

SHARD

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**a novel by
A.M. Pierre**

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*For my family
past and present*

¹Airport

Yesterday? High school student. Today? Terrorist. That has to be some kind of record.

Kaia Davis stole a quick glance around the sterile interrogation room where the officers had dumped her. There weren't any cameras—well, not any obvious ones. In a room like this, someone *had* to be watching.

Kaia knew she should try to look calm for her unseen observers, but she couldn't stop herself—her leg bounced out a staccato rhythm under the plain steel table, and her hand pulled at her pendant so hard it gouged into the back of her neck. *Don't be nervous, don't be nervous, don't be . . . who am I kidding? I'm not nervous. I'm freaking terrified.*

And why shouldn't she be? Kaia had heard the stories about what happened to people who got flagged, the rumors that included everything from prison time to straight-up disappearing off the face of the earth. *It just doesn't make any sense. I know I didn't say anything from the Taboo Words Directory—I would've had to have spoken to someone first. Plus, I must've checked the Prohibited Contraband Directive at least twenty times while I packed. Maybe if an adult had gone over my bag . . . please, like the Johnsons would've helped me even if I'd asked.*

There hadn't been any problems when she got on the plane in

New York. Nothing strange in flight, either. When she arrived at Charles de Gaulle Airport (or *Aéroport Paris-Charles de Gaulle*, as her French teacher would say), she was happy just to be somewhere new. Sure, it was only an airport, but it was a *new* airport, where the tubes connecting the terminals were made entirely of glass, and the voices on the intercoms weren't speaking English by way of Long Island.

When she entered the security checkpoint, the whole “human interaction” aspect of the proceedings had made her nervous, but not the “check your stuff for bombs” part. What did she have to be nervous about? The most offensive thing in her bag was acne medicine. When her turn came, she tried to give the customs soldier a friendly grin (which came out strangled at best), but he didn't seem to notice. All he did was hold his hand out for her Universal ID card.

Which Kaia promptly gave. And then he promptly gave her a look like she'd just insulted his mother. “Oh, right, I'm so sorry, I forgot—I mean, *je suis désolée, je l'ai oublié.*” She took the card back and pressed her thumb down on it until the “DNA Match” light went green. She tried for another grin as she laid the card in his hand. “Sorry,” she whispered.

The customs soldier swiped the card with a little too much force and stared at her, unsmiling, while the computer searched for her records. *Stop it. Stop staring at me. Please. Staring back is completely out of the question, so where am I supposed to look? At my feet? At my hands? At the dirt on the floor?! Where?! . . . Calm down, Kaia. It's only been a couple seconds. Soon the computer will make that cute little happy beep like it did with everyone else, and you'll be able to get away from this ridiculously uncomfortable moment.*

The computer let out a sort of high-pitched squeal, like a wounded animal. The customs soldier's expression froze, and his right hand slid under his desk. A block of ice settled in Kaia's gut. “*Est-ce qu'il y a un problème, monsieur?*”

He didn't respond.

She tried English instead. “Is there a problem, sir?”

His phone rang, and Kaia jumped in spite of herself. She strained to hear what he was saying but could only pick out a few muttered words.

“. . . petite taille . . .”

Short? Well, yeah, I am, but what does that matter?

“. . . recherché . . .”

*Research? What would that—wait, did he mean ‘wanted’? As in, wanted **by the cops**?!* “Sir, excuse me, pardonnez-moi, mais avez-vous dit ‘recherché par la police’? Ce n’est pas—”

The soldier stared her down, and Kaia saw hatred in his eyes. “Terroriste.”

No . . . That’s not . . .

Two enormous guards with machine guns appeared at her side as if by magic.

“Sir, please, I don’t know what’s—”

Massive hands encircled her arms, lifting her up onto her toes.

“Please! Just tell me what you think I’ve—”

In perfect unison, they pivoted in a circle, turning Kaia 180 degrees from the customs desk, and set off through the crowds at a pace that Kaia would have had difficulty matching if they weren’t essentially carrying her.

As if that wasn’t humiliating enough, the airport was particularly crowded, so the human mountains who were pulling (carrying) her along kept calling out to the masses ahead of them to move so they could take the super-dangerous terrified awkward 15-year-old to airport jail. The people moved, but they kept sneaking glances, like they were scared but still wanted to see what a real, live terrorist looked like. One teenage boy didn’t even try to hide it. He stared at her outright, glaring at her from under his dark green hoodie.

For a moment, it was almost funny. *Yesterday, my biggest fear was whether I could introduce myself to my host family without hyperventilating, and now they’re going to lock me up and throw away the key. Ha!*

All because of my UNID card. But that doesn't make sense. They're supposed to be un-hackable . . . Great, now I'm gonna be stuck on that stupid jingle.

It's Un-crackable!

Un-hackable!

Un-crackable, un-hackable UNID!

Keeping you safe around the world!

The gendarmes who had been hustling her along suddenly stopped. Kaia looked up to see they had brought her to a dank-smelling, dimly-lit room and had positioned her in front of a blank, dingy-looking wall.

“Wait, what are we—?”

A seam appeared in the wall, and a previously invisible door opened before them. Something clicked in Kaia's mind—a wave of terror emerging from deep inside and overwhelming her. There were stories, so many stories. And this is how they all began.

She pulled backwards with all of her might, struggling to wrench her arms free from the gendarmes' iron clad grips. “No! You can't! You can't do this! I haven't done anything! I don't belong here! NO!”

More hands grabbed onto her from every angle, and a hand the size of a dinner plate clamped over her mouth.

“That's quite enough of that.” A man stepped from within the doorway—smaller than her captors, but with an air of authority. His smile didn't reach his eyes. “I'd advise you to calm down, young lady, or I'll be adding ‘Assault on World Security Officers’ to your list of charges.”

Kaia stopped struggling, but the fear swirling in her belly remained.

“That's better.” He looked over Kaia's head to the officer on her left. “Interrogation room number 3, I think.”

It had been ten minutes since they dumped her in this cold, windowless white room. Not that she actually minded the lack of windows. Too many windows in a place made her antsy and jittery, like someone was whispering about her behind her back.

In short, it wasn't the *room* she couldn't stand. It was the *wait* that was driving her nuts. *Keep it together*, she told herself. *Ten minutes isn't very long. In fact, it's probably a good sign. After all, they'll need some time to figure out it's a misunderstanding. A complete, total, 100% misunderstanding. Someone will find the right file or call the right person and straighten it out. It'll be over before you know it.*

Will it? You don't know. It might be hours, even days, before this is all cleared up. *If it's cleared up.*

Great. Thanks for that happy thought, subconscious.

An even happier thought followed—no matter how long it took, no matter what they ended up doing to her, there wasn't anyone besides herself who cared. She ducked her head down and hoped whatever cameras they had in here wouldn't show she was crying.

The door to her cell opened, and a man almost as wide as the door stepped in. "Ms. Davis?"

"Y-Yes. Hi. I mean, hello." She tried to hide her tears with an uneasy smile. "Hi."

He pulled out a metal chair on the other side of the table and eased down onto it, as if to give the piece of furniture time to adjust to his massive weight. The chair still squealed in protest. He held up an inch-thick file folder, lifted it to eye height, and then let it fall. It struck the metal surface of the table with a deafening splat.

He let the echoes die out completely before he leaned over toward Kaia. She could smell onions on his breath. His lips split into a sneer. "Shall we begin?"

* * *

Connor Rhys knew he looked a bit suspicious. A teen-aged boy alone in an airport wouldn't have raised too many flags, but add in a dark green hoodie with the hood pulled up over his head and the fact that he was clearly muttering something under his

breath? That might strike someone as being a bit odd. *If* they had been paying attention. Fortunately for him, no one was.

It all felt quite strange to Connor. He'd been too young to remember what New York was like in the years after the Twin Towers fell, but he knew how India had reacted after the Taj Mahal was destroyed—and he'd actually *been* in London during the Tower Bridge Incident. He just would've thought your average Parisian would still be wary of "suspicious characters." Granted, it *had* been a whole year since the Eiffel Tower bombing—or any large-scale attack, for that matter. Maybe everyone had become a little more complacent. Whatever their reasons, the people walking by seemed too self-absorbed to pay attention to a possible delinquent.

Or, Connor thought, *they're still thinking about the little "terrorist parade" they saw.* "Have you found her yet, Dice?" he muttered.

"I'm looking through the camera feeds now, but it would have been a lot easier if I had managed to hack their system before she was marched away from customs." Dice's voice boomed through the earpiece concealed by Connor's hood, but Connor knew no one else stood a chance of hearing it. Just another one of Dice's handy little inventions. "Speaking of customs, you know what they're really looking for, don't you?" Dice continued. "Oh, sure, they tell you it's lighters and pocket knives and six-ounce shampoos, when really—"

"Fascinating as that sounds, could we stow the conspiracy theories for once and get on with the job?"

"Party pooper." Somehow Connor knew Dice had stuck his tongue out at him.

"Eh, I've been called worse. Particularly by Ms. Smith. Like when she's annoyed with us. Or when she's in a bad mood. Or when she finds out we're wasting time and risking capture instead of fulfilling our mission."

"You know, you seem a bit edgy today. Is it because you're in France?"

Connor scrunched up his face, thoroughly puzzled. “Why on earth would that matter?”

“I’ve heard how the English have that whole rivalry thing with the French.”

“For the last time, I’m not English. My parents were Welsh.”

“Same difference,” Dice said.

“You’re purposely baiting me, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am. You need to loosen up.”

Connor’s shoulders got even tighter. He knew Dice liked to wind him up during missions, but right now he wasn’t in the mood. “I’ll loosen up when we’ve recovered the package and are headed back home. Now, for the last time, have you found—”

Dice interrupted him. “I’m not completely incompetent, you know. I’ve pulled the feeds from all the interrogation rooms, but they’ve got a lot of people back there. Can you verify her current description?”

“A bit on the short side, right at five feet. Cute face. Dark skin—like mocha or hot chocolate. Shoulder-length straight black hair with a fringe down to her eyes. Dark blue t-shirt, jeans, and, uh, black and white trainers.”

“Cute, huh?” Connor could hear the smile in Dice’s voice.

“Shut up.”

A little burst of static crackled in his ear. Connor’s eyes narrowed. There was never static on Dice’s airwaves. It vanished a half second later, and Dice’s voice came through loud and clear. “So what are you going to tell this one?” Dice asked.

Connor had been wondering that himself. “I kinda wanted to tell her the truth.”

“Do I need to remind you how that tactic turned out last time?”

Connor let his head fall backward until it bumped the wall behind him. “For once, I don’t want to lie. Okay, Dice?”

“Did I hear you call your fellow agent by his real name?” Connor tried to reign in his annoyance as the authoritative female voice boomed in his ear. *So **that** was what that burst of static was.*

Ms. Smith had been listening in. “I’m sure you are still aware of The Company’s policy: ‘no real names on an open channel?’”

Dice definitely sounded offended. “Open channel? Really? With *my* encryption skills? Not even Marian Rejewski would stand a chance.”

There was silence for a few seconds.

“You know, the Polish mathematician.”

Still no response.

“Jeez, he was only the first person to have any success cracking the Enigma cryptography machine in World War II. Didn’t you pay attention in that stuffy boarding school you went to?”

“I did, actually,” Connor said, “but for some reason they neglected to include Polish cryptologists in the curriculum.”

“Boys!” Ms. Smith’s voice cut through like a knife. “Can we focus, please? I don’t care how good the encryption is. Only use your code names. Period.”

“Ma’am, I believe Connor has a problem with his code name.”

“Is that it?”

Connor gritted his teeth. “Yes.”

“I don’t care.”

“Understood.” One last question occurred to him, and his hand jerked reflexively as if to grab her before she left. “Ma’am, wait!” Connor took a deep breath. “What if I get in there and the girl doesn’t trust me?”

“We’ve been through this before. We set this scenario up so she *would* trust you. You have the fun part—the easy part. You get to be her brave and gallant knight, rescuing her from the evil that awaits her.”

“. . . But what if she still says no?”

Ms. Smith didn’t even pause. “‘No’ is not an option. Whatever happens, she’ll get over it. Eventually. Get in there, get her out, and stop using your real names. I’ll see you back at base.”

They answered in unison. “Yes, ma’am.”

The static hissed again as she signed off. Dice sighed. “Dude.

Why do you keep asking when you know the answer never changes?”

Connor closed his eyes. “Because I keep hoping one day it might.”

“Okay, I can hear you pitying yourself, and we’ve got work to do. Stand by for code name check.” Connor thought he heard Dice stifle a chuckle. “This is Hawkeye calling Summer Breeze. Come in, Summer Breeze.”

Connor was pretty sure even Dice’s hyper-sensitive earpiece couldn’t pick up the sound of his eyes rolling.

“Summer Breeze, come in, please.”

“I really hate you sometimes.”

“Just following protocol, Summer Breeze, no need to get tetchy.” Dice’s voice was pure innocence.

Connor pushed the words through clenched teeth. “Summer Breeze here, moving out.”

* * *

Yamamoto Daisuke, “Dice” to his friends, grinned as he muted the microphone on his headset and leaned back in his seat. While most kids his age were stuck in school, he was sitting in a tricked-out car with tens of thousands of dollars of top-of-the-line tech (most of which he’d built or at least modified himself), running a covert operation specifically designed to confound and confuse multiple government agencies, all while teasing his best friend mercilessly. His grin got even wider. “This is far too much fun.”

“Why do you mess him up so much?” the heavily accented voice from the front seat of the car asked.

“You mean, ‘why do I *mess with* him so much?’”

“Yes, *mess with*.”

“Because I can, Vladimir.”

The burly Russian thought for a second. “That does not seem to be good reason for messing with friend.”

“But see, that’s the beauty of it. He knows he’s my friend *because* I mess with him.”

“That is not making any sense to me.”

“Don’t worry about it, Vlad.” A movement in one of the many tiny video feeds caught his eye, and he turned his mike back on. “Summer Breeze, I found the package. There’s a fairly huge dude in there with her right now. Probably doing his best to freak her out.”

Connor’s voice was tight. “Probably succeeding.”

Daisuke frowned. “You okay? You sound worried.” He grinned. “Or is *concerned* more accurate?”

“Whatever, Hawkeye. I feel bad for *anyone* who has to go through that. As you may recall, it wasn’t exactly fun.”

“Relax, I’m just giving you a hard time.” *And if I were actually worried about this mission, I’d be teasing you even more.* “Don’t worry, Romeo, we’ll have her out of there in two shakes. Give me a minute to confirm all the guards’ current locations, and I’ll be able to give you a clear run up to her room.”

“Fine, but hurry up. I don’t want to leave her in there a second longer than we have to.”

For a second, Daisuke dropped his teasing tone. “We’ll get her out. You know we will.”

* * *

“I’m sorry, Ms. Davis, what was that?” Kaia’s interrogator cupped his enormous hand behind his ear as if he were hard of hearing. Kaia fought not to pull away. Did they really think they needed someone extra-large so she would be extra-intimidated? He could’ve been 5’2” and carrying a basket of kittens, and she still would’ve been shaking like a leaf. The giant’s eyes narrowed. “I said, what was that again?”

Kaia bit her lip. Her voice came out in a raspy whisper. “I . . . I said, ‘I don’t know.’”

“I don’t know, I don’t know.” He leaned back in his chair. It

creaked and moaned. “Seems to be the only phrase you’re capable of. Is that because you’re a consummate liar or because you’re an idiot?”

Kaia couldn’t help the quick flare of anger she felt. “I’m not an idiot.”

“Oh, so you’re a liar, then.”

“No, I . . .” She realized she was staring him in the eyes, and she quickly looked away. “No.” The word came out so low even she barely heard it.

He flipped through the documents lying on the table between them. “Your customs forms say you’re a student, here in Paris for a short-term foreign exchange visit. Then perhaps you can explain why neither the directors of the program nor your ‘host family’ have ever heard of you?”

Kaia blinked. “. . . What?”

“We contacted your American high school as well. They said you had indeed applied for the program, but your grades and conduct were so poor you had been dismissed without a second thought.”

*No. That . . . That’s not right. I worked hard, so hard. I **earned** this. Why would they—?* She cleared her throat and took a deep breath. *Just look at him and say it. You can do this. You have to.* “They made a mis . . .” Kaia’s voice faded away under her interrogator’s looming face.

“A mistake? Is that what you’re trying to say? ‘They made a mistake’? I’m afraid not, but *you* sure did. You didn’t even attempt to forge or steal a new UNID card before your pitiful attempt to breach our security. Not that it would’ve helped, but I’m still shocked you didn’t even try.” He smiled broadly, showing the points of his eye teeth. “See, this is why, personally, I keep leaning away from ‘liar’ and more towards ‘idiot.’”

Kaia ignored the growing pressure in her chest. Getting angry wouldn’t do her any good right now. Of course, getting angry *never* did her any good, but right now it seemed even more useless than usual. “I wasn’t worried about any bad records on my

UNID card because I don't have any. It's a mistake, and once you call the police or FBI or whoever you'll see I'm telling the truth."

At least, that's what she tried to say. The words choked her, like always, jamming up in her throat like white bread peanut butter sandwiches. All that came out was: "It's . . . a mistake."

He burst into a gut-shaking laugh. "I'm going to let you in on a little secret, girlie." He moved in so close she could see the crusts in the corners of his eyes. "UNID doesn't make mistakes. The instant you became the prime suspect in that school bombing plot in Pennsylvania, every law enforcement agency in the world knew about it."

B-Bomb?! "What—?"

"What's particularly interesting," he added, "are all the other terror plots we now can link you to. So many of them. You know, we have special places for people like you. Nice, quiet places where the law-abiding citizens of this world won't ever be bothered by you again." He grinned. "I bet you're thinking, 'But I'm young—they wouldn't do that!' That might have been true if you had 'borrowed' a car or spray-painted some walls. Not this. Trust me, people won't care what age you are so long as you're *off—their—streets!*" He slammed his hand down on the table in rhythm with his finishing barrage.

Kaia tried to speak, but nothing came out but a small puff of air. The giant eased back down into his chair in triumph, crossing his legs and resting an elbow casually on the table. "Of course, we don't *have* to let the public know anything about this. Which means we can choose to be merciful." His hand clenched into a fist. "But only if you stop this pointless charade and start talking."

Talk? Kaia wasn't even sure she could breathe anymore. The foul stench of his breath. The tightness in her chest. The claustrophobically small room that somehow kept getting smaller. She wanted to tell him how wrong he was, how terribly, horribly wrong. She wanted, for once in her life, to speak out without hesitation. Without fear.

The words barely clawed their way out. “I don’t . . . know . . . anything.”

Her interrogator groaned as he stood up. “All right, I tried.” He looked down at her with grim satisfaction. “We’ll see how cooperative you are once the real questioning starts.”

Kaia stared down at her hands. It wasn’t until she heard the turn of the bolt in the door that she realized he had left. She had to think of something—some defense, some evidence, some uncontested proof she was innocent . . . and she had nothing. All she could do was sit and stare and rub her pendant.

The blaring alarm outside her room—and the strobing red lights—broke the spell. *I know this isn’t for anything I did.* Kaia grimaced to herself. *Doesn’t mean they won’t try to pin it on me, though.*

With a sharp crack and a whoosh of air, the door to her room burst open, flew the full 180 degrees, slammed against the wall, and closed again. There was a brief pause, then it opened a second time—a bit more calmly and only halfway. A taller-than-average teenage boy with dark blonde hair and brown eyes stood in the doorway. He gave her a big smile, showing off the dimple in his right cheek, and waved. For some reason, she found herself slowly waving back. “Hello!” he said, with the same level of enthusiasm he’d used to open the door. She knew his accent was British but couldn’t pin it down beyond that.

Somehow Kaia felt like she’d seen him before, but she didn’t recognize his face. His clothes were nondescript, too, just jeans, a t-shirt, and a hoodie. A *dark green* hoodie. Confusion overrode her normal shyness. “Wait, are you—?”

The boy held up his hand. “I know you’ve got a million questions, and I promise I’ll answer them all in time. But first, I have a question for you—do you want to get out of here or what?”

Of course, I do, but still— “I’m sorry, who are you?”

“The name’s Connor Rhys.” The smile got even wider. “And I’m your knight in shining armor.”