

## ***The Hunt***

They say one bad decision can haunt you for the rest of your life. It was my bad decision that brought me here.

In the heart of the Daniel Boone Forest, shadows of mist and vapor prowl the perimeter. They're called Khayal and I work for SEEK, a covert government agency that is tasked with destroying the Khayal, or at least stopping the Episteme Brotherhood from getting a hold of them. The Brotherhood, a twisted group who actually uses the Khayal, is growing rapidly. Our government is worried the Brotherhood will use them against humanity in an effort to control the world.

"Time?" my partner, Tom Corduroy, barks.

"Half past a monkey's ass and quarter to his..." Jackson bellows, spit-shining his Ruger with his sleeve.

"Dude! Really? In front of the girls?" Cord coughs.

"Girls? I'll give you Martin, but Donovan? She's no girl, she's a machine." Jackson roars, pounding a fist into my shoulder. "How many kills you get yesterday, Donovan?"

"Twenty-seven. Now can we get back to work? I've felt at least a dozen slip by." I rub my arm.

"Damn girl, you need to chill. You're making the rest of us look lazy." Jackson points to his partner Jenny Martin, when she isn't looking.

“It’s like talking to a rock,” I mutter to the tree beside me.

“Wow, sorry I missed the high-kicks. Are we here to hunt or kiss Donovan’s ass?”

Martin glares at me, marring her perfect makeup-enhanced features.

“Hey, I didn’t ask to be good at my job.” *I’m as surprised as you*, I think, knocking into Martin’s shoulder. The scent of blue spruce grows stronger as I storm up the trail.

“Maybe we’ll get lucky and they’ll wipe her dead first.” Cord catches up alongside me.

I glance back just as Martin flings her freshly-fluffed hair over her shoulder and stalks after Jackson in the opposite direction. “I’ll never understand how a prissy Barbie like Martin got into SEEK in the first place.”

Cord hocks-up a mouthful of saliva and launches it into the shrubbery. “Who cares? You’re only here for one reason, remember?”

Cord’s right. I’m here for my sister, Lindy. And like a switch, my focus turns to the forest, its gruesome secrets creeping silently undetected through the trees. The Khayal. I shudder sensing their presence.

Cord marches at my heels, sensing them too. The Khayal are close. I slide into the thicket, careful not to disturb even a twig. Cord’s right hand slides to his holster as I string an arrow, navigating the thorny underbrush.

“Martin just acts like that because she’s threatened by you. Don’t let her rattle you.” Cord elbows me, pressing against my shoulder.

“I don’t. Every time little Miss tramp-stamp puckers her bitch-face at me, I consider it a compliment.”

Cord howls with a laugh so loud he's going to draw in every Khayal in the preserve.

"Thomas Corduroy." I smack his arm, straightening up to my full five-foot six-inches. The trees rustle at our backs. Electricity shoots through my veins, uncoiling my tightly wound nerves. I whirl, following the bend and sway of the leaves, there's a slight change in color. It's a blur, like looking through foggy glass, as the concentration of muted greens shift from one branch to the next. Not just anyone would notice, at least not without training. And as a SEEK Agent, this is my job. I've been taught to hunt Khayal by an agency that isn't even supposed to exist, just like the parasites we're charged with destroying.

"On your right!" I growl, letting two arrows loose. Time slows to that of a dream. Cord draws his monstrosity of a gun, firing blindly to the woods as he whirls. "Gragh!" I fall sideways to the ground, rolling and stringing another arrow. It flies from my bow with a quiet thwap. I fire arrow after arrow before I'm even back on my feet.

Two. Five. Seven charred and deformed figures fall to the ground.

And that's why Martin hates me. She just can't stand that a tomboy like me—my face always smeared with dirt and hair littered with twigs—could be more popular at SEEK than someone like her—a curvy blonde whose peachy pink lip-gloss she chose to enhance her canned tan. It goes against the societal norm. But it's not my fault Martin hasn't got any friends. She's managed that all on her own because she's rude. Maybe if she'd stop spreading lies about me, people would give her a chance.

The forest grows quiet, with the exception of an angry squirrel barking in the long-off distance, the sweet smell of a tropical bouquet fills the air as the shadows dissolve.

Cord holsters his Glock.

“Next time, why not just get a loudspeaker?” I guess I should be used to his lack of protocol. Cord’s never been one to follow rules.

“Please, I was never in any danger. You had my back. How can something so ugly smell so girly?” Cord runs a finger under his nose.

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen a live specimen. Dead they look more like petrified charcoal than shadows.”

“I hear live Khayal are even more hideous. Team Six in the Mess said the Khayal have the face of a demon, breath like ice, and teeth as sharp as slivered razors,” Cord says with a deep eerie voice trying to spook me.

“You gossip like my mom.” I push him away from the pile of burnt twisted limbs.

“Yeah? I’ll whoop you like your mama should’ve!”

I tear into the trees dodging his too-slow grabs for me. “Maybe if you lay off the steroids you could catch me!”

Here in the forest with Cord, under a canopy of dense leaves, woody vines and Spanish moss, I feel free. Free of my past, free of my guilt, and free of my memories. Tracking is my therapy. For me running comes easily, as does jumping logs and ducking under low-hanging branches, but for Cord...not so much.

“Okay, stop. Hold up. Wait a minute. Or I’ll tell Martin you have a thing for Jackson!” Cord threatens when I don’t stop.

Before I even have time to slow my momentum, I draw an arrow and whirl on him.

“Kidding! Kidding, put that thing away, Keira.”

The sound of my name, my real name, sends a current of joy and fear simultaneously through me. “Shut up! Someone might hear you.” I hiss.

“Who? The Khayal? I don’t think they care. Jackson and Martin are on the other side of the compound by now. It’s just you and me,” Cord laughs, grabbing me around the neck and grinding his knuckles into my skull.

Arrow pointed at the ground, I kick him. “Get off!”

“Ouch, you feisty little ferret!” Cord crows, snaking a hulking arm out to catch me.

I wiggle away, stowing my bow and arrow on my back and thrusting my hands onto my hips. “Ha! I’ll beat you to Red River Gorge!”

He can’t say I didn’t give him fair warning as he puffs for breath in a cloud of red dust.

“Yeah, I’ll catch up,” Cord mutters sorely, taking off after me only a second later.

When I reach Beaver Creek I tiptoe onto the log we use to cross the ravine, it’s the only way to get to the cliffs of Red River, and where a place called Angry Hollow hides nestled in a hillside brae. Location is the real secret to my success. There’s always a horde of Khayal hanging out down there with nowhere to run and no one else knows about this place but me and Cord.

“You coming?” I holler over my shoulder.

“Right behind you,” Cord calls from a distance.

I slow my run to a jog.

“Grugh!” Cord’s yelp echoes off the canyon walls.

My veins run cold as I skid to a stop on loose pebbles, whirling around at the unmistakable crack of splintering wood.

“Cord!” I cry, charging back to my partner.

He doesn’t answer.

I grab my two-way with shaking fingers. “Cord’s in trouble!”

“What?” Martin stammers into the crackly walkie, being her usual useless self.

“Jackson! Bentley! Log bridge. Beaver Creek. Now!” I shout breathlessly, sprinting to the edge of the ravine.

I find Cord straddled over a sagging log threatening to crumble at any moment. Judging by the streak of moss, he’d slipped. His face is sheet-white—like his knuckles—as he peers down to the snarling stone peaks below. Even the water rushes around the jagged stones—a warning that certain peril awaits anyone unlucky enough to fall.

A ball of fiery panic lodges in my throat. I’ve never thought of Cord as vulnerable before, until now. He drapes himself around this disintegrating log, hanging on to any sliver he can wrap his meaty fingers around, moments from plunging to his death. Even if the impact doesn’t kill him, he’ll be swept into the undertow and drown before any of us could reach him.

“Well, that looks fun.” I mask my terror.

“You should try it.” Cord snorts, sarcasm furrowed in his brow. He knows he’s screwed.

It’s more than I can handle. “Cord, you listen to me! Belly-crawl your butt over here right now, do you understand me?” I wail, all composure forgotten.

“Do you have a plan that doesn’t involve me scrambling my brains down there?”

*No.* “Hang on! I’ll get help.” My arms flailing like a crazy person, a splotch of orange glints in the sun. “Cord! That stupid survival bracelet is gonna come in handy after all!”

“I told you it would.” Cord’s voice is muffled now, as he’s tucked his face against the log.

I yank the pin, pulling at the first knot with my teeth. It unravels like a snake in a can, pooling at my feet. I loop the paracord around a nearby tree and hurl the free end toward Cord.

“Catch!”

It sails straight to him.

But just before it reaches the log, the gusts rising from the raging waters push it askew.

Cord’s arm snakes out—just in time.

I brace myself, digging my heels into red clay.

The moment Cord shifts his body-weight the log crumbles, falling in three pieces to the depths below. Cord’s face bunches up, his tongue lolling about like a canine’s. The rope twangs like a banjo, stretched to its max capacity.

Cord howls, swinging toward the cliff like a human wrecking ball.

“Oh, shi-i-it!” I grimace, vaguely aware the cable is slowly hacking my hand in two.

My feet shred through layers of clay, gravel, and sand as I speed toward the cliff. The next instant, I catch sight of a boulder. If I can just get to it...

“Brace yourself!” I screech.

Suddenly, my hands go numb as the rope slackens.

I fall backward, landing on my bow, it cracks but there’s no time. I crawl to the edge and peer over. “You alright?”

“I’ve been better!” Cord groans, dangling off the end of a protruding rock.

I scoot the cable off my throbbing palms, pressing the blood-raw marks against my jeans.

Cord shimmies up a few feet to loop the cable around his hip and thigh. I say a silent prayer that his years of rock climbing will help him now. A drip of sweat rolls between my eyes, the hallow rumbling of a crisis still revving my nerves on high.

“Ready?” Cord is clearly feeling as leery about this as I am.

My hands refuse to cooperate, but I force the twine around swollen palms one more time and jump into what I hope is a good position.

“Seriously, could y’all be any slower getting here?” I mutter to my absent team who should’ve been here by now.

“Okay, go!” I wince.

Blinding white pain rips through my vision as Cord settles his three-hundred pounds onto the rope. The throbbing lessens slightly as he begins to climb. I walk my hands forward and pull, again and again until I see his over-muscled arm reach up between tufts of crabgrass. I wait for his other hand to grasp the edge before I race to him.

My momentum in full swing, I reach down before my feet stop. He grabs my wrecked hand and throws his leg up on solid ground. Gravity takes over. Cord goes one way—and I go the other. My feet fly into the air, one and then the other. It all happens in slow motion, as if I intentionally threw myself in a sort of front aerial, over the side of a cliff.

For the briefest of moments, I catch Cord’s upside-down eyes gazing at me in sheer panic. He makes a grab for me. I stretch for him, but like a dream our fingers graze—and miss.

Time speeds up again as I realize I'm going to die. And next thing I know, I freefall heading straight for a cradle of boulders.

## *Prey*

Khayal surround me, an eerie sensation amidst the sweet lilac breeze, and flitter between glimpses of sun sparkling on dewy leaves. They're everywhere, stalking me in the shadows, sneaking through the trees like ghosts.

I close my eyes searching for memories of how I got here, forcing the hot swampy air in and out of my lungs. The last thing I remember, Cord was climbing over the edge of Red River Gulch and then nothing—except flashes of rainbows in raging waters.

And now I'm pressed against a sugar maple, balancing on one leg, and fumbling for an arrow with bloodied fingers.

Khayal are hunting me.

I squint down the long golden rod. It's cracked, but I steady anyway and release it. The shaft warbles lamely through the air. A terrible shot. Surprised relief washes over me as the spear stops mid-flight, a charcoal figure materializing around it. My attacker writhes and falls with a dull thump at my feet.

Precious seconds I can't afford pass while I blink, blurry-eyed, at the dark shape. It's as though I've never killed a Khayal before.

*“What’s the first thing you do if you’re injured, agent?”* Captain Roselle’s voice rings in my memories.

I give myself a shake. It’s been a year since my SEEK training, but I should know what to do instinctively. Kistall, the corporation which owns SEEK, trained me to react without thinking.

*“Inform my team, sir.”* I answered easily then, when there was no imminent threat of danger.

I pat my leg for my radio. It’s not there.

“Cord?” I call out softly for my partner.

No answer.

Tiny hairs rise over my neck with the sensation of being watched. The woods remain quiet, apart from a lonely magpie somewhere in the distance. I shove off from the scratchy trunk, spotting the trail, and stumble forward with a crunch. A twig or perhaps a Khayal arm.

The smell of gardenia permeates the air. I flee from the stench, sodden ground splattering underfoot. I slash my bow blindly through the thicket, branches slapping against my face until I tumble over a mossy stump and bite my tongue.

“Crap!” I curse, hobbling up.

Deep in the hollows of my stomach a restless rumbling says it’s been days since I’ve eaten. I glance down to find a bite in my calf, dripping a bright trail of crimson for every shadow to follow me.

I can't remember it happening. I'm alone and lost in a forest full of predators. Why am I still alive? I'm easy prey. The thought crosses my mind that maybe the Khayal are like my cat, Mr. Mouser. He likes to play with his kill before he rips it to pieces. I slip over the edge of delirium, the idea of being eaten slowly too much to handle.

Despite the physical protest, I tighten my grip on my bow until my fingers go white, forcing myself to stay alert—knowing each ragged breath might be my last.

Overhead, a Khayal ripples through the branches, invisibly taunting me.

I scramble over a boulder, SEEK's motto echoing in my dizzy head: Search, Evade, Extract, Kill.

Though it's March, my breath streams in the sunlight streaking through the trees, a warning.

A shadow dives straight for me.

I reach for an arrow and grab at nothing.

"Dammit!" An empty quiver.

With more effort than is necessary I jump the creek, wincing under my own weight, and hobble to the next tree line. My lungs fill with fire—the Khayal venom must be taking hold—but I can't stop to breathe. I have to make it for Lindy.

In just one more mile, I'll clear the trees. But I stumble and sway, latching on to the branch of a birch.

*"What do you do when there's no hope, agent?"* Captain Roselle is back in my head.

*"Fight till the last breath, sir!"*

I have to survive. I have to save myself if I'm going to save her.

I just...have to...hold on...

Glimpses of jagged teeth looming over me cloud my vision.

I shake my head and get moving again. After a few steps I'm sliding down a hill on my butt, and then I'm running, hopping, falling. Until at last, I clear the forest. My eyesight wavers, flickering from real-time to dream. Spindly fingers reaching for me, pointy teeth glint in the sun, smiling at me with their special brand of menace.

My lips tingle—I'm lacking oxygen—but I trudge toward camp, dragging my right leg like a dead stump. The sign post that reads SEEK is a welcome sight. I pass the chain-link barrier into the compound. I'm home. I'm safe. This is where I belong.

I force my feet forward, boots sticking in the mud, each step more agonizing than the last. The red medic symbol on the mobile building is sixty feet ahead when black spots eat away at my vision.

I have only seconds before I lose consciousness.

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Sporadic beeping penetrates my snarled reality. Somewhere in there an unfamiliar mechanical hum whirs nearby. I can't make any sense of it. Where am I? Do Khayal use machines to extract my organs before devouring them? That doesn't sound right. I must be with their handlers, the Episteme Brotherhood.

What little I know about Episteme baffles me. Handlers—the agents of Episteme—actually use Khayal like guard dogs or circus monkeys trained to kill. Are they going to torture me for information?

I'm vaguely aware of murmurs bouncing around outside of my head. But I can't work out all the words.

"Is she going to make it?"

To which someone replies, "There's no way to know how long her brain went without oxygen."

None of it makes any sense and I can't fight my way clear of the grog. I want to get back to the voices. I need to understand what they're saying. Instead, I slip away to another time...

I'm eight years old. My sister Lindy and I are riding bikes on a long summer day with the wind in our faces and sun on our backs.

Then the image fades to another. I was six when Lindy took me to the park to play. We weren't supposed to leave the yard but she said it was alright since it was only two blocks from our house. Our mother, pulling weeds in her giant straw sunhat, didn't see us sneak off. We'd only been at the park for a few minutes when I fell off the monkey bars. I broke my arm. I couldn't go to school for a couple of days. I was so bored. Lindy felt so guilty. She came straight home every day and took care of me in the weeks that followed. After that, we were closer than any other sisters at our school.

And still another dream flashes. I was fifteen when I started feeling overshadowed. Lindy was so damned determined to make the Olympic Swim Team. She was the star of our town. Her face was in the newspaper almost weekly—which our mother plastered proudly all over the fridge. People stopped calling me Keira. I became "Lindy's little sister." That's when I started making up excuses not to hang out with her. Then I stopped going to her swim meets and I bailed

at the last minute on her graduation party. I was her designated driver. She would've never gotten in the car that stole her legs, if I hadn't been such a resentful bitch.

It was at that moment that I decided to do whatever it took to make it up to her. I needed to make it right.

The dreams continue showing me bits and pieces of my life. Some are of moments of great happiness—like Lindy and I making up our own language. Others are memories of sorrow and pain—my darkest hours—Lindy in a wheelchair, bound to a machine for life.

How could she ever forgive me? Look what I've done!

The dreams turn dark. My poor helpless sister, with her useless legs, rolls her chair across our high school's gymnasium. She doesn't see the Khayal, though how could she? The image transforms, giving the Khayal shape. It looks like a grim reaper composed of burnt trees and spindly arms compiled into the tiny body of a fairy. The effect is fantastic. Horrifying, yet incredible. I can't stop staring at the creatures, until Lindy screams, "Keira!"

"I'm coming, Lindy! I'll save you! I have to save you!" I cry in the dream, as my two worlds collide.

"It's time to let her go." A dreary voice announces outside of my subconscious hell.

*No! My family. Please tell them where I am.* I hope I say it aloud. *Move something dammit!* I concentrate hard on closing my fingers, order my body to obey. It's agonizing.

*Save Lindy! Fight for Lindy!* I scream in my head.

At last, my hand closes into a loose fist and every sound in the room rushes in all at once. A loud chug-swish pumping in close proximity to my head, running feet skidding to a halt on hollow flooring, and a high-pitched beeping going crazy.

A female voice screeches, “Dr. Solomon!”

“Get Corduroy!” barks Solomon, SEEK’s combat medic. “Now!”

I relax inwardly. I recognize those names and know I’m in friendly hands. Until unimaginable pain tears through me, bringing me back to full consciousness. Eyes wide and vision blurred, I try to scream but only squeak. My head pounds in time with the bleeps of the cardiac monitor. Every muscle feels bruised, but it’s the icy burn in my right leg that has me twisting in the sheets.

“Remain still, Donovan. Do you want something for the pain?” Solomon asks, shining a light in my eyes. His brow furrows as he scribbles on his clipboard.

“Drugs,” I gurgle.

He nods and scurries away in blood-smearred scrubs.

“I knew you’d do it, baby, come back to papa!” Corduroy says, rushing toward me like a freight train. His arms stretched wide to embrace me.

“Shut up, Cord.” I roll my eyes, adjusting the scratchy pillow behind me.

“I see a week with the Khayal didn’t improve your attitude.” Jenny Martin struts into the room like she owns the place.

The last person I want to see. It’s bad enough she makes my life hell when I’m well. I really don’t need her shit right now. I pretend she’s not here, hoping she’ll get bored and go away. I look back to Cord, twisting at my snarled hair. “Was I really alone in the Boone for that long?” I whisper, my throat rough like sandpaper.

Corduroy shakes off a fleeting look of concern and snaps on a cool grin. “Actually, you were. Doc Sol resuscitated you three times. You’re not a cat, you know? You don’t get nine lives.”

Jenny Martin slithers out the door in a huff.

I sigh in relief. I’m glad Martin’s gone and Cord’s here. “I didn’t do it on purpose.”

Cord’s the one true friend I have at SEEK. I trust him with my life. He’s the only agent who is privy to the truth about me. Everyone else knows me by my sister’s name. But I’m Keira, Lindy’s seventeen-year-old sister. That was the condition Captain Roselle gave me when he recruited me. On paper, I became Lindy—nineteen and legal. And Lindy became a number on a waiting list for an organically-manufactured spinal cord transplant.

Although, looking at Cord now – the overgrown cue ball stressing the spindly-legged chair to the max – I wonder why he puts up with me. He’s not bad looking, though he’d look a lot better if he shaved off that ridiculous tuft of hair below his ears, but he’s not my type. And I’m pretty sure I’d know if he had a crush on me. I’m not sure where his loyalty comes from.

The painkillers are starting to take effect. I’m a little too comfortable, almost stoned. A long moment passes, neither of us bothered by the gap in conversation, but he watches me from the corner of his eye.

“How long have I been in Medic?” I ask, voice barely more than a whisper.

I know SEEK policy too well. They won’t keep me long. They can’t afford it. If I can’t SEEK, I’m baggage.

“Five days. Always living on the edge, my friend. Those shadows really busted you up. Wait till you see your face. I hope you got them back.”

“I hope I did, too. It’s all pretty fuzzy, but I did the nose myself.” I grimace, rubbing my hands on my shoulders as a shiver steals over me.

“Yes, I see why you chose it. It’s a huge improvement from the nose you had before. Now you look badass, too.”

The best part about Cord—he has no pity for the wounded and sarcasm is always the best medicine.

## ***Mission***

In the following days, I'm forced to stay in bed. My room is dreadful, bland honey-colored halls – the standard color for all SEEK's PSHs, Portable Surgical Hospitals – blah neutral tones on every surface. The only thing that's comparable to a civilian hospital is the overwhelming stench of disinfectant.

My strength is returning with a vengeance. Every minute I feel stronger, more agile. This, however, creates another more serious problem. I have way too much energy and no way to expel it. I'm bored and fidgety. I stare at the ceiling while replaying yesterday's conversation with Dr. Solomon.

*"You'll stay off that leg, if I have to strap you down. Are we clear, Agent?"* he'd threatened.

But I knew something more was wrong. I'd heard him talking to the other Corpsman the previous night, saying something about "unusually fast healing."

I'd confronted him, demanding to know what the hell he meant, but he wouldn't give me a straight answer.

*“Just cell apoptosis and regeneration we haven’t seen before. How’s it feel?”* he’d asked, skeptically squinting at me.

*“It feels fine.”* It wasn’t a lie. The pain vanished shortly after I’d woken. I studied his guarded expression, but I knew he was still hiding something. *“What’s that mean? Ap- whatever?”*

He’d diverted his eyes, guiltily. *“Your cells are dying and then regenerating, releasing a mature, activated form of Caspase Nine,”* he’d mumbled.

There was enough silence to fill a football stadium.

I’d pressed again. *“Can you repeat that in English?”*

His shirt was speckled with sweat as he turned his back to me before answering. *“In layman’s terms, we have no idea why you’re healing this damn quickly.”*

And there it was. He didn’t even know what the problem was, how could he have kept me here like a lame horse? *“What does it matter? I’m ready to go back to work.”* I’d insisted, but I knew it was hopeless the moment he’d begun feverishly scribbling on his clipboard.

*“This kind of healing shouldn’t be possible and it’s not a good thing. You sure you don’t want something for pain?”* he’d asked again, as he’d done every one of the eighty-six hours I’d been his prisoner.

*“No, honestly I feel great. Can’t I get up?”* I’d asked, my voice verging on whiny. I hated lying here.

*“Next week, maybe,”* he’d growled, tired of explaining his decisions. *“If you don’t allow that leg to heal properly, you’ll be done hunting forever.”*

That had shut me up as he'd marched out the door.

I have to be able to hunt to help Lindy so I did the only thing I could—I pouted, all night.

I'm restless and stir-crazy. Between the flashes of nightmarish dreams and the constant pinging of the monitors beside my bed, I didn't sleep more than an hour. I'm in a foul mood by morning. Lucky for me Cord shows up with my laptop, pushing a food tray cheerfully to my bed.

“Oh, thank God you're here. You have to help me.”

“Why? What's wrong?” He looks around for someone's ass to kick.

“Break me out of this hell! I can't take it anymore.” I scratch my head melodramatically.

Cord's face falls. “What, why? Did someone hurt you? I mean, beyond...you know, patching you up?” He points to my right leg.

“No, but they don't let me move. And look what they're feeding me. It's like baby food!” I point to the gray pile in the middle of the tin plate. “What is it? Mashed potatoes?”

Cord scoops up a spoonful of the creamy mush and gulps it down. “Mmmm, bananas. Who doesn't like bananas?”

“That's bananas?” I grimace. My stomach grumbles its complaint at my refusal to eat. “Eesh. You gotta get me a burger or pizza. Anything edible.”

“And get on Solomon's bad side? No way. Try Captain Roselle.” He happily chokes down my breakfast as if it's a delicacy.

I flounce back against the lumpy pillows, staring at a water-stained circle on the ceiling when an idea hits me.

“You can tell Captain Roselle for me. Tell him to talk to Solomon. Roselle’s numbers have to be suffering without me. I know he’ll do it!” I clasp my hands together, pleadingly. Captain Roselle for sure can’t want me cooped up in here unnecessarily. I make him look good in front of the other captains.

Cord considers me, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. For a moment I don’t think he’s going to do that either. And I don’t blame him. The last thing any SEEK agent wants is to put their neck out there where someone might notice it. Those kinds of agents usually get called up by Ops. I hold my breath, peering at him hopefully.

“See what I can do,” he says, halfheartedly saluting me goodbye as he ducks out of the room.

I listen to his footsteps fade and reach for my laptop, drumming my fingers on the roll-away desk as my email opens. My inbox is overflowing with messages from my family. I read Lindy’s.

**Hey Sis,**

**I had a good week. The doctors are very optimistic about this new procedure and they’ve been running tests to make sure I’m a good candidate for the study. All signs look good. Can you believe it? I might actually walk again someday.**

**Love you,**

**Lindy**

The next two messages are every bit as cheerful, and she’s been given a surgery date. I grin. SEEK is keeping their promise. I scroll down to the next message.

**Keira,**

**Why haven't you written me back? Aren't you happy for me?**

And...

**Are you trouble? Mom's calling your school soon if you don't write back.**

She ended that one with a post script.

**P.S. I ran over your Mr. Mouser's tail again today. I don't think it's going to straighten out this time. Sorry.**

Sheer terror washes over me. Not for my cat, but for the fact that my cover could already be blown. My poor parents—thinking I'm off at college. Roselle did a fabulous job making my documents look real. He even posed as my academic advisor on the phone. But if my parents call the school, it's over. They'll yank my butt home so fast I won't have time to warn Captain Roselle.

Quickly, I skim all of the other emails for proof that my parents haven't contacted Brown University, demanding someone locate me at once. I let out a deep sigh when the last line of my mother's most recent email reads...

**Last chance, Keira Maria! If I don't hear from you by 6:00 p.m. Tues. I'm calling the Dean and the police!**

I have three hours to come up with, and execute, my excuse for ignoring my family. I hit reply and stare at the blank page, resting my fingers on the keyboard. What can I say? I have finals. I shake my head. It's March. Mid-terms? That's it. I'll say I'm swamped with my studies of Evolutionary Science.

I type a quick note...

Hi Mom,

Don't be silly! I'm fine. I'm just super busy. I'm in college, remember? I have mid-terms all week and I've been studying in the library with my study group. I'm sorry if I worried you, but everything is fine.

How's Lindy? Is she really as happy as she sounds in her emails?

Tell dad I said hi and yes he can use my room to build model airplanes. Tell him I'll write soon.

Love you,

Keira

Next, I write Lindy. This time I type slowly, methodically, careful not to say the wrong thing and risk upsetting her.

Hi, Sis!

Oh, how I miss you. Sorry I've been so busy studying, I'm only trying to live up to your GPA. Ha! You could've set the bar a little lower ya' know.

I'm soooo happy to hear about your surgery! I can't wait! June 3<sup>rd</sup>! I'll be there.

**Don't worry about Mr. Mouser's tail. He'll live. Just give him kisses from me.**

I pause for a moment recalling the day I got Mr. Mouser. Lindy gave him to me for my fifth birthday. She came running into our room, face flushed and sweaty. "Come see, Keiry! I picked him out myself. Mom and dad made me promise to help. And I did. I promised. Hurry up!"

Lindy grabbed my hand, dancing me out of our room. I trotted down the hall after her. She posed me at the living room door. "No peeking. Not yet—okay, now! Open your eyes."

Wrapped in pink princess paper with a huge white bow spilling over the edges was a box. I galloped forward. The box moved. I whirled around and hid behind Lindy. "It's okay. It's not scary," she promised as she led me back to the box. She lifted the lid and held my hand. Mr. Mouser let out a teeny-tiny mew.

I wipe my eye and sign the letter. My fingers are just finishing the close when I spot Dr. Solomon marching toward my room and looking lethal. I slam the lid shut. I can't be too careful when Lindy's life rides on my keeping my true identity a secret. Roselle will kill me himself if I get us both fired. I know. He told me as much.

"Donavan?" Solomon growls.

I swallow.

"Congratulations, you're free. *If* you promise to keep taking your meds until the pain is gone."

I pause, biting my lower lip. "It doesn't hurt."

“That’s just the Vicodin talking.” Solomon’s eyebrows arch together into one long black caterpillar.

“I haven’t taken any meds,” I say.

“You haven’t... you mean since breakfast?”

“No, I mean since the day before yesterday.” I snap my mouth shut, wishing I wouldn’t have said that.

Solomon’s brow beads with sweat, color rushing to his cheeks. “I see. Before you go then I need to make sure you haven’t exaggerated the injury.”

I bite a cuticle as Solomon slides the table away and pulls back the covers. I know what he’s going to say, he’s going to take one look at the six inches of stitches and force me back on those mind-numbing narcotics. Solomon snips his surgical scissors through the center. One layer at time, the bandage falls away.

We gasp in unison as fresh pink skin shines under the fluorescents like that of a new born baby’s.

“Nice work, Doc.” I admire the faint, white scar.

“Don’t thank me. I’ve never seen anything like that.” He draws thick black glasses from his lab coat, squinting down his nose, baffled.

It takes Solomon half an hour, jotting down notes, tapping me with a reflex hammer, running a needle along the bottom of my foot, to be convinced that my leg is not about to fall off.

As I leave Medical all he says is, “If anything happens....” Shaking his head, he mumbles the rest under his breath.

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By the next morning, I'm on the track running circles around my team at P.T. My comrades jeer and stare as I whiz past them, especially Jenny Martin. She seems angrier by my recovery than is warranted. "I told you she was faking it. Probably got just got lost and expects us all to feel sorry for her. Oh, poor little Donovan, got lost in the woods."

At this I spin around—jogging backward.

"Ignore her. She's just trying to get you in trouble. Trust me, I know." Cord tugs on my arm.

I get going the right way again, but Jenny Martin keeps flapping her mouth. And she's impossible not to hear. "I can ignore Martin, but why's everyone else listening to her?"

"She's as bad as Ballard, remember him? That stupid guy who ended up in a wheel chair? Seriously, who tries cliff jumping off Cumberland Gap? He used to be a great hunter, the moron. Now he's pathetic!" Martin laughs and the world shifts. It's Lindy's accident all over again. And my friends—my team mates—are laughing with her.

I stop dead, face burning. "You shut up, Martin! You don't know what you're talking about."

"Shhh, Roselle's watching. Keep jogging," Cord puffs, pushing my shoulder around.

"Gah, touchy much?" Jenny Martin snips. A group of agents form a wall behind her.

I can't understand it. These people—except for Martin—were my friends. I've never had any trouble with them. I glower at Martin. My hands ball at my sides, hoping she'll throw a punch so I have an excuse to defend myself.

“Enough!” Cord jogs in front of me. “Donavan, Captain’s motioning for you. Go!” He shoves my shoulder.

I storm off across the field, less enthusiastic about today’s hunt. It’ll go back to normal soon, I assure myself as I approach the Captain. In a weird way Captain Roselle’s been like a second father to me. Maybe that’s because he knows my age. Or maybe he just likes the numbers I bring in. Either way, I don’t want to let him down.

“Captain.” I dance in a stationary jog. “What do you think? Am I cleared to hunt?”

“I can’t stop you,” Captain Roselle grumbles tersely, slashing a check next to my alias.

Overwhelming relief floods over me. I jump up, planting a kiss on the Captain’s cheek.

A tinge of pink spreads under his aging skin.

I tear off for the showers feeling vindicated. I’m going to double my record just to rub it in Martin’s face.

“Donavan, I forgot, Ops wants to see you first.”

## ***Enemy***

My feet stop moving though my heart races. I can't go to Ops. I have to hunt. That was the deal! I search the track frantically for Cord, but he has already hit the showers with everyone else.

"Donavan, did you hear me? I said go to Ops and then get back to work. And I don't recommend kissing anyone else." Captain warns me, his lips pressed into thin white lines.

"Yes, sir," I snap, fighting back an angry retort.

I have time to think on my way to the showers. And maybe this isn't so bad. Maybe, like the Captain says, I just have to pop in at Ops and then get back to work. I hold on to that thought, ignoring the nagging voice in my head saying, "*agents that go to Ops don't go back to hunting.*" That's the rumor anyway, but if it were true Captain Roselle would know, right? My ears buzz with the chatter in my head all the way into the locker room.

"I'm telling you, it's true. It's always been him. I think he's too nice to her."

Three agents wearing only white towels stand gossiping in front of the mirrors, under a cloud of perfume and hairspray. They fall silent when they see me. Jenny Martin is in the middle.

I roll my eyes. They are way too old to be acting like high schoolers.

“I thought there was a mandatory recovery period, didn’t you?” Martin says to them.

“Yeah, I think you’re right. No hunting for two weeks.”

Obviously, they’re talking about me. Jaw clenched, I open my locker, grabbing my shower bag and towel. I slam the door—the acoustics are great in here—and head toward the showers.

“I guess some people get special treatment,” one of the females says loudly enough for me to hear.

I turn the water to full, trying to drown out their voices. As my eyes close under the stream of lukewarm water, a foggy memory creeps into my consciousness. Jenny Martin outside my hospital room, what was it she was saying?

*“It’s not like they’re going to keep her.”*

Recognition edges into my head one word at a time. She was talking about me. Martin knew Ops’ was going to call me up. She probably had something to do with it. Choking back a scream, I scramble out of the shower. At a jog, I pass the three of them—ignoring their laughter—haphazardly throwing on my clothes, and race back out of the locker room.

I run the whole way to the Ops CHU, containerized housing unit. It’s situated on the other side of the compound, as far away from us hunters as possible.

With my hair dripping into my hoodie, the Ops building looms ominously before me. I fix a look of professionalism on my face. Martin can’t win. I can’t let them kick me out of SEEK. One step at a time, I stomp to the top, catching sight of the sign on the steel door and just like that, my resolve melts away.

## **SEEK Code**

**Qualified to Search**

**Qualified to Evade**

**Qualified to Extract**

**Qualified to Kill**

**Fight to Right**

**Never Quit**

### **Serving with Loyalty, Honor, Integrity, and Discipline**

I press the white button on a stainless steel box labeled SCAN IN. The door slides open, revealing a numerical key pad. I type #39 and watch as a retinal scanner emerges from somewhere deep in the wall. We don't use anything as sophisticated as this on the hunter side of the compound. My stomach ties in knots as the laser shines into my eyes. An angry buzz blares at me and the scan begins again. Sweat itches under my collar as the third and fourth scans yield the same results.

I jump as a deadbolt unlocks and the heavy, vault-type door opens.

“Donavan?” a voice barks.

I peek around the corner. “Sir?”

A typical looking Ops Agent—one inch of hair in a neat flattop, more muscles than personality, and a general “bite me” expression—emerges from the doorway. His name tag says

Harnel and he smells of polish sausage. “This way.” He leads me into a stuffy little conference room on the left and sits at the table near a remote and a yellow envelope stamped TOP SECRET in dark red letters. He motions me to a chair with a nod.

“We have a special target we need you to handle.” His beady hazel eyes size me up like I’m an unwanted fly.

“A special Khayal, Sir?” Immediately sensing that was stupid, I drop my gaze to the shiny black table.

“No. This is an Ops mission.” Harnel points the remote at the TV on the wall. “Watch the screen.”

On the plasma screen the green SEEK logo floats across a black binary-code background before the image cuts away to surveillance footage. I study it intently as a man in a fisherman’s hat withdraws money from an ATM. He keeps his head down, like he knows he’s being watched.

“Mr. Jonathan Steed is a Handler who’s defected from the Episteme Brotherhood. He’s a fully trained spy gone rouge, and we need him. Without an allegiance, he’s anybody’s pawn and he could inflict serious harm against us. There’s good news though. Word is—he’s out for revenge against the Brotherhood. Do you understand?”

I nod. Though I have no idea what this rogue Handler has to do with me.

“Here’s where you come in. It’s your mission to sway him. This footage was taken yesterday, about three hours from here.” Harnel slides me a manila envelope. “Your new identity and directions to find Mr. Steed. All you have to do is gather the requested information and persuade him to join SEEK.”

“What if I can’t *sway* him?” I gulp, staring at the video footage as it loops over and over.

“Let me put that another way. If you fail to convince him to join us,” —he pauses, leaning back in the army-green office chair— “Destroy him or don’t come back. I’m sure your sister can adjust to her wheelchair.”

I’m frozen to my seat as understanding sinks in. He knows about Lindy. He knows who I really am and he’s using it against me. The word “destroy” sounds like cannon fire in my head. Does Kistall know about this? Do they really expect me to *kill* someone?

“But I’m not Ops, I’m just a huntress. I don’t murder people. I couldn’t if...” I swallow the bitter taste of certain failure.

“You’re Ops now, and we need this guy!” Harnel snarls, as if that settles the matter.

“All respect sir, but how am I going to do that?” I stuff my trembling fingers inside the pocket of my sweatshirt.

But I’m too slow, he sees.

“You could be pretty if you tried,” Harnel says through pasty lips. “Plus you’re athletic, young with nice hair and green eyes... don’t underestimate what you bring to the table.” He leans over, resting on his beefy arms.

“They’re blue,” I mutter, shying away from his invasive gaze.

Harnel shrugs indifferently. “Look green to me.”

“If this mission is so important shouldn’t someone else do it? What about Martin? She’s—” I stop myself from saying gorgeous.

“Martin’s not fit for this mission.” Harnel snorts and leans in like he has a secret. “Look, you have what it takes. We’ve been watching you since San Jose. Top in every class and holding

the most kills this year. Given your age and ability now, you have nowhere to go but up. Think what you could do for your family.” He pauses, opening a blue folder and thumbing through a few papers. “Keira Marie Donovan, Destin, Florida and only seventeen years old. Impressive,” he says, genuinely.

“Wait. So, I’ve been chosen for this mission because you think I’m good, and not because I’m being punished?” I exhale.

A successful mission could mean faster surgery for Lindy, and at a better facility, as long as I don’t fail anyway. I shake that thought away. If I have to hog-tie that guy Mr. Gelding, or whatever his name is, I’ll get him back here. There’s no way I’m going to turn assassin.

“Punished for what?” Harnel asks, tilting his square head.

“Nothing. I just... Usually...I’ve heard...Never mind.”

Harnel rubs his freshly-shaven angular jaw, considering me. “You’re an Agent of SEEK. You took an oath to do this job for your country, but I understand your concern for your family. If your vow isn’t enough to motivate you, do it for them. Think what your sister will need after her operation, she’s got years of rehabilitation ahead of her. Do this for her.”

That’s the most sincere any commanding officer has been with me. He’s not blackmailing me—he’s giving me, and Lindy, the opportunity we need.

Straightening my back I say, “I’ll do it, Sir.”

“Raise your right hand and repeat after me...”

Thumb over my palm I lift my pledge hand, steady as an oak, and repeat the lines he feeds me.

“I, Keira Donovan, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Federation of Kistall against all enemies, alien and domestic; that my allegiance to the Branch of Operations under SEEK shall be true and will bring honor to the office into which I am about to enter.”

“Good. Now that you’re sworn in let’s go over your target’s background. Jonathan Steed, nineteen years old.”

I choke. “Nineteen?”

“Yes, that’s why you’re a good fit. You’re the only Agent we have that won’t view him like the child he is.”

“I see.”

“Don’t let his age fool you. Like you, he’s extremely bright—so much so that he has invented an anti-hacking program and sold it for hundreds of millions of dollars.”

“I’m sorry. Did you say hundreds of millions?”

“Agent Donovan, there will be time for questions after the briefing; however, we have also included every detail in your packet.”

“Sorry,” I mutter, putting my hands in my lap to show I’ll listen quietly.

Harnel rattles off a few more details about the target that I promptly forget. All I keep thinking is this guy has hundreds of millions at nineteen. Why join the Brotherhood? He could do anything, be anyone, and he chose to fight SEEK. Harnel’s right, I shouldn’t underestimate him because of his age.

I try to listen to Harnel’s words. My stomach grumbles with anxiety.

“...there are no more details on why he dropped out of college to join the Brotherhood, we’re assuming that he was recruited but our sources cannot confirm. Remember this guy could be dangerous. He’s been hidden under the radar so we don’t really know for sure what his temperament looks like. Use caution on approach. He’s probably expecting someone from SEEK to contact him. That’s why you’re our best shot. Understand?”

“Yes, Sir,” I say, not really sure what I’ve just agreed to.

“Make us proud.” Harnel stands then, crisply saluting me.

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.” I rise to attention, laying four fingers over my heart, the traditional SEEK solute.

Harnel grins, looking pleased and points to the envelope. “Do not share this information with anyone. Your eyes only. And remember, normal society will look different now. You can’t go around shooting at invisible shadows. Out there, Khayal don’t exist. Dismissed,” he says.

As I turn to go, he adds one more thing to my list.

“Oh, but, Donavan, first get some girl clothes. You’re trying to appeal to him, not make him feel sorry for you.”

“But there’s nothing wrong with my...” I glance down at the state of clothes. Holes in my jeans, holes in my SEEK hoodie. I hang my head in defeat and shuffle away.

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Clearly Harnel is serious about new clothes because he’s included the address to the Fayette Mall in Lexington, Kentucky. Hopping into the driver’s seat, I flip the roll of bills under my thumb. “Where am I supposed to shop, Saks Fifth Avenue?” I mutter, stashing the cash and the envelope in the empty console.

After programming the GPS, I scoot the seat up as far as it can go and turn the key. The engine purrs as I ease the massive Hummer carefully through the gates, feeling anxious. I turn onto the highway heading east and punch the accelerator.

It doesn't take long for the freedom of the open road to awaken a restlessness I hadn't known I'd felt. I roll down the windows and crank the radio, pounding on the steering wheel. The weather is warm and sunny and the air smells of magnolias, but I'd rather be back in my dark squashy forest hunting shadows with Cord instead of galloping around in a shiny-black Hummer like some spoiled party girl.

And then some female artist singing about being bullied by mean girls comes on the radio and I begin to relax.

The mall is no Rodeo Drive, but a mall is a mall as far as I'm concerned.

It's been well over a year since I've been shopping. Way before Captain Roselle came to my school looking to recruit potential hunters and computer programmers. All under the guise of a college scholarship program for gifted teens. It was the brochure on clone harvesting—which promised to help people in need of a new organ or spinal cord—that caught my attention. Back then, I thought the world was normal. Before I learned Khayal existed. Since then I've been tucked away on one compound or another.

Inside the mall is loud and busy. It's easy to understand why people don't feel the Khayal. There's so much going on. No one stands still long enough to notice the shadows are moving. But even I, a trained professional, can't feel them out here.

By the time I leave I match every other mallrat strutting around like a glam-doll on parade for boys to gawk at. With my nails done, new highlights in my hair, and a wardrobe any nineteen-year-old girl would be jealous of I have to admit it, I do look pretty.

As if on cue, a group of rowdy guys whistle and stare as I wobble across the parking lot in three-inch cork wedges. And they're still watching as I unlock the car, shove my horde of shopping bags in the back, and climb in the driver's seat. I hit the blue OnStar button for directions to Sandy Hook and catch my reflection in the rearview mirror. A total stranger stares back me. My heart beats furiously, like a hummingbird trying to escape my chest. I gawk at the image that should be me, but isn't.

It's not the sea foam-green eye shadow, or the blonde highlights in my russet hair. It's not even these fun-n-flirty clothes. My eyes have completely changed color. They're supposed to be blue-gray and instead they're extraordinarily brilliant neon-green.

The color of something radioactive.