

The kitchen is a battleground when I get to it. One of the Europeans pulls the fridge from the wall until it topples with a crash. A contestant tackles another when they both don't fit into a pantry. Cameras jostle for the best angles as contestants throw open kitchen cabinets in their scramble to find the key.

*Too late. Too many in here.*

Nothing on the countertops looks like it could be a small-appliance, but it's hard to tell in the chaos. Anything obvious would have been found already.

I've lost before I've even begun.

The competitor in me misses the memo that it's hopeless. It's an enormous kitchen. Antwerp didn't go to extraordinary lengths for a five-minute sprint.

I start on cabinets below the countertops only to find emptiness. My hand acts as a vault, springing me high enough to check the top shelves of the upper cabinets. Nothing. It's like someone took the hollow shell of a warehouse model kitchen and transported it intact from the mainland.

I search while I ignore the bigger problem: I find the key, it will be a stand up fight I can't win. Cameras are indifferent to me now, but if they smell I'm pulling ahead they'll swoop like carrion birds on rot. Attracting nastier predators. Like the front-runner who has just come into the kitchen followed by two more cameras.

"Man said key, right," the front-runner says for the benefit of the audience at home. Cameras love her, with her good standing in The Trials, Olympiad-sprinter physique, and weapons-grade sports bras, and she loves them right back. "Where does Roca keep her keys? One of those knick-knack drawers." Her confidence is loud enough to be heard over the

cacophony of eighty contestants waging war on the manor, but frenzied motion ruins the effect as she hurries into empty drawers.

*She wants that prize money. They all do.*

A scream, then a thud on the ceiling above us, like a body falling from a height. For a crazed moment I imagine the manor coming alive, fighting against its destruction. The cameras' thirst for ratings, the need to see if violence means someone is winning, proves stronger than their love for a dwindling front-runner in an empty kitchen. She sees their love wane as well and slams shut her current drawer.

"Got it! Roca's got it!" Contestants and cameras give chase as she sprints from the kitchen.

I find myself alone but for one other person. Can only see the back of his pale, bald head because he's staring at, and not searching, a closed wooden cupboard against a wall. Taller than any of the contestants by a head or more, and ghastly thin. No idea how I didn't notice him before.

"Mud in the hair, blood in the eye, a pity," he tells the cupboard with a cartoonishly high voice, but his words must be for me.

I get close enough to see transparent wisps of hair sticking to his head. Caked on foundation and badly applied color corrector end at a sallow neckline.

"These toaster ovens have a nasty habit of turning up dead." He turns from the cupboard with a jerk.

*grabit*

Long strides carry him from the kitchen through the door on the opposite end of the kitchen faster than I can form a response.

*grabitnow*

Inside the cupboard there's a toaster sitting on the shelf. I pull out the crumb tray to find folded paper and a silvery key.

*How did no one find this? Guarding it?*

It's obviously not the package, but steps coming into the kitchen hasten the paper and key into my pocket before I can give it much thought. I exit through the same door as the strange Toaster Oven Man, who is nowhere to be seen in the hallway.

*Must be a clue. Should have guessed Antwerp wouldn't make it easy. Like The Trials all over again, straight-forward objectives confounded by...not straight-forwardness.*

*I have the best words.*

None of the rooms I half-jog past afford the privacy I need for the clue. They're occupied and all violence of action. A reporter tries to conduct an interview with another of the front-runners, a giant of a man cleverly dubbed The Giant, while he murders an innocent couch. No way I want someone like him to see the note.

*Crabs in a bucket. Claw me back in if they see me climbing out. Then eat me.*

I'm back in the entrance hall where Antwerp gave his speech. More reporters have set up a home base of sorts where they're conducting interviews. Small groups of contestants loiter in the hall and on the stairs, huddled together in close conversation. Looking around, I don't see Toaster Oven Man anywhere in the crowd. But I can feel eyes on me, like I'm being followed.

I move to the wide stairs on the side of the entrance hall. As I make my way up, the small groups stare with hungry eyes that promise it's only a matter of time before their violence will turn towards solo contestants like me. A fight breaks out below, in the middle of the entrance

hall, that steals their attention. I take the opportunity to double- and triple-step the rest of the way to the second floor.

Off the landing, I find a closed door that looks like it will give something akin to privacy. It's a small bathroom, with a toilet, sink, mirror, and a light with one of those old-fashioned pull-strings. I close the door behind me, and I give a small thanks that it has a lock.

The scrap of paper comes out of my pocket. I unfold it, turn it over, then turn it over once again in case the words are hard to rouse.

It's blank.

I hold the paper up to the light, but there's nothing.

*It's blank, you idiot.*

My hands flex to rip the paper into satisfying shreds, held fast by some unknown inner restraint.

*Intel was WRONG.*

A smaller voice resists.

*Is that so surprising?*

Except now I'm in a half-bath on some wealthy eccentric's fun-times island playing in his sick fantasy reality television show.

Another scream, followed by shouts, echoes from someplace in the manor.

*And there's that going on.*

I can't bring myself to look at the blank piece of paper again. I'm grateful I don't have a camera following me as I sink onto the toilet seat. Some other contestant is closer to finding Antwerp's decryption key because they weren't dicking around in an empty kitchen based on bad intel, and I've never felt worse.

*Never?*

That absence on my ring finger niggles at me again. Need to do something with my hands. There's hard metal in my pocket that came with the infuriatingly blank scrap of paper. It's not some big skeleton key or prop. A common house key, freshly cut with metal shavings still clinging to it.

*There's a locked door somewhere, and I'm going to find it. Toaster Oven Man was guarding this for a reason...*

What that reason might be eludes me. I brush away the questions as I put the key and, just in case, the blank paper back into my pocket.

The mirror above the sink taunts me until I spend a minimal effort to remove mud from my hair.

*Mom can criticize it for me next time I'm on camera.*

She and Danny are probably in her living room, on the green couch that will never die, mid-morning light coming into her small Anaheim home that Dad bought. She'll be saying something like, "Everyone's hair looks so much better." Danny says, "Shut up, Mom," and she loves him for it. Then she'll be asking questions, filling any silences, talking over the television. Not because Mom's dumb and doesn't understand things, but to make Danny look smart. And because she doesn't think more than one step ahead except to ponder who-betrays-who in her telenovelas.

What did the man mean by de-crypt-ing, she asks, sounding out the unfamiliar English word as she does. It's sort of a special mathematical password, Danny says with the patience of a favorite son.

It is not an actual key? No, more like a computer program — a hard drive or USB stick they have to find, that's what Antwerp made it seem like in that speech.

And they need this key because this man is stealing the computer's data? Not stealing, just locking it away. Like, instead of towing your car sometimes they put a boot on the tires and you can't use the car until you pay up. Except instead of paying Antwerp, he's made it a contest.

*And instead of a car, it's corporate and government computers worldwide. Decryption key worth at least Antwerp's prize money for the unscrupulous sort, and unscrupulous might be the kindest word for this bunch.*

I'm dallying, putting off going back out there. I turn the faucet to splash water on my face, drink some, maybe fix my hair a little more, but it's loose and nothing comes out. The toilet handle, too, flops when I try it.

*Not just the kitchen that's for show.*

I leave the brief sanctuary of the upstairs bathroom and begin my search for a locked door. Crashes and thuds that echo through the manor, intermixed with yells and screams, adds immediacy to the search.

*Doors, even locked ones, won't last long with contestants kicking and battering them down.*

Each hallway I pass upstairs is filled with the light of open doors, the smell of sweat, and the taste of desperation tinged with iron. Can't shake the uneasiness up here. I make for the ground floor again.

*Not saving the world here. Divisions of techies, from every country, probably decrypting whatever virus Antwerp's unleashed already. Sure to be backups of backups of backups, anyway.*

That smaller voice again.

*Then why'd they try so hard to get operatives on this island. Why are you here if you believed that?*

Downstairs, it's much the same if at least more orderly with the interviews happening in the main hall. Groups still loiter, and I don't quite know why they're not also searching for the decryption key.

I pick a hallway, one as likely to have a locked door as any other, and head down it. One room I pass on the left looks like a hurricane strolled through: heaps of homogeneously indistinct books scatter the floor from shelves pulled from the wall, chairs and tables upended and smashed. Two contestants work their way through the wreckage as though to build a forensic case against the natural disaster. On the right, the remains of a dining room. The next room on the right, though, looks to be a promisingly closed door. My feet pick up the pace.

As I reach the door, it opens outward, expelling a contestant who gives me an automatic smile and sense of manners he might have as well left on the mainland. Except I'm as guilty of the automatic manners as I return a fake smile and go through the politely held open door. Behind the door are stairs that lead down to an unexpected basement.

The steps are utilitarian and steep without even a handrail to accompany them. Coming up the steps are Glum and Glummer, one after the other. Even with my honed sense of balance, one sharp shove from either would be enough to send me into open air, then harsh concrete. My body would be bait for every camera in the manor.

*Would it? Those rumors on the ship that they'd edited out most, if not all, of the deaths in The Trials...*

I give them both my most un-fakish smile, hoping they aren't reading my mind, giving them ideas. Both ignore me, preoccupied with their own thoughts, as I pass, then I rush down the rest of the stairs without incident.

At the bottom, I look around the room with one sweeping gaze, which is enough to convince me there's nothing down here of interest, and certainly no locked doors. The basement is empty, the length and width of the ground floor with occasional load-bearing beams. At regular intervals along the walls, windows look up and out into night's darkness. Two more contestants aren't as convinced as me: a man jumping to sweep his arm below each of the windows, and a blonde woman I recognize from the semi-finals.

It takes a moment before the realization hits me. She had died. Fell more than four stories, she must have died. And now she's here in an island basement giving bare walls a thorough examination.

*What is going on? Is this early onset crazy? Were all hands lost in a shipwreck, and this is my personal hell?*

*Sort of expected more killer clowns.*

Somewhere, probably back in the great hall, a grandfather clock starts to chime. I check my wrist, forgetting for a second the cheap black watch is in the plastic tub with everything else. An insane urge to laugh threatens to escape.

*Get a grip.*

I count the time as I ascend the stairs. Five chimes, not long until sunrise.

*Do I have to take a guided tour of this entire —*

*follow*

I look up to what can only be Mr. Toaster Oven Man standing in the doorway at the top, staring down at me, the crown of his head well above the upper frame. He turns with a jerky movement and disappears from the door frame with a step.

I bound three steps at a time, forgetting my previous fears of shoves and hard concrete floors. Not losing sight of him again.