

ONE

Adrenaline roared through my veins, making my palms grow slick with sweat as I held my controller in a white-knuckled grip. This was it. The moment of truth.

Sitting on the floor of the computer lab where the Saint Bernard's robotics team had their meetings, I fought to slow my pulse and steady my breathing. I could do this. No big deal. Only seven hundred hours of late-night practice on my game console at home and countless cans of Red Bull, Code Red, and Dr. Pepper had led to this moment—my inevitable victory. I just had to stay calm. Cool. Collected.

Now was not the time to freak out.

Next to me, my best friend and current reigning school champion of the new game *Alien BotPit 2: Reign of the Battlemaster*, Drake Collins, yawned as he made the final selections to his mech suit. He always went for a medium armor and ranged weapon combo. Today, that was going to be his downfall.

Today, Saint Bernard's Catholic School would have a new champion: Koji Owens.

"Ready to lose?" He flicked me a sarcastic grin as he adjusted the color settings on his mech's armor to pink. Was that a taunt? Adding insult to injury?

Harsh.

I stuck a hand toward him to shake. "Honor code—no glitching."

His mouth scrunched unhappily, light amber eyes narrowing through shaggy platinum bangs. At last, he gave a dramatic sigh and shook my hand.

"Agreed."

"And we're using the map randomizer," I added before letting his hand go.

"Fine, fine," he groaned. "Paranoid much?"

"No," I snapped. "I'm just wise to all your crap, Collins."

He chuckled. Or maybe that was a maniacal, evil genius laugh. I wasn't sure. "Terms of victory are: winner destroys opponent's bot by whatever game-original means available. Sound fair enough for you?"

"Deal," I agreed.

"You guys are seriously lame, you do realize that, right?" Drake's girlfriend, Tabitha Hunt, grumbled. I could practically feel her rolling her eyes from where she stood behind our chairs.

According to Tabitha, she and Drake had been dating seriously since... right after the Winter Ball last year. He would neither confirm nor deny that status, though, and I couldn't tell if it was because he wasn't into commitment or he just wanted to annoy her. Probably both, knowing him.

Whatever they were, they texted *constantly* and Tabitha always waited in the hall after class so she could walk with us. She'd even started sitting with us at lunch sometimes, plopping herself down

confidently right beside Drake. Whether I liked it or not, Tabitha had officially demoted me to third wheel. Ugh.

At least Drake had forced her to start calling me by my name now instead of “sneakers guy” like before. So, I had that tiny bit of my dignity back. But still...

She seemed to treat everyone like they were filthy commoners in her perfect kingdom. Not to mention she clearly didn’t understand the significance of video game dominance. This match was the most important thing in my life. Well, you know, except for being Noxius, protecting New York, trying to track down my sort-of girlfriend Madeline, and passing the Chemistry final.

Hmm. Maybe I should have studied for that instead of playing video games. Hmm. I’d taken that exam first thing this morning and, honestly, I barely even remembered going into the classroom. Yikes. Had I even taken the right exam? Oh well. Too late now.

Tabitha probably wouldn’t have insisted on hanging around us so much if Claire Faust was still around, but after the incident at the Philharmonic, things had gotten complicated for her family. It didn’t take long for the press to get wind of the scandal between the Faustus and our former school headmaster, Mr. Ignatius. They took those rumors and ran with them, and suddenly Claire’s terrified face was on the front of tabloids all over the city with a big bold caption: HEIRESS TO COMRIDORE-FAUST

FAMILY TO INHERIT EMBEZZLED CHARITY FUNDS.

Not good.

Things had gone downhill pretty fast after that. Now lawyers were involved, a criminal investigation was underway. Some of the online news articles theorized that—if there was any truth to the rumor that the Faustus had indeed tried to frame Madeline’s mom for stealing a bunch of money from the Philharmonic’s charity fund—they could be brought up on some serious charges. Not that any of it was Claire’s fault, of course. She’d been a little kid when all of that happened. But the press seemed more than happy to drag her name through the mud anyway. Bunch of jerkwads.

No one was really surprised when she didn’t come back to school after spring break. Apparently, her family’s lawyer had advised her to finish out the year at home by taking classes online, just in case there were any weirdoes out there with bright ideas about harassing her while she was at school. Drake thought she must have gotten threats for the family lawyers to insist on something like that.

Just considering that possibility put a lump of raw fury in my throat, like I was trying to swallow a red-hot piece of charcoal. But I hadn’t worked up the nerve to call her again. Rotten, I know. But the first time I tried, she hadn’t answered, and I’d been forced to leave a stammering, idiotic attempt at a voicemail asking if she was okay. Duh. Of course she wasn’t.

Tabitha still talked to her some, although their friendship seemed to have cooled considerably now that they didn’t see each other at school every day. Tabitha insisted it didn’t bother her, but my super-dragon third eye senses told me otherwise. Each totem scale, like the one I had fixed to a bracelet on my wrist, came with a bonus secret power called a “third eye.”

Mine was being able to tell whenever someone wasn’t being 100 percent truthful. Cool as that sounds, it sort of sucked to realize how often people lied to me.

For instance, I now knew that my dad had no intention of ever letting me drive his car in the city. The art teacher, Mr. Molins, secretly thought my last attempt at still life painting was horrendous. Oh, and Drake had definitely lost the *Dragonball Z* graphic novel I loaned him.

Uuuugh.

Anyway, it seemed like Claire was distancing herself from everyone, most likely afraid one of us might turn on her. But, come on, she should have known better than to think that about me, right? I'd *never* betray her. Some twisted thing her parents had done years ago didn't change anything. Claire was still my friend, and I knew, without a single shred of doubt, that she was a good person. In fact, I probably knew that better than anyone.

Well... except maybe for her fiancé, Damien Blount.

Passing him in the hall was still painfully awkward—for me, anyway.

He didn't have a clue that his supposed-to-be-future-wife was in love with me.

Damien didn't know a *lot* of things about Claire, though. And even if the whole love thing wasn't mutual for me, I couldn't deny that somewhere deep down, I still liked her a little. Not like in a major way. Nothing like before.

But I couldn't push down the rush of furious, protective wrath that rose in my chest whenever I heard people spreading more rumors about her. That was different, though, right? Not love. Or at least, not the romantic kind.

Despite all the rumors flying and the nasty news headlines, it was Damien's place, not mine, to defend her honor. Too bad he seemed too busy yucking it up with all his judo team buddies, laughing and carrying on like nothing had changed. Never mind that his fiancée was probably miserable, confined to her house like a prisoner, and carrying a huge secret about how she'd been spending her spare time. If they were really going to get married, then she should have been able to trust him with a secret like that, right?

Basically, Damien was a clueless jerk. I might've told him that to his face if not for the fact that he could probably put his fist straight through my head with one punch. I liked having all my teeth, so I wasn't about to start anything with him.

Tabitha began whining again. "This is the dumbest thing I've ever—"

"Shhh," someone else hissed. "If you're gonna keep whining then just get out."

We had a pretty decent sized audience. Most of the robotics team and a few of my art class friends crowded behind us, leaning into the glow of the screen that filled the dim computer lab.

"You better not cry when you lose," Drake sneered as we both hit the start button to begin the battle.

"Hey, after I win, maybe I should run for robotics club president next year. They'll be wanting someone with actual battling skills, right?" I fired back.

Whispers and quiet laughter stirred in the crowd.

“Nah, they want someone who can actually do math without having to Google all the formulas.”

I set my jaw, thumbs primed on the joysticks as the loading screen showed beautifully intricate artwork of the humanoid robots locked in combat. Then the screen flashed, fading to black before the countdown began.

*3... 2... 1... FIGHT!*

The instant the screen lit up again, presenting us with a map of a rocky, rugged terrain riddled with steep canyons and cliffs, I whipped my mech into action. My fingers tingled, flying over the controls as I threw up my perimeter shield projectors and readied my long-range heat-seeking missiles.

Drake hit the boosters on the back of his mech, looking to make his first assault. My heart throbbed against my ribs like there was a miniature man in my chest, punching me from the inside. My left foot bounced as explosions bloomed on the screen and the sound of gunfire mingled with the cheers of our classmates.

Normally, playing video games at school would have earned us all a few days in detention. But special circumstances prevailed today. First of all, it was the last day of the last official week of school. Final exams were almost over, so everyone was just coasting to the finish line—especially if they’d already finished their day’s exam and had nothing to do except wait for a parent to pick them up. Second, Drake was the president of the robotics club, so he had his own key to the lab and could let us in whenever we wanted. Not to mention the teachers liked him enough to look the other way. And third, we had a lookout outside the door, just in case.

Couldn’t be too careful when it came to breaking school rules on electronics.

Locked in our epic mech battle to the death, I bit down hard against a sudden twinge of tingling discomfort right in the arch of my left foot. No—not now! I couldn’t get an itch now!

I squirmed my toes around, curling my foot inside my stupid, starchy uniform socks and black dress shoes. It was all in vain. The itch had taken on a life of its own. It was becoming self-aware, creeping up my whole foot. But if I took my eyes off the screen or my hands off the controller for even a second, Drake would obliterate me. Seven hundred hours and me spending every night and weekend locked in my room like a smelly, soda-hoarding hermit—wasted.

Drake whipped his mech into an aerial assault with both thrusters at max power. I surged after him, determined not to let him fall back to optimal range with those long-range beam cannons. I had him on the run. Perfect.

Just a little closer and then— Out of nowhere, Drake’s mech changed trajectory, diving down to meet my bot head-on. I tried to evade, but it was useless. Our mechs collided, and I flailed to swap weapons over to my close-combat plasma sword.

An instant before it should have materialized, Drake’s mech began to glow red, then orange, then electric yellow as though it were growing hotter and hotter. An explosion bloomed across the screen with a blinding white light that filled the whole computer lab. Two words faded into view, emerging from a smoky background riddled with hunks of charred metal debris: *GAME OVER*.

I sat frozen in my chair, staring at the screen. No one in the crowd said a single word. What the heck just happened? Had he... self-detonated his mech?

“We did agree that whichever mech destroyed the other is the victor, right?” He chuckled darkly. “I believe the game is mine.”

“You just—but that—you can’t—” I sputtered, too angry to put together a full sentence.

“It’s called strategy, Koji,” he purred.

“It’s called *cheating!*” I roared, slamming down my controller. “That’s not fair play! Your mech was destroyed too! It’s a draw!”

The room erupted into arguing as people began taking sides, converging around us in a shouting mob. Some agreed with me—self-detonation was a slimy tactic and shouldn’t count as a win. Others firmly believed I had won since, technically, Drake’s mech would have been destroyed first and mine, only as a secondary casualty of the blast. The rest claimed that since the detonation was intentional, the effect of destroying my mech was all that mattered, so Drake should be the winner.

Despite all the commotion and Tabitha declaring that we were all nerds who were going to die alone in our parents’ basements, the buzz of something in the back pocket of my school uniform slacks made me tense. My normal phone sat on the ground beside me. This one had a completely different purpose.

Through the crowd of our friends, Drake met my gaze. His hand darted down to his own pocket, eyes wide as he gave me a slow nod. We were getting the same call.

Time to get to work.

\* \* \*

I left first, faking an enraged storm out of the computer lab and slamming the door behind me. Okay, so maybe it wasn’t completely fake. But we would settle that argument later.

Keeping a casual pace, I headed for the stairs as I slipped the sleek, credit-card-sized black cell phone out of the main fold of my wallet. Drake and I each had one, and we weren’t supposed to show them to anyone, make calls on them, or try sending messages.

One missed call from an unknown number flashed on the screen. No big deal. I wasn’t supposed to answer those calls anyway.

They were just my version of a superhero signal—my spotlight in the sky.

No sooner had I tucked the phone back into my wallet, returning it to my pocket, than Drake appeared at my side like he’d materialized from thin air. “No message, just a call,” he whispered. “I checked news headlines.

Unrest in the Middle East, another missile launch out of North Korea, blah blah blah. Nothing out of the ordinary, though. Any idea what this is about?”

I shrugged. “We’ll just have to wait and see.”

We kept our casual pace and our voices hushed as we made our way through the school, heading straight to the headmaster’s office on the first floor. The secretary sitting behind the broad mahogany desk looked up at us as we entered, smiling through the thick, square frames of his stylish glasses.

He was new. Actually, all the office staff had been swapped out after the whole evil-headmaster-tries-to-murder-people-and-destroy-the-city incident four months ago. The uproar among the parents and faculty had been pretty impressive, but now the dust was settling. The new headmaster had smoothed things over, and Secretary Josh was a big hit with the moms. That probably had something to do with his textured, high-fade haircut, obnoxiously perfect teeth, and athletic physique displayed in tightly tailored suits. Drake joked that he looked like a version of me from an alternate reality where I’d been bitten by a radioactive Calvin Klein model. Great.

Josh stood as the door closed behind us, sidestepping when we passed to lock it. “So, who won?” he asked.

Someone must have told him about our gaming match. That, or the FBI had the whole school bugged so they could watch and listen to everything that went down. Probably that.

After all, Josh, the headmaster, and several of the custodial staff were all undercover FBI agents, charged to be our glorified babysitters as we went on about our normal, civilian daily lives.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I grumbled as I crammed my hands into my pockets, glaring at the floor.

Drake grinned smugly. “Don’t be a sore loser.”

“I didn’t lose! That did *not* count!”

Josh laughed as he showed us to the headmaster’s office and held the door open to let us inside. “Good luck, boys.” He closed the door behind us, sealing Drake and me inside the dimly lit room.

Standing there made my stomach flip and wrench. I remembered all too clearly the first time I’d come here and met Headmaster Ignatius. Part of me still expected to see him appear from the shadows, laughing maniacally and brandishing his golden-tipped scepter. Fortunately, the only other person in the room was basically the opposite of Ignatius.

Instead of a grim cave stocked with ancient artifacts, the newly refurbished headmaster’s office was painted a soft, soothing blue. The lit bookcases were stocked with hardback thriller novels, succulents in natural stone planters, and dozens of hiking snapshots from around the world. An oil diffuser filled the room with the ambient aroma of lavender and chamomile, and a large oil painting of a rocky Washington beach hung on the only empty wall.

Agent Carrie Bates sat behind her desk, her black hair pinned into a neat, no-nonsense bun on the back of her neck as she flipped through a folder.

She was young-ish, too—probably somewhere in her late twenties—with a round face and warm eyes that made her seem deceptively soft and feminine.

That totally didn’t fool me, though. She was FBI, so I had no doubts that she could have folded me like a lawn chair and left me in a handcuffed heap on the floor in about two seconds if she wanted to.

Still, she was pretty. Her smooth umber skin had a lovely flush of deep rose along her cheekbones, and her long lashes framed her dark eyes as she looked at us over the top of the folder. “So? Who won?” she asked, an eyebrow arched expectantly.

I rolled my head back and flailed my arms like an angry muppet.

“Come on! Why does freaking everyone know about this already?”

“Cause I tweeted it,” Drake replied, like it wasn’t a big deal.

I shot him a glare. “Stop tweeting about my life!”

Agent Carrie laughed musically as she put the folder down and motioned for us to sit in the two open leather chairs in front of her desk.

“Let’s get to business, shall we? Agent Kirkland just contacted me. There’s a training exercise planned for this weekend and a request was sent to have the *asset* involved.”

My insides fluttered as I sank into my seat, half excited, half terrified.

Ellison Kirkland was the FBI agent in charge of handling all the cases involving dragon totems as well as organizing all interface between me, the

“asset,” and, well, basically everyone else. Our first few times crossing paths hadn’t been pleasant. He’d scared the crap out of Drake and me by following us around New York while investigating the secret identity of a certain anthropomorphic dragon monster, ultimately arresting my dad when he thought he’d figured it out. Eventually, when the FBI finally figured out who I was, he had been assigned to keep tabs on us.

All the other agents here at the school, Carrie and Josh included, worked for him. They were a lot more approachable, honestly. They’d asked us to call them by their first names right off and actually seemed interested in trying to keep our lives relatively normal.

Well, normal for an undercover dragon superhero and his tech-genius sidekick, anyway.

“I don’t suppose you could persuade your... female counterpart to participate?” Agent Carrie’s voice had a hopeful edge.

I didn’t have to ask who she was referring to. This was about Oceana—another totem-wielding dragon superhero like me. She’d been the first to discover me in my own dragon-form and had taught me all the basics of flying and using my totem right after I’d found it. We hadn’t gotten off to a great start, but I had no doubts about where her loyalties were now. Just like I had no doubts about her real identity beneath that powerful, scaly disguise.

Like an idiot, I’d let it slip to Agent Kirkland that I knew who Oceana really was. My bad. Now they were dying to figure it out, and I’d had to warn my dragoness ally to be extra careful. No way was I giving her identity up, though. She was my cohort, so I was duty-bound to have her back no matter what. When it came to revealing that kind of sensitive, personal information—even to the FBI—that was her choice to make.

“Not a chance.” I smiled weakly. “She’s not into the whole military scene. Sorry.”

“Do you have any details about the exercise?” Drake pressed, leaning closer with his expression the picture of excitement. “I get to go too, right? I mean, I *am* his tech expert. And my new devices are ready for an official test.” He’d been dying to strap my dragon form into some of his weird inventions for weeks now. Lucky for me, Agent Kirkland had strictly forbidden testing that kind of stuff over the city. Just in case, you know, it exploded.

“Yes, Mr. Collins, you’ll be going. Your parents have already been contacted. As far as they are concerned, you are both attending an invitation-only science camp at Arizona University this weekend.” Agent Carrie slid the folder across her desk toward us. “These are the details, as well as the documentation proving the event is valid, in case there are any... lingering suspicions.”

I snorted. “Uh, and my dad actually believed I’m going to an exclusive science camp?”

She leaned back in her seat with a knowing smile. “Of course. The headmaster gave you both a glowing recommendation, after all.”

I sighed. As long as it worked, I couldn’t really object. I’d just have to let Drake do all the lying when it came to what we actually did at this made-up camp.

“Civilian plane tickets have been purchased, so you’ll need to arrive at the airport early next Friday afternoon,” she instructed. “Pack light. The entirety of Saturday will be spent training, and you’ll be flown back home Sunday. Any questions?”

From across her desk, I met Agent Carrie’s stare for a second before staring back down at the folder on her desk. She always seemed to sense my unease, like she had sixth sense about it. A Koji sense.

I quietly took the folder and shook my head.

“Nope, all good,” Drake agreed.

“That’s all I have for now, gentlemen,” she said as she stood and gestured to the door. “Oh, but Koji, would you mind sticking around for a minute? I need to go over some of the notes Agent Kirkland sent for you.”

She was lying. My third eye gave her away immediately, like a tingly heat in the back of my mind.

Drake and I exchanged a quick look. Then he nodded and swiped the folder out of my hands before starting out the door. “Sure. I’ll meet you outside.”

Only after the door to her office closed behind him and the sound of his footsteps faded did I dare to lift my gaze to meet hers again.

“Is everything all right?” she asked softly, sounding genuinely concerned.

Sitting alone before her, I rubbed at the back of my neck and racked my brain for the right way to bring this up. “I... I just wondered... did Agent Kirkland say anything about Madeline? You know, like if they’d found any new leads or had heard anything from her?” I hated how pathetic and scared I sounded. But it had been four long months since I’d spoken to her. I didn’t even know if she was alive.

My last memory of her, cradling her limp body in my arms in the bottom of a smoking crater after her dad basically tried burning the whole city down to avenge her mother's death, was still scorched into my brain.

What came after—how I'd managed to get out of there with my identity and totem scale intact—I still couldn't remember. But I remembered the look in her eyes, the touch of her fingers on my cheek, and the smell of her hair. It put a sting of fresh pain through my chest, centering around the gnarled, hand-shaped burn scar over my heart.

I swallowed hard. "I know it's complicated and... and you guys probably still want to arrest her, but..." My voice caught, dying in my throat before I could finish.

"Oh, Koji." Agent Carrie's tone had that hushed, maternal softness—

like someone comforting a frightened child—as she stepped quickly around her desk to crouch in front of me. She put a hand on my arm. "No. We still don't know where she is. Agent Kirkland has chased down hundreds of leads worldwide, but Madeline's a ghost. Someone trained her well, and I doubt we'll find her a single second before she wants us to."

Well, at least she was telling the truth about that.

I worked my jaw, trying not to let that little spark of annoyed anger go nuclear. They still believed Madeline was a threat, even though I knew she wasn't. Maybe she had fought alongside her dad, at first. In the end, though, she'd come around. She'd been the one to bring his big monster down, and she had knocked the scepter from his hand, ending our final fight. Madeline had saved New York—not me.

"I miss her," I heard myself admit in a broken voice.

"Of course you do." Agent Carrie gave my arm a reassuring squeeze.

"Just between you and me, I don't think you've seen the last of her."

"You really mean that?"

The corners of her eyes creased slightly as her lips curved into a secretive little smile. "Call it woman's intuition. She'll be back."

All I could do was bob my head. It hurt too much to try to talk about it, even to Drake. Besides, it's not like he could relate. He and Tabitha had their own version of a normal dating relationship going strong. They talked every day. Sometimes, if she forced it, they even held hands in the hall.

I would've killed for just a tiny taste of that with Madeline. To hold her hand. To take her out somewhere for dinner. To sit and watch a movie together. To kiss her again.

"For now, let's just worry about the things we can control, okay?"

Standing again, Agent Carrie tipped her head toward the door. "Now, you get out there and demand a rematch because that stunt Collins pulled was *definitely* cheating."

I managed a hoarse laugh. "You think so?"

"Oh, without a doubt." She grinned. "We'll be in touch. Good luck next weekend, Koji."

