

**Agent Darcy**

**&**

**Ninja Steve**

**in...**

**Tiger Trouble!**

**By Grant Goodman**

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Disclaimer: The following story is a work of fiction. Regarding the events in this book, any similarity to any person, living or dead, is merely coincidental.

**This book is dedicated to my parents, my brother,  
and my students.**

**Thank you for being awesome.**

## STEVE

At 6 AM, Ninja Steve was catapulted out of his bed. As Steve shot through the air, he regained his sense of balance, twisted twice, and landed hard on his heels. Without a second thought, he was in a fighting stance, looking for his attacker.

“Happy twelfth birthday, little brother!”

His sister, Ninja Nora, was standing upside-down on the ceiling and laughing so hard she was crying. She had wrapped her black hair into a swirling bun and had stuck two chopsticks through to hold it all in place.

“I can’t believe you got me,” Ninja Steve said, rubbing his super-short brown hair.

“There’s a reason I graduated early from Ninja School,” she said, and suddenly she vanished from the ceiling.

Ninja Steve looked all around. She wasn’t in the shadows behind the door. She wasn’t under the bed.

There was an explosion of wood as Nora burst up through the floor, holding a round, green cake in one hand and a chocolate ice cream cone in the other. She had a huge smile on her face as she threw the ice cream cone at Steve.

The dessert spun end over end. Steve waited until the last second before he cartwheeled to the right. The cone hit the floor and shattered into a thousand pieces. The ice cream landed with a splat. Nora had anticipated his move and was already changing her direction.

Steve dashed to the wall, ran up the side of it, and did a backflip to avoid his sister. He landed with a grunt and Nora had to throw on the brakes. Before she could turn around, he pulled one of the chopsticks out of her hair.

“Hey, no touching the hair!” she shouted, and threw a back-kick that would have sent Steve sailing out of the house if he hadn’t dodged it. She really, really hated when people

messed with her hair.

Nora rushed after him, bounding from floor to ceiling and back down to the floor in pursuit. Steve wished he had managed to get hold of a smoke bomb or a mist trap or a packet of sneeze dust, but they were all stored neatly in the secret compartment behind his bed. They were the only things that he stored neatly.

Nora touched her finger to the tip of her nose and she became a blur. She circled around Steve again and again at blinding speed and he knew then that there was no escape.

She crushed the entire cake into Steve's face and laughed out loud as she did it. When Steve finished wiping the green tea icing out of his eyes, he saw that she had *another* cake – this one was white.

"Hey! No fair! You used a level two technique!" Steve shouted. "It isn't even legal for me to use a level one technique!"

"Whatever, snot-face. I'm sixteen and that means I can use any level technique that I want," she said. "You'll start learning some next year and even then you won't stand a chance against me."

Nora reached back, ready to throw the second cake.

The door flew open and Nora froze.

Steve leaped forward and snatched the cake out of her hand.

"What is going on in here?!"

Ninja Steve's parents stood in the doorway. Both of them were dressed for work, so their faces were almost completely covered by their black and gray ninja headgear. Steve's mom was the taller of the two and she stood with her arms crossed.

"Nora attacked me," Steve said, pointing to the cake that was still all over his face.

"It's his birthday!" Nora said. "It's tradition!"

“Enough,” their mother said, quietly. “Now, Steve, please hand me the cake you’re holding.”

Steve hung his head and trudged over to his mother. “It’s not fair. I didn’t get a chance to strike back.”

His mom held out her hands. He handed her the cake.

She smooshed it right into Steve’s face.

“Steve, you forget Sensei Raheem’s second rule,” his father told him. “Say it out loud, please.”

Steve sighed. “Never give up your weapon.”

His mother nodded. “Correct.”

His father said, “Nora, get out of your brother’s room. He has to get ready for school and you have to go to archery practice now.”

Nora huffed and walked out, fixing her hair back in place as she went. She turned and stuck her tongue out at Steve and then disappeared into the hallway. Steve wondered if all sisters were like that.

“Happy birthday, honey,” his mother said, with a smile in her voice.

“We’ll celebrate after school today, big guy,” his father said.

“Sounds great, dad,” Steve said.

His parents left. Steve looked around at his ruined room. The mattress was on its side. His sister had destroyed the floorboards. There was melting ice cream and smeared icing everywhere.

He looked at the clock and saw that he only had fifteen minutes before he had to leave for school.

“Happy birthday to me,” he said.



## DARCY

Darcy held her breath.

That's what the handbook said you needed to do to calm down when you were hiding from a pursuer. She pressed her back against the wall as hard as she could, as if she could fade into it. In her head, she counted back from ten, just like she had been taught in training.

All she had to do to complete the mission was reach the ship without being caught.

Agent Darcy tucked a loose strand of her black hair back under her baseball cap, turned the corner and started walking as calmly as she could. She walked through the crowded main street and tried to steady her thoughts. She told herself she was prepared for moments like this one. A new plan would have to work. She would find a way to the harbor from the next street over.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder, hard.

Agent Darcy spun around and gasped as she found herself face to face with her assailant, a willowy girl who smiled as she held a stun gun to Darcy's stomach.

"Busted," said Serena, and she flicked Darcy right on the nose. "You fail."

The word hurt her more than the flick on the face. She had done everything according to practice. Her instructors had gone over the best techniques. What more was there to do? How else could you shake someone after you'd been spotted?

"Jeez, you look like you're burning up," Serena said. And then her eyes went wide. "Ohmigod, this is the first test you've ever failed, isn't it?"

Serena was right.

"I...I..." Darcy stammered.

She felt the tears stinging the corners of her eyes. Thirteen years old and now, only

now, had she failed a test. The first academic failure of her entire life. The pile of successes, of A's and perfect papers and smiles from her teachers at the Bureau of Sneakery, those had all been wiped away. A single word obliterated every good feeling she'd ever had, replaced all of those triumphs with defeat.

The "f" word.

*Fail.*

She would not cry in front of Serena. She would *not* cry in front of Serena.

"You are totally about to cry," Serena said, taking off her fedora to let down her long, brown curls. "This is too rich."

Darcy's resolve crumbled and she cried in front of Serena. Serena left the practice zone and from the sound of it, she was skipping. Darcy was leaning back against the wall, patting her eyes with the sleeve of her black combat-ready shirt, wondering when the Lead Agent would dismiss her over the speaker system.

"Agent Darcy, pull yourself together."

Darcy looked up. Leaning over the edge of the roof of one of the fake buildings in this fake town was Lead Agent Evelyn. She, like any good Lead Agent, was average height, with a pretty but indistinct face, and knew how to dress to blend in with the surroundings. Since this was a simulation of a bustling town, she wore a light gray coat, a pair of black gloves, and fashionable but not flashy black boots.

"Yes, ma'am," Darcy said, and sniffled.

She counted backwards from three and took deep, deep breaths. With each decreasing number, she mentally recited a rule from the handbook.

"3: Never make friends with an outsider. 2: Never speak of the Bureau. 1: Never reveal your name to anyone who isn't an agent," she thought, and by then she had steadied herself.

Agent Evelyn used her remote to shut down the practice zone and all of the hologram citizens flickered and disappeared. Aside from where she went in simulations created for the practice zone, Darcy had spent her entire life living in the hidden territory that belonged to the Bureau of Sneakery.

Agent Evelyn leaped from the rooftop and right before she hit the ground, her multi-boots let out a rush of air and she landed gently in front of Darcy. That must have been a new feature developed by The Giga Squad.

“No more crying,” Evelyn said to Darcy. “It’s ill-mannered for an agent of the Bureau of Sneakery.”

Darcy looked at her chief instructor. Evelyn had shoulder-length blonde hair and an intense stare that could intimidate anyone. There was a reason she was Lead Agent and it surely wasn’t because she was soft. When names were being drawn for mentor agents, Darcy had heard a few others hoping and praying and wishing for anyone other than Lead Agent Evelyn. That had confused her. Shouldn’t you want to be trained by the best? Why would anyone settle for less?

Darcy did her best to meet Evelyn’s stare and not wither.

“Why did you fail, Agent Darcy?”

“I did not take the right path to the harbor,” she said, and the words were heavy coming out of her mouth.

“Wrong,” Evelyn said, and Darcy shrank down.

There was a knot in Darcy’s chest and it was getting tighter and tighter. Evelyn was trying to get to her, to get under her skin and upset her again. Well, she wouldn’t let that happen. She would stick to her answer.

“I...f...failed because I did not take the right—”

Evelyn cleared her throat. “Agent Darcy, repeating the wrong answer does not make

it right. Choose your next words carefully.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I followed the book and the lessons perfectly.”

Evelyn smirked. “That is a much better response, agent. When I see you tomorrow, you had better be able to say that word aloud without stumbling around it. The Bureau is all about failure.”

With that, Lead Agent Evelyn walked away, down the fake Main Street, and toward one of the many hidden exits in the walls of the practice zone. Darcy went in the opposite direction, out the way she had come in.

She walked out onto campus, which thankfully was mostly empty since it was getting late in the evening. The lamplights were starting to blink on and as she walked the winding path back to her dormitory, she said the word to herself over and over again.

Her room was a rectangle large enough for a twin-size bed, a black desk, a dresser with three drawers, and a closet wide enough for ten hangers. She sat down at her desk and opened up her laptop. Darcy punched in her 20 character password and brought up her writing app.

“I failed today, mom and dad,” she said out loud as she typed. “And I will never fail again.”

## STEVE

Ninja Steve was bored. It was History of the Ninja Wars class and Sensei Raheem was making them all stand on the ceiling while taking notes. Sensei claimed that it would build their endurance. Steve wasn't so sure. All it did was make him want to be right-side-up as soon as possible.

Sensei Raheem was writing on the board using his sword. He was a tall, wide man, bald except for a very short mohawk. In tall, wide letters he wrote the words, "The dinosaur assassins were banished from planet Earth." While the rest of the class was taking notes, Ninja Steve was drawing a picture of a hamburger. He had given it arms and legs, and he was about to give it eyes when he got the strange feeling that someone was behind him. He turned and found Sensei Raheem standing there, a severe look of disapproval on his face.

"Ninja Steve! Is that a hamburger with arms and legs?"

Steve nodded. "Yes, Sensei."

"Since you clearly don't understand what hamburgers are, I am giving you a week of cafeteria detention. You will be preparing hamburgers for the rest of the ninjas. Except, of course, for the vegetarian ninjas. For them, you'll prepare mashed potato patties."

Ninja Steve lost his concentration and fell down from the ceiling. Nothing was more humiliating than cafeteria duty, except for falling off of the ceiling. The other ninja students snickered until Sensei Raheem threw a tomato and hit one of them in the head. It was one of the many weird things Sensei was known for doing.

"Now isn't the time for laughing. The Dinosaur War was serious!" he said, and resumed his lesson.

Steve was sent to the cafeteria ten minutes before the start of lunch.

"You must be my new apprentice for the week," said Sensei Chow. He flared his

nostrils after every sentence. Sensei Chow also had the bushiest eyebrows in Ninjastoria. "I already have the food on the grill, but you can serve it."

He handed Ninja Steve a spatula that must have weighed ten pounds.

"You will train hard with that spatula. You will learn that a heavy spatula will make your arms strong and your mind focused. You will learn that mistakes are costly, both in time and energy."

Steve held the spatula tightly as he stood behind the lunch counter. The hamburgers and the mashed potato patties sizzled on the hot grill in front of him. The smell should have made him hungry, but Ninja Steve was nauseous. Any minute now, the cafeteria would fill with the other students and they'd line up for their food. Because every ninja needed to be served lunch, every ninja in the school would know that he had been punished.

The gong struck and lunch began. They all came in, in their black or their white uniforms, talking quietly and occasionally pointing at Steve. Steve flipped the patties onto buns, two at a time. He passed the lunch tray down the line to Sensei Chow, who filled the rest of the plate with fresh berry salad.

"Nice work, Steve," said Samurai Sam when he got to Steve. "What'd you do this time?"

Samurai Sam was the chubby, glasses-wearing son of the Bushido Gardens ambassador. He was also Ninja Steve's best friend.

While everyone else was required to wear the cloth uniforms of the ninja, Samurai Sam was permitted to wear the gray metal armor of his warrior people. It made it easy to find him in the halls, since he was always clanking around with every step. Steve wasn't sure how Sam could stand it, being so noisy all the time.

"I'll tell you later," he said, and Sam moved on.

Getting through the rest of the line took forever. The extra-heavy spatula began to take

its toll on Steve and soon his arms felt like they were going to fall off.

“Hey, Steve.”

He looked up and it was Ninja Kelly. Steve’s hand slipped and the burger he had scooped up fell onto the floor.

“Oh, um, hi,” he said, and tried to look cool. But then he couldn’t remember how to look cool, so he changed his pose again. “What’s up?”

“Nothing much,” she said. “I was just wondering what—”

Before she could finish, Ninja Steph tapped her on the shoulder.

“OH HEY GIRL!” Ninja Steph shouted.

Then they lapsed into girl talk. It was loud and it was energetic and it had absolutely nothing to do with Steve. Ninja Kelly and Ninja Steph continued through the lunch line and didn’t look back. Whatever she had been about to tell him was gone forever.

Steve was able to serve himself a burger once everyone else had their food. He took his tray over to the table where Samurai Sam sat, along with Ninja Arjun, who was the tallest ninja student in the whole school. They were talking about the latest episode of their favorite tv show, “Kung-Food.”

“Dude, you know that Burrito-San is going to rescue Princess Sashimi next episode, right?” Samurai Sam said.

Arjun shook his head. “That’s what they want you to think. Burrito-San is going to get there at the exact same time as Sifu Tofu and they’ll spend the whole episode fighting each other. The princess won’t be any closer to being rescued.”

Steve agreed with Arjun, so all he did was nod. His arms shook as he lifted his burger to take a bite.

“Anyway, Steve, what’s up with you today? What happened?” Sam asked.

Steve told them. They laughed at him, because that's what good friends do. He laughed, too. His worries, he realized, were ridiculous. He'd do his lunch prep and then the week would be over and no one would care about it.

Plus, it meant that he had four more chances to talk to Kelly.

## DARCY

Darcy couldn't sleep. She had written a diary entry. She had said goodnight to the photo of her parents. She had listened to her favorite song.

"This is ridiculous," she said into her pillow, and she flopped over onto her side. She was growing frustrated and that definitely wasn't going to help her fall asleep at all. After another minute, she gave up and got up.

The little café in the basement was always open. You never knew when you'd be returning from training, so someone was always there to make sure you didn't have to go to bed hungry. Some of the instructors grumbled that the current students were spoiled and that some missions in the field required going without food and that was how "the real world" worked. Then again, some of the instructors grumbled about everything being better when they were younger.

One of the nice parts of living in a girls-only school was that if you wanted to walk around in your pajamas at night, you could. Darcy wandered downstairs in her powder-blue pajama pants and a white top, passing a handful of other students dressed similarly.

She smelled cinnamon and coffee way before she got to the café. It was music to her nose. When she walked in, all four of the little round tables were empty, their chairs neatly pushed in. One of the glass display cases was open in the back and Matilda was carefully arranging some muffins. She looked out through the glass, saw Darcy, and waved.

Matilda was one of the senior students at the Bureau of Sneakery; she was seventeen. She had a handful of missions to her name, which kept her away from campus most of the time. When Darcy had first entered the Bureau, Matilda had been her guide. Unlike most of the other girls and their mentors, the two of them had stayed friends.

"Darcy, why are you still awake?"

"Bad day," Darcy said.

Matilda closed the case and when she stood up, Darcy saw that she had a spot of powdered sugar on her nose.

“Bad day?” she asked, and brushed the sugar off of her nose. “I’ve heard of those. A coffee cake muffin is supposed to be a tremendous help.”

Darcy shook her head.

“No? Some herbal tea, then?”

“Please.”

Matilda poured two cups and then walked over and sat down with Darcy. Darcy stared into her tea and got lost until Matilda cleared her throat.

“If you’re not going to drink, then you might as well talk,” Matilda said, taking a sip.

Darcy stirred her tea around with a spoon, thinking of where to start. It all seemed so petty. Matilda had been halfway around the world, had probably put her life in danger. What was a training mission gone wrong? It was a waste of Matilda’s time.

“It’s nothing.”

Matilda laughed. “You have got to be kidding me. Out with it, girl.”

“You’re going to think it’s ridiculous. You have real problems, I only have—”

“Whoa. Slow down. This isn’t some sort of problem contest. Tell me what’s up and you’ll feel better.”

Darcy told her. It was easier to say this time. She still felt a little ashamed at the end, but not as much as she had expected. And Matilda didn’t laugh at all.

“Oh, that’s perfectly normal. It doesn’t mean you’ll never get your first mission. And, no, they’re not going to kick you out for that,” Matilda said.

“What?”

“Come on, Darcy. Think about it. Everyone got here by being exceptional. That’s all you’ve been, all the time. Of course it’s going to come as a shock when, for once, you mess up. You can’t stay perfect forever. None of us do.”

Hearing that was a relief, like a rainbow after a storm. Someone else understood.

They talked a lot after that, about the pressure of being in the Bureau, about which class was the hardest, about which agents were training whom. After an hour, Darcy was feeling like herself again.

“Look at you now,” Matilda said. “You are a million times better.”

“Thanks, Mattie,” Darcy told her. “I think I might be able to sleep tonight.”

“Go for it,” Matilda said. “See you later.”

Darcy said goodbye to her friend and walked back through the hall and up the stairs. When she turned the corner to get to her room, she found Lead Agent Evelyn standing there, leaning against the door with her arms crossed. Darcy’s good mood suddenly scattered. She knew – absolutely *knew* – that Evelyn was there to kick her out.

“Hello, Darcy,” she said. “I wasn’t sure if you’d still be awake.”

“Hello, Lead Agent,” she said.

“We need to talk about something important.”

Darcy felt a lump in her throat. She swallowed, and it was still there. “Yes?”

“A mission came up. They needed two candidates. I nominated you.”

A mission? Nominated? Now her fear had been replaced by curiosity. What was it? Where was it? How long would it last? A good agent, however, had control, and a good agent wouldn’t spout off a stream of questions in the middle of the hallway in the middle of the night. That kind of conduct would get you nowhere.

“Thank you, Lead Agent,” was all she said.

“I’ll let you ask one question about the mission,” Evelyn said. “The rest will have to wait until morning.”

There it was. The way to test an agent-in-training’s patience. To see how she’d react to having to wait for mission details. She’d win this one.

“Who is the other agent?”

Evelyn cracked a hint of a smile. “Agent Serena.”

With that, Evelyn left, and Darcy stood there in the hall, trying to figure out whether she was going to shout with joy or with anger.

## STEVE

“A true ninja does not name his katana,” said Sensei Raheem, addressing his students as they all stood in the Field of Tall Purple Grass. The grass was tall enough to reach Sensei Raheem’s chest. “Just as you do not name your arms, you do not name your katana.”

Ninja Steve immediately named his arms. His left arm was Dr. Cyborg and his right arm was Valkor the Great. Why wouldn’t you name your arms? That seemed like a cool thing to do.

“Today, you will be practicing precision. Watch carefully.”

There was a flash of light as Sensei Raheem drew his katana and returned it to its sheath. He waved his hand and then smiled. The rest of the students looked at each other. What had they missed?

“Sensei, I don’t see what —” Ninja Thomas started to say, but Sensei Raheem threw a tomato into his face before he could finish.

“Ninja Steve, tell me what happened,” Sensei Raheem said with crossed arms. “Your sister was the only one in her class who was able to.”

Steve hadn’t been paying attention. Nora would have and that was why she would have known what Sensei had done. Instead, Steve had been wondering why the grass was purple. Nowhere else in Ninjastoria had purple grass, let alone *tall* purple grass.

“Sensei, you...um...you cut a single blade of grass with your katana,” he said.

Sensei Raheem grunted and threw a gold sticker at Steve. It was shaped like a sword and it hit Steve in the middle of his forehead.

“That is for being correct,” said Sensei, and Steve glowed with pride. “And this is for not paying attention but still getting a lucky guess.”

The tomato came speeding toward his face. Steve leaned to the right and dodged it, only to be hit by a red onion right behind it. Onions, it turned out, hurt far more than

tomatoes.

“Now, you will draw your katana once, you will make one cut, and you will trim one blade of grass. Get to work.”

The ninjas spread out silently and the grass folded in around them as they settled into new spots. Steve heard the clank of Samurai Sam’s armor not too far away. He wanted to talk to Sam, but didn’t want to risk another vegetable to the face.

Steve gripped the hilt of his katana, which was a rough sharkskin covered in thin ribbons of silk. His *saya*, the scabbard, was solid black wood. The silver blade he drew was exactly two feet long, stamped with an image of a sunburst just above the *tsuba*, the guard. The katana had been in his mother’s family for centuries, dating back at least as far as the Interstellar Pixie Rebellion. Not as far back as the Dinosaur War, though. He would have to find a good, proper name for the sword.

After half an hour of attempts, Ninja Steve was grumpy and sweaty. Sensei had compared him to Nora in front of everyone. So many teachers did that. Steve had lousy test scores, was terrible with any weapon other than a sword, and wasn’t interested in most of his classes. Year after year, his teachers mentioned Nora’s early admission to college, her deadly accuracy with a blowdart gun in Superbowl XXV, and her decision to double-major in Ghost Studies and Spin Kicks. Nora was, aside from President Ninja, the leading ninja expert on ghosts and was giving monthly lectures at the university. Steve gripped the handle of his sword and stared straight ahead, looking past the grass instead of at it.

He drew his sword slowly, with a long breath. He turned to his right, cut as quickly as he could, and returned his sword to its sheath.

A single stalk of purple grass blew away in the wind. A gold sword sticker from Sensei Raheem hit Steve on his chin before he could even realize what had happened. When he did, he shouted and drew his sword and cut again, convinced he could repeat his task.

Unfortunately, Steve couldn't manage to do it again. Every time, his katana clipped through several blades of grass. The wind was no help, either.

Class was dismissed for lunch. Drawing, swinging, and sheathing a sword so many times had worn everyone out.

Steve had finished his cafeteria duty yesterday and today Sensei Chow was the only one serving lunch. It was teriyaki chicken with edamame and steamed rice. Ninja Steve's favorite.

"Steve, you have two stickers on you," Samurai Sam said, as they moved down the line. "Where'd the second one come from?"

"I cut the grass," Steve said.

"No way! You did that?"

"I did," he said, and silently thanked his arms, Dr. Cyborg and Valkor the Great.

Someone else joined the conversation. "Really? You cut down a single blade of grass?"

It was Ninja Kelly. She had taken off her hood and let her red hair down. When Steve looked at her, he somehow forgot the basics of how to speak.

"I...grass...yeah," he stammered. Then he got it together. "Yeah, I did."

"Maybe you can help me, then?" she asked.

Steve's brain fired the word "Yes!" a million times. Thankfully, he only said it out loud once.

"Cool! I can't do tomorrow, but how about Wednesday afternoon? 3 o'clock?" she asked.

Steve smiled a big, stupid smile. "Sure."

"Here, give me your phone," she said and he obeyed.

“Text me, okay?” she said, and then walked off to sit with her friends.

Samurai Sam, who had been standing right next to Steve the entire time, let out a big breath. “What. Just. Happened?”

Ninja Steve, to whom it had just happened, shrugged. “I have no idea, Sam.”

They sat down at the table in silence. Ninja Arjun joined them five minutes later. He looked at Steve, then down at Steve’s plate.

“Steve, buddy, are you okay? You haven’t eaten,” said Arjun.

“Yeah, great. Got to, you know, stuff,” Steve said, pushing his rice around with his fork.

Arjun crinkled his forehead. “Steve, you aren’t saying anything of value. That didn’t make any sense.”

Luckily, Samurai Sam was there to translate. “Arjun, five minutes ago, Ninja Kelly gave Steve her number. It’s like he’s been hit with the spell of a thousand face-slaps.”

Arjun laughed. “That would explain it. Steve, you gonna be okay?”

“Yeah, great. Got to, you know, stuff.”

“Steve, that still doesn’t make any sense,” Arjun said. “And if you’re not going to eat that, I will.”

Ninja Steve pushed his lunch tray over to Arjun and then went back to spacing out. His two friends shrugged and ate. They’d let Steve do his thing and eventually he’d come back down.

Steve couldn’t stop thinking about how awesome Wednesday afternoon would be.

## DARCY

Darcy couldn't stop thinking about how stressful the afternoon was going to be. She had tried writing in her diary, hoping that turning her stress into words would relieve some of the pressure.

It hadn't.

She put on her standard agent clothing: black button down shirt, tan pants, black boots. She went to Mission Central, a white marble building in the middle of campus. While most of the buildings had a triangular roof, Mission Central was the only one with a dome. It looked like a big, white bubble. She stood outside the frosted glass double-doors and took a breath. This was it. Her first real assignment.

The handbook said that when you approached Mission Central, you should do it with perfect posture. That if a superior agent passed you, you were to hold open any doors for her to walk through. That if you forgot your agent smartphone, you would not be allowed in.

She touched her agent smartphone to the black box on the side of the door and waited for the little light bulb to blink green. It didn't. She touched her phone to it a second time. Nothing happened.

She started to panic. The handbook said that when your first mission came up, you would automatically be programmed into the system. All you had to do was go to Mission Central and you would be able to get in. It was supposed to be simple.

The third time, the light turned green and the doors slid open with a whisper. A rush of cool air came out as Darcy went in. The overhead lights were a soft yellow.

The lobby was a massive room with a ceiling so high it seemed like it could have been on the moon. She wondered if it was a trick of the light. The only decorations were square red columns that went from floor to ceiling. Darcy counted eight of them.

As she walked, the echoes of her footsteps went on and on and on. Then she remembered that a true agent always takes silent steps and suddenly the room was quiet as a mausoleum.

At the far end of the lobby she came to a tiny desk. The desk was made of white stone and behind it was a woman who might have been older than the stone. She was wrinkly and she was hunched over and she had hair that was as white as ocean foam.

“Good afternoon, lass,” she said, with a voice that was full of warmth. “May I see your phone?”

“Yes, ma’am,” she said, and handed it over.

“No need to be trembling, dear,” she said.

“Yes, well, I’m terribly sorry about that,” Darcy said.

The old woman looked at her very carefully. Then she looked at the phone and tapped it against the desk. A screen suddenly appeared in the middle of the white stone desk and it popped up and floated right into the woman’s hands. That must have been another one of The Giga Squad’s new inventions.

“You are all set now, Darcy,” the woman said. “If you could go stand on that clear tile to my left, you’ll get to the right place.”

“Thank you.”

“And, Darcy, you look just like your mother.”

“Thank you,” Darcy said, though she didn’t look at her when she said it. She didn’t want to talk about that.

She stood on the clear tile, which was big enough for at least two people to stand on, side-by-side. There was a noise like crickets chirping and then beams of blue light came out from the tile’s edges. Darcy’s feet were suddenly locked in place and the tile began to turn ninety degrees at a time. The first time it turned, the lobby disappeared. The second

time it turned, she could have sworn she was looking at her childhood bedroom. The third turn put her in a room full of vases and statues. The fourth turn put her in a wallpapered room with large, comfy chairs, a glass cabinet full of jewelry, and a roaring fireplace.

She didn't like the way the room looked. And she didn't like how the room had Serena in it.

"Oh, look, it's Darcy," Serena said from where she stood by the fireplace. "I wonder if she's going to cry this time, too."

Darcy shook her head and didn't respond. She wouldn't rise to Serena's goading. She would let it roll off.

"It's okay, Darcy, I don't want to work with you, either. I was hoping my first mission would be solo," she said, twirling her hair in her fingers.

Serena leaned against the mantelpiece and was about to say something else when the entire fireplace began to lift off the ground. She lost her balance and fell over. The fireplace was a secret doorway and Lead Agent Evelyn walked through, right beside a woman Darcy had never seen before.

She wore a black dress and her hair was in braids. When this woman saw Serena still trying to get up, she laughed at her. Darcy liked this woman a lot.

Evelyn made the introduction. "Agent Darcy and Agent Serena, this is Commander Natalya."

Darcy stood up straighter. In the Bureau of Sneakery, Commanders were above the Lead Agents, though they were below the Director.

"At least one of you has the manners to stand," Natalya said. "Thank you."

Serena's face had turned a deep, deep red. This was going much better than Darcy had expected.

“For now, though, find a chair, so we can discuss the details.”

The two girls seated themselves and Natalya touched a button above the fireplace-door. The painting above the fire – a controlled mess of lines and circles – turned into a display screen.

“I’m sure both of you are familiar with Ninjastoria,” said Natalya. “We have a student exchange with them every year. They send two of their top ninjas to our campus, we send two of ours to their city. It lasts six months and then everyone goes home.”

Darcy nodded. She had seen the ninja girls around campus last year. They always moved so quickly.

Natalya continued. “The exchange is also a long-running contest between us and them. Each pair of students has one task to complete during their stay. The first team to successfully do it receives a ranking promotion. Of all of our students, you two are our top nominees.”

The girls looked at each other with even, stoic faces. Darcy couldn’t stand Serena, but she did know that Serena was a very talented agent. It was a grudging admission, though it was true. If anyone was her number one competition, it was her.

“What kind of task?” asked Darcy.

“Tough stuff,” said Natalya. “In the past it’s been helping old ladies cross the street, inflating balloons, or getting a kiss.”

Then she broke into laughter. “Kidding, of course. We can’t tell you until you’re on campus.”

“An exchange student contest?” said Serena. “*That’s* our mission?”

Natalya sighed. “You should take this more seriously. It’s not like we’re sending you to summer camp. Besides, our agents have won the contest nine years in a row. I’m sure you two will make it ten, no problem.”

That seemed to settle Serena. And it made Darcy feel a spark of excitement.

“You have the next two hours to pack and then you’re off. Someone will come to get you from your dorm room.”

Natalya snapped her fingers and the screen turned back into a painting.

“Here are your agent watches,” she said, handing one to Darcy, then to Serena.

Darcy couldn’t help but smile. It was the sign of a true agent. While it looked like a regular watch, it had many extra features that would be unlocked with each promotion. Darcy’s had a thin, rectangular watch face and a strap made of soft, brown leather.

“You’ll need new names for the mission,” Natalya said. “So we picked them out for you. Agent Serena, you will be going by the name ‘Ashlyn.’”

Serena nodded.

Evelyn looked at Darcy. “Agent Darcy, you will be changing your name to ‘Marcy.’”

Darcy frowned. “May I ask you a question?”

Evelyn glared at her. “It seems like you just did. Ask another.”

Darcy’s mouth went dry. “Isn’t...isn’t that a little close to my real name?”

“No,” Evelyn said, and that was that.

“Okay, agents, that is all for now,” said Natalya. “The elevator tile will take you out of here.”

Natalya pressed a button and the hidden doorway sprang open and she walked away. Lead Agent Evelyn trailed after her.

Serena looked at Darcy and shrugged. “That wasn’t what I was expecting.”

For once, Darcy agreed with her.