

WIN ON THE RUN



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I – LOST AND FOUND

Beep... beep... beep... the high pitched tone of medical equipment attached to Winnie was an annoying sound that she had come to loathe after countless trips to the hospital. Heavy, chocolate colored lids fluttered open as groggy grey iris' peered at the mysterious liquids dripping into her IV, most likely pain killers. Her nose itched uncontrollably.

"Glad to see that you are awake," said the blonde haired doctor in his ivory tunic and horned rimmed glasses. The man had been gazing out the window. He reached for the pen clipped to his sky blue shirt pocket. Wearing the two top most buttons undone on his cotton dress shirt with a black leather belt, matching shoes and tan khakis completed the universal doctor uniform. "How are you feeling Ms. Nikoli?" he asked while making a note in the clipboard.

"Where am I?" asked Winnie trying to sit up and failing. She felt light headed and weak.

"Don't remember anything that happened do you?"

"Who are you?"

"I have someone here that would like to see you," said the doctor motioning to an unseen person outside the room.

The fear mounting in Winnie's heart quickly turned to sadness and then a burning hot rage. Her fifteen-year-old son, Marvel Nikoli, sprinted to her bedside and leapt into her arms. Embracing each other in a fierce hug, Winnie found herself fighting back tears. She stroked her son's curly dark hair. Marvel was in desperate need of a bath but that was to be expected after being on the run for more than a week. She was still very confused by the fact that so many kids in this day and age wanted a Mohawk.

Winnie tried to listen in as the doctor spoke in hushed tones at the entrance of her room. Two agents in black suits entered and stood side by side in front of her bed. She could not help but feel vulnerable while lying in the hospital bed with tubes protruding from her nose and wires hooked up to her chest. She fought down the urge to pull the covers up to her neck.

"Please, Ms. Nikoli," said one of the agents, Ali Simpson. He was lean and fit with dark shades and a buzz cut of black hair. "Do not try to run from us again. You cannot survive without our care. We will always find you."

"I have not the slightest clue of what you are referring to," said Winnie. Grey eyes defiantly meeting the shaded gaze of the agent.

"Do not try to play us for the fool, Ms. Nikoli," replied agent Simpson. "You were picked up well over two hundred and fifty miles from your designated *Area of Interest*. What were you doing?"

"I don't have to explain my actions to you," replied Winnie with a snarl.

"Maybe not but you will have to explain them to the *Top Tier*," said the other agent, Lionel Huy. He tossed her a bulging backpack. "We will give you fifteen minutes to get dressed. Fifteen exactly mind you. No funny business. We will be right outside. When you are finished dressing you are to come with us. The *Three-Six-Zero* would like to have a word with you."

After the agents left the room and closed the door, Winnie turned to her son and communicated silently. They used a special system of sign language created and perfected over the years.

Marvel rushed over to the door and locked it.

To her surprise the guards did not respond at the sound of the door locking. Winnie unzipped the backpack, dumping the contents onto the bed. She sat upright, legs folded. Spread out in front of her, everything she could have asked for: rope, firearms, and knives but most importantly a clean change of clothes. She silently said a quick prayer to bless Lionel's heart for the risk he took. However, a moment was all she could spare and pulled off the assortment of wires and tubes with a practiced ease and familiarity. After changing in the bathroom, Winnie exited several minutes later in loose fitting yet comfortable attire, black steel toed boots, denim slacks and a brown leather jacket over a wrinkled t-shirt. She secured the standard issue nine millimeter handgun in the small of her back and the knife into her boot. She tossed a small caliber snub-nosed revolver to her son along with a butterfly pocket knife. The pack also contained a day's worth of rations and extra rounds of ammunition. Still weak from the medicine that had been pumped into her system; she crept over to the window. As expected, she was on the top floor. She figured that they would not make it too easy for her to escape.

Winnie would have to improvise. She took the rope from the backpack and tied a knot around the closed door handle that led into her room. Dragging the other end of the rope across the room, she opened the window to let the rope dangle outside. It did not reach the ground but it would be good enough for right now. Once certain the rope was secure, she had Marvel start climbing first. Once he began the treacherous climb down, there was a loud knock at the door.

"Okay Ms. Nikoli," said one of the agents.

She guessed Lionel by the nasally sound of his voice.

"Time is up, unlock the door and step on out," said Lionel.

"Be right out in a second," called Winnie. She hurriedly packed the items of her escape into the back pack along with extra towels and surgical latex gloves. She practically leapt from the ninth floor window yet was careful to maintain a tight grip on the rope. She slid down several floors in a matter of seconds, gloved hands burning from the friction before stopping her momentum only a few feet above where her son hung suspended and helpless at the end of the rope. There were three remaining stories of air between them and the ground.

The rope started to give way just a bit and the pair barely managed to remain holding onto the rope as they descended another few inches. Just as Winnie had intended when she tied the rope to the door handle. With the opening of the door, it would alert her to the fact that agents had entered the room. She could hear muffled orders being shouted.

One of the agents ran to the window and stuck out his head. "Don't do it Win!" shouted Lionel.

She blew him a kiss and then reached for her pistol. The agent ducked back inside of the hospital room, reaching for his side arm. Winnie hastily shot out the glass of the third floor window in front of her. Marvel jumped through and nimbly landed on his feet. Winnie followed right behind him with an acrobatic, twisting flip that got her inside the room but landed her unceremoniously to her rump.

"Damn narcotics," she said smiling up at her son. She took his hand for assistance, rising to her feet, wiping tiny bits of shattered glass from her clothes.

"Hurry ma, we gotta go," said Marvel. "Can ya run? I don't wanna go back with those people."

"I know honey, neither do I."

They safely made it off the third floor and into the elevator disguised as a nurse with a patient being transferred to a different room via wheelchair. On the ground floor, the emergency entrance doors swooshed open allowing the warm weather to ease the nauseas feeling in Winnie's stomach. She inhaled deeply, lungs savoring the fresh air. The streets were calm and quiet like always, almost deserted. Every major city across the country, for all intents and purposes were just like this one. Anyone new to the town of Stamford would think it abandoned, yet the people here simply no longer held the desire to go outside or even socialize except for when mandatory while at work. Even children were conditioned to remain in the home with incentives like free video games and home schooling. Why should anyone leave their comfortable abode when unknown contagious diseases could arrive on an

international flight at any moment? Why bother to run the risk of being harassed by officers when a persons every need and desire was seen to by the delivery men. If someone needed groceries they would fill out an email and within an hour the items would be brought to the front door step. From prescription drugs to gorgeous women, anything could be delivered without questions asked.

Winnie knew they would not last long traveling on foot and needed to get out of town quickly. She had to hope all of this action would not provoke her condition to flare up and cause another outbreak that would alert the authorities.

II – ESCAPE OR DIE

Winnie marched around to the back of the hospital building and instantly regretted her decision. The complex buzzed with undercover detectives and police officers in uniform. She tried to quickly turn the wheelchair and retreat but was halted abruptly by an approaching officer.

“Hey you,” shouted a cop wearing a midnight blue hat tilted sideways in an attempt to look hip; it only succeeded in exposing his premature balding.

Winnie stopped and slowly turned around as the burly man approached.

“Where are you going with this patient,” he asked. “Didn’t you get the notification that all staff members are to remain inside the building? It’s not safe out here, mam. We have a biological and chemical threat on the premises.”

“Oh goodness no, not again,” said Winnie in a broken English accent. “Hope everyone’s okay. I so sorry. I go back inside.”

“Hey, let me see your badge,” said the officer trudging closer. The out of shape cop’s belly jiggled with each step.

Winnie inhaled sharply, back straightening and mind working frantically to come up with a plan before turning around to face the officer.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a lighter would you?” he asked, cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. “That says..., Ms. Sargozil...” The man leaned in close and squinted trying to read the name tag. “We would not want the mister Sargozil to get upset if you became infected, now would we.”

Playing along, Winnie blushed and shook her head. She could smell the whiskey on his breath and see the far away gaze in his wandering eyes. Before she could distance herself from the officer he changed the subject.

“Hey you look familiar. Did you go to Johnston Middle?”

Winnie smiled pleasantly and shook her head. Trying to keep up this coy persona infuriated Winnie to no end. She tried to banish thoughts of reaching for her pocket knife and ramming it through the pervert’s skull.

“Well what is your number? Maybe we can go out for a drink sometime since there is no Mr. Sargozil.”

“Sorry, I get back to work, now,” said Winnie trying to hurriedly get away and around the corner.

Across the street in the station, a high-speed rail train pulled to a smooth and silent stop. She thought about hopping the train which might mean instant recapture for her. Every human child born within the last fifty years was immediately taken from the mother after delivery and an *Ident-Chip* was inserted under their skin. Not to mention the retinal scans implemented worldwide in the last century would lock onto and scan her grey eyes. They would know who she was and immediately stop the train, sealing it shut to prevent escape. Luckily, Winnie had delivered Marvel at home using a mid-wife, one of the less than dozen still in existence. Also, by keeping the birth of her son secret, the government did not have a record of his retinal scan on the database.

“Hey, where are you going?” shouted another officer.

She could hear excited voices behind her.

“The hospital is the other way!”

Hairs on the back of Winnie's neck stood on end. She increased her pace, unwilling to turn around, legs gobbling up pavement in long strides. The only option left was to make a run for the rail stations across the abandoned two lane road way. Grabbing Marvel's hand, they bolted for the train.

"Stop! Police!" shouted the officers chasing them.

Winnie and Marvel ran at a neck breaking pace, shedding the stolen hospital garments as they went. Leaping up the concrete steps of the platform two at a time, they jumped down onto the railway tracks before the train could pull away. The rail train was suspended between two magnetic rails. Winnie picked up Marvel and threw him onto the back of the train while running along behind it. Once certain the train was traveling at a pace she could not catch and too fast for Marvel to leap from, she blew him a kiss and waved goodbye. Turning to face the officers, she pulled the knife from her boot. The guards converged on her, surrounding her with weapons draw, shouting for her to put down the knife and put her hands up. She did as commanded, in one smooth motion she also left a deep gash along her wrist.

III – HELP ME, HELP YOU

Beep... beep... beep... it was the sound that Winnie dreaded. Her eyes fluttered open to the all too familiar scene of large rectangular lights overhead that fit snugly in place next to white, pock marked ceiling tiles. She tried to move but straps on her chest, waist, hands and ankles kept her bound securely. She raised her head to look down at the all too familiar bluish-green hospital gown that no doubt would have her back open and exposed which she hated.

“Glad to see you are still with us, Ms. Nikoli,” said a high pitched female voice in the room.

“Where am I?” asked Winnie with a dry and parched throat.

The doctor must have heard the struggle behind her words and offered a plastic cup of water with a bent straw.

Winnie sipped down the fluids ravenously.

“You gave us quite the scare, Ms. Nikoli,” continued the doctor after placing the empty cup on a nearby tray and jotting down some quick notes on her clipboard. “You made an entire platoon sick with your antics, Ms. Nikoli. But do not worry. They are not dead. The last time we got ahold of your son we were able to secure a sample of his blood and reverse engineer an antidote to your most unique of blood diseases.”

“Where is Marv?” asked Winnie.

“I have someone here that would like to see you.”

At the utterance of those words, Winnie’s heart dropped to her feet, filled with despair. She wanted desperately for the person coming through the door to not be her son. She had sacrificed so much to keep him safe.

“You have no idea how good it is to see you again, Ms. Nikoli,” said agent Ali Simpson dressed in his black suit and tie. His dark eyes were fierce as he entered the room, wood bottom shoes clacking like the sound of hooves on a sidewalk.

This time agent Simpson had a new partner. Cheryl Connor, a five-feet-two inch brunette with fiery forest green eyes. She wore the typical black agent suit and tie, opting for a black skirt that stopped just below her knees. Winnie wondered if the agency doled out the government costumes at orientation.

“It’s good to finally meet you,” said agent Connor. “You’re buddy, agent Huy, who *claims* he forgot there was a gun and rope in the bag has been reassigned.”

Winnie’s heart hurt for Lionel but in the forefront of her mind was Marvel and whether or not he had got away. She could not give in to her urges and ask the two agents. She had to wait them out.

“You know that we can have you arrested for attempted murder,” said agent Simpson.

Winnie tried to fold her arms but had to settle for staring at the agent Simpson with a glower.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” said agent Connor. “We need you to get in contact with your son. You hurt a lot of people with that little stunt at the train station and we have used up most of the anti-virus.”

“What makes you think I would help you?” said Winnie defiantly, simmering grey eyes locked with the agents intense green orbs.

“Oh you will help us,” said agent Connor. Her hands gripped the thick, white plastic foot board at the base of the bed and leaned forward. “I can guarantee that, whether you want to or not.”

IV – READ BETWEEN THE LINES

Marvel Nikoli jumped off the rail train well before its next scheduled stop. His shoulder still ached but he shrugged it off with the help of a pain killing nano-capsule. He walked through empty and quiet streets of Stamford. Stopping in a dimly lit alleyway by a hover-bot street lamp suspended ten feet in the air; Marvel pulled the map from his mesh backpack. He knew that he had to get to Gotham in order to find safety. With fifty miles between Stamford and the metropolis that was Gotham he folded the map back into a square and replaced it inside the backpack. On the move again down the deserted streets with square cement blocks and floating robotic lamps that lit up overhead when he neared the motion sensor radius, the smart-bot-lamps flicked on, casting a long and lonely shadow before turning back off to conserve energy. He walked swiftly, expecting to arrive in Gotham by midday tomorrow. The sun made patterns of deep orange and red across the greyish blue sky. Marvel would have to find a place to sleep. His stomach loudly protested the lack of food. He sipped at the water bottle that was in the back pack. It would tough sledding since he had to rely on rations for the next day and a half. With no money and his reluctance to commit theft, the trip would be arduous.

The downtown district of Stamford was like any other city with tall buildings and countless plexi-glass windows. Virtual reality and 3-D billboards hovered in the air. A television with its screen facing the street so passerby's could catch glimpses of the major news networks. The image on the screen had Marvel's mouth gaping in shock. The images projected on the paper thin, ninety nine inch screen made him clench his fist at his sides in anger as he fought back tears.

Major news anchor and international celebrity, Roger Luck's large head and greying hair was on the news. The bobbing head was next to a square image in the top right corner of the screen and contained a mug shot of his mother, Winnie Nikoli. Thanks to the captions scrolling along at the bottom of the screen, Marvel read what Roger Luck was reporting.

"Most wanted fugitive, Winnie Nikoli, has just been captured by secret service intelligence agents and has been convicted in a military court of law. The sentence will be carried out tomorrow at sunset, death by firing squad."

V – I SEE YOU

Marvel Nikoli easily scaled the roof of the one story building and found an opening on the gravel roof top that would allow entrance to the convenience store; his previously held qualms regarding theft long ago abandoned. After prying open a lock on the triangular roof-window with his butterfly knife he slid down the rope that was tied to a pipe sticking out of the gravel rooftop. Marvel slid down with a practiced ease, touching down on the shining floor tiles silently. He was sure there was no alarm system. He had watched the owner shut down the store and drive home. His conscious made him vow to somehow find a way to pay them back however. Marvel loaded up the black mesh back pack, water and food; roasted cashews were his favorite. He also secured extra batteries and first aid supplies. Finished packing the essential goods, he crawled up the rope with the ease of a centipede.

“Stop,” said agent Conner. “Rewind.”

The surveillance tape being played on a fifty inch flat panel in the convenience stores tiny back room quickly skipped backwards. Marvel Nikoli was now moving quickly in reverse, sliding back down the rope and walking briskly backwards as he took out items from his backpack and returned items to the shelf.

“Stop,” interrupted agent Simpson. “We have seen enough. Thank you for your time mister Wardruff. We will make sure we catch him.” Ali quickly turned on his heels and exited the small store.

Agent Connor said thanks and goodbye and handed over a business card for the owner. She exited the convenience store and informed the local officers that they would no longer be needed on this investigation. They were not happy about being overruled in their own jurisdiction but her badge spoke volumes. She strolled toward the tactical, armor plated hover- SUV suspended several inches above the pavement, floating on blue streams of ion propulsion jets.

Simpson gazed out the window, reclining in the tan brown, plush leather seats with a furrowed brow and his chin resting on his fist, seemingly in deep concentration; the thinking man pose.

The car barely moved as agent Connor entered the vehicle and sat down on the butter soft leather. “So what are you thinking,” asked Cheryl.

“He has to be coming,” replied agent Simpson. “He will likely have seen the news report of his mother’s scheduled execution and he will not allow that to happen. We did a psyche profile on the boy while we had him in our custody. He will come to us.”

“How can you be certain that he will not see through the ruse and decide to stay away,” asked agent Connor. “He might figure that it is a trap. He must know that we need his blood in order to engineer more of the anti-virus.”

“Even if he does suspect a trap, he will still want to get his mother away from us and the doctors and the hospitals. It is one of the things that he confessed that he and his mother hate with a passion about their blood condition, the endless stream of doctors and hospitals. He was probably already planning to come pay us a visit and rescue his mother but now with this, we know the timeline has been sped up.”

“Well then... we will need to prepare,” said agent Connor.

“Exactly,” said agent Simpson. His dark eyes finally looking at Cheryl and her deep green pupils dilated as she diverted her gaze after catching a glimpse of the destruction that Ali Simpson was willing to unleash in order to recapture Marvel.

VI – Enemy of My Enemy

Four knocks, followed by three quick, light taps in rapid succession would alert the people behind the dark grey metal basement door that Marvel was an ally, as long as the password had not changed.

A small rectangular viewing port slid open in the middle of the door and hard, dark brown eyes stared out into the hallway at Marvel. When the brown orbs finished surveying the character in front of him he nearly cursed in shock and realization, eyes widening.

“I don’t believe it,” said Foy Charleston with a gasp. He quickly slid the viewing window shut.

Thick, heavy locks un-turned and un-latched on the inside of the thick metal door with several dents and a dull finish. The door opened and a wide smiling, six feet three bald head man grabbed Marvel and yanked him inside of the room. Foy stuck his head out into the abandon streets of the sunny afternoon and looked around to make sure no one was watching or following and then slammed the door shut and locked it. Foy turned around and wrapped Marvel in a fierce hug.

“It’s good to see you again lad,” said Foy. He held Marvel at arm’s length, hands tightly gripping the young teen’s shoulders. “Look at you. You’re almost as big as me. Last time I saw you, you were a little thing still pulling on mum’s apron strings. Where is Win anyway?”

“That’s why I’m here,” replied Marvel in a grave tone. “They got her. She sacrificed herself to get me out. I need your help.”

“Come quickly,” said Foy. “Follow me to the basement.”

Marvel visibly released the knots in his muscles ever so slightly at the excitement of being around trusted friends after a slow yet constant jog fifty miles through the night in order to reach Gotham. He stumbled as he ducked into a hidden corridor located near a fire place in the den. Foy was there to catch him.

“We gotta get some food in you,” said Foy.

“No time,” replied Marvel. He straightened with a cracking in his young bones that made him feel older than just fifteen. “We will need to move soon. Her execution is scheduled for 6:00PM today.”

“What the hell!” exclaimed Foy. “That’s only five hours from now.”

Descending a flight of tightly curving stairs lined with concrete walls they emerged onto a balcony. Just over the edge of the railing was a deep twenty foot expanse with a concrete floor, computers lining the east and west walls while rows of cubicles were set up in the middle of the room.

Foy walked over to a small shaft elevator. Marvel followed and closed the chain link fence acting as a door and they descended to the bottom. When the elevator came to a stop, Foy cupped his hands in front of his mouth and made cawing bird sounds that carried around the room. Heads appeared from closed doors and popped over the makeshift cubicle walls. Marvel was unsure how large this place could have been but then again he was surprised to find this under a seemingly normal two story family home, the size of the place was deceiving.

“Kira, I need you to scan the local and international news channels for anything on a high priority target, Winnie Nikoli,” said Foy to a young woman in glasses at the cubicle closest to the elevator. She nodded a quick and wordless reply then the crème colored skin woman with a shadow of pink fuzzy hair on her shaved head ducked below the office dividers. A clacking away at the keys was the only other sound in the basement expanse besides the low hum of electronic equipment.

“What’s going on?” asked a lanky caramel skinned man, who was six foot five wearing a well fitted grey suit; Marvel thought it resembled a Halloween costume.

“Here,” said Foy. He placed a hand on Marvel’s shoulder, “is a longtime friend of mine and he is in need of some serious help.”

“Sir,” shouted Kira. Her closely shaved head popped up from behind the cubicle wall. “You are going to want to see this.”

A stream of people flooded the cubicle, tightly packed together trying to view the thirty inch computer monitor that sat on a wooden desk. An article was displayed with the headline, *Wanted Chemical and Biological International Terrorist Captured*. A photo of Winnie Nikoli was displayed. She held a blade in her hand while standing at the center of a ring of security officers in the rail-train station in Stamford. This picture was of course going to be taken out of context but as the old adage went, *a thousand letters can’t account for one portrait*, or something along those lines thought Marvel.

“Ok people listen up,” said Foy, voice echoing around the room. “We need to find out where she is being held and launch a hostage rescue.”

“I have already located her,” said Kira. “She is at the Short Island Hellcatz detention facility.”

A collective gasp spread throughout the gathered listeners; followed by a low murmur of voices and fearful conversations.

“That place is a fortress.”

“It’s guarded by a battalion of Marines, Rangers and SEELs.”

“It’s an impenetrable island,” said another person. “I even hear they have sharks with lasers beams mounted on their heads to patrol the water.”

The last statement was met with small bits of forced laughter but still served to convey the veritable destructive prowess of the base that they planned to assault.

“Let’s get to work people,” said Foy over the commotion in a tone that abruptly halted the idle banter with authority. “I will need a battle plan in sixty minutes.”

Everyone scrambled to comply and flew back to their respective stations. The place was transformed into a beehive of activity.

Foy clamped a hand onto Marvel’s shoulder and smiled down at the young man. “While that’s being done let us get an IV in you so we can get you some food and fluids the quickest possible way,” said Foy. “You will need to get as much rest as possible before we head out.”

Marvel nodded and followed Foy into one of the side rooms that resembled a clinic.

VII – Calm Before the Storm

Winnie Nikoli lay on her back for how long, she was not sure, she had lost track of the time. The straps on her ankles and wrist had long ago begun to chaff and turn her skin raw and red. The catheter was more of an irritant than anything else. She longed to get up and walk around. She could feel her muscles beginning to atrophy and turn to slush, unsure what type of cocktail mixture was leaking from the IV and being pumped into her veins. Clacking high heeled shoes marched down the hall and turned inside of Winnie's room. She did not need to open her eyes in order to know who had come calling.

"Are you ready for your execution, Ms. Nikoli?" asked agent Connor with arms folded. She tried to conceal the grin on her face.

"Won't make any difference," replied Winnie.

"On the contrary, Ms. Nikoli. We need this to look as authentic as possible. You will not be moving of course. We have already learned how dangerous that can be. But your body double will be seen as getting shot but she obviously won't die. She is actually a good friend of mine, Wanda, from accounting. She was surprised when agents approached her to be a body double. Ha, ha, too funny. Anyway, when your son shows up and tries to rescue you, that's when we will nab him."

"Good luck," said Winnie with a grimace.

"I don't need your luck, Ms. Nikoli. I make my own. We captured you, didn't we. Sit tight will you," said Connor with a wry smile and a giggle. "I need to be early in order to grab a good view of your death."

VIII – The Get Away

Marvel Nikoli watched the attractive young agent walk out of the room, brown curls bouncing as they fell around her shoulders. He dropped silently to the floor. “That lady seems really annoying,” he whispered into this mother’s ear causing her to jump. She likely would have leapt from the bed had she not been strapped down.

“What are you doing here?” replied Winnie in a hushed tone. She tried not to move her lips, unsure if her room was monitored or bugged although it was a high probability.

“I went to visit Foy,” said Marvel.

“Holy hell Marv,” sighed Winnie. “Why in the world would you do that honey?”

Sirens and alarms burst to life as if to answer her question. The short brunette agent came running back into the room nimbly despite the high heels and Marvel saw her eyes widen in shock at seeing him standing in the corner enveloped by shadows. Before agent Connor could speak she received a shot to the chest with a dart which immediately took her into unconsciousness. Marvel unstrapped his mother from the bed. With Winnie now able to move about freely Marvel gave her a boost towards the opening in the ceiling that he had descended from. Once inside the ventilation shaft she pulled Marvel inside. Trying to move as quietly as they could while crawling on all fours, Marvel led the way.

“Let me guess,” said Winnie in a quiet whisper, sweat made tracks through the dust covering her face. “Foy wanted to launch an attack as a diversion and then let you sneak in during the commotion?”

“It sounded like a good idea at the time,” replied Marvel. “Why?”

“That’s the only plan he can ever come up with,” said Winnie with a groan. “Where is the rendezvous?”

“Just up ahead. Get ready to slide.”

Marvel put his hands out in front of him and took a nose dive down a shaft.

Winnie followed after waiting several seconds, giving Marvel time to move and unsure what she would find at the bottom of the ride.

Landing onto the fresh linen of new laundry in the basement of the complex was a pleasant surprise to Winnie. Marvel had moved the cart into position earlier while sneaking through the building. Thanks to the blueprints downloaded to his PDA that was programmed by Kira, he was able to plot a course that would offer the least resistance. Not to mention the fact that the device allowed him to monitor all of the agents in the building and their current location in real time. He watched as they ran and scrambled to and fro.

“Where to?” asked Winnie.

On the PDA Marvel brought up a 3-D, virtual image of the building reminding him of those pop-up picture books he played with as a child. He was able to manipulate the tall, spired building with his fingers. He zoomed into the basement area by pinching the interactive layout with index finger and thumb then slowly pulling the digits apart. The thirty foot wide basement expanse swooped down like a hawk catching prey. The screen showed the empty rectangular cube shaped area with just two green balls of light positioned closely together.

“The two green dots are us,” said Marvel. “According to Foy there should be a package in the north west corner.”

Winnie stalked over to the corner of the room and searched behind the pipes that protruded from the grey stone walls. Searching the area, her hands traversed the wall and pushed in one of the

large rectangular bricks. She was rewarded with an audible click. One of the stone blocks slid out like a dresser drawer. Winnie grabbed the back pack from the waist high compartment and unzipped it. She pulled out two, black, waterproof body suits and tossed one to Marv. They each turned around and slipped into the suits. Once they donned the gear it hung loose in several areas.

Winnie was happy to get out of the thin and poorly constructed hospital gown. She pushed the white circular button on the belt of the suit. The suit shrunk around her chocolate colored skin and fit snug like a diving suit. Still inside the hidden compartment were two helmets and two power packs. They each equipped the helmets which sprung to life instantly. The shaded visor could switch between different viewing modes, night vision and infrared. There was a compass and a GPS guided mini-map in the bottom corners of the Heads-Up-Display.

They heard the sound of metal scraping against stone. Marvel and Winnie stared at each other with startled eyes like deer caught in the headlights. They quickly scrambled behind the bins used to transport clothes. Marvel jumped into one of the carts while Winnie stooped behind another, hand concealing the small caliber twenty two pistol in her palm that was also in the hidden compartment.

A sewer cover opened in the middle of the room. Winnie ventured a peek around the corner, curiosity getting the better of her and relief flooded through her at the sight of Foy's head swiveling above the opening.

"About time," said Winnie. She sprung from around the cart and shook Marvel as she passed by him.

"Foy, thank the Gods you found us," said Marvel. He leapt from the bin, leaving a trail of linen sheets in his wake.

"Hurry up," said Foy. His head disappeared down the hole. "Hop in."

They practically ran to the opening. Winnie made sure that Marvel went down the ladder first so she could watch to make sure he entered the submersible successfully. As she extended her foot over the edge, double doors on the opposite side of the basement burst open with agent Cheryl Connor at the lead.

"Freeze Nikoli!" shouted agent Conner. Other agents in camouflage body armor raised their guns, taking aim as they dropped to one knee.

Winnie's eyes widened as she saw what they were about to do. "Okay, okay, I surrender," said Winnie.

"Take your hands from behind your back," said agent Connor, approaching cautiously. She pulled a gas mask down over her face as she stepped closer; the other agents did the same. "Where is your son?"

Winnie heard the shouts of protest coming from the hole behind her. She knew what needed to be done. In order to keep her son, Marvel Nikoli safe and away from the government agents forever, there was only one thing left for her to do.

"I said raise your hands!" agent Connor crept forward with the pace of a snail. "Do not try anything stupid. We will drop you before you can even form the thought."

Winnie slowly raised one hand from behind her back, fingers spread as her hand hovered above her head.

"Now the other one," demanded agent Connor.

Before the agents could respond, Winnie quickly pulled the small twenty two caliber pistol seemingly from thin air. The last thing she remembered was pulling the trigger as the cold steel aimed at her head.

IX – Victory in Defeat

Beep... beep... beep... Winnie Nikoli knew the sound of the machines must be her funeral anthem. She had awoken to that sound so many times; maybe they played it in hell as part of her punishment to torment her. Opening her eyes preparing to see the familiar tiles of the hospital and to her surprise it was the night sky with stars sparkling. Winnie did not know what to make of her surroundings, never before had the agents brought her outside after capturing her; maybe they were just going to execute her for real this time. She tried to sit up.

“Easy there,” said a familiar voice in her ears. Winnie tried to sit up but something heavy was pressing against her chest. She looked down to see the sleeping head of her son Marvel and the tears burst forth uncontrollably.

“He did not leave your side for one moment,” said Foy. He sat in a chair next to her on the roof.

“What... Where...” the words did not come easy for Winnie.

“Don’t worry about that right now,” said Foy. He handed her a glass of water which she down in a few large, satisfying gulps, water slipping down the sides of her mouth.

“How did I...” Winnie tried to ask but was interrupted with a finger over her mouth.

“You have been asleep for over a week Win,” said Foy, dark brown eyes full of compassion. “It might be easier for me to just show you.” He leaned to the side and picked up a mirror which he handed to Winnie and grasped her hand before allowing her to turn it over and see her reflection. “Brace yourself Win...”

She slowly turned the mirror over, hands shaking and brought it in front of her face. A startling shriek of fear erupted from her lips.

Marvel jumped awake.

Winnie could not believe what she was seeing; the right side of her brain was missing, replaced with metal. She touched the cold steel plate tentatively, tears rolled down her face.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” said Marvel, hugging his mother tightly.

She softly tapped at the plate and was rewarded with a metallic clink in response.

“How...” Winnie finally managed to ask after getting over her initial shock.

“They think you’re dead,” said Marvel. “We pulled you into the submersible before they could grab you. Don’t worry mom, we’re safe now.”

Winnie lay back down on her cot and stared into the night sky with distant twinkling lights. Somehow she allowed herself to smile through the pain and the deformity that was now her face. Tears continued to flow but these were tears of joy as she stroked her son’s curly Mohawk. She thought to herself that he could keep it as long as he liked, as long as they were together.

The End.