

# HIJO

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Sometimes missions occurred in the break of night. A mission could be prepped days in advance, and that was how the MTA preferred to operate, but Grifters didn't always provide the courtesy of a fair warning. James Reynolds had asked enough questions to learn what sparked these impromptu missions. In most cases, it began with a phone call to civilian authorities. The four red-alert words: "People wearing strange masks."

"Because civilians are too dumb to realize Grifters' faces are *real*," a cadet had scoffed.

James had seen plenty of pictures of Grifters and could understand why civilians leaned toward "strange masks." Better civilians think that than the truth.

Leveling up from A to B meant James was no longer a technical newbie, though he and his fellow cadets would maintain the title until their first mission. The twelve-year-old Bs talked of little else. The first pair of Bs to receive a mission were hounded by their classmates for days afterward. Sheedy had refused to utter a snippet of the details, but Burnette had whispered to James that *their* Grifter cut off its own leg.

"But *why*?" James had whispered back.

"Because it was trying to distract us," Burnette answered, her brown eyes huge, "so its gigantic Grifter horse could sneak in behind!"

"There are Grifter *horses*?"

"No," Sheedy interrupted with a scowl at Burnette. "She just made all that up. Don't lie to him, Burnette."

Burnette giggled, and James had decided a Grifter horse didn't really make much sense.

A few other Bs went on their first missions. Each time, the awe and curiosity shifted like wind changing course.

"We've got to be next," Brittney would say. Brittney McFarland would always be the girl who yearned to fight. Whenever James asked his partner if she thought Grifters rode dragon-sized creatures (they'd grown in James' imagination), Brittney just frowned. Her frowns made him laugh. Most things Brittney said or did could lighten James' mood. He'd realized that once he'd turned ten. James had a way with Brittney, and Brittney had a way with James.

Partners went on assignment together, so James knew he'd experience his first with Brit. He called her an assortment of Brittney spin-offs – Britta,

Brittney, Nay – but she refused to call him anything other than James.

“Not even ‘Jamesie’?” he’d suggested once.

She’d furrowed her dark brows. “‘Jamesie’ is hardly suitable for a future agent.”

James had never decided he’d one day be an agent; Brittney had decided that for him, and he’d been happy to oblige. Wherever she went, he’d follow. As long as both of them still lived.

The day of his first assignment, James awoke to his name.

“Reynolds.”

Dreams broke apart as his eyes sprung open. The intercom set along the wall repeated his name in a mechanical drone. He sat up and peered left to witness his roommate, Garza, slumping back to his pillow.

“Thought it would be me before you,” Garza muttered.

James had thought so, too.

He felt no attachment to the single mission outfit folded in his drawer, but he imagined that, seven doors over, Brittney took her time getting dressed. Hazy excitement twisted James’ thoughts; he didn’t realize he’d put his pants on backward until he tried to zip them. The cargo pants looked baggy on James, too many pockets with nothing to fill them. His freckled arms disappeared under the long-sleeved shirt, black to match the rest. As he absently adjusted his belt, questions raced in his head. Could Grifters actually change their skin color like chameleons? Even more intriguing, how much of the outside world would James encounter? He remembered his trip from primary school to the academy, how he’d peered around Brittney on the bus, gawking at every electric pole and passing car until Brit switched seats with him so he’d have the window spot.

*“It’s only a group of construction people,” she’d grumbled.*

*“But look at those yellow hats! And the cranes! Do civilians really have no telekinesis?”*

James walked toward his bedroom door and stumbled. He’d only put on one boot.

“You forgot your jacket too,” called Garza, and a wad of fabric brushed James’ cheek.

James accepted the floating jacket and said, “Thanks.”

“Don’t get killed.”

"I'll do my best." James patted himself down, making sure he wore everything correctly. Then he slipped into the hallway.

A note had been taped to Brittney's door. He recognized the handwriting and the formal tone.

*To Reynolds:*

*I've gone downstairs already.*

*Your partner,*

*McFarland*

James grinned and tucked the note into a pocket.

He arrived at Leader's office last. Four Js, mere months away from graduating, wore their combat gear with enough ease that sleeves were rolled, pockets unzipped, jacket strap unbuttoned. James realized only they could get away with sloppy dress. Between the Js, Brittney seemed in a competition for fierceness. She bore a wide stance, not afraid to make herself seen. The dark colors of her clothes gave her own dark skin a softer glow, somehow; James thought the outfit suited her, whereas it made him pasty as paper. He watched her glance sideways at her superiors, after which she casually rolled the cuffs of her jacket to match theirs.

Another grin tickled James. Brit wanted so badly to be a J, twenty years old and waiting to graduate. She'd jump straight into her new agent career as soon as she left the graduation ceremony. James had never felt anywhere near as eager to be an agent, but—

"Reynolds, do you understand your objective?"

His wonderings fled, and he shook the temptation of them free as he returned Leader's stare. "Sorry, sir. McFarland will tell me what I've missed," James said. Inwardly, he smacked himself. Too much daydreaming, Brittney always said. James never knew how to stop himself. The rest of the Bs had their ambitions; James just had his curiosity. So far, he hadn't needed anything else.

The commanding general, Jensen, grew a heavier frown at James' agreeable bobs all throughout their car-ride-briefing. James had found that most Js preferred total acknowledgment of every word they spoke. Jensen, however, seemed offended by James' murmurs of assent. He decided to stop responding so she'd let her expression soften. He went mute.

Their trip from the academy to Milton, a rural town eight miles away, took less time than their on-site prep. James was disappointed that the

back of the van provided no windows. The only things to observe were the Js, and James had never found them as interesting as Brittney did.

Before exiting the van, CG Jenssen gave her repeated order: Brittney and James were meant to observe *only*.

“And if we’re in danger —”

“You won’t be in danger,” Jenssen told Brittney. “One Grifter, four metas. No danger.”

Brittney’s mouth puckered and whitened, but she said nothing.

Jenssen and the three other Js hopped outside the van with the command that Brittney and James stay put with Cuff, the medic. Cuff sat in the cab while the two Bs counted seconds.

“She doesn’t think we count as metas,” Brittney whispered.

“I’m sure she meant able-bodied, Brit.”

“So we’re not able-bodied?”

“Not as much as Js.” Even though James disliked confrontation, he’d never lie his way out of it.

Five minutes passed before James and Brittney were permitted to exit. Brittney nearly flung herself to the grass. James fought to control his own eagerness. They’d arrived at a *real* civilian farm.

Outside, a wide sky dotted with twinkles extended beyond James’ line of sight. It spread above them like a black cape. He saw little in the dim, early-morning light. More than a civilian, certainly, but the stars were far away and the moon absent. CG Jenssen tossed him night vision goggles, and formerly shadowed shapes grew definition.

Cuff, the medic, had parked the van one-hundred yards from any structures on this plain. James gave the landscape another inspection and recognized a tall, domed funnel, like a giant cylinder. He wracked his memory for the name of the building. *Silo*, he remembered. Beside that, a barn and matching slanted roof showed signs of weathering, evident in the darker splotches of blue shown through the goggles. CG Jenssen cared little for the barn and silo, however; her attention faced east, toward a two-story home whose windows glowed orange with candlelight.

“Grifter’s in there,” she said softly. “Second floor. Three windows from the left.” Jenssen had an extra lens on her goggles; she twisted it around and nodded at all she saw. “No one else. It’s alone.”

James felt the swoop of his pulse. A real farm and a real Grifter.

An agent had shot this Grifter with a tracker, Jenssen had reiterated

during the ride. The agent tracked the injured Grifter to this civilian farmland, where the Grifter had sought refuge in the unoccupied house. Then, the agent had called Leader. Here was an easy opportunity for cadets to learn and the MTA to eliminate one more hostile. The agent had left; now Jenssen would make the decisions. This would be no simple strike; the Js would learn how to question a Grifter for information. The Grifter's cooperation would determine how the rest of the mission unfolded. Meanwhile, James and Brittney would watch from the sideline and do nothing.

"Can we eliminate the light near that cylinder structure?" Martin, a J, asked their CG.

"A silo," James said.

The metas stared at him.

"It's used to store grain," he added.

Rutledge, another J, guffawed. "Who brought the encyclopedia?" she said.

James' ears heated. He caught sight of the fury narrowing Brittney's eyebrows, but Jenssen replied before Brittney could jump to James' defense. Not that Brittney could do much against a J.

"We'll stay out of that silo thing's light," Jenssen said. "Move out." She signaled the group forward. Rutledge took point. James and Brittney followed last. The team of six trekked through ankle-high grass that made a swishing sound under their soles.

*If we could fly, James thought, we'd make much less noise.*

Candles were set in nearly every window of the home. They didn't waver or breathe smoke onto the glass. *Electric*, James decided. *But why so many? One seems bright enough.*

Pillars grew from the porch and appeared to support the second story. James waited by one, noting the smell of dirt, while the others crept toward the door. A wooden stair, all flecked with paint, creaked beneath Brittney's boot. She froze and earned a scowl from the Js.

*Yes, flying would be good.*

The Js checked their bracers. Shoulders rolled. Jenssen's brow had begun dripping sweat, though her fellow Js shared none of her anxiety. Brittney still wore a frozen look, probably more out of guilt than worry over the Grifter. James knew she'd beat herself up over this one accident for a good week. Possibly two, depending on how successful this mission

was.

Jenssen's leg rose. A swift kick near the knob split the door inward. "Go, go!" she shouted. No need for discretion now; the Grifter knew it was no longer alone.

The team of four rushed through the doorway and fanned apart on the stairs around the corner from the entrance. They sped upwards while James and Brittney had orders to wait at the base of the stairwell. The two Bs could only listen to the commotion above them. Brittney stared up with a wistful expression, but James found the house more interesting than the scene upstairs. He'd never seen wood paneling as walls before, nor so much decoration. A small table by the stairs held a fuzzy lamp and a statue of some woman. Patterned curtains adorned the few windows he saw, with their candlesticks aglow. The ceilings were lower than those at the academy – just a couple feet higher than his head. Everything smelled of something spicy enough to tickle his nose.

"Do you hear that?"

James twisted from his inspections. Brittney was no longer eyeing the stairwell but pointed below. James let his hearing expand – did ears really grow continuously? – and detected words, though not meaning.

"Por favor... por favor... ayuda me."

A woman's voice, thick as if her throat were wet, rose from beneath the floor. She spoke in whispers James could not understand. Not a Grifter, but a *civilian*.

He and Brittney exchanged troubled looks.

"Isn't this house supposed to be unoccupied by civilians?" James said.

Brittney nodded.

"She sounds hurt. We should help her."

"CG said observe only."

"You're right. She did." James scratched his nose, though it hadn't itched. He found Brittney's eyes again. "Are you sure? Maybe we should tell CG."

Brittney squinted up the stairs, toward the murmur of speech, and James knew she was reluctant over what an interruption might do to the success of the mission, and thereby their status at the academy. Two Bs botching their first mission would not be anyone's favorite.

"I..." Brittney hesitated.

James knew how disobedience would weigh in her chest like an iron

claw. He had no problem following orders, of course, but *not* following them seemed equally acceptable, especially in a situation like this. “Do you want me to go,” he asked her, “while you stay here?”

That smacked Brittney into conviction. “Partners don’t separate,” she said firmly. “Let’s go.”

The woman’s voice led them toward the kitchen; at least, James assumed this was the kitchen. He’d never seen one, but his primary teachers had taught him how an oven conducted heat. This oven had four iron fixtures instead of the flat burners James had learned of.

*Stop studying the oven!* he told himself.

A door stood behind the dining table; a cherry-colored cloth draped over the table and nearly touched the floor. The woman’s voice originated seemingly from beyond the door. Brittney swept a hand through the air, and the door opened. James followed her through the doorway, beyond which darkness lay. A cold chain, hanging from the ceiling, clinked against their foreheads. When Brittney pulled it, light bloomed from an uncovered bulb. It illuminated a flight of stairs leading down, and at the base of that, a shape swathed in clothing. James barely caught the glimmer of the woman’s outline before he leapt the remainder of the steps. Brittney and James reached the floor in one leap.

The stairs had led to a basement of concrete floor and more wood walls. James inspected nothing else, intent upon the woman curled on the floor. Blood spotted the sleeping robe she pulled around her frame. Her long hair covered most her face and made a heap on the floor. She lay in her curled tangle, moaning. When they crouched beside her, she started at the sight of them.

“Niños mijos!” She tried to reach for them, then winced. “Vayanse de aqui, no estan asalvo. Hay un monstruo aqui.” Her large, brown eyes pleaded with them. Sweat shone off a tanned face slightly wrinkled. Strands of black hair clung to her sweaty cheeks.

James gaped. He felt a stirring of concern so strong that he didn’t wait for Brittney to command the situation. “I’m sorry,” he said, “we don’t speak your language.”

“Ya, rapido! Los lastimara – oh.” The woman, already curled on her side, somehow doubled over even more. “Mi brazo,” she whimpered. “Mi vientre. Tengo mi hijito. Mi pobre hijito. Por favor. Ayudenlo.”

“Your arm?” James said, pointing to the arm she lay on. Her wrist

looked purple and swollen. “We can dress it. We have a medic.” He looked at his partner. “Where’s Cuff?”

Brittney flinched, as if James’ question had awoken her. “He’s still with the van.”

“Can you get him?”

She gawked at him. “And leave you?”

“I’ll be safe here. Someone should stay with her.” He waited for Brittney to spring into action, but the ground must have glued her to it. “Do you want me to get Cuff?” James prodded her.

“No, I’ll—I’ll go get him.” Her features hardened with purpose, and she pushed herself off the floor. Soon she was just a patter on the stairs.

“She’s getting some help for you,” James told the injured woman. “You’ll be all right.”

The woman seemed oblivious to the exchange between James and Brittney. She stared at James from her crooked curl. “Mi hijo...” she whispered.

“Eee-ho? Is that your arm?”

“No, no. Aqui.” With a grunt, she brought her arm, the one not squashed beneath her frame, to her stomach.

James noticed deeper blood stains beneath the area, maroon patches on her blue night dress. He’d seen blood before, during sparring. The sight typically froze him. For the woman’s sake, he hid his panic. “You might be hurt there,” he said. “Try not to move.”

Yet she understood him as little as he understood her, and she squirmed on the ground. James reached for her, only meaning to keep her still, but she gripped his wrist with surprising strength for an injured civilian. Had he hurt her? No, she gazed up at him with no anger in her features. The openness in her face, the way her eyes locked onto him—it pulled at something inside James he’d been mostly unaware of throughout his life. What followed came naturally. He scooted closer to the woman. With gentle effort, he eased her torso across his sprawled legs so her head could rest on his thighs instead of the hard floor. She shook at first, though she calmed when he patted her shoulder. The gesture came easily to James, though he’d never shown physical affection to anyone, not even Brittney. He wondered how he knew what to do.

*Maybe some things are instinct.*

The woman cried for a moment, and James murmured words she

wouldn't have understood. Somehow she did. She twisted her head so their eyes could meet. James expected a tortured expression from her, but the woman smiled at him.

"Tus ojos," she said. "Son como los que me... imaginaba que mi hijo tuviera. Así de grandes." Her hand rose toward his cheek, but her arm must have realized its weakness. James caught her fingers before they plummeted. Her hand clung to his. "Tu mama... te a de amar mucho."

He strained to grasp any meaning. *Mucho*? Much, perhaps?

"Ojala y tu," she whispered. Her grip slackened. The effort of speaking, it must have tired her.

James kept her soft gaze and waited for movement in it. She would speak again in the other language that somehow soothed James. His hearing, not on par with his peers, failed to notify him of the truth. He held her eyes for a full minute, seeing his own red-headed reflection in them, before realizing there was no more movement left. He was still clutching her hand when Brittney returned.

"... just down here. Reynolds, how is she?"

His partner and Cuff, the medic, crouched around him. When James offered no reply, Cuff's hand went to the woman's throat.

"She's dead," he said.

Brittney sucked in air and held it. She must've sucked all the oxygen from the room, because James suddenly couldn't breathe.

"Doubt I would've been able to do much," Cuff said. "Civilians are fragile. And it looks like the Grifter shoved her down the stairs. A fall like that would kill most people."

James' eyes burned. Water tickled his cheeks. At that moment, he didn't care whether Grifters rode horses or even dragons. He wanted so badly to do something useful, but he'd merely held a poor civilian woman as she died. That failure felt worse than if the Grifter had escaped all because of James.

No one had spoken, and seconds had passed. "You can let go of her," Cuff told James.

A shiver crawled up James' spine. He lowered the woman's arm and found it difficult to release her fingers. Cupping the back of her neck, he eased her off his lap. She looked pitiful in a curl, so he rearranged her so she lay flat. At least she wouldn't feel the pain of moving.

"Oh," Cuff said, staring down. "She was pregnant."

“Pregnant?” James said. The word was as foreign as the woman’s language.

“With child.”

That phrase, he knew. James searched and saw, yes, a bump beneath the woman’s dress. Another shiver passed over him.

“Can you save it?” he said to Cuff with a demanding strength never before heard in his voice. “The child?”

“The mother’s been dead – what, ten minutes? Chances are, the child’s died along with her. That may explain her hemorrhaging. The child likely died when she fell.”

“But can you try? Please.”

“I... I don’t know how to do a....” Cuff lost color, as flustered as a newbie. He wrung his hands and glanced between James and the woman.

James felt more seconds passing and wanted to shake Cuff into action.

*Shake him?* he wondered. *Am I angry?*

Brittney cleared her throat, and Cuff took in a breath. With a flick of his hand, Cuff’s medical bag unzipped. He waved Brittney and James away. The two Bs stood by the edge of the stairs, silent observers like they’d been ordered to be. James wished the child would live, though he did not know where to store his wishes. Could thinking something make it happen?

Cuff’s grid floated over the woman’s torso, and a blue shimmer scanned her from the neck down. He conducted the grid with twitches of his hand. When the grid hovered above the woman’s stomach, Cuff craned his head over the grid’s screen. His eyes absorbed the screen’s contents, then drifted to a spot in the air.

“No sign of life.”

The words felt like two stingers that pinched James’ chest. A pit opened in his belly and felt hot and cold at once, like fire and ice fought for dominance. He spoke in strangled sentences. “That must’ve been what she was saying. Trying to tell me she had a child. If I’d understood her –”

Brittney clutched his elbow. “It’s not your fault you didn’t understand. None of us did. And like Cuff said, the child probably died when she fell.”

James shook his head. He was not disagreeing, but he felt faint and this seemed like the proper way to manage it.

“When we get back,” Cuff said, “you should tell Instructor Velencia about your interaction. Classroom thirteen. She can translate. How much do you remember of your conversation?”

He remembered very much, but he could only say, "Hijo."

"Instructor Velencia?"

The aged woman, with hair a shocking steel color all wiry and frayed, glanced from her grid. She still sat in her classroom, though the dinner bell had rung.

"Yes?" she said.

"I went on a mission..." James started. He'd never met Velencia, instructor of Civilian Studies, and found her unblinking stare intimidating. Bs did not enter classrooms, yet there he stood, in hers. "Uh, Cuff said I should talk to you."

"I'm not a general."

"It's about... there was a woman there who spoke another language. Would you be able to translate?"

Velencia straightened her back, and her face wrinkled in interest.

"What'd she say?"

"She kept saying 'por favor,' 'ayuda me,' and 'mi hijo.'"

"'Please,' 'help me,' and 'my son.' It's Spanish."

"Oh." Pressure forced James' shoulders into a slump. It had been a son. Of course, James probably could've gotten that information from Leader, but he'd asked only for her name. Luciana.

"What about," James squinted to be sure he said it correctly, "'Tu mama... amar mucho.'"

Instructor Velencia's mouth tightened. Her fingers unclasped and plucked at her sleeves. Pink colored her fair cheeks. She shifted, and James realized she seemed quite embarrassed.

"It means 'Your mother loves you very much,'" Velencia said. Her voice cracked, and she couldn't meet James' gaze.

"Oh," he said again. "I see. Thank you." He made for the door, or at least told his feet to move. They wouldn't.

James often thought of his mother—both his parents—wondering if they had red hair and freckles like he did. Wondering if they missed the son they'd given to the MTA to raise apart from the civilian world. All at once, he knew they *must*. Luciana wouldn't have lied.

He put his palms over his face and found it wet with tears. In a moment, firm hands tugged his torso into a hug. Velencia's approaching footsteps must've made a noise that could've alerted James, but he'd never be good

at listening. The touch startled him, yet he found it comforting. How did Velencia know the gestures that worked? It must have come with studying civilians.

“It’s all right, my boy,” she murmured. “It’ll be quite all right.”

After dinner, he and Brittney went on a walk. They did this sometimes, when James wanted a private word. Anyone could hear anything within the academy building.

“Brittney.” He said her full name, so she knew something serious would follow.

She stopped right along their running trail. Her dark eyes studied him.

“I want...” James cleared his throat. “What would you think if, instead of an agent, I chose Civilian Studies as my vocation?”

Brittney stepped back with a tilt of her head. She bumped the tree behind her. “Civilian Studies? That’s... *no* one chooses that.”

“Some do.”

“The others think Velencia’s daft. They’ll laugh at you.”

“But will you?”

Emotion did not flit to and fro on Brittney’s features as easily as it did on others. Even with James, emotion had trouble wriggling its way free. In the woods that evening, however, Brittney allowed – or perhaps could not help – the appearance of a softness that made James yearn for the days of primary school. She stepped to him and set a hand on his cheek. James did not attempt to hide his excited shiver.

“I’ll never laugh at you, Jamesie,” she whispered.

He reached for the cool hand on his cheek, afraid it might’ve been imagined. She was *touching* him, and not how she did every day during their sparring. James held the hand that held him and wanted to stand this way until the sun rose. Or maybe longer.

“You want to help civilians, and I want to help civilians,” Brittney said. “We’ll just do it in different ways.”

“Do you think we’ll still progress at the same rate?”

“Yes. No one’s going to be your partner but me,” she said, fiercely as always, and his pulse raced. “I was worried. Being an agent is dangerous. I wasn’t sure you could handle it. But you’ll be safe in Civ Studies.”

Though she’d had five years of opportunities to convey this perception

to James, he'd never realized, until that moment, how little confidence she had in his abilities. The understanding smarted so sharply that he winced. His hand and focus plummeted. Would she ever find him capable?

"Now I'll just worry about you," he murmured, watching the forest floor.

She took back her touch and barked a short laugh. "Don't ever worry about me, James. I'm not afraid of anything."

That was what worried James most.

She didn't call him "Jamesie" again. Not for many years.