

1

A shove between the shoulders welcomes me to the island manor. Mud, churned by the inbound vehicles, cushions my fall as I lie flat from the force of it. Darkness from the cloud cover, and a new moon, hides the extent of my new mud suit.

Dicks.

Glum and Glummer, the pair of morose-looking contestants who manufactured quiet accidents aboard the ship, follow my hastened exit from the Bongo van's sliding door with a shared chuckle and the slop of boots.

"Watch your step, Contestant," one of them says for the benefit of no one. The camera crews are busy chauffeuring contestants. This isn't the main event, just more deployment logistics carting eighty people to the finale of The Trials.

My hands swap mud with my pants in equal parts as I wipe them. Someone, one of the camera crew, shuffles me along as the next van pulls up to the manor entrance. Two more of the contest crew hold open the doors, their faces just visible in the escaping light.

I stomp my boots to dislodge mud onto the laminate flooring once I get inside. It's petty, but I feel better.

The entrance hall is a french colonial impression worn over the cologne of fresh paint and carpentry. Contestants, reporters, and crew fill the great hall, and at least half of the convoy is still coming.

Gonna be a tight fit.

Three camera crews set up on a wide stair winding along the left wall. The stairs continue to a second-floor balustrade landing, and there in the center, looking down on us with the pompous hint of a smile, is John Antwerp. Other contestants notice him, too, but if Antwerp expects any sort of reverence by this point, he's mistaken.

As I stare up at our island host, lost in the artificial grandeur of the moment, I shrink further into the crowd. I'm alone. No alliances—who would burden themselves with the underwhelming gymnast?—and no reinforcements. Never thought it would be only me.

This island is for the elite. The cunning and the vicious. Not second-raters who enlist out of their small-time lives. Barely capable of gaining a third-rate education and commission. Too blind and stupid to see a relationship falling into the same failures that built it.

My fingers twist at the space where the black rubber ring – the one I should have taken off months ago – lived before I placed it in an unmarked plastic tub with the rest of my personal effects. Not even my commander thinks I've got a shot, quick to tell me I'm only another contingency. No doubt as surprised as anyone when I squeaked through the semi-finals. This is a place for the likes of Mr. Special-Forces-Business-Man Eric Prince, or veritable giants among men, or Olympians with oversized personalities. My contact gave me that exact who-do-you-even-think-you-are look when he took back the intel.

Sorry. Eric Prince didn't make it onto the ship. None of the undercover did.

Just me.

Better this way. Alone. No one the cameras care about. Dark horse with an inside track, get in, get out.

A hush comes over the entrance hall, stilling the chatter and conversation I now associate with any grouping of the contestants. The room is packed past its limits, my arms inevitably brushing someone no matter how I position them. Antwerp adjusts his gaze, then stares into one of the stationary cameras situated amongst us in the crowd.

"Ladies and Gentleman, welcome to my island," Antwerp says with his usual confidence, thick with a Texas accent he brings out special for these announcements. "You have all made it to the final round of this contest." Clapping pockmarks the whoops and cheers. I'm certain cameras are zooming in on the front-runners who are giving their best close-up-shot faces, all smirks of varying caliber. Glum and Glummer howl, as is their wont, and several others join in as well. It's unnerving in the claustrophobic hall.

"The rules are simple," Antwerp continues after letting the interruption play out for the cameras. "Somewhere in this manor, or on these grounds, or elsewhere on this island, there is a package of a most special nature. It is the *key* to winning."

The note with the intel is at the fore-front of my thoughts, my fast-pass in this contest:

OBJ: SM BLK BOX

LOC: KITCHEN / TOASTER

ALT: LAB QTRS / OBSVTRY / FRST TMPL (?)

At the time, I wanted to laugh. *Is the US government getting charged by the letter?* Instead, I gave my contact, the beard, a serious nod to match his serious face. This is serious undercover business, after all.

"The winning contestant must be the first to bring that package here, to this room, and place it on the pedestal," Antwerp says into the camera from his perch. Contestants around me shift on their feet, bumping and crowding me, and no part of me wants to laugh now.

Get the key, get back to the ship.

Antwerp continues his speech, his demeanor leavening, its joviality contrasting the dark hunger below him. "There can only be one winner. The winner can, naturally, do with their prize, and the key, whatever they see fit."

Some contestants look around the room, as if the key might be sitting under a neon sign. Others ready themselves, movement stilling, waiting to pounce.

"The prize: the entirety of my quite considerable wealth," Antwerp says with the chuckle of an inside joke as though the culmination of the most-watched reality television event is a whim to be waved away.

Everyone knew there would be a prize. Millions, maybe — Antwerp is move-mountains rich, he can afford it — but this...

Glancing around, there are no more smiles, no more gestures of bravado. The shared comradery of reaching the finale, built on the back of a three-week ship voyage, is forgotten. Forgotten is the friendly, and not-so-friendly, call and response of "Contestant!" echoing in the ship's hallways after the parties and drinking. An almost sub-vocal chattering starts. A growl. Forgotten, it seems, that we should have evolved past low instincts of violence. My stomach does its free-fall routine, solid ground a thousand miles below.

John Antwerp's voice changes, louder, serious, and unsmiling, and the chattering growl subsides. "This package you seek is more than just the key to winning." He has their attention

again, but not for long. His voice is quicker and louder still. "Even as I speak, a virus spreads from network to network globally. It has laid dormant until now, and its purpose is singular."

His speech slows again, a clear diction bereft of its earlier accent. "It will encrypt all data that it encounters." Antwerp pauses, lending weight to his next sentence. "The package you seek is the key to decrypting that data."

It doesn't seem like the end of a speech. More like the speech ran off a cliff, defying gravity as it hangs in mid-air, absent words of encouragement or a start signal that might encumber it. Cameras follow Antwerp's steps as he leaves the balcony, then walks purposefully down the stairway, while other cameras pan for reaction shots. I lose sight of him behind the crowd.

There's a half-dozen heartbeats of uncertainty, and the moment looms. I'm shrinking again, small in the face of enormous events. An intrusive thought whispers a dagger into me.

You're going to die on this island.

Glum and Glummer start another howl that breaks the spell. I move, automatic despite a muddle of thoughts.

Get to the kitchen. Get the toaster.

I slip between frantic bodies and limbs.

Get the key, get back to the ship.

I try to find an opening when an elbow strikes my face, bringing with it bright pain.