected to help out a Baller this season. This game is always unpredictable.”

Boden grinned. “I agree. I didn’t think we’d meet for a while.”

“People fated to win will always meet on the road to the playoffs,” Jimmy said. His voice started to go flat. “Your team is second in the rankings. Mine is fifth. If we both keep on winning, we’ll have to fight in the playoffs.”

Boden looked back at Jimmy. He was serious. “Let’s have that fight when we’re both going for the title. Only one of us can win it for Chicago. ”

The two secondary wing thieves gave each other a silent nod and went their separate ways. They retreated off into the shadows, happy to have made a connection between fellow

thieves. Between the Ballers and Razorbacks, Chicago was on the rise in the Grand Larceny League.

At the San Francisco Police Department headquarters, Tessa Narini walked down the hallway to an interrogation room. The police officers in the corridor all turned their backs, fearful of a conversation with the Treasury Agent. She entered a small room in the corner and turned on the lights.

“Spectre, what were you trying to pull?” Tessa demanded.

In the room, Silent Spectre stood in the far corner. His dark helmet covered his face, hiding any expression. He did not respond to Tessa.

“I wanted you to capture the thieves, not fight them,” Tessa said angrily. “You brought me no evidence, no proof. Now the pro thieves are going to be ready for you.”

Still no response.

Tessa tightened her face. She didn't understand Spectre at all. "Did you bring me anything?"

Silent Spectre handed Tessa a manila folder. She opened it up. Inside, photographs of eight All-Stud thieves were inside. On the back of each picture, there were written numbers.

"Are these the suggested bounties for each thief?" Tessa asked.

Spectre nodded.

Tessa looked over each photograph. She didn't recognize any of the faces.

"Ken Koala from Chicago," Tessa read quietly. "You think he's worth a \$950,000 reward? That's a lot for a kid."

Spectre motioned for Tessa to continue. She flipped through the pictures and looked over the bounty numbers.

“These will be useful,” Tessa said. “I’ll post these around the country. The police haven’t been that useful lately, but these bounties will help. I might be able to catch these thieves faster than I had hoped.”

Spectre nodded. The information that he provided was definitely useful for the government. The bounties would become public information, putting more pressure and attention on the pro thieves.

Tessa put down the folder. “Look, I don’t want you to kill anyone, Spectre. That’s absolutely against our agreement. They can be half dead or ninety-nine percent dead, but I want them alive.”

Spectre shrugged.

“I need these thieves to confess to stealing for the league,” Tessa added. “Once that happens, the government will issue a

nation-wide hunt for these thieves. I could end this era of thievery with only a handful of arrests. On top of that, I can purge the corruption of the police. To do all of this, I need you on board."

Instead of saying anything, Silent Spectre handed Tessa another picture. At first she was surprised, but then noticed a familiar face.

"Emerson Jay," Tessa murmured. She remembered him vividly. "I'll put him a little higher than I normally would. I want this kid to get caught as soon as possible."

Silent Spectre pointed to the map on the desk. "East," he rasped. "The east coast is not my territory. Nor is it Dark Rain's. We need another."

Tessa looked at the eastern part of the country. It was true; she didn't have a lot of information on the major cities like New

York or Boston. Even after all of her traveling, the country was still too much to cover.

“Hax Money,” Spectre hissed through his helmet. “Hax Money is the one to handle the east. He is strong. He can handle the GLL thieves easily.”

“I’m not sure,” Tessa said. She wanted more manpower, but she had doubts about working with convicts. Spectre was already becoming hard to manage. “What makes this Hax Money so special?”

“Hax is more than just a convict,” Spectre rasped. “He was a dirty cop. He used to steal along with the thieves in Boston. Hax Money is the one you need.”

Tessa was convinced. She glanced over at Emerson’s photo again. All she needed was a little bit more and the league would be hers.

Chapter 16

“You’re lucky to be alive,” Cort said. “Most people would have died after seeing Spectre.”

Emerson chuckled at the statement. “Silent Spectre’s not that bad. He’s a little scary but I think he’s beatable.”

Phyllis shook her head. “Spectre is one the deadliest criminals ever,” she said. “It would take at least four full teams of thieves to kill him. It would take even more to capture him alive.”

Earlier in the day, Emerson had flown back to Chicago. The Grand Larceny League ordered him to go back to his home city for safety. After Silent Spectre had crashed the All-Stud ceremony, there wasn’t any time to waste. Emerson went straight to the Hotel Mango and explained the situation to his teammates. Cort and Phyllis were already aware of the situation from Ronald.

“The scary part is that there is another prisoner like Spectre,” Cort said. “Scoreline reports that Dark Rain is free as well. They’ve become glorified bounty hunters.”

“The media is calling them the Convict Cowboys,” Phyllis said, sitting down in a chair. “The name is appropriate, considering they’re basically jailhouse killers.”

“Who are these guys?” Emerson asked. “I know that the government hired them, but what’s their background?”

“They’re pre-Crash criminals,” Cort answered. “Before the black market crash, both held great power in the underworld. It was during a time with no rules, no help from the cops, and no mercy. Dark Rain worked in the Midwest, spending most of his career as a crime boss. Spectre is just a brawler. All we know is that he’s a psychotic killer, not much else.”

“Both of them were locked up at some point,” Phyllis said.

“From what we’ve heard, Tessa Narini was responsible for freeing them. She’s become quite dangerous to our league.”

Emerson scratched his head. “I don’t get it,” he said. “What does she expect from freeing those guys?”

“Tessa’s trying to gather evidence,” Phyllis said. “If she can capture enough thieves, they’ll confess the details about the league. It’ll ruin us.”

“It’ll also turn over the police departments across the country,” Cort said. “We need to remain connected with police to operate. If Tessa reveals that connection, everyone will go down.”

“I don’t want that to happen,” Emerson said plainly. “At least not until I win a title.”

“Agreed,” Phyllis said. “We’ll all be spending time in a jail cell if Tessa succeeds.”

From the lobby, the automatic glass door opened up with a bell ding. From the entrance, Boden walked into the lobby and joined his teammates. His clothes had rips and tears all over. He hoisted his guitar case over his shoulder and approached the team.

“So you’re alive,” Boden said to Emerson. “I heard about the fight at the All-Stud ceremony. I’m glad you didn’t get killed.”

Emerson shrugged. “I won’t die from just that. Next time, I’ll take Silent Spectre down myself.”

Boden smiled. He was happy that Emerson was still in good spirits. Times were changing and becoming more dangerous.

“We have a problem,” he said. “The cops are aware of us. Tessa Narini seems to have put bounties on thieves in the GLL.”

Phyllis tightened her face. “Bounties? How do you know this, Boden?”

“I ran into some cops in South side,” Boden answered. “They have information on us. Tessa Narini has control over the police all across the country. She’s pushing hard to get us all caught.”

Cort rubbed his beard. He turned and looked at the map on the wall. Agent Narini had been busy this season. “This isn’t good,” he murmured to himself. “With the playoffs almost here, the stakes are higher. The league is not safe anymore.”

Boden pulled up a chair in the lobby. “We need to cancel the rest of the season,” he said curtly. “We should lay low until the GLL can stop Tessa Narini.”

Phyllis jerked her head at Boden. “Not an option,” she said sharply. “We won’t be doing that.”

Boden shrugged. “I don’t want to give up either,” he said simply. “However, if we keep on stealing, we will get caught. That much is obvious. Unless the GLL has someone higher up than Tessa Narini in the government, we need to change our plans.”

“There is someone,” Phyllis said softly. She looked to Cort. “There’s the Commissioner.”

Cort sighed. It had been a while since they mentioned that name. In past years, they never had to talk about the Commissioner because none of the thieves cared enough to ask. This season brought about a lot of changes, good and bad.

“I hate to interrupt, but who is the Commissioner?” Rose asked. “We never were told about him.”

Cort rubbed his neck. "As implied, the Commish is the head of the league. He's the absolute authority of the Grand Larceny League. Ten years ago, he was responsible for creating the league; it was his idea. It may seem strange to the present day thieves, but there was a point where the league was just a concept in someone's head. The Commissioner is responsible for creating the league and all its rules. Everything has to go through him."

"And that's just the surface," Phyllis said. "No one outside of the league office has even seen the Commissioner. We never interact with him due to security reasons. The league does not want to risk anyone implicating the Commissioner. He controls the league from the shadows, manipulating everything that happens."

"Actually, I might know that guy," Emerson said, rubbing his chin. "I think I grew up next door to him."

Boden ignored Emerson's comment. "Does this so called Commissioner have a plan?"

"We can only hope that he does," Phyllis said. "He has some kind of sway over the government. Like we said, there's no contact between us and his office."

"So we just keep on stealing?" Boden asked. He had his doubts. He had seen firsthand what the police were willing to do to catch thieves. "We keep on traveling to other cities?"

"Our last week will be in New York," Phyllis said. She faced the entire team. "We're going to raid a TV studio."

Emerson popped a breath mint into his mouth. Boden scratched himself behind the ears. Rose perked up and sat attentively in front of Phyllis. Tessa Narini was a threat, but they still had the rest of the season to take care of.

"New York?" Rose said. "Why not stay here in Chicago?"

“We have info that Tessa Narini will be in the city,” Cort replied. “We want to stay far away from her. Chicago is not safe for any pro thief this week.”

“The Razorbacks are doing the same,” Phyllis added. “If we can avoid Agent Narini until the playoffs, we’ll be safe.”

“But we’ll be in the territory of the Knights,” Boden pointed out. “You want us to challenge Sally Saga’s team.”

Phyllis nodded. “I do,” she confirmed. “This week will be a good litmus test of our abilities. Plus, if we can outperform the Knights this week, we might be able to hurt their ranking.”

“This one will be tough, guys,” Cort warned the team. “Along with the Showtimers, the New York Knights are part of the Double Dynasties; they’re only two GLL teams that have won multiple and consecutive championships. Sally Saga is the main

reason for the Knights' success. She might be slipping out of her prime, but her team is still solid."

Emerson jumped up from his chair. "We can beat them," he said. "The regular season doesn't matter to me, but I want to do better than the Showtimers and Knights. They'll have to acknowledge us as a threat in the post season."

Cort motioned for Emerson to sit down. "Believe me, if we can stay in the top four, life will be much easier," he said. "Let's just hope we don't drop any further."

"What exactly are we stealing?" Boden asked. "TV cameras?"

"Among other things, yes," Phyllis replied. "We're going to Times Square in New York City. PBC studios has just renovated and revamped their main television studio. The studio is stacked with cutting edge technology. On the side, we can also steal

some footage of random TV shows and programs. This might be the biggest score we have this year.”

“Get some sleep,” Cort said. “We have an early flight tomorrow.”

Before Emerson left the lobby, Phyllis tapped him on the shoulder. She had something to give him.

“A parcel from California came in for you,” Phyllis told Emerson. “Arrived here this morning.”

“Is it from the league?” Emerson asked.

“Doesn’t look like it,” Phyllis replied. She picked up a white rectangular box from the counter. “Anything from the GLL comes in from their New York office and in a black package. I think this is a personal item.”

Emerson took the box. “Thanks,” he said with a hint of apprehension. Not many people knew Emerson was staying at

the Mango. With a little anticipation, he headed back to his room on the seventeenth floor.

In the lobby, Boden stayed behind. Cort and Phyllis were making a strategy for the upcoming week against the Knights. He was surprised that Emerson and Rose were so relaxed about Tessa Narini. They didn't even question Phyllis about how to avoid getting caught. Unlike them, Boden had a few more concerns.

"Phyllis, will we really be safe this week?" Boden asked. "I want your honest opinion."

Phyllis looked at Boden's face. She could see the doubt in his eyes. She wanted to reassure him, but Boden would be able to see through any fake words. "I'm not sure, Boden," she said plainly. "But the Ballers have been doing this for a long time. If there's anyone who can stop the government from taking us

down, it's the Commissioner. It might look bleak right now, but there's still work to be done. We must steal on."

The next morning, the Ballers reached O'Hare International Airport as they did every week they needed to travel. With their tickets in hand, the team walked through the lines and boarded their plane. They sat down in their first class seats and prepared for their takeoff. In a few hours, the Chicago thieves would hit the Big Apple.

In his seat, Emerson tried closing his eyes to sleep but it wasn't working. All he could think about was the upcoming battle with the Knights. Sally Saga was on the same level as Marcus the Magician. She even had one more MVP award than Marcus. Beyond that, Sally was responsible for creating a true dynasty in the Grand Larceny league, an achievement Emerson hoped for as well. Emerson felt a chill as he weighed over the

situation. This week was going to be a battle between two strong title contenders.

Emerson exhaled in frustration and unbuckled his seatbelt. He stood up to go to the bathroom. Maybe splashing some water on his face would help him relax. He opened up the folding door and entered the tiny bathroom. He poured a handful of water over his face and stared hard at himself in the mirror. Despite all his talk, Emerson knew winning a championship would be incredibly difficult this year. Everybody witnessed the champions celebrate with the trophy in their hands, but no one ever saw the solitary moments before the battle.

He finished drying his face and pushed at the folding door. It didn't budge. The door was jammed. Emerson tried fiddling with the lock but it didn't open.

“Perfect,” Emerson grumbled.

Without even thinking, Emerson swung back his right leg and kicked the door with a glowing green shoe. The door snapped off the hinges and went flying into the opposing side of the plane. It slammed into the interior wall of the plane, making a loud cracking noise. The plane shook uncontrollably and went off balance. Emerson tried clutching at the walls, but fell to the floor of the plane.

“Emerson!” Phyllis screamed from her seat. “What did you do?”

“It’s the door’s fault!” Emerson shouted back. “It wouldn’t open!”

Phyllis tried getting to Emerson, but she tumbled back into her seat. The plane vibrated, sending all the passengers into a panic. The lights inside went out and the oxygen masks popped out of their compartments. The emergency systems for a cash

landing were implemented inside the aircraft. Emerson stared in horror as the plane wobbled through the sky. Even though he used his shoes every day, Emerson forgot about the power in his imbued items. A small nudge from his shoes could crack concrete.

Just then, the insides of the airplane grinded and the shaking died down. The airplane evened out and regained its balance. Somehow the plane returned to its normal flying condition. All the passengers gave out sounds of relief; they weren't going to crash.

Phyllis bolted from her seat and grabbed Emerson by the ear. She was about to yell something when a voice over the airplane speakers came through.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We had a little trouble, but we’re doing fine now. Some kind of internal impact occurred and set off the emergency systems.”

Phyllis glared fiercely at Emerson. Her eyes drilled harder into him than a jackhammer.

“The plane is operational, but company policy requires us to land at the nearest airport for repairs,” the captain said over the speakers. “We’ll now be flying into Detroit Metro Airport. Please fasten your seatbelts as we’ll be landing shortly.”

The passengers groaned in frustration. Despite surviving the ordeal, their entire flight schedule was now ruined.

After the plane landed, the passengers went through the terminal and into the Detroit airport. The Ballers went to the terminal and sat down in the waiting area. Phyllis was on the phone with the GLL front office. She was trying to figure out a

way to get to New York from Detroit. With their plane down, the team needed to fix their travel plans.

In the terminal, Boden pulled the strap of his guitar case over his shoulder. "Thanks for the pit stop, Emerson," he muttered. "One trip to the bathroom and you nearly killed us all."

Emerson cleared his throat. "I believe the official term is an aircraft lavatory," he corrected. "If it was a real bathroom, I would have much space to drown some brown."

Cort looked out of the terminal windows. He saw the sun shine over the Detroit landscape. "Motor City," he murmured. "This place is dangerous for us."

"Why?" Rose asked. "Detroit can't be nearly as tough as Chicago."

"Chicago is much bigger and more spread out," Cort replied. "We have a lot more options when it comes to thievery."

We also have safer neighborhoods to retreat to. Nothing like that here.”

“You’re talking about the Detroit Demons,” Boden said.

Cort nodded. “The Demons are vehicle specialists; they steal cars like they’re lollipops. Even though the BB book gives higher cash points for other items, the Demons can overload their loot with a mountain of cars.”

“Then we need to get out of here,” Boden said. “If we look at this season only, Zed Harper is probably tougher than Sally Saga.”

Emerson raised an eyebrow. “Who’s Zed Harper?” he asked.

“Have I met this guy before?”

Cort sighed. “Emerson, Zed is—”

Before he finished, Phyllis came back to the team. She didn't look happy at all. "I have bad news," she said grimly. "There are no available flights from to Detroit to New York. All the flights are either booked or cancelled."

"Can we can take a bus?" Rose asked.

"Not until tomorrow morning," Phyllis answered. "And it'll take at least ten hours to get there. With a slow driver, it'll be a twelve hour trip. We'd basically lose two days just to get there. There's no way we can lose that kind of time on travel. "

"This is a bad week for transportation issues," Cort muttered. "The regular season is almost over."

"And it gets worse," Phyllis said. "I was just on the phone with the GLL office. The cops don't want us to travel to New York; they want us to stay in Detroit for the week."

Rose's face fell. "You mean they want us to compete against the Demons?" she groaned. "They can't do that to us. We'll get killed."

"I have to agree with Rose," Boden said. "The Demons are holding onto first place with a huge lead. We can't compete with that team."

"What about the team originally scheduled to arrive here in Detroit?" Cort asked. "Some other team must have wanted to come here before our little mishap. There can't be that many teams in Detroit."

"The Phoenix Foxes were registered to be here," Phyllis said. "Now the league decided to swap our teams and sent them to New York. From the looks of it, the Foxes are more than happy with the schedule change."

“This is going to be a rough week,” Cort said, shaking his head. “We don’t even know what items to steal here.”

“So where are we going to stay?” Boden asked Phyllis. “We should get settled in as soon as we can. Where’s our housing?”

Phyllis motioned her hand to the terminal. “You’re looking at it.”

“Here?” Cort responded. “You mean this airport?”

“It’s all we got,” Phyllis replied. “The Foxes were supposed to stay here too.”

“It’s not so bad,” Boden said, picking up his bags. “We have a major international airport at our disposal. I mean, it can’t be worse than a zoo.”

Cort ruffled his hair uncomfortably. The busy noise inside of the Michigan airport echoed throughout his ears. Speedy

footsteps and random conversations were sprawled all over the busy building. The idea of staying in such fast paced place didn't exactly please Cort. He had enough trouble sleeping already.

"I love airports," Rose said happily. "You never know what kind of people you'll see here. Everyone has a different life story." She picked up her bag, but noticed something was missing. "Where did Emerson go?"

At Gate 13, Emerson jogged across the floor to the food vendors and restaurants. He only hoped that the team was still talking things over when he got back. He needed time to order and consume a fresh, salty, and very greasy pretzel.

At the Pink Pretzel shop, Emerson ran into a long line of people waiting to make an order. He tapped his foot anxiously, hoping the line would speed up. Without even noticing it, the

tiled floor trembled slightly from Emerson's shoes. Standing in front of him was a man with a long tube case, about the length of a golf club. The case was made out of shiny steel and stood on the ground vertically. Emerson guessed that the case was for some kind of instrument, maybe a flute. The man set the case aside for a moment as he pulled out some money for a pretzel. After another hard tap of Emerson's shoe, the case tilted and went off balance. The man flinched and instantly went for the silver case. Emerson reached out with his hand and stopped it from falling.

"I got it," Emerson said, holding the case gently.

The man exhaled deeply. "Thanks kid," he replied. He clutched the case with both hands. "I can't let anything happen to this."

"What's in there?" Emerson asked as he let go.

The man smiled. "Something really special to me," he answered. He looked up at Emerson. "The name's Tommy. I'm from Miami, but I got a home here in Detroit. I just flew in."

Emerson could tell Tommy was much older than him, maybe by about twenty years. He had spots of gray lining up his hair and hard wrinkles lining up his face. But beyond just his age, there seemed to be a strong energy surrounding Tommy. This guy had some pride on him.

Tommy turned his attention to the cashier at the counter. He needed to make an order. "I want three dozen pretzels and two sodas," he said sharply. "I'm very hungry and very thirsty."

Emerson raised his hand to object. "Wait a minute," he said. "I'm pretty hungry myself. I want some pretzels too."

"So what?" Tommy said dismissively. "I'm hungrier than you."

Emerson scowled. He just met this guy, but he was already starting to get annoyed by him. "Prove it," he said to Tommy. "I'm the hungriest man in the airport."

"I'm the hungriest person in Detroit," Tommy sneered.

"I'm so hungry I could eat a bear," Emerson yelled.

"I could eat four bears," Tommy shouted.

"I bet I could eat five bears and two chickens," Emerson growled.

Tommy spun around and looked straight at Emerson. "I could gulp down a herd of buffalo, six bears, three chickens, and a can of soda with no straw," he snapped. "And that's *after* I eat a hundred pretzels."

Emerson gritted his teeth. Tommy had beat him. This man was quite hungry. "You got quite the stomach, mister," he

grunted. "But I'm not going anywhere. Take your silver case and get out of here. I got pretzels to eat."

Tommy looked as if he wanted to say more, but held his tongue. Normally, he'd argue with Emerson until the sun went down. But he just flew in from Miami and he needed to hit the driving range in Rogue Park before it closed in the afternoon. He shook his head and took off. Emerson was left standing in line, one less spot in front him. He was finally ready to order his pretzels.

"How can I help you?" asked the cashier.

Emerson slammed his hand on the glass counter. "I want three dozen pretzels," he shouted, "with everything on them!"

The cashier blinked. "O-okay," she said. "That'll be fifty eight dollars."

Emerson looked into his wallet. "Oh crap," he muttered. "I don't have money."

Chapter 17

“We haven’t had much time to prepare for Detroit’s available items,” Phyllis told the team, “so we have to speed this up. Furthermore, there’s only one item on the BB book, which means we have to dance twice as hard with half the music.”

The team gathered in one of the passenger lounges in Gate 22. At a circular dining table, Cort and Boden sipped on some airline coffee. On the side, Rose nibbled on a muffin as she fiddled with a toy airplane. Emerson sat in the corner with a small pamphlet, reading by himself.

“The item in question is a major specialty item, something we haven’t encountered before,” Phyllis explained. “The GLL wants us to steal the Excalibur Club.”

Cort let out a low whistle. “That’s one tasty item.”

“What’s the Excalibur Club?” Boden asked.

"It's the most powerful golf club of all time," Cort answered.

"It also happens to be an imbued item, one of the oldest."

Phyllis nodded. "The Excalibur Club gives its user the ability to get an automatic hole-in-one. All one needs to do is tap a golf ball and it'll go directly to the hole."

"I've gotten a hole-in-one before," Emerson said loudly. "It just took me a few dozen hits."

"Using that club would make any person the best golfer in the world," Cort went on. "You'd never need any practice, preparation, or training. One club would rule them all."

"Even though that sounds amazing," Rose said, "wouldn't the Excalibur Club be banned at golf tournaments? If people found out that it was imbued, no one would ever allow it."

"Not necessarily," Boden commented. "You could probably disguise it somehow. Maybe even use sparingly on certain parts

of the golf course. The Excalibur Club is more than useful; it could break the competitive spirit of golf.”

“The GLL agrees with you,” Phyllis said. “That club will fetch us a pretty score of seven million dollars.”

“Where is it being held right now?” Boden asked.

“A golf pro named Tommy Wilson has owned the Excalibur Club for almost a decade,” Cort answered. Wilson is one of the best players in the world. He’s an ultra-competitive player and he won’t let go of the club easily.”

“So is this guy going to put the club in a safe or something?” Rose asked.

Cort revealed a folder of black papers. He set them on the table. “Wilson is a very wealthy man with a number of resources at his disposal,” he said. “The Detroit cops have informed us that he’s set up a security system inside his home to protect the club.”

“So we finally get to rob someone's house,” Emerson snickered. “I like the sound of this job.”

“And what of the Demons?” Boden asked. “They'll definitely try something.”

Phyllis nodded once again. “Normally they'd steal random items, maybe a few cars just to boost their lead. But I've been hearing rumors they want to teach Emerson a little lesson in manners.”

“I never liked learning,” Emerson said, smirking. “Of course, it always depends on who's teaching me.”

Cort handed Boden a folder full of papers. “Figure out a battle strategy with Emerson,” he said. “You two will probably have the toughest job; taking care of the Zed and his fighters. We have to stop the Demons.”

Boden took hold of the folder. "I'll try," he said with a sigh. "The best team in the league will be tough to topple."

"Think you can handle it, Emerson?" Cort asked.

Emerson hesitated. "Yeah, but I have to figure this out," he replied. He held up his papers. "If I can get this to work, we can win."

Boden gave him a confused look. "What are you reading?" he asked. "In fact, *when* did you start reading?"

Before Emerson could answer, Phyllis said, "Let him be, Boden. He's got a special assignment this week. You'll have plenty of time to prepare together."

Boden had his doubts. Whatever Emerson was trying to learn didn't seem relevant to the matter at hand, especially since Zed wanted to kill them both.

“Remember, the Demons are just like any other team in the league,” Phyllis said firmly. “They’re human beings with human weaknesses. More importantly, they can be beat. Let’s show them how long the road is between today and the championship.”

The Hotel Mango. Ronald Dorf tightened his blue tie as he took his elevator down to the second floor restaurant in his hotel. He was excited for the new menu that would be debuting this spring. He had put a lot of money into finding new chefs and wanted the very best food in his hotel. Strangely enough, he realized that many of his chefs were complaining about a certain guest who was constantly ordering room service on the 17th floor. This guest would travel in and out of the hotel, so Ronald never really got a chance to find out who it was. A minor nuisance, he thought.

Ronald walked in slowly to the restaurant, looking for a particular guest he was going to have lunch with. The Ballers were out of town this week, so he knew that today would be a good chance to talk with an old friend of his. In the corner booth, Chief Thompson of the Chicago Police was enjoying a plate of bacon wrapped shrimp. His lunch appointment hadn't started so he went ahead and began eating the delicious bacon in front of him.

"A pig eating some pig," Ronald remarked slyly. "Is that considered cannibalism?"

Thompson turned around and wiped his mouth. "What a bad joke," he mumbled. "I came here as a courtesy and in return you tease me."

"Calm down, Thompson," Ronald said, sitting down at the table. "Be a real man for once in your life."

Chief Thompson shook his head. "If you talked to me like that ten years ago, I would have arrested you in a heartbeat."

"Ten years ago you were much weaker than you are," Ronald said. "I, on the other hand, have always had power."

"Then you can take care of your old friend Silent Spectre," Thompson said. He stared at Ronald's tiny body. He had the appearance of a ten-year old, but the battle skills of a hardened thief. "You two had your share of battles before."

"Our fights were always pretty even," Ronald said, remembering them vividly. "But I never felt like trying against him. He worked too hard to impress people."

"What do you want, Rising Dwarf?" Thompson said, changing the subject. "You wouldn't ask me up here without a good reason."

Ronald smiled. Thompson was an easy read. “We want to make sure you know what side you’re on, Chief.”

Thompson stared blankly at Ronald. He wasn’t sure what Ronald was getting at.

“We know that your daughter is a student at the University of Chicago,” Ronald said, speaking more slowly. “She got good grades last semester, but she’ll have to keep them up to make the dean’s list. Of course, her tuition is being paid by a policeman’s salary.”

Thompson still didn’t say anything.

“Your wife must be proud,” Ronald said, crossing his short legs. “Speaking of your wife, did you two celebrate your anniversary this year yet?”

“We did,” Thompson said softly. “Thirty-two years this past December.”

“That’s great,” Ronald said, smiling even wider. “We want those years to keep on going. And of course, we want you to be with us. In case you were wondering, Tessa Narini won’t be a threat this year. We’ll handle her easily.”

“What do you mean?”

“Even Agent Yellow has bosses,” Ronald said. “She can’t stop the GLL with her bounties. We’re on top of it.”

Thompson cleared his throat. “Did the Commissioner talk to you? Does he have a plan?”

Ronald chuckled. Despite his appearance, Ronald was a genuine businessman. He was savvy, cutthroat, and willing to do anything for money. “Our power is the only power you need to worry about, Thompson. The harder you work for us, the longer you and your family will get to live. Never forget that.”

Chapter 18

“That’s a big house,” Emerson remarked. He looked over the blueprints of Tommy Wilson’s Detroit home. “I want to live in a place like that.”

“You’re broke,” Boden pointed out. “You need money to buy a house like that.”

Emerson shrugged. “I’ll just steal one someday. Maybe Tommy will let me take his house off his hands.”

Inside the Detroit Metro Airport, the Ballers were going over their plan to take the Excalibur Club from Tommy Wilson’s large Detroit Mansion. The goal was to enter the house without tripping up the security system. Emerson and Boden were sitting inside an airport lounge at Gate 22, while Cort and Phyllis were figuring out a way to get past the home security system. They were coming

up with a battle strategy for the Detroit Demons. They had three days left.

“According to the cops, the Demons might just go after guaranteed money and hijack a shipment of cars coming in,” Boden said, reading a report he got from Phyllis. “Tommy Wilson’s home is at least forty miles from the nearest car and shipment centers. There’s a chance we might not even see them this week.”

“But you don’t believe that.”

Boden grinned. “No, I don’t. The first and second place teams don’t travel in the same city and not battle it out.”

Emerson nodded. Although the Ballers were in second place, part of him felt like the team overachieved his first season. The results felt a little too good to be true. The Ballers were a solid team, but Emerson never felt like he belonged on the same level

of Marcus or Sally. He had struggled against Kane and Frida, two midlevel thieves of the GLL who weren't even All-Studs. If Emerson wanted to take down the league's best, he needed to be the best.

"If we can beat the Demons this week, they'll fall to at least second or third place," Boden pointed out. "Our chances of succeeding in the playoffs increases by a lot. This week is crucial for us, Emerson."

Emerson agreed. "I learned some new tricks this week, Boden," he said. "Me and my shoes are going to have some fun in Detroit."

Boden arched an eyebrow. He noticed that Emerson had been reading over some papers sent to him from mystery person. Ever since the All-Stud Ceremony in San Francisco, Emerson acted differently. Perhaps it was the playoffs looming or Tessa Narini's bounties, but Emerson seemed extra motivated. Boden

only hoped that whatever moves Emerson learned how to do were going to work against the Demons.

Three days later.

Emerson and Cort jogged through the gated community of Tanner Drive. Even in the darkness, Emerson marveled at the giant houses that lined up the street. The moonlight barely came through the clouds, making the Ballers hard to notice in the night. Emerson saw grassy hills and lakes surround the huge houses in the area. He smelled the neatly cut grass as he made his way towards Wilson Manor. The mansion was the last one on the street. Emerson approached the large black metal gate at the front. He stepped to the side of the gate and waited. Cort pulled out small notebook computer.

“You go first Emerson,” Cort whispered. “I’m sending out a signal that will jam any electronic devices from the house. The cameras might catch you, but it won’t matter. The security system won’t function if I jam it. Also, the back of the house has no way exit route; there’s a lake that cuts it off. I’ll bring Boden up to the front. Go around back and wait for us.”

Emerson nodded. He crouched down and powered up his shoes. He gave a smooth leap over the gate. As he was falling back down, Cort just remembered something. Emerson’s shoes always blasted away the ground every time he landed. If Emerson crushed the ground, everyone in the neighborhood would hear him.

“Emerson, don’t—” Cort started.

Emerson landed—with no sound. He hit the driveway path behind the gate with his shoes, but he did softly. All he heard was a small tap on the ground. Cort was more than surprised.

Perhaps Emerson could control the power of his impact. Maybe he was able to do it the entire time. Regardless, Emerson went running to the backyard.

Emerson marveled at the large stone mansion. Even in the dark night, he could see the large sides and high arching windows. He could tell this house has been built ages ago, generations before him. Tommy must have inherited the house, passing it down from earlier generations of his family.

After a solid run, Emerson reached the back of the home. There was another long stone pathway that led up to the house. He was about walk down it, but he heard something from beyond the house. Emerson held his breath and focused his ears. A thwacking sound, swiping through grass, echoed from the yard. Emerson went away from the house and started running farther out towards the lake.

Emerson jogged over the large well-trimmed backyard, the grass cut low to the ground. Although it was dark, he could see a small light near the edge of the lake. At the edge of the gigantic backyard, he saw a figure hitting golf balls into the lake.

Surrounding the figure was a whole mess of belongings; chairs, TV's, dishes, a bowling ball, a bicycle, even a bed. It reminded Emerson of a garage sale. All the things that were in the large field were simple every day, household things.

Emerson kept on hearing the sharp swinging sound of the club. Someone was hitting balls hundreds of yards into the distance. The stroke, the form, the hits were beautifully performed. Emerson slowed his steps and approached the person slowly. He had an idea of who it was.

“Mr. Thomas Wilson?” Emerson said. “Is that you?”

The figure turned around. Tommy Wilson's gray hair shined through the darkness. He had an electric powered lamp to his

right side. As Tommy turned, Emerson took a moment to breathe. The Excalibur Club was right in Tommy's hands.

"You?" Tommy said, half surprisingly. "You're the guy from Chicago. We met at the airport."

Emerson blinked. He barely remembered his breakfast this morning, let alone someone he met at the airport. "We've met before?"

Tommy snickered. "So you're the one who has come to steal my treasure," he said. "You're here for Excalibur."

Emerson shrugged. "Not sure if we've met before, but what you said is true. I'm here for the club."

Tommy pointed to the objects around him. "Do you see these things, Emerson?" he said. "These objects are things that belonged to me and my family. Furniture, appliances, little things that people take for granted in life." Tommy lifted the Excalibur

club. Although the light was dim, Emerson could see Tommy's calloused and rough hands in the night. The hands were built to hold golf clubs.

"I've played golf since I was six years old," Tommy continued calmly. "I've worked and practiced harder than anyone I've ever met. This past year I was ranked as high as third in the world. I earned that spot in the rankings."

"So?" Emerson said. "What do I care about golf?"

Tommy pointed the gold Excalibur Club at Emerson. "This club would break the game that I love so much, kid," he said.

"All I want to do is win golf tournaments. I want to be the best in the world."

Emerson didn't understand. "So you used the club yourself?" he said. "Aren't you sort of cheating too?"

“Emerson, I have never used it in a pro tournament,” Tommy said forcefully. “I’m keeping this club away from the wrong hands so that nobody uses it to cheat at golf. And I won’t let you take it away from me.”

“You’re kind of dumb,” Emerson said plainly. “But I’ll give you a chance, Tommy. Give me the club, and I promise I won’t hurt you.”

Tommy glared at Emerson. “I’ll die before I give this club up,” he shouted. He pointed at the objects littered across the grass. “These are all the things I owned in my home. I’m going to use them to destroy you.”

Emerson laughed. “You’re one weird person,” he said. “What can you do with a golf club?”

Tommy gripped the club with both hands. “The Excalibur Club isn’t just for golf balls, Emerson,” he said sharply. “Anything

the club hits, I can send it flying anywhere I want. One touch and I can control anything it hits.”

Tommy raised the Excalibur club. He approached a large black TV sitting next to him. He swung it past his shoulder and hit the large fifty inch TV with the golden club. The TV launched into the air and flew directly at Emerson. The TV flew so accurately Emerson couldn't believe it. This large TV, weighing over sixty pounds, soared through the air over thirty feet directly at Emerson's head. Emerson jumped to the side and hit the grass rolling. The TV smashed into the ground and was completely demolished. Emerson looked at where the TV had landed. If the TV had connected, he would have died for sure.

“This can't be good,” Emerson muttered.

Tommy raised the club once more. He hit a long, purple cushioned sofa. The sofa was lifted into the air and went flying at Emerson. The sofa curved in the air as if launched by a catapult.

Emerson powered up his shoes and jumped to the side. The sofa crashed down, breaking apart completely. Emerson looked at the rest of the objects near Tommy. He had a lot of ammo to use.

“This will never end,” Emerson said to himself.

Tommy kept on swinging, hitting everything around him. He hit the bowling ball, a stereo, chairs, even a few pairs of shoes. Emerson kept on dodging, weaving around and letting the objects land around him. Tommy was destroying all of his possessions just to keep this golf club.

Emerson was losing energy fast. He was breathing hard from trying to dodge all of these flying objects. Tommy was exhausted too. He wanted to hit Emerson at least once, but it was harder than expected. His energy was waning. If he wanted to keep the club, he had to take down Emerson Jay.

Emerson crouched down. “Who cares about a stupid golf club?” he asked. Tommy had stopped swinging. “Why does it matter so much to you?”

Tommy stood up. He put the club on his shoulders. “I’ve spent almost ninety percent of my life playing golf. I’ve played more golf than anything else I’ve done in life and I still have more to learn. I won’t have anyone cheating at this game, not while I’m still alive. I never want to lose to anyone because they used the Excalibur Club. If I win or lose, I want it to happen because of an honest battle.”

Emerson looked back at Tommy. He seemed so determined, so competitive at his sport. He didn’t think he’d meet another person as competitive as him, but Tommy surprised him.

“Look, I don’t know why you love golf so much,” Emerson said firmly. “In fact, I don’t even care. But I need that club. I need it for my own goals. I can’t let you keep it this week.”

Tommy gripped the club handle even harder. He wasn't about to let the Excalibur club go.

"But I'll give you a chance to prove your words," Emerson said, continuing. "If you give me 7 million dollars in cash, I'll leave you alone. The BB book for my league says that thing is worth at least that much money. Give me 7 million dollars and I won't steal the club from you."

"7 million?" Tommy said, taken aback. Even for him and his wealth, 7 million dollars was nothing to sneeze at. That much of a withdrawal could bankrupt him.

"If you really care that much golf, then you can make a trade," Emerson said, pointing out Tommy's words. "Be a real man and prove it to me. You can't win this fight, Tommy. But you can at least have a shot at keeping your sport alive."

Tommy weighed his options. At this point, the fight with Emerson was a stalemate at best. If it continued, he might end losing more than the club. How much was Excalibur worth to him? How much was the sport of golf worth to him?

Tommy lowered the club. “O-ok,” he finally said, stammering. “I’ll take your deal. 7 million dollars it is.”

Emerson smiled and exhaled. He was happy that Tommy took his offer. Emerson could have attacked him like an enemy, but that’s not what he wanted. It was true that Emerson wanted the club. However, what he really wanted was to help someone achieve their dream.

“7 million dollars might kill my bank account,” Tommy said, relaxing a little, “but it’ll be worth it. I’ll become a pro golfer and then I’ll—”

Before Tommy could finish, a sudden blur swept past both him and Emerson. A loud metal sound swiped through the air. Emerson felt a gust of cold wind blow past his body. He cringed and blinked, covering his face from a sudden blast of wind. When he opened his eyes, he saw Tommy in front of him. Tommy reached with his right hand and touched his chest.

“Emerson?” Tommy said in the softest voice. His hands were suddenly empty. The club was no longer in his hands.

Tommy fell to the ground, hitting the grass face first. Emerson didn't understand what was happening. The moon started to shine brighter all of a sudden. Emerson looked down and saw a pool of blood flowing through the grass from Tommy's body. He then looked up. Someone else had arrived next to them.

“This week belongs to the Demons,” Zed Harper hissed loudly. The moonlight bounced off his shiny bald head. He held

the Excalibur with both hands. “The championship will be ours again.”

Chapter 19

Emerson fell to his knees in the grass. He reached down and turned over Tommy's body. He didn't even see what happened. Zed had zoomed right past them. Blood was pouring out of Tommy non-stop. Emerson saw a wooden knife handle sticking out from Tommy's chest where his heart was. Tommy was dead.

Emerson looked up. "Who are you?" he screamed at Zed. "Why did you kill him? Why did you steal his life?"

Zed shook his head. He wore a blue track jacket lined with white stripes. He put the Excalibur Club inside the left side of his belt. "Idiot," he muttered. "I'm Zed Harper, last year's GLL champ. I told you before the season started I'd find you, Emerson. You came to the wrong town, this week."

Emerson clutched Tommy's body hard. He was angry, furious that he let Tommy die. He didn't remember Zed from before, but he would never forget him now.

Footsteps approached the two thieves from the direction of the mansion. Boden was running in to help Emerson. He heard Emerson's shouting from the house. Boden was wondering what was going on in the backyard.

"Emerson!" Boden shouted. He ran up beside him. He saw Zed Harper standing there with the Excalibur Club in his belt. Nothing was going according to plan this week.

Zed's face darkened. He recognized Boden instantly. Boden lifted his invisible sword in hand and was ready to fight. Zed had waited for this moment all season.

"I'm going to enjoy this," Zed said, killer intent lining his voice.

Boden looked down at Emerson. He could tell Emerson's emotions were all over the place. He saw all the furniture and personal items that belonged to Tommy Wilson scattered all over the place. Something strange had happened before he arrived. He wasn't sure if he could rely on Emerson at the moment.

Zed widened his stance. For the first time, Boden noticed Zed's shoes. They were white low top shoes with a plain and simple design. The only unique thing about them were the laces; they had a distinct red color easily seen in the night.

Zed's red laces suddenly burst into red hot flames, lighting up the area around them. Boden covered his eyes as the shoelaces blazed throughout the shoes. Somehow, the fiery laces weren't burning the rest of the shoe. Zed grinned as he noticed Boden's reaction.

“So you haven’t seen my ability yet, have you?” Zed said, snickering. “People call me ‘Speed Demon’ Zed, and I’m the fastest man in the Grand Larceny League.”

Before Boden could react, Zed dashed at him with superhuman speed. Boden swung his invisible sword, hoping to hit something, anything.

“I’ve seen your attack before,” Zed yelled, running past Boden. “As long as I move faster than your swing, you can’t hit me.”

Zed dashed back in and struck Boden from behind the head. Boden grunted as he got hit. Boden relied on his sword’s ability to be invisible, but Zed was just as impossible to see. He was faster than any opponent he had ever faced.

“I got to slow him down,” Boden muttered to himself.

Boden saw Zed running around the grass like a speeding car on a highway. He was nimble, quick, and hard to hit. This would be difficult.

Zed's shoes were still lit up from the fiery shoelaces. He kept his distance from Boden in fear of getting sliced. He talked big, but he really couldn't see Boden's blade. One misstep and he could get killed.

Zed took a running start and then blasted off at Boden. The footsteps pounded into the ground like machine gun fire. Boden raised his blade hoping with all his might that he could cut him down before he was hit. But before he could swing, the suddenly ground shook and rumbled. Caught off guard, Zed tripped and fell to his side. He was running too fast and he lost his balance. Boden went backwards from the ground shaking and tried to regain his footing.

“Zed Harper!” Emerson screamed at the top of his lungs. He had slammed his shoes into the earth hard, shaking the entire area. He pulled off his orange baseball hat and put in his back pocket. “I’m going to steal your life tonight!”

Zed got back up on his feet. “Go ahead and try, rookie,” he snarled.

Emerson took a step and jumped hard. He launched his body at Zed, hands out first. Zed shuffled his feet and easily dodged Emerson’s attack. Zed moved with a graceful step to the side. Emerson landed with his face hitting the grass.

“How in the world did your team get to second place?” Zed said, shaking his head. “I’m going to have to change your money count by myself.”

“Where’s the rest of your team?” Boden demanded. “Why are you here by yourself?”

Zed laughed. "My team stole an entire shipment of imported cars," he said. "Unlike you guys, we have more than one or two good thieves. Our entire team is solid. We weren't going to steal the Excalibur Club tonight, but I volunteered. I figured, why not? I could kill your entire team by myself anyway."

Zed's comment sparked anger in Emerson. He jumped again at Zed, but it was no use. Zed dashed back and let Emerson hit the ground first. Then he ran back in and slammed fifteen punches into Emerson's face before he could even react.

Boden was in awe. Zed shouldn't have been this fast. It just wasn't possible.

"His hands and arms are just as fast as his feet," Boden said, still in disbelief. "His imbued item makes his entire body fast."

Emerson knees started to shake. Zed had pummeled his face in so hard that he could barely stand. But no matter what,

he wasn't going to fall to this opponent. He had left Tommy die without a fight, no chance he was going to die as well.

Boden ran in with his blade. He had to save Emerson before he got killed. Zed smiled as he saw Boden try to attack him. Zed pulled out the gold Excalibur Club and swung. Boden, unaware of the club's power, swung his sword as well. The head of the Excalibur Club struck Boden's blade with incredible force. Boden's blade was sent flying way back behind him. Boden's hands vibrated from the hit. He couldn't believe the club had that much power.

Zed laughed hard at Boden, cackling in the darkness. "This gold club can send any object anywhere I want," he said, completely amused with himself. "I don't have to just hit golf balls, I can even hit people."

Zed spun around and smacked Emerson in the chest with the Excalibur Club. Emerson's whole body went flying through

the air, this time not from his jump, but from a golf swing. He went soaring and landed in the lake water beyond the grass.

“Emerson!” Boden shouted. He ran past Zed and towards the water. He had to save Emerson before he drowned. Zed just kept on laughing at the two Ballers. He had demolished them completely by himself.

Boden dived into the lake, swimming hard to find Emerson’s body. He was sinking fast and appeared to be unconscious. Boden reached through the water and grabbed at something. He felt a person’s wrist through the water; he had found Emerson Jay.

Boden pulled as hard as he could while trying to swim back up to the surface. He kicked and pulled, trying to change his position in the water. He finally pulled Emerson and himself back up to the surface and gasped for air. Boden waded through the water and dragged Emerson’s body to the grass. He looked

around, but Zed Harper was gone. The Excalibur Club was gone with him.

Boden panted as he caught his breath trying to save Emerson. He lifted Emerson's soaking head gently, trying to see if he was conscious.

"Emerson," Boden said softly, "are you all right?"

Emerson groaned from the pain, but he appeared to be awake and alert. "I think so," he murmured. He coughed up some water from the lake. "What happened?"

Boden grimaced. "Zed Harper singlehandedly robbed us tonight," he said, wiping his forehead. "Not only did the Demons beat us, but we have nothing to show for this week. We're in trouble for the playoffs."

Emerson stayed lying down on his back. His body was aching and still soaking wet from the lake. Boden stood up to

retrieve his sword. In the distance, he could hear Cort and Rose coming towards them. The moonlight shined through the darkness, lighting up the grassy yard. Boden looked to the side and saw Tommy Wilson's dead body in the grass. The Ballers had lost a lot tonight.

Chapter 20

“This is Scoreline,” Michael Paul Williams said. “The last week of the Grand Larceny League regular season was quite a turnaround. A lot of unexpected surprises happened in the final week of the season.”

Andrew Scott Johnson nodded right next to him. “The top eight teams completely changed their standings in the very last week. The matchups for the playoffs are way more different than we expected.”

The orange jumpsuits on the two prisoners were extra bright tonight. The two convicted prisoners were facing the TV cameras in their jail cell, reporting the details around the league. This would be the last broadcast before the GLL playoffs started.

“We start with the showdown in Cleveland, Ohio,” Michael Paul Williams. “The Cleveland Vagabonds gave the Razorbacks

a solid beating in Cleveland, mugging them of their fifth place standing. The two Midwest teams battled for a smuggled shipment of computers. After losing half the computers in the fight, the Vagabonds came through. The Razorbacks dropped down to sixth while the Cleveland Vagabonds sneaked in at eighth place.”

“The Showtimers pounded down on the Philadelphia Fangers and jumped a spot in the rankings,” Andrew Scott Johnson reported. “The battle in Philly was quite epic with Marcus the Magician fighting the entire Fox team on his own. The old-timer stole five Colonial style paintings from the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Fox let down their city by letting the Magician steal the historic paintings. Marcus later commented, ‘I wanted to test myself before the playoffs.’”

“I’d say he aced that test,” Michael Paul Williams said. “The Showtimers are now in second place right behind the Demons.”

“Speaking of the Demons,” Andrew Scott Johnson said, “the throwdown in Motor City was quite a stunner. The Ballers, running a host streak the entire season, got rolled hard. The Detroit Demons stole the Excalibur Club, over fifty different luxury cars, and added a boxful of car fresheners as a bonus. The Demons swooped in with a massive pile-on, bringing in their total to 12 million dollars. It was easily the season high this year.”

“The Ballers on the other hand brought in a handful of used furniture and broken TV's,” Michael Paul Williams reported. “For some reason, they also threw in all the cash in their wallets. The Ballers' total ended up to be six hundred, fifty four dollars, and thirty-five cents. A season-low for any team in the GLL. The Ballers dropped pretty far down the league standings.”

“Disappointing, but the Ballers still made the playoffs at seventh place,” Andrew Scott Johnson said. “The top eight teams for the GLL playoffs have been decided. The biggest

change this year is that the historically bad Ballers have finally made the post season and will be matched up the Los Angeles Showtimers.”

“Despite the strange turn of events, the matchup should be interesting,” Michael Paul Williams commented. “The Magician versus the Jumpstar, a legendary champ versus a golden rookie. Many of us will ready and waiting for how the results come out.”

Cort turned off the glass TV. He turned to the rest of the team. Boden and Rose were sitting down on the sofa. Despite the positive news that the team had made the playoffs, the mood in the Hotel Mango was bleak. A battle with the Demons and the team had lost nearly all their morale. It was tough on the rookies. Emerson suffered a lot of injuries in Detroit. He was up in his room on the seventeenth floor resting up. Phyllis was sitting in a chair with a stack of papers in her hands.

“We made the playoffs,” Phyllis said to the team. “We have two weeks this time around. We need to prepare and get ready for the Showtimers.”

Rose sat up. “We completely got destroyed this past week,” she said, frustration in her voice. “Emerson and Boden, our two best thieves, couldn’t handle one pro. What can we do against the Showtimers?”

Boden sighed. “We weren’t ready for the Demons,” he said. “We might not be ready for the playoffs.”

“It’s true, we had a setback,” Phyllis said. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t take on the Showtimers. They’re just another team. They’re beatable.”

“That’s what you said about the Demons,” Rose pointed out. “Look what happened to us in Detroit. One guy beat us, one

single person. How can we beat a legendary team that's won three titles?"

Cort wanted to object, but Rose was right. The Showtimers were powerful. They were an established dynasty in the Grand Larceny League. Only LA and New York could boast that. The mental damage from Detroit created more doubt than the physical damage. The team was strong, but their mental strength was being tested right now.

"We have to regroup," Phyllis said, trying to lead the team. "We need to map out a battle strategy for our item that we'll be stealing in Los Angeles."

Phyllis set up a bulletin board in front of the team. She put a photograph in the middle and placed a pushpin into it. She pointed to the picture and showed it to the team.

“The Devil’s Piano,” Phyllis said loudly. The picture showed a large blood-red painted piano in the middle of a music hall. The sleek piano had a beautiful shiny gloss that gleamed through. The grand piano looked perfect, almost too perfect to be real. “This piano is a legend in the music and orchestra world,” Phyllis continued. “It never has to be tuned, polished, or managed. It’s an incredible piano that produces pitch perfect sounds regardless of who plays it. The songs that can be played on the Devil’s Piano cannot be matched by any other piano in the world.”

“So why the strange name?” Boden asked. “It sounds too good to be true.”

“It’s a piano surrounded by death,” Cort said grimly. “Rumors say every person who has ever played a song on the Devil’s Piano has died. Random deaths, accidents, even murders. A professional concert pianist played Beethoven’s Moonlight

Sonata on the piano ten years ago at a music hall in New York. Twelve seconds after he finished his song, he suffered a heart attack. He was twenty-nine years old.”

“Five years ago, a scientist tried figuring out the sonic vibrations from the Devil's Piano through a bunch of experiments,” Phyllis said, looking over a report sheet. “She played a basic scale and half a song before she died. She had a brain tumor that ruptured the exact moment she stopped playing. She was thirty-eight.”

“Last year, a few furniture movers and drivers were moving the Devil's Piano to Los Angeles,” Cort described. “The movers were taking a break and played the piano without thinking about it. They apparently played a Beach Boy's song. Within the next hour, the movers got into a car accident, demolishing their moving truck and killing all the people inside. The Devil's Piano somehow was untouched, unscratched, and pristine as ever.

The piano hasn't been played by anyone since and it remains in LA."

"So don't play the Devil's Piano," Rose said curtly. "Point taken."

"Sounds like a dangerous score," Boden said. "I don't want to die from a song."

"Don't worry, we're just stealing the piano," Cort said. "The problem will be the Showtimers."

"We got to fight them on their home ground," Rose pointed out. "I don't know how comfortable I feel about LA. I've never been there, but I hear driving there is straight madness."

"How much is the Devil's Piano worth anyway?" Boden asked.

"It's a playoff item, Boden," Cort said. "The value isn't disclosed to us. In the playoffs, we just have to steal the item

before the other team does. In the regular season, teams can go after different targets or even steal cash money. But in the playoffs, the game is way fiercer. We can't sneak by the Showtimers. We have to take them straight on."

"We need more time," Boden said. "We need time for Emerson to heal. Without him, we can't fight Marcus and his team. We need the Jumpstar in his best condition."

"That's not something we can rely on," Phyllis said. "Injuries are part of the game. You can't avoid them no matter who you are."

"And what happens if they kill us in the process?" Boden asked. "Is that part of the game as well?"

Phyllis stared hard at Boden. She didn't like his attitude. "You're questioning me on this?" she said. "You're that scared?"

Boden stood up. He flexed his shoulders and towered over Phyllis. "I'm a soldier, Phyllis," he said. "I fight for a living. But you're asking us to get killed for a guaranteed loss. We can't win this."

"You're a coward," Phyllis snarled. "You can't even do your job properly."

Boden and Phyllis kept on arguing. The two teammates were arguing all over the place, taking personal shots at each other. Cort rubbed his forehead. He couldn't believe the team was imploding this week. It was first time the team had made the playoffs and they were fighting each other. Rose was getting nervous. She knew that both Boden and Phyllis had strong personalities. This might be a big problem.

"I can do this," a voice shouted from the stairwell. "I can take Marcus on my own."

The Ballers turned around and looked. They saw Emerson Jay standing by the stairs. "I'll take on Showtimers by myself," he said, his voice not at full strength. "I can do this."

"You can't do that, Emerson," Boden said quickly. "You're not fully healed yet. Even if you were, you can't take on that team by yourself."

Emerson walked down the stairs and towards the team. He pulled out some sheets of paper from his back pocket. "My new moves will work."

Boden took a look at the notes that Emerson had been holding onto. Emerson had told him that he was working on new moves with his shoes, but he didn't reveal them in Detroit. He looked over the notes, trying to see what Emerson saw.

"These are strong techniques," Boden said, looking over the papers. "They utilize your moves well. Where did you get these?"

“An old friend,” Emerson said, grinning. “She was the one who made my shoes.”

The Ballers all paused and looked at each other. Despite all the time they had spent together, the team never really talked about their personal lives. It wasn't that they didn't care about each other, it was the fact that the thievery took precedence over their lives. Emerson in particular was so driven to win a title that he seemed to never talk about anything else.

“Who's your friend?” Cort asked. His interest was starting to peak.

Emerson limped down to the lobby floor. He approached a chair and sat down with a sigh of relief. “She's someone I'm no longer with,” he said plainly. “I'll tell you guys about it more, later. For now, we have to stop the Showtimers.”

“Why didn’t you use these techniques back in Detroit?”

Boden asked, still thumbing through the papers.

“When Tommy got killed, it threw me off my game,”

Emerson answered. “I wanted to take Zed down, but he caught me off guard. He’s a strong fighter. I never saw or met him before either.”

Phyllis raised an eyebrow. Emerson had angered Zed Harper on the first day the Ballers had met.

“With Marcus, it will be different,” Emerson said forcefully. “I know I can compete with him. With an extra week to prepare, Boden and I can take him.”

Boden sighed again. “It’s not like that Emerson,” he said. “We can’t just decide to beat a guy like Marcus. Our team is outmatched every step of the way.”

“We were listed as second place for most of the season,” Emerson pointed out. “This week’s matchup is really between a second and third seed. We can take them. I know we can.”

Boden wasn’t convinced. He wanted to believe Emerson, but he still had doubt.

“Emerson is right,” Phyllis said. “There is a way.”

“Which is?”

“We’ll be using Cort,” Phyllis answered. She turned to the team’s veteran entry thief. Cort breathed heavily after hearing his name.

Emerson didn’t understand. “Cort?” he said incredulously. “Cort’s no fighter. He’s just an old dude with quick hands.”

Cort scowled. “I’m thirty-six,” he barked at Emerson. “And I have a little history with Marcus the Magician.”

Boden looked at Cort. "What kind of history?" he asked.

"What can that do to help us?"

Phyllis grinned. "Cort is the only non-All-Stud thief in the GLL who can go fifty-fifty with Marcus the Magician," she described. She walked over and patted Cort on the back. "He's our secret weapon against the Showtimers."

"It seems like a secret to us as well," Boden said. He had no clue where Phyllis was going. Cort's face turned red. Emerson and Boden were real fighters, battle-tested and battle-ready. Cort wasn't an old man, but he wasn't an energetic youngster either. He simply didn't have that fighter feel about him. But Phyllis wouldn't have mentioned Cort as a fighting tool for some random reason. Cort must have an ace up his sleeve. "We'd all like for you to tell us how Cort will help, Phyllis."

"I will," Phyllis said. "However, the most important thing you need to do is help Emerson get back in shape and ready for the

playoffs." She looked to the rest of her team. Doubt, fear, insecurity all filled their faces. It reminded her of the first week of the season. "Every team in this league will face a time where the odds seem against them. The great teams break those odds and win. The great teams push through when it gets harder and harder. It always seems impossible until you actually do it. This week, believe in yourselves. We can steal this victory."

Massachusetts Correctional Institution in Cedar Junction. Agent Tessa Narini walked into the lobby entrance and sat down at a small desk. A prison guard handed her a sign in sheet for visitors. Tessa tightened her yellow tie before she started writing her name. This was her tenth prison in just as many weeks. She was getting sick of traveling across this country.

"Who are you looking to visit?" the prison guard asked.

“Harry Delane,” Tessa replied.

“Your relationship with him?”

Tessa stood up and brushed back her dark hair. “Shut up and let me through,” she snapped. Her stare lasered through the glass and into the guard’s eyes. This government agent was not joking around. The door buzzed and opened instantly. Tessa Narini walked through and into the visitors’ area.

Tessa sat down in front of a glass window with a speaker embedded into the center. A guard on the other side of the window guided a middle aged man to a chair. The man sat down in front of the glass opposite of Agent Narini. He stared through the window with a very confused face.

“Who are you?” Harry Delane asked. “I don’t know you.”

Tessa pulled out a folder. She started reading in front of the glass. “You’re Harold Delane, former police detective of the

Boston Police Department. You've spent six years of a fifty year sentence in this level 6 prison for theft, police corruption, and conspiracy to commit fraud." She looked up and into the glass. "I'm here to offer you a deal."

Harry Delane folded his arms. His orange jumpsuit tightened across his shoulders. He wasn't sure what this Treasury Agent was aiming at.

"Silent Spectre recommended you to me," Tessa said.

"You're the legendary cop-thief, Hax Money."

Harry swallowed, completely surprised by Tessa. This agent was well informed. Few people knew that name, even in prison. Harry had battled Silent Spectre a few times in the past, each time being a horrible experience. However, they started to respect each other after their run-ins. They also got imprisoned around the same time too. Their generation was very different

from the thieves of today. Old school thieves became ancient school thieves by the time they went into prison.

“I *am* Hax Money,” Harry said flatly. “But I don’t see how you can offer me anything. I’m in here for a while, you know.”

“That’s where I can help,” Tessa said. “Silent Spectre and Dark Rain are out and back in their old territories. I want you to go around the Atlantic North and find as many thieves as you can. Round them up, and see if there are any bigger connections with higher level players.”

“Thieves?” Harry said. “What kind of thieves?”

Tessa smiled. “I know about the Grand Larceny League,” she said. “I know there’s a league of pro thieves running around the underground. You know about it too.”

Harry’s grin disappeared. Tessa knew way more than he expected. How did she know about the GLL?

“So you know,” Harry murmured. “You want me to catch GLL thieves? You want me to see if they’ll turn and give up their owners?”

“Exactly,” Tessa said. “We can catch these thieves and make them snitch on their owners. My goal is to take down the league from the inside out. You’re one of the few people who can catch these thieves and make them talk. The name of Hax Money will make plenty of thieves sing songs that I want to hear.”

Harry Delane’s red hair seemed to almost glow in the prison room. He had worked with the owner of the Boston Bombsoldiers, ‘Mr. Greenblood’ for years. He didn’t particularly like the guy, but he got paid well. The work he did with the GLL gave him plenty of money, but it was never enough. He got greedy and tried to take more which is what got him trouble. The government put a

fifty year sentence for that trouble. But now he had a chance to leave this cursed prison.

Harry leaned in. "I'll take that deal," he said in a low voice. "I'll take on these new eastern thieves myself, no problem." He paused and sharpened his eyes at Tessa. "But I want to get to visit Chicago a few times out of the year. My daughter Rose is living there in the Hotel Mango. I have to see her."

Chapter 21

“I want to take them all on,” Emerson said, nearly shouting.

“I can take on the Showtimers by myself. Five-on-one is pretty fair odds in my opinion.”

The Chicago Ballers were in the lobby of the Hotel Mango, discussing how to plan their strategy against the Los Angeles Showtimers. Their flight to LA would be tomorrow. That would leave them three days to steal the Devil’s Piano in downtown LA. Despite the heavy injuries, Emerson’s body was healing ahead of schedule. Although not a hundred percent, he was feeling pretty solid. He wanted to take on the world and all the Showtimers. Boden and Cort had to calm him down.

“No, we have to split them up,” Boden said, pointing the bulletin board. “The Showtimers are a strong team, but we have a shot if we can split them up.”

“Agreed,” Cort said. “The Showtimers will be over confident against us. That will be their weak point. They know that we’re not that experienced so they won’t plan too hard against us.”

Boden looked at the blueprints of the building housing the Devil’s Piano. The small building was an old concert hall with five levels. The piano itself would be at the top floor. If the Ballers could isolate each Showtimer, they’d have better chances.

“I’m worried that they’ll have a counter-strategy that we’re not aware of,” Boden said, looking at the profile of the Showtimers. He turned to Cort. “Are the Showtimers good at planning strategies?”

“Not in particular,” Cort said. “They’re a rush down squad. They take on many teams with a fast and quick fighting style. They hammer their opponents and pin them down. They rely on unpredictable and wild moves, not well thought out plans. If we can slow down the pace of the fight, it’ll be better for us.”

“I’ll take on Marcus by myself,” Emerson said, not really listening to anyone. “The Magician is mine.”

“You and Cort will take him together,” Boden said. “We want to split up the Showtimers so that you can Cort can beat Marcus completely. I’ll take on their secondary players, but that’ll be hard as well. Either way, beating Marcus is our highest priority.”

Emerson stood to object. “But I can—” he started.

“No,” Boden said sharply, interrupting Emerson before he could finish. “You and Cort together. That’s the only way we can fly with this.”

Emerson promptly sat down. He wasn’t happy, but he understood.

From the lobby door, Rose came through and approached the team. She had been practicing some driving moves in the hotel parking lot. She came in with some mail in her hands.

“How’s the battle strategy going?” Rose asked. She sat down next to Emerson. “Ready to take on a legend?”

Emerson shrugged. “I don’t need a plan,” he said. “But Boden’s idea sounds all right. We should be fine.”

Boden smiled. He knew how Emerson felt, but the team came first. Without teamwork or any kind of strategy, no GLL team could succeed. Thievery at the highest level with the highest stakes required strong planners as well as strong fighters. There was always more than one side to the battle.

Rose smiled and went through the mail letters. One letter stood out from the rest; it had the black wrapping of the GLL. Rose flipped the envelope in her hands.

“A league notice,” Rose murmured. “I wonder what it’s about.”

Phyllis walked in on the three rookies. She just called up the airline to reserve their plane tickets to LA tomorrow. Phyllis saw Rose with the black envelope in her hands.

“When did that letter come in?” Phyllis asked.

“It’s some old mail actually,” Rose said, handing the letter to the coach. “We’ve been traveling a lot so a lot of our mail got crammed in. It could be a few weeks old.”

“I see,” Phyllis said. She took the envelope and opened it up.

Boden hesitated. “Is it okay for you to read that? I think that’s only for the owner.”

“Shut up,” Phyllis grunted. She looked over the papers inside for a few moments. Her eyes scanned the black papers quickly, reading the same lines several times.

“Is something wrong, Phyllis?”

Phyllis slowly looked up. Then, she smiled.

“No, it’s perfectly fine,” Phyllis replied, her face suddenly changing. “It looks like the league wanted to tell us about some changes. I’ll take this to Ron himself.”

The other Ballers were puzzled, but let it go. Questioning Phyllis was not exactly a recreational activity. They knew when not to press the issue. Phyllis left the lobby and headed towards the elevator.

Phyllis reached the top floor of the hotel and stormed into the Ronald’s office. Inside, Ronald was inside reading over a stack of paper behind a wooden desk. Ronald recently had a special seat cushion made for him to sit on. His leather office chairs were a bit too stiff for his small body. Phyllis ran in and slammed the envelope in front of Ronald.

“What are you trying to pull?” Phyllis shouted. “Why were you trying to make a trade?”

Ronald sighed and folded his hands. “Hello Phyllis,” he muttered. “It’s always great to see you when you were not invited.”

Phyllis tightened her face in front of Ronald. “Why are you trying to trade Cort?” she demanded. “Why are you trying to trade your own brother?”

Ronald stood up from his desk and walked to the window. “I was offered a deal, an amazing one,” he replied. “The San Fran Goldeners were trying to move their new entry man, Duke Wallace. They said he wants a new long term contract worth millions. They can afford it, but Duke’s become hard to manage. They offered us Duke, while we’d have to give them Cort and some cash.”

“So what happened?” Phyllis asked. “This letter says the San Fran team rejected the trade.”

“The initial trade would force me to pay a lot,” Ronald replied. “So I gave them a counter offer. In exchange for Duke and some tax breaks, I would give them Cort and the remaining dollars of his contract after this season. However, I was going to arrange for Cort to retire after the season so that I wouldn’t have to pay them anything. I’m not sure if they figured it out, but the offer was declined. Either way, the trade deadline is over now.”

“I can’t believe it,” Phyllis said. “You used your own brother as a bargaining chip.”

“Half brother,” Ronald corrected. “And this isn’t about family. Cort is barely an average thief. I’ve been taking care of him for years and will continue to do so. The trade was about money, that’s all. It would have helped the team operate better for a very reasonable price.”

“Cort has been invaluable to the team,” Phyllis said firmly. “He helped train the new kids and contributes to our planning. Most importantly, he’s someone we can trust.”

“This just shows how soft you’ve become,” Ronald muttered. “These past ten years you’ve been taking it easy, failing at the end of each season. I allowed you stay on the team even when you were doing terrible. Cort’s presence on the team didn’t help at all.”

“But we have something real now,” Phyllis argued. “We have a team worthy of the playoffs, of a championship. Cort knows our system. We need him.”

Ronald shook his head. “It doesn’t matter, the deal didn’t happen,” he said. “At least not this year.”

“You’re pathetic,” Phyllis said in disgust. “All you care about is money. Personal gain is all that interests you.”

“And you’re idiotic,” Ronald snapped back. “The Grand Larceny League is facing potential destruction because of this Agent Narini. Even worse, we could be locked up in prison for decades. We need to prepare now so we can survive the coming storm.”

Phyllis knew there was truth inside of his words; she had voiced a similar opinion to the team earlier. But Cort had been her teammate for almost a decade. Those years were filled with countless adventures and memories. She could not accept the idea of a trade lightly.

“You will regret the moment you ever thought of trading Cort,” Phyllis warned. “I will make you regret it.”

Ronald smirked. “I never regret anything,” he said. “That’s why I have true power, and you have none.”

Phyllis glared back angrily. There was always a power struggle between the team and its owner; this was just another battle. She bolted out of the office. There was work to be done.

On the airplane to Los Angeles, Emerson and Boden sat side by side each other in first class. They were planning their battle strategy for the Showtimers nonstop, constantly trying to figure out the best way to attack. They had been discussing as many ideas as possible the moment they woke up today. At first, Boden wasn't too thrilled about entering the playoffs. But now, Emerson's energy and enthusiasm made him feel more hopeful, more determined. The first class cabin echoed from the chatter between the two Chicago Ballers. Phyllis was taking a nap and Rose was reading a magazine. Cort was in the bathroom, working out a stomach problem he had from the airline food.

Boden rolled out a piece of paper onto the pull-down tray on his seat.

“We need to figure out what moves you can use against Marcus,” Boden said to Emerson. “What move are you going to open with?”

Emerson pulled a set of papers from his pocket. “I’m going to start out with my S-H-E-C jump,” he said.

“Shec-jump?” Boden said. “What’s that?”

“SHEC stands for ‘short hop energy cancel’,” Emerson said, reading his notes. “I’ve been working on this move since Detroit.”

“What does it do?”

“It lets me control the amount of energy in my shoes,” Emerson described. “When I jump, there’s a massive amount of energy built up in my shoes. It’s to protect me when I land. When I normally land, my shoes crush the ground. But if I short hop and

cancel the energy, I can land without breaking the ground. I can also jump more than once. Shec-jumping will give me a chance to be stealthy and quick.”

“Very interesting,” Boden said. He wrote down Emerson’s description on the piece of paper. “What else you got?”

“The ‘Shoe-Nail’,” Emerson said, reading down the list. “With enough focused energy, I can drill my shoes into the ceiling or wall like a nail-gun. I can nail my feet into the wall and climb up it.”

“You can walk on walls?” Boden asked.

“Sort of,” Emerson said. “It depends on the wall. If the wall is made of strong enough material, I can drill my feet into it. I tried practicing in my hotel room. It’s a little messy and extremely loud.”

Boden grinned. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“The last thing is something that I learned on my own,” Emerson said, looking up at Boden. He folded his hands in his comfy first class seat. “The fight with Zed taught me something about our imbued items. It taught me something I never noticed before.”

Boden listened in closely. He remembered the fight with Zed Harper vividly. It was not a great moment for either him or Emerson. It exposed a lot of their weaknesses that they had.

“Zed’s speed shoes didn’t just make his feet fast,” Emerson said. “They made his entire body fast. He was so quick with his hands that I couldn’t keep up with his punches.”

“I noticed,” Boden said, remembering. “Zed beat us up quick that night.”

Emerson nodded. “That’s when I thought about our imbued items. I think our imbued items can change our bodies as a

whole,” he said. He pulled down his shirt from the collar and showed Boden his upper chest. A small, barely noticeable bruise was there. “Zed slammed me hard with the Excalibur Club not too long ago. At the time, it felt like a cannonball hit me. I felt some bones in my chest crack apart. But after a few days rest, I healed up much faster than I ever have.”

“What are you saying, Emerson?” Boden asked.

“I think my imbued shoes are making my entire body stronger,” Emerson said. “I think it’s possible for the power in my shoes to spread across my entire body, making me stronger overall.”

Boden rubbed his chin. He hadn’t thought of that theory before. His own imbued item never had any effects like Emerson was describing. It was possible, but there was no time and no way to test Emerson’s idea. They had to face the Showtimers very soon.

“Zed Harper isn't likely to help us confirm your theory, Emerson,” Boden said. “But either way, you're going to have to fight Marcus. You'll need use every trick in the book to take him on.”

Emerson nodded. He had been planning for this fight for the entire season. Emerson reached into his pocket and pulled out a yellow playing card; the jack of diamonds. He didn't have a great memory, but he always remembered the first time he met Marcus. He wanted a chance to prove that he was on the championship level of the GLL. This was his time to show that he belonged there.

LAX Airport. The sunshine started beaming down on the Ballers as they left the gate of the airport. The California sun felt pleasantly warm after being stuck in an airplane. Emerson looked around with great interest. It was his first time in Los

Angeles and his first time being in the GLL playoffs. Compared to Miami, the LA weather was much less humid and moist. The dry heat of the southern California region was comfortable and relaxing compared to any other region they had traveled to. Deep inside, Emerson always knew he'd come to this town at some point. LA always had a strong legacy within the GLL. Call it fate or destiny, but it was Emerson's time to battle the legendary LA Showtimers. His first shot at the championship started here.

The Ballers entered a limousine and headed straight to the heart of downtown LA. The playoffs were starting tonight and there was no time to waste. In the GLL playoffs, teams did not stay in the designated cities for long. Teams flew in, battled for the targets, then took them in. There was no time for rest or sleep. The playoffs were a serious time for the GLL; champions and legends were born through these battles. Emerson didn't want to miss a moment of it.

The limousine dropped off the Ballers on West Fifth Street and Pency Avenue in LA's downtown area. The Ballers stepped out, still not completely used to the sunny weather, towards the music hall where the Devil's Piano was being housed. Emerson and his team saw the music hall from the street. The building had a simple design, almost dull compared to the rest of LA. They walked up to the front of the door. Emerson looked up and saw the front sign, "Sunshine Sounds of Los Angeles".

Emerson, Boden, and Cort approached the front side whereas Phyllis and Rose approached the side entrance.

Emerson pulled open the door, feeling almost confused. The door was unlocked and opened smoothly. As he pulled on the door, he felt a gust in the air near his ear.

"Go home, Emerson," a whisper hushed through his ear.
"Your time isn't here yet."

Emerson looked around, even more confused. Someone had said something to him.

“Did you hear that?” Emerson asked Boden. “Where did that come from?”

Boden didn't hear a thing. “What are you talking about?”

Emerson smiled. He knew who had whispered to him.

“Marcus,” he said softly. “He's here.”

The three Ballers walked into the music hall, unsure what to expect. The main forum was empty, completely silent. At the end of the floor, there was a wide, open stairway to the floor above them. The stone steps were beautiful, polished green marble with music notes etched into the sides. The sound of Emerson's breathing echoing throughout the silent hall. Boden felt more and more nervous with every passing second.

“Where are these Showtimers?” Boden murmured to himself. He had his invisible sword in hand, ready for anything. “I can’t sense them yet.”

Cort was looking around as well. He was waiting for Marcus to show up. If any of the other Showtimers besides Marcus fought him, he would lose instantly. Cort wanted to target Marcus right away.

Emerson walked up some of the steps, hoping to see if anyone was hiding around. He looked around from the steps. There was something strange about the situation. Marcus the Magician was not a thief who would try to sneak past them. He would not steal the Devil’s Piano without an honest battle. Ever since their meeting from the pre-season, Emerson knew that Marcus wanted to fight him just as much as he did.

Emerson was about to go up another step when he heard someone come down the stairs. Quiet footsteps echoed from

the stone. Emerson looked up and prepared himself. A man in a purple jacket with yellow stripes on the back walked down. The hall started to light up; the West Coast Magician was here.

“Emerson the Jumpstar,” Marcus chuckled. “You finally made it LA. Too bad you won’t be leaving alive.”

Emerson grinned. “You’re mine, Marcus!” he shouted.

Cort saw Emerson ready to fight Marcus. Cort and Emerson were supposed to double-team Marcus together. “Emerson, wait!” he yelled.

Boden and Cort started to run towards the stairs. Boden took a step forward when something large flew in from the side door. A figure crashed down into the floor and blew apart of the stone. Stone tiles and concrete exploded apart from the impact. Boden and Cort flew back from the force of the explosion. They fell to the ground, landing on their backs. Boden looked at the

spot where the figure landed. A short figure rose from the hole it created. The person had a tiny frame, barely five feet tall. He stepped out of the crushed ground and adjusted his yellow glasses. Boden had prepared for this person for the last two weeks. Louis Ferdinand, Lord of the GLL Giants. He was one of the oldest thieves in the Grand Larceny League. Boden read his file but there wasn't much information on him. Louis had started as a thief before the crash of the second millennium. He came before Silent Spectre, even before Marcus and Sally Saga. Louis was a living ancestor of the current era of thieves. Boden was a rookie, but his opponent would be a legend. He just hoped he wouldn't die today.

“Louis, stop Boden and Cort,” Marcus said from the top of the stairs. “Don't let Cort come up to the second floor!”

Marcus turned and ran up the second flight of stairs. Boden blinked at Marcus' statement. Cort really was a threat to Marcus.

Emerson kicked his legs and bolted after Marcus. Without even a moment's hesitation, Emerson ran after him. He chased after him to the next floor.

Louis Ferdinand calmly stepped between the stairs and Boden and Cort. His tiny frame seemed so small compared to the rest of the hall. Louis' short body reminded Cort of Ronald. He was so short, yet so frightening at the same time. With every step he took, the stone tiles cracked underneath his feet. The footsteps sound like hammers on an anvil. Boden and Cort weren't sure what to do. Marcus caught them off guard and split them up. They didn't want to fight like this.

"This isn't good, Boden," Cort said softly. "I can take on Marcus, but not Louis. He's way too strong for me."

"I know," Boden said. "This guy is my responsibility."

Louis smiled. His yellow suit jacket was untouched from the dust and rubble. Louis reached down and touched his midsection. Boden looked at his waist. There was a black leather belt. It was in the shape of a black snake's body. It wrapped around Louis' slim waist tightly. Boden had heard about a similar imbued item.

"Jackson from Cleveland had an imbued belt as well," Boden said to himself. "But his belt was white, not black."

Louis reached to his waist and unbuckled his belt. He gripped the metal buckle and grinned at Boden.

"My belt is imbued," Louis said, his deep voice echoing in the hall. "But it's only for practical use. It is *not* a weapon."

Louis slid the belt through the loops of his pants and threw it onto the ground. The buckle clanked off the floor. Boden was

surprised. If that belt was an imbued weapon, why did he toss it away?

To Boden's surprise, Louis' body started to shake. There was a slight movement to his body. Boden could sense a vibration emitting powerfully from Louis' tiny body. Louis tossed off his suit jacket and revealed a muscular upper body. His body suddenly changed in front of Boden. Louis's short arms extended out, reaching far. Louis's body continued to shake and spread apart, expanding fast. Boden couldn't believe it. Louis had turned into a twelve-foot giant with extremely long arms and legs. He towered over Boden like a mountain.

"What happened to the imbued belt?" Boden said. He took a step back from Louis' presence. It was impossible not to feel small in front of him. "You're not even wearing it."

Louis smiled. His yellow glasses still shined on his face. "Don't you understand?" he said. "If I walked around at this height, it'd

be too bothersome. This is my natural size. The belt makes my body *smaller*, not bigger.”

Boden’s heart nearly jumped into his throat. It was impossible he thought. Louis was naturally this big? Was this the power of a pre-Crash thief?

Louis pounded his fists together. “Let us fight, Shadow-Blade Boden,” his deep voice bellowed. “Before I retire, I need to win another title. This is the first step to the championship. You will be my first victim of the playoffs, Boden Campbell.”

Emerson panted as he ran up the open stairwell. With every stride of his run, he took he climbed five steps. He ran faster and faster, going after Marcus the Magician. He knew that Boden could his own ground and protect Cort at the same time. Emerson had to fight Marcus with Cort alongside him, but the

plan changed. And to be frankly honest, he didn't want it any other way.

Emerson reached the second floor and skidded on the marble. He saw Marcus all the way at the back of another large music hall. This hall had gold and silver tiles on the floor. The gold and silver tiles interchanged with other all across the floor like a giant chessboard. The high ceiling arched over the both of them like a beautiful cathedral. From the inside, the building had a surprisingly beautiful décor compared to the outside.

Marcus was sitting cross-legged on the ground. Somehow, he reached the second floor much faster than Emerson did. He had a pair of purple ear-buds in his ears, listening to music as he waited from Emerson. Marcus sat about fifty feet away from Emerson and the entrance. He pulled on ear-bud out and grinned widely at Emerson Jay.

“Took you long enough to get here, rookie,” Marcus said, tapping his fingers in rhythm with the music. “I’ve been listening to a soundtrack while your slow feet brought you up here. I love music, but I was getting bored.”

Emerson cracked the knuckles in his right hand one by one. “After I’m done with you today, music will be all you have left, Marcus.”

Emerson raised his right fist and punched the nearest wall to him. The solid stone wall shook and cracked open from his punch. Emerson pulled back his fist and looked down at it. There wasn’t any doubt anymore; his whole body was becoming stronger.

Marcus yawned. “If that’s all you can do, then I’d be worried,” he said, lazily. “Everyone in the GLL has power, Emerson. What matters is what you can do with that power.”

Marcus raised his left hand and slapped the tiled floor. In an instant, tiles from the ground popped off from the floor, shattering in the air. The tiles sound like machine gun fire as they cracked apart one by one. Emerson covered his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he looked down at the floor. A large “M” was carved into the floor right in front of him. Emerson was impressed.

“Nice trick,” Emerson remarked. “But tricks won’t be enough. I’m not the same rookie you saw before the season started. I’m going to beat you down then take this year’s championship. I’m going to win it all!”

Emerson jumped into the air. He soared far, covering the fifty-foot distance between him and Marcus. He pointed his feet out and focused. “Jump and cancel the energy,” he said to himself.

Emerson's green shoes hit the floor, but didn't destroy the ground. He pulled back the energy and landed smoothly in front of Marcus. He raised his right fist and threw it downward at Marcus' head. Marcus chuckled silently and rolled backwards, a single ear-bud in his left ear. Emerson's fist hit the ground and cracked the floor. He barely missed hitting the Magician.

"Whew," Marcus said, his grin disappearing. He stood to the side and looked back at Emerson. "That could have been dangerous."

Emerson saw Marcus' reaction to his attack. Compared to Zed Harper, Marcus was a slow turtle. Emerson could definitely read his movements. On top of that, he felt confident that his attacks were strong enough to hurt him. Without saying anything, Emerson turned and faced Marcus once more. He wanted, no he *needed* to face this former GLL champ head on. Nothing else would satisfy Emerson.

Marcus saw Emerson's stance. He could see his intentions from a mile away. For the first time since they had met, Marcus felt anger towards Emerson. "You want to fight *me*, the West Coast Magician, straight up?" he said angrily. "If I can't beat some punk rookie, then the whole league will laugh at me. How can I run away from a challenge like this?"

Marcus ran in, his purple ear-bud still blaring music into his ear. Emerson short-hopped in and raised his fists. Marcus reached back and threw a punch in as well. The two thieves slammed their punches into each other, their fists colliding. Emerson threw a wide left hook. Marcus ducked down low and threw a left counter punch. Emerson had seen this type of punch from Kane Jones. He dashed backwards as Marcus' left fist hit nothing but air. Emerson pulled out his silver chain from inside the back of his pants. He whipped it out sideways and snapped it hard. He aimed the chain at Marcus' upper body.

Marcus raised his eyes. He saw the chain shine in the air. Instinctively, he raised his left arm to block. The silver chain wrapped around his arm and wrist like a whip. Marcus felt the metal chain links tighten on his forearm. "He used this attack on Kane," he grunted.

Emerson pulled on the chain with both hands. He yanked hard, dragging Marcus into him. Emerson raised his back foot and kicked. He threw a glowing green shoe into Marcus' ribs. Marcus nearly choked on his tongue from the strike.

Emerson saw the painful reaction. He had caught the Magician. He let go of the chain with his right hand, but kept it in his left. He threw a right straight punch into Marcus. The fist hit Marcus in chest, slamming into him hard. Emerson still kept Marcus' left arm chained up. He opened with a move of his own and gained the upper hand on the Magician.

“I need to hit harder,” Emerson muttered to himself. “I need to beat him harder!”

Emerson raised his right foot and threw it downwards.

Marcus was still focused on the chain on his arm. Emerson aimed his green shoe downwards at Marcus' leg. The green shoe dug into Marcus' left knee, hitting it hard and fast. Marcus grunted painfully. Emerson's shoes were strong enough to break concrete walls. He took the full brunt of his attack.

“My turn,” Marcus whispered.

Marcus pulled on the other end of the chain. He saw Emerson's foot was still up from kicking him. Marcus pulled on the chain as Emerson was on one leg. Emerson felt the imbalance and his leg gave in. Marcus dragged him in and punched him hard in the chin. A sharp, stinging pain pierced through Emerson's jaw. Marcus let go of the chain and pulled his arm off the chain-links; his arm was free again. He threw another punch

at Emerson's forehead, making his head fling back. Marcus and Emerson finally separated, creating some distance from each other.

"You're strong," Emerson said to Marcus, panting hard. He realized only a few minutes had passed since he reached the second floor. "You're pretty good for an old thief."

Marcus smiled and rubbed his knee. There was a stinging pain, but nothing serious. "I gave you a chance to show me your best hits," he said, calming himself. "They weren't bad for a rookie. You will die well today, Emerson."

Marcus spread out his arms and straightened out his hands. Emerson didn't understand what he was doing. Marcus threw his hands together and clapped them hard. Emerson dashed in, unsure of the attack. From his hands, a shockwave of sound blasted at Emerson. A sound wave of sheer force hit Emerson full on from less than three feet away. The force hit him like a bomb,

sending his entire body off the ground. Emerson flew across the floor and hit the opposing wall. The back of his head bounced off the wall hard, cutting skin and making him dizzy.

Emerson leaned against the wall painfully. "What was that?" he muttered. "What kind of ability does he have?"

Marcus stood up and straightened his body. His hands seemed to vibrate in front of him. "I'm about to go all out, Emerson," he said, his grin widening even farther. "Please don't die too quickly."

Chapter 22

Cort ran back to the inside wall. He was farther away from the steps to the second floor, but he couldn't help it. The battle between Boden Campbell and Louis Ferdinand raged on in front of him. Louis' enormous frame was not just for show; he had the power of giants. If he wanted a chance to fight Marcus, he needed a way to get past him.

Boden rolled to the side and held his sword handle tightly. Louis stood over him, shirtless with his arms reaching out. His long arms were six feet long each, his entire wingspan was thirteen feet wide. Boden wasn't sure how to fight Louis. He underestimated Louis' overall reach and length. This man used an imbued belt to suppress his massive power, not enhance it. Boden could barely imagine the full power Louis really had.

“I got to make an opening for Cort,” Boden said in a low voice. “We can’t beat this monster, but Cort might be able to help take on Marcus.” Boden flipped his blade around. Only he could see his own blade. He had trusted his invisible blade for years, using it beat fighters all across the world. Only since joining the GLL did he realize how many strong fighters were out there. If he couldn’t even break through the first round of the playoffs, what use was he?

Boden dashed in with his blade, gripping the handle with both hands. He swung the blade horizontally across. Louis took one step back. Even as a giant he didn’t want to be sliced from that sword. Louis stepped back and swung his arm at Boden. The gust from the swing blew back Boden’s hair. He couldn’t afford to get hit by that giant arm. Louis raised his foot and stomped the ground. The floor shook heavily under Boden’s feet. The power was on par with Emerson’s shoes.

“He’s strong,” Boden muttered. “Maybe the strongest I’ve ever seen.”

Boden raised his sword one more time. He had to take down this giant somehow. He relaxed his grip a little and arched the blade over his head. He counted the steps between him and Louis. Three steps to reach him, Boden thought.

Boden exhaled softly. He calmed himself, readying himself for his opening move. One hit could decide the entire fight. Boden saw Louis’ gigantic feet shift. If he wanted to slow Louis down, he needed to go for the lower body. If he could slice open his ankle, even a giant would be able to go down.

Boden dashed in, his first step fast as ever. Louis narrowed his eyes on Boden’s movement. He saw the Chicago Baller move at him. A second step. Boden gained momentum and his speed increased. Louis clenched his fists hard. He would pound Boden into the ground the moment he stepped within his range.

Boden's foot was about to land on more time. His feet moved fast, but Louis could see every single step. Boden was going to get demolished.

Boden's right foot descended fast. His final step was about to finish. Louis readied his fist and tracked Boden as he moved. He couldn't see his sword so he would follow Boden's feet with his eyes. A sudden shimmer occurred around Boden's body. To his Louis' surprise, he saw a large blade appeared out of nowhere. A shiny gold handle with a ruby in the hilt shined in the air. A long, double-edged, broadsword shined brightly, floating in the air. Louis could see the sword clearly, but something was missing; Boden had disappeared.

"Impossible," Louis blurted out, his eyes scanning the area for Boden. "He's gone."

Louis never saw Boden's last step. The blade shined bright and sliced through the air. It slashed into Louis' lower leg, right

above the ankle. The long blade cut hard into the hard muscular leg, spilling the blood of a giant. Louis roared from the pain. He didn't expect this attack at all.

Boden's feet slid across the marble floor. He hit his target. He breathed hard, unsure how his body had turned invisible just then. He remembered Emerson's statement from the plane; their imbued items might be changing their bodies.

Boden looked over his shoulder. He remembered the plan. "Cort!" he shouted. "Get to the second floor and help Emerson!"

Cort ran out from the corner. He weaved through the debris and headed to the stairs. But without warning, a giant hand slammed the ground hard in front of him.

"You're not going anywhere," Louis growled. His sliced open leg bended and he was down on one knee.

Boden turned around and raised his blade again. He was visible again, but his blade couldn't be seen. Boden swung his blade downwards at Louis' leg again. Louis caught the blade with his giant left hand. The blade cut in, but it went into his palm. Boden couldn't pull his blade out because the large hand had covered the entire sword. Louis backhanded Boden's whole body with his other arm. Boden and his sword went flying across the hall and landed painfully on the marble floor. It felt like a tank had hit him. Boden could feel broken bones in his chest.

Louis rubbed the cut on his hand. Boden's blade had cut deep, but he'd survive. He turned and focused his attention on Cort. If Boden was out of commission, he needed to take out Cort before he could get to Marcus. Cort looked around him; he'd got stuck in the corner with no way out. Louis stood up, trying to straighten out his cut leg. He raised his fist one more

time and aimed for Cort. These Ballers needed to be taken out fast.

From the wall next to Cort, the thieves heard a slight rumble. Then, an explosion. A red jeep rammed through the wall and plowed into the music hall. Louis turned to see what came through the wall. It was Rose. She drove the jeep through and into the hall. The jeep bounced up and down over the crushed parts of the wall and headed straight at Louis. The front metal grill of the jeep crashed into Louis' cut leg, bringing him crashing down. Louis howled in extreme pain. Rose pointed at Cort.

“Go!” Rose shouted from the driver's seat. “Help out Emerson! We'll take on Louis down here.”

Cort nodded and bolted towards the steps without any hesitation. He ran past the wrecked stone and concrete and headed up the stairs. Sweat poured down his face, soaking his

beard heavily. He couldn't help Boden and Rose, but Emerson needed his help. The battle was changing.

Emerson pulled himself off the wall. He had a heavy glare on his face. His fight with Marcus wasn't going to plan. At first, he thought he could keep up with Marcus. He wasn't stronger than Kane Jones or faster than Zed so Emerson figured he had a solid shot. Clearly Marcus the Magician had some more tricks up his sleeve.

Marcus stepped towards Emerson. He could easily read Emerson's emotions. "What's the matter, rookie?" he shouted. "Is there something wrong?"

Emerson flinched at the taunt. Marcus's plan was to provoke him, to goad him into attack first. Unfortunately, the plan worked.

“I can’t run away from a challenge like that,” Emerson said to himself. “If I’m going to be the champ, I have to move forward!”

Emerson jump-dashed in and picked up his silver chain. He ran and went straight at Marcus. He wasn’t sure what ability Marcus had, but something told him that he needed every weapon. Marcus saw Emerson’s determination and laughed. This rookie had no fear.

“Bring your best, Emerson,” Marcus sneered. “You’re going to need it.”

Emerson leaped in and whipped his chain at Marcus. He aimed the chain directly at Marcus’ head, hoping to knock him out with a single blow. Marcus yawned and put both his purple earbuds in his ears.

“I’ll let you attack me until this song is over,” Marcus said, covering his yawn. He turned up the volume on his portable music player. “I don’t really feel like moving until then.”

Emerson’s chain went down fast in a metal blur. He saw the chain go down towards the top of Marcus when something shimmered near the chain. The end of the chain link bounced off like a wet towel and vibrated hard in Emerson’s hands. The chain never touched Marcus.

“Is that it?” Marcus said loudly, still listening to music.

Emerson grunted. He put the chain back into the pocket of his jeans. Marcus wasn’t taking him seriously at all. “If he wants me to fight for real, then he’s got it,” he said.

Emerson jumped in, completely ignoring the fact that he might get killed by Marcus. He raised his feet and pointed them at Marcus. The heels of his shoes pointed sharply at Marcus. The

glowing green shoes went hard at Marcus. Emerson slammed the shoes as hard as he could at Marcus the Magician, hoping with all his might that he could at least hit him.

Marcus stood in the same position with no movement, still folding his arms and listening to the last minute of his song. Emerson pointed his shoes at Marcus' face. Marcus opened his mouth and whistled. Without hitting him, Emerson bounced off of Marcus hard. He flipped in mid-air and landed several feet away from Marcus.

"His body is covered in some kind of sound shield," Emerson muttered to himself. "I can't break through."

Marcus saw Emerson's reaction. He smiled, knowing full well that Emerson had no chance of beating him. Emerson tried to remain calm. He tried observing Marcus, searching for an imbued item that he might be using. Could it be the earbuds? Was it the music that gave him such power?

“You seem confused,” Marcus said, snickering. “You must be wondering what kind of ability I have.”

Emerson didn't reply. He saw no imbued item on Marcus that could be giving him any kind of powers.

“Many thieves of this current generation rely on imbued items,” Marcus said. “You and your secondary wing are examples of that. But there was once a time where imbued items didn't exist yet. Instead of imbuing items, people imbued *people* with special powers and abilities.”

Emerson didn't understand. “What?” he said. “There are imbued people?”

Marcus gave out a low chuckle. “Instead of imbuing items, all of the passion and emotions of a person went into another person,” he said. “Special powers and abilities came out as a result. Of course, it was much riskier than imbuing random items

because some people weren't able to handle it. Many thieves died because of imbued abilities."

Emerson could hardly believe it. Imbued abilities? What kind of generation did Marcus come from?

"In the old days, we never called them imbued abilities," Marcus said, continuing. "We named them 'curses'. We are the cursed ones that have the power of gods."

Marcus lifted his right hand. He snapped his fingers quickly at Emerson. Caught unaware, a blast of wind and sound hit Emerson in the face. Emerson's head snapped back and he staggered for a second. He didn't see what hit him.

"I have the power of sound," Marcus said. He saw Emerson's confused reaction. He saw that Emerson had no clue how to face him. Marcus reached down and turned off his portable music player. He pulled out the earphones and looked up. "My

song just ended. You did well at first, but it's over for you, Emerson. You're done."

Emerson clenched his teeth hard. He refused to believe that Marcus had that much power. He ran at Marcus. He had trained and worked too hard for this fight to end like this. Marcus clapped his hands at Emerson once more. A wave of sound blasted right at him. Emerson jumped high and flipped around in the air. He turned his body around and landed on the wall behind Marcus. His feet slammed into the wall and dug in. His feet stuck to the wall like nails on the wall. The concrete wall shook from Emerson's feet. The shoe-nail move had saved him from getting hit.

Marcus looked up and saw Emerson hanging on the wall. He pressed his hand on the wall. A heavy vibration echoed through the wall. The concrete shattered behind Marcus' hand. The wall crumbled, shattering completely. Emerson fell down,

feeling like he was surfing without a surfboard. Emerson hit the ground hard with the stone pieces of the wall falling down with him. Marcus laughed as he saw Emerson trying to get up.

“Excellent try,” Marcus said. “You’re using adaptation, improvisation, even some creating some new techniques. You’re learning.”

Emerson pushed the rubble off his shoulders. He heard Marcus’ words, but he couldn’t accept them. He didn’t want to learn, he wanted to win. “As a reward, I’ll show you my strongest move,” Marcus said. “If you survive it, we’ll have to have a drink together sometime, Emerson.”

Marcus took a few steps back. He faced Emerson and widened his legs. He took a deep breath. He inhaled smoothly, evenly. His chest lifted and his mouth exhaled. Emerson’s molars started to shake. The muscles and bones in his ears started to vibrate. Marcus opened his mouth and a sonic blast was

released from his voice. The powerful scream lifted Emerson's body and blew him across the hall. Emerson hit the floor once more, his ears bleeding and his bones shaking. The force hit him so hard his body was numb.

Emerson tried pulling himself up. The power of Marcus' scream was impossibly powerful. Emerson felt himself losing consciousness with every second. His eyes saw Marcus still standing. He wanted to fight, but his body was failing him. Marcus had demolished him, straight up. Even worse, he let Emerson believe for a moment that he could have beaten him. Emerson's hands trembled as his eyes closed and his head went down. Did he ever have a chance to win in this league?

Marcus saw Emerson pass out on the floor. He smiled and gave him a wink. "Your time will come, kid," he said. "It's just won't happen right now."

Marcus left Emerson on the second floor and headed to the next level. He went to the next stairway and lifted his foot. He took a step and his knee nearly gave out. Emerson nearly caved in his knee. Without his sound power, he would have been killed by Emerson. Ages ago, he would have been angry that he couldn't have beaten Emerson with his fists alone. But time took its toll on him. How many years did he have left in this league? How many years did it take for him to get here? Emerson would have his day when he retired, Marcus thought.

Marcus reached the next floor where the Devil's Piano was being displayed. He was going to need Louis' help to bring down the piano, but he figured he could get it started. Marcus opened the door to the third floor music hall. He grunted as he opened the tall double doors. Marcus walked in, happy that the worst was over. With Emerson out of commission, it'd be clear sailing.

“Been a while, Marcus,” Cort said, sitting on the red piano bench. He rotated his neck and cracked his fingers. “I’ve been looking for you.”

Marcus eyes narrowed. Louis was supposed to have taken care of Cort. This changed things for him. Cort was sitting on the bench of the blood-red piano in the room. The piano shined behind from where Cort was sitting. Marcus wanted to take the piano, but Cort was in the way. This wouldn’t be easy.

“I told you from the pre-season that I’d have you killed if you got in my way,” Marcus said sharply. “Get out of here before you really die.”

Cort stood up. He looked across the hall. Marcus had aged well over the years. Overall, Marcus still looked relatively same after so many years. The both of them had been in the game for so long. Time had barely changed Marcus, but Cort felt old. For many years, Cort and Marcus had been partners in crime and

the best of friends. Ten years ago, instead of going west with Marcus, Cort stayed in Chicago with his brother Ronald.

Sometimes he regretted his decision. It was hard letting go of their friendship. It was hard pretending that he didn't miss his friend.

"I'm not like Emerson," Cort said, standing up. He took a step towards his former friend. "Your attacks aren't enough to beat me."

Marcus grimaced. He spread his arms once more and slapped them hard together. A slicing sound echoed through the hall. The floor shook and trembled from the vibrating sound. The blast hit Cort dead on, right on his body. Instead of falling to the ground, Cort smiled.

"You'll have to do better than an attack with sound, Marky boy," Cort said with a grin. "You might have thunder, but you don't have any lightning."

Marcus hated when Cort called him “Marky”; such a childish nickname. He took a deep breath, sucking in a chestful of air. He pushed air and sound through his lungs and out of his mouth. He shot a bullet of sound at Cort's face. The sound pressure evaporated before it even touched Cort.

“Your imbued ability can't work on me, remember?” Cort said. He raised his hand and pointed at Marcus. “After all, I'm on the one who gave it to you.”

A stinging sensation hit Marcus as memories flooded back into his mind. Before the Crash, he and Cort had battled the cops and went after scores together for years. They risked their lives so many times back in the pre-Crash days. The time that Marcus actually almost died, Cort had saved him. Somehow, the imbued ability was given to him as well. His power had increased dramatically, but there was a price. Marcus couldn't harm Cort

at all, not with an attack of sound. In fact, attacking him in general was impossible.

“So what do we do?” Marcus said from across the third floor hall. “You can’t kill me either. You’re way too weak to beat me straight up. If you stay there for too long, Louis will come up and take you out. You have less options than I do.”

Cort reached in his back pocket. He pulled out a large pair of black headphones. The headphones were bulky and had an antenna on the side. Cort walked back to the Devil’s piano. He sat on the bench and put the headphones on his ears. He lifted the case of the piano and looked down at the keys. Instead of the usual white ivory, the keys were black. The sharp and flat keys were a bright red, looking much like lines of blood. Eighty-eight keys in all, the keyboard itself looked magnificent. Cort pressed down on one of his favorite notes; a bass clef G flat.

The note rang out beautifully in the hall, a single note hanging in the air. Before Marcus could say anything, the note rang in his ears. The sound vibrated his ear drum and went down to his chest. He felt like someone hit him with a baseball bat to the back of the head and then punched him in the gut. He staggered to keep his balance.

Cort pulled off his headphones for a moment. "The Devil's Piano is an imbued item," he said calmly. "When it's played, it emits notes that feel like an attack. This piano is basically a weapon."

"That piano will kill us both," Marcus gasped. He could feel blood starting to run down his nose. "You'll die as well if you play it."

Cort shook his head. He tapped his headphones to show Marcus the frequency receiver. "This is a high definition noise-cancelling head set," he said. "It's heavy, but the battery and

antenna cancel out any ambient sounds near me. Not only that, they absorb sound and cover my ears pretty well. I might not be able to hear the sounds of this beautiful piano, but I certainly won't die either."

Cort pressed two notes this time; C sharp and D. The two simple notes echoed beautifully, the sound clearer than any symphony around the world. Marcus felt a vibration pound him in the right shoulder and another hit him in his hip; the piano targeted different parts of his body.

Cort continued to hit notes with his right hand only, having no pattern to the key strokes. A hectic succession of sounds pelted Marcus hard, his whole body getting pounded by an invisible force. At the piano bench, Cort could hear absolutely nothing. He closed his eyes, trying to keep the fear from away from his mind.

Finally, Cort paused for a moment. He could hear nothing around him because of the headphones. Marcus on the other hand, could barely stand. His body was battered and bloody from the attacks. He wanted to counter attack, but at this point he was too weak. Marcus fell to his knees, his energy nearly all gone.

Cort raised both hands. He didn't have much musical talent; Marcus was always the one who could sing and entertain the crowd. However, Cort did know how to play one particular song on the piano: 'Brandy' by the Looking Glass. He and Marcus had sung this song at karaoke bars for years. Cort lowered his hands, the tips of his fingers landing first. It felt strange not hearing the music from the piano, but Cort pressed on. The headphones may have blocked all the sound in his ears, but he could still feel the black keys under his fingers. He played every note as deeply as he could, letting out the rhythm in beautiful

succession. Cort wanted to hear the notes so badly, to hear the song being played at its fullest. But he remembered that this piano was a weapon, an instrument of death and destruction. And he was using this instrument on his old friend.

Marcus heard the music, the familiar song from the Looking Glass hitting his ears melodically. The notes resonated deeply within, each note bringing about a memory with Cort. As the song winded down, Marcus smiled. He remembered every note of this particular song. In the old days, he sang the vocals while Cort played the keyboard. Cort played the last note, dropping his fingers on a lonely C note. He looked to the side and stared at Marcus.

“I’m sorry,” Cort whispered, unable to hear his own words.
“This is goodbye.”

The last note faded away in the music hall, leaving a ghostly feel to the room. Marcus fell to the ground, face forward. A thud

echoed out as the Magician hit the floor. Cort yanked off his headphones and ran towards Marcus. For a moment, he forgot that he was supposed to be stealing the Devil's Piano and ran towards his friend. Cort dashed over and gripped Marcus by the shoulders. He turned him over, pulling by his shoulders. Marcus' eyes were closed and his body was limp. Cort's hands trembled as he held Marcus. Cort closed his eyes tightly. Had he really stolen someone's life?

A heartbeat. Then, another. Cort's eyes opened. Was it his own heart thumping so loudly? The body in Cort's hands twitched. Marcus sprung up from the floor. He jumped and landed on his feet. The Magician lived.

"That took some precise timing, but it worked," Marcus muttered, wiping the blood from his ears. He rotated his neck, making a cracking sound. "The Devil's Piano makes some beautiful music."

Cort wiped his face. He was still on the floor. He looked up and gaped at Marcus. How had he survived?

“Impossible,” Cort said, standing up. “The piano should have killed you. What did you do?”

Marcus grinned. For a dead man, he still looked quite good. He pointed at the headphones near the piano bench. “The noise cancellation headphones,” he said. “They gave me quite the idea.”

Cort looked at the headphones. He didn’t understand. What did the headphones have to do with anything?

“You gave me the power of sound, Corty,” Marcus said. He tapped his chest. “I can produce any sound at any frequency. At first, I couldn’t tell what notes you were playing; the keys were random. But once you started playing ‘Brandy’, I knew every note that would ring out. I cancelled the sound by emitting an

anti-noise signal, just like your headphones. Only problem is that the Devil's Piano is quite powerful. I still have a headache after hearing that song."

Cort was shocked. He knew Marcus had the power of sound, but he still thought the piano would kill him. He had prepared himself mentally for killing his former friend.

Marcus walked past Cort, wiping the blood off his cheek. He completely ignored him and went towards the Devil's piano. Cort was no fighter, he wouldn't be able to stop him. Marcus focused his attention on the large grand piano. It'd be a pain to carry it down without Louis. Marcus was already trying to figure out a way to get it downstairs.

Before Marcus could reach for the piano, he shifted his attention downwards. He could hear a vibration coming from the beneath the floor. Marcus' instincts told him not to step forward; something was coming from the floor below.

The floor exploded in a rush of concrete and metal, the chunks of the marble floor flew around the room. Marcus covered himself with his sound armor, letting the stone pieces bounce off of him. After the dust and debris settled, Marcus peered at the gaping hole in the floor. Something had blasted its way through from the second floor and up into the third.

“Marcus,” Emerson growled. He stood in front of the Magician with dried blood on his ears. “You got me good, but the fight's not over. This is round two!”

Marcus blinked in surprise. Emerson had blasted through the ceiling after being completely beaten earlier. The rookie could take his hits.

“I beat you once already, rook,” Marcus said. He turned and pointed at Cort. “I just beat your entry man as well. What do you think will change this time around?”

Emerson looked at Cort. He saw that Cort was untouched and uninjured. Marcus must have found a way around him. Emerson jumped high over Marcus and landed safely next to Cort. The Magician tracked Emerson with his eyes, unsure of what he was trying to do. Emerson walked up to Cort and took a look at his face. Cort seemed completely fine. Emerson clenched his fist hard. He punched Cort in the face, directly on the nose.

Cort's face flung back, his nose pointing to the ceiling. He felt a slight crunch from the bones in his face. Emerson the Jumpstar broke his nose.

“What was that for?” Cort said, covering his face with a hand. He could feel blood spilling down. “You hit the wrong guy, Emerson!”

Emerson lifted his hand; Cort's blood was on his knuckles. He smiled and smeared the blood over his whole right hand.

Emerson dashed away from Cort and ran back at Marcus. He rushed hard at the Magician, running at top speed. Marcus folded his arms. He raised a barrier of sound around his body. There was no way Emerson could hit him. Emerson jumped up and raised his fist. He flew into the air and threw his fist down. The blood-covered knuckles slammed into Marcus' cheek, a solid hit to the face.

Marcus' face snapped back and his legs buckled. How did Emerson get through his shield?

Emerson raised his foot and slammed it down. The floor shook for a moment, catching Marcus off balance. Emerson rushed in once more and slammed his right fist into Marcus' stomach. The hard knuckles went in deep, nearly making Marcus pass out. He backed away, feeling incredible pain in his insides. Emerson was beating him.

“How?” Marcus gasped. His midsection was on fire. “You shouldn’t be able to...”

“Able to hit you?” Emerson said. He raised his fist. Cort’s blood was still smeared all over his hand. “I know that Cort somehow cancels out your ability. I figured his blood might do the same. I don’t know what exactly happened between you two, but I’m here to settle it. Cort and I can’t beat you individually, but we can do it together. The Ballers are going to win tonight!”

Marcus scowled. At first, he was impressed by Emerson’s determination. Now, he was just very angry.

“You Chicago thieves are done,” Marcus snarled. “I will end this.”

Marcus snapped the fingers on both of his hands, letting out a couple of deafening sounds. The snapping sound echoed

hard in the hall. Emerson's face got hit by sound and air. It sliced into his face like a whip.

“Your fist might be protected, but the rest of you is not,” Marcus said sharply. “You can hit me, but I can hit back.”

Emerson's face still stung, but he grinned widely. This was a battle of taking hits; he wouldn't lose this one. Emerson saw the Devil's Piano behind Marcus. He figured if it was time to die, he'd take Marcus with him. Emerson raised his right foot high. He instead of focusing it on one spot, he wanted to shake the entire floor. Emerson slammed his foot down, spreading the power across the hall. The hall shook heavily with a massive quake. Any more hits like that the entire third floor might fall down. From behind Marcus, the Devil's Piano shook, the keys rattled and rang out. Even when shook, the piano notes still sounded beautiful and clear. However, the sound pierced hard into

Emerson and Marcus, even Cort felt the hit. All three thieves, buckled under the sound.

Marcus' knees folded down. He had taken a lot of damage today from the piano and from Emerson. His hands hit the ground and he had to hold himself up. Marcus took a deep breath. He told himself two seasons ago, he would have held up better. Age was stealing the stamina from him. Emerson on the other hand, still had the power of youth. He stood tall over Marcus. He took a lot of hits as well, but he still had plenty of fight left in him. Emerson stepped towards Marcus, confident in his victory.

As Emerson passed the hole in the floor that he made, something came through. A giant hand reached through the hole from the floor and swatted away Emerson. It hit him across his entire body and sent him flying at the wall. Emerson's head hit the wall and he passed out. Cort saw another giant hand reach

through the hole. The hand tossed Boden and Rose's unconscious bodies onto the third floor hall. Someone had beaten them to a pulp. Louis' giant figure climbed up through the floor. Cort saw the cuts and injuries on Louis' long arms. Louis stood tall over Marcus and gave a heavy sigh.

"I thought you could beat the Jumpstar without me," Louis said, his deep voice sounding tired. "Shadowblade Boden was a lot of work for me. Any more fighting and I would have had to kill him."

"Sorry, big man," Marcus said, standing up. He gave Louis a friendly tap on his leg. "These rookies get stronger every year. Thanks for the back up."

Cort saw the two LA Showtimers stand in their victory over Emerson, Boden, and Rose. The rookies worked so hard and so honestly for this moment. The Ballers were a different team

because of them. They changed the landscape of the league. Defeat made the change feel less special.

Louis ignored Cort and went over to the Devil's Piano. He closed the lid and gently picked up the piano. He tried extra hard to make sure the keys and strings didn't shake. Marcus rubbed his forehead and looked back at Cort.

"It wasn't your year, Cort," Marcus said. He pointed at the three rookies. "You got something special with these rooks. Don't let them walk."

Cort said nothing and did nothing as the LA Showtimers walked away with the piano. Louis held the piano with a single hand like a toy. He went through the hole in the floor, calmly with no hesitation. He knew that Cort was no threat. Marcus went through the door, turning his back on his former friend. The Ballers' season in the Grand Larceny League was over.

Chapter 23

The Ballers returned back home. The team took their loss against the Showtimers pretty hard. They wanted to stay and fight, but the Showtimers already stole the Devil's Piano from the music hall. The rules of the GLL stated they had to leave before the second round of the playoffs started. The Ballers came back, injured, bruised, and extremely disappointed about their finish. Emerson took the elevator up to the top of the floor. He went to the office of his owner, hoping to find some answers for his future.

Emerson knocked on the door and went into the room. He didn't have an appointment, but he wanted to talk to his owner. He went in and saw Ronald behind his desk. Surprisingly, he saw Cort sitting in front of him. Cort's face looked pale and tired. He seemed to be in the middle of a heavy conversation with his brother Ronald Dorf.

“We’re in the middle of a meeting, Emerson,” Ronald said, his attention diverted. “You have to wait for a bit until me and Cort are done.”

Emerson’s eyebrows narrowed. He saw Cort’s reaction. Something must have happened.

“What’s going on here?” Emerson asked. “What are you guys doing?”

Ronald straightened his shirt. “If you insist on being here, I guess there’s not much I can hide.” He pointed to Cort. “My brother and I were talking about what happened in the playoffs. Cort wants to leave the team.”

Emerson clenched his fists. He couldn’t believe what he heard. “No way,” he said sharply. “Cort can’t leave. He’s one of us.”

Cort gave a weak smile. "It's something I have to do, Emerson," he said softly. "I have to move on as a thief."

Emerson walked up to Cort. "What are you talking about?" he yelled. "You're the one who recruited me. Without you, I would have never been able to join the Ballers. We need you, Cort."

Cort shook his head slowly. "That's not true," he said. "You have talent, Emerson. Eventually, you would have found your way onto a GLL team. The truth is that I held you back during the playoffs. In LA, I was a liability. You need a better thief than me to be your entry man."

Emerson refused to accept it. He turned to Ronald. "You're going to let him quit on us?" he said. "You're going to let your own brother leave?"

Ronald cleared his throat. "Cort wants to make a career on his own," he answered calmly. "I offered him a chance to stay. He doesn't want my money and he doesn't want to stay. I can't do anything about it, Emerson."

"Where will you go?" Emerson asked Cort. "What will you do?"

"The coach for the San Francisco Goldeners is quitting this season," Cort answered. "And their entry man Duke might be traded soon. They contacted me and said they're interested in recruiting me. I'll make a visit over there and see if it's a good fit. Ronald's letting me go in for an interview."

Emerson bit his lower lip. His owner was letting Cort just walk out. Cort stood and put a gentle hand on Emerson's shoulder. "You'll be fine without me," he said. "I couldn't help you win a title, but you'll get one soon enough. Make Chicago proud of the Ballers, Emerson."

Cort walked out of the office and went towards the elevator. It was time for him to move on.

Emerson stood frozen in place. It hurt so much losing the playoffs and now he was losing one of his closest friends.

“I’m actually glad you came up here, Emerson,” Ronald said. He reached into his desk and pulled out a black envelope. “I have news from the GLL for you.”

Emerson didn’t even hear him. He still stood in the same spot thinking about Cort.

Ronald pulled out a sheet of black paper. “Emerson Jay, out of all the teams in the league, you were voted in as rookie of the year by the GLL. You beat fellow Chicago thief Ken Koala by three percent of the total votes. As a prize, you get a five hundred thousand dollar bonus.”

Emerson twitched at the mention of money. "If I let you have that bonus money, will you keep Cort on the team?"

Ronald raised an eyebrow. "You're missing the point, Emerson, he said calmly. "Cort chose to leave. I have to find someone to replace him by the start of next season. I didn't drive him away; he made the decision on his own."

"What about my contract?" Emerson asked. "What are you going to do about me?"

"Your contract ended the moment you lost in the playoffs," Ronald said plainly. "Even though you lost badly, I didn't really care. You made me a lot of money this year. I quite enjoyed it."

Emerson nodded. He remembered that Ronald kept most of the profit from the scores they stole. If the team did better, so did Ronald.

“You present me with a unique situation,” Ronald said to Emerson. “Normally, I would let most thieves just walk out and move on to other teams. It’s cheaper to find new and inexperienced thieves for free. But you made a lot of profit by being on the team. You also were the first Baller to make it as rookie of the year. So I’ll make an exception for you; I’ll offer you what your bounty is worth.”

“I have a bounty?” Emerson said. He actually never heard about it himself.

“You’re worth ten million dollars to the government,” Ronald said. “I’ll offer you a one-year contract with ten million dollars to match your bounty. You should appreciate it. You’re the first thief I’ve offered a real money contract to.”

Emerson heard Ronald’s words, but they seemed so hollow to him. He didn’t care about anything that he was saying. After Cort had left the room, nothing he heard mattered to him.

“Pay me whatever you want,” Emerson said. “I’ll stay on your team because I want to win. Before the season started, I told you that all I wanted to do was win a championship. I’ll stay and keep stealing for you, but I will never need your money. Remember that.”

Emerson stormed out of the office. He wanted to talk to Cort one more time before he left the Hotel Mango. Ronald Dorf sat still in his office chair. He smiled as he watched Emerson walk out. No matter what happened on the street, Ronald always made a profit. Even when he lost, he still made his money. That’s all that mattered.

Washington DC. Tessa Narini walked down the halls of the Justice Department. It had been long time since she walked up and down these halls. The floor tiles had that government smell that Tess loved and missed. She grew up in Los Angeles, but she

loved being here in DC. She was overdue for a meeting with her director. She planted seeds all over the country, waiting for her plans to grow. Now, it was time to talk to the bosses.

Tessa opened the door of Director Samson. She loved Samson; her boss gave her all the freedom and jurisdiction she ever wanted. He was a hard old man, but he definitely shared the same sense of justice that she did. Tessa went in with a binder full of bounty signs. She gathered all the information she collected over the past months and prepared it for Samson.

“Hey, boss,” Tessa said, going in with a smile. “I’m back home.”

Behind a long metal desk, Director Samson folded his hands. His gray hair seemed thinner this year. He had sent Tessa Narini across the nation, confident that she would make a solid case against the underground thieves. But now, the situation had changed.

“You might be back, Agent Narini, but you brought problems with you,” Samson said, a grim tone filling his voice. “You’ve made some enemies.”

Tessa didn’t understand. She approached “Who are you talking about, boss?”

Samson pulled out a white folder with a lot of papers inside. “I have over a dozen city police leaders complaining that you abused your authority in their organizations” he started. “Reports say you forced them to start investigations they never wanted. They even say you may have done illegal activity as a government agent.”

“They’re just angry that I told them what to do,” Tessa said. “The cops will get over it.”

“You also have three prison wardens saying you dealt illegally with convicted felons,” Samson went on. “You released

three major criminals, all from maximum security prisons. The prison wardens said you let them walk without getting proper approval.”

Tessa shrugged. “I had your approval,” she said. “Isn’t all that matters?”

Samson put a piece of white paper in front of Tessa. “And this is the icing on the cake,” he said. “An anonymous source tipped us off about a problem with your bank account statement, an aberration of some sorts.”

Tessa picked up the piece of paper. “What are you talking about?” she asked. “What is this?”

Director Samson grimaced. “It says you received a million dollars every time you visited cities,” he said. “The bank account statements show you got the money on a consistent basis from

different wire transfers. The banks say that the money came from illegal sources of revenue. You know what that means right?"

Tessa shook her head.

"It means that it's evidence for conspiracy," Director Samson said flatly. "I might be your boss, but my bosses think you're on the take. They think you're corrupt."

The moment Tessa heard the word "corrupt", she crushed the piece of paper in her hand. Of all the words in the English dictionary, she hated that one the most. It cut extra deep hearing it from her trusted boss.

"Of course, that's what my bosses think," Samson said, a small grin starting to form. "I know you better, Tess. Don't think for a moment that I believe this garbage, Agent Yellow."

Tessa looked up. She felt hope spring up from inside her.

“I’ve worked with you since you were a rookie,” Samson said, leaning back. “You’d never take dirty money, not for a moment. I’ve got your back, Tess. But you’ll have to lay low for a little bit.”

“Why?” asked Tessa. “Why do I have to take a backseat?”

Samson raised his hand to calm her down. “Don’t worry, it’ll only be for a little bit,” he said, trying to assure Tessa. “Plus, I’ve got some good news for you. I’m giving you some backup.”

Samson pressed a buzzer on his desk. The door to his office opened once more, a small hand on the handle. Two agents in black suits walked in. The first agent had short brown hair and soft eyes. She wore an orange tie, bright and vibrant. The second agent had tied up blond hair, a deep scar over her left eye. She sported a red tie, dark and sharp. They walked in with heavy confidence and pride. Tessa knew these agents from a long way back.

“Hanna Royce, Marla Stone,” Tessa said softly. Hanna was in the FBI and Marla worked over at the CIA. These two were some of the heaviest hitters in the government. Years ago, they worked together under Samson as rookie government officers. They went in different directions, but they all had the same drive and determination to outdo each other. The only problem was that they also competed with each other. Tessa didn’t want to lose to her old pals.

“I hear you’re in a pinch,” Hanna said in a teasing voice. “Didn’t expect you to get in trouble like this.”

“You messed up, Narini,” Marla sneered. Her scarred eye gleamed. “We’re here to clean up your mess.”

Samson chuckled. “Agent Orange and Agent Red are here to the rescue,” he said. “If you three can’t take down the GLL, no one can.”

Tessa smiled at her old friends. She never fully trusted the Convict Cowboys, but now she had more help than ever. She might have to take a break, but the GLL was in some major trouble.

Chapter 24

“For the last time this season, this is Scoreline,” Andrew Scott Johnson said, chiming in. “The playoffs this year were full of drama and action. The championship round was quite the battle.”

Boden and Rose sat in front of the razor thin TV, eager to hear about what happened in the playoffs. Phyllis stood over the table in the lobby of the Hotel Mango. She was still trying to get over the departure of Cort. She didn't care at all about who won this year anymore.

The two Scoreline reporters seemed so excited to report about the GLL playoffs. After many years, this season seemed to energize the league in way they hadn't seen before.

“The Demons rolled through the playoffs easily, beating the Razorbacks and the Knights without any trouble,” Michael Paul

Williams reported. "The Detroit team made the fights look too easy."

"The Showtimers played well this year too," Andrew Scott Johnson said. "After a heavy battle with the Ballers, the Vagabonds and the Foxes gave the Showtimers quite the struggle. Reports say that Marcus the Magician looked more tired than ever. Even though the LA Showtimers made it to the final round, the injuries he suffered slowed him down."

"In the championship round, the Detroit Demons and LA Showtimers faced off in a heated battle in Motor City," Michael Paul Williams said in the broadcast. "The teams battled for a gold statue of the Greek god Hermes, the patron of thieves. Although the battle was tight, the Detroit Demons made it through once more and won their second title in a row. The Demons are champions once again."

“Indeed they are,” Andrew Scott Johnson said. “Zed Harper is becoming a legend within this league, dominating the teams with his speed and power. He might be the next powerhouse of the GLL.”

“Although the season is over, we’re very excited for what will happen next,” Michael Paul Williams said. “The new rookies, the legends of old, and the emerging powers of the GLL are creating stories we never expected. The game has changed a lot this season.”

“The season is officially over, but teams will be rebuilding soon,” Andrew Scott Johnson said. “Steal on, stealers. The next season will be upon us soon enough.”

Boden turned off the TV. He took deep breath after hearing about the news around the league. He rubbed his aching shoulders. The fight with Louis left him injured badly. His body was healing, but his pride had been cut deep.

“I’m glad Emerson won rookie of the year,” Rose said. “But I wish he gave us some of that bonus money. I could use some cash.”

Boden snickered. “He promised to buy us dinner,” he said. “Besides, we got some money for our new contracts. Don’t be greedy, Rose.”

Rose laughed. They both got new contracts from Ronald. Before Cort left the team, he made a hard push for the three rookies to get paid properly. He convinced his brother to make real offers to the rookies. After all, this Baller team made more money than the last five years combined. They made huge progress this season. It also made Ronald more money than he had ever seen as a team owner.

Boden heard a cell phone ring on the coffee table next to Rose. He went over and picked it up. “Hello?” he said.

“How’s it going, Shadowblade?” Roger Bryant said, greeting Boden. “It’s been a while.”

Boden smiled. Treasure hunter Roger Bryant had called in. He hadn’t heard from Roger since the Boston job. “I’m doing well,” he replied. “Injuries are healing up just fine.”

“I heard about what happened in the playoffs,” Roger said. He played with a throwing knife in one hand and held the phone in the other. “You guys did well. Don’t be too disappointed. There’s always next season.”

Boden agreed, but the loss still hurt. “Thanks. How’s the treasure hunting business?”

Roger chuckled over the phone. “I found a diamond sword from the Roman era and book of scrolls written during the Middle Ages,” he said proudly. “It took some work, but I finally found enough items to join my dad. I finally made it to the pros.”

“Congrats,” Boden said. “I’m glad you made it to the big time.”

“I appreciate it,” Roger said. “Look, Boden, I wanted to call you instead of Emerson because I came across some information. I don’t think the Jumpstar will take it well.”

Boden raised his eyebrow. “I don’t get it,” he said. “What kind of information are we talking about?”

“Marissa’s dad is a colleague of my father,” Roger said. “They’ve worked together in the past. I don’t really know Marissa, but she’s the one who told me about the GLL and Emerson. She helped me find you guys.”

Boden still didn’t understand. “Who’s Marissa?” he said. “And how does she know Emerson?”

“Didn’t you know?” Roger said, half surprisingly. “Marissa is Emerson’s old girlfriend. They’ve known each other since the

fourth grade. She's also the one who made his jump shoes. Marissa's the one that Emerson has been fighting so hard for. Emerson is trying to win a title to prove that he's good enough for her."

Boden nearly dropped the phone. Emerson never really told him about his personal life. He never really hid anything, but he wasn't open about his love life either.

"Emerson flew out this morning, Roger," Boden said. "He said he had something to take care of in California."

Roger grimaced. He was too late. "Emerson went to Stanford, didn't he?" he said. "He went to go see her."

"So what?" Boden said. "Is there a problem?"

"You should have stopped him, Boden," Roger said grimly. "You should have kept Emerson in Chicago. He won't like what he learns about Marissa Simmons if he goes to see her."

The California sunshine beamed down on the Stanford campus beautifully. The light made the campus look picture perfect in the afternoon. Emerson walked down the main sidewalk of the quad and straightened his tie. He bought a black suit the day before with his bonus money. Emerson didn't win his title, but he won the rookie of the year award and got a high paying contract from his owner. It was a step in the right direction, he thought. He only hoped that Marissa would see it that way as well.

Emerson walked towards Braun lecture hall. He did some snooping and found out Marissa's two o'clock class was in Braun Hall. He figured that he'd pop in before she had a chance to eat. After a full season, Emerson finally had the cash to buy Marissa that dinner he promised.

Though Emerson wore a hand-tailored suit, he kept his green jump shoes on his feet. He wanted to make sure Marissa saw the shoes that she made for him. He also bought pink roses at a flower shop near the campus. He gripped them hard in his hands. Marissa loved pink roses. She always smiled at the sight of them. Emerson tapped his feet on the ground. He hated waiting, especially when he was nervous.

Marissa Simmons walked out of the lecture hall, a smile on her face as the sunlight reached her. Marissa looked prettier than ever to Emerson. He really missed her. Even though he saw her during the All-Stud break, things felt unresolved. With the season over, Emerson just had to see her.

Marissa walked down the steps of the building with books in hand. Emerson smiled at the bottom of the steps. He had been waiting for this moment for a while.

“Hey, it’s been a –,” Emerson began.

A male student came in from behind Marissa and approached her. The boy had a thick brown hair and wore a black leather jacket. He smiled widely and tapped Marissa on the shoulder. Marissa's face brightened as she turned to greet the boy. Marissa put her arms around the boy, giving him a kiss on the cheek. They whispered quiet words to each other, their eyes happy to see one another. Emerson covered his face with a hand. Who was this guy?

Emerson quickly turned around and went to a street lamp. His heart pounded hard in his chest. Emerson breathed hard as he leaned on the pole. He felt like someone hit him in the stomach with a shovel. He dropped the flowers to the ground, the petals falling off one by one.

"Emerson?" a voice said. "Is that you?"

Emerson swung around. His suit jacket flapped as he looked behind him. Marissa had found him.

“Marissa,” Emerson whispered. “It’s you.”

Marissa Simmons faked a smile. She gripped her books tightly. She didn’t know that Emerson was going to visit her. “I didn’t expect us to meet for a while,” she said. “I heard about the playoffs. I’m sorry you lost in the first round.”

Emerson cleared his throat. “Yeah, it was a tough loss,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady. “Next year will be different.”

Marissa nodded. “I’m rooting for you,” she said. “I really think you’ll get a title one day.”

Emerson looked past Marissa. The boy he had seen earlier stood on the steps behind her, waiting for Marissa to come back. “What’s going on, Marissa?” Emerson asked. “Who is he? Who is that guy?”

Marissa rubbed her forehead. Her blond hair seemed to shimmer in the sun. "That's Peter," she answered softly. "I met him about a month ago. He lives in the dorm next to me."

"Are you dating him?" Emerson asked, his voice starting to shake. "Are you with that guy?"

Marissa looked straight at him. "I am," she said clearly. "Peter's my boyfriend."

Emerson clenched his jaw hard. Marissa's words hit harder than any attack he took over the course of the GLL season. This pain was different.

"I told you before, Emerson," Marissa said. "I couldn't wait forever. You're my oldest friend, and we'll always have something between us, but things changed. I changed too."

“You made these shoes for me,” Emerson said sharply, pointing down to his feet. “You imbued these shoes with everything you felt for me.”

Marissa sighed. “That’s part of the reason I moved on,” she said softly. “Everything I had went into those shoes. I had to let go of you and my feelings.”

Emerson couldn’t believe what he was hearing. All the work he put into the season was for this moment. Now everything seemed to have gone to waste.

“I might be the GLL Commissioner’s daughter, but I can’t date a pro thief,” Marissa said, taking a step away from Emerson. “I know you want us to be together, but it’ll take more than just a title for that to happen. You can’t steal me away so easily.”

Emerson looked deeply at Marissa. Memories from their past rushed into his mind. He remembered the day that Marissa told

him about the GLL, about the greatness of the thieves who stole across the country. Marissa told him everything she learned from her dad about the GLL. Emerson couldn't go to a college like Marissa did, but he figured that winning in the GLL would be enough. He became a thief for her.

Marissa walked away, going back to the boy on the steps. She looked away, turning away from Emerson. She couldn't stay with him any longer.

Emerson put his tattooed hands into his pockets and watched Marissa leave him. A cloud passed over him, casting a small shadow from above.

"Every thief steals from himself," Emerson whispered. "But I'll steal you back one day."

Emerson walked away, the cloud above him floated past. Sunshine poured down on him once again as he walked back to

the quad. The Jumpstar lost a lot this season, but he won just as much. For Chicago, for the Ballers, for Marissa, Emerson was going to win it all. He looked up to the bright blue sky. The next season of the GLL would be here soon. There was no time to waste.