

BEING A SIX at primary proved more arduous than what a six-year-old's development could maintain – or so Traditor Mallory had heard her co-traditors comment. Those facts referred to a civilian six year old, however. A meta did not adhere to the behavioral expectations documented by civilians.

Traditor Mallory, four times the age of her students, had eleven Sixes in her class. A smaller amount than previous years. This batch of primers, she'd decided, would surpass enough expectations to earn their place in the MTA's hall of fame. Most of her students, at least. A few still dawdled in line or fidgeted too much, but Mallory had – with minor exceptions – strong leaders and listeners in her class. Yes, Traditor Mallory enjoyed having the best group of students in primary school. The other traditors could see it, and they'd have to attribute the Six's success to Mallory's instruction.

All eight primary school traditors operated in open competition. Each wanted his own class to perform the best. Mallory had pushed last year's Sixes harder than this year's, but those primers were now Sevens, and Mallory cared only about her current Sixes. She especially cared that they beat Brenden's class in today's search-and-find. He needed a kick to his arrogance.

Of course, that wasn't to say Mallory *only* cared about their ability to do well. Caring about the wellbeing of your primers was a prerequisite to becoming a traditor. Traditors were to care, but to temper their attachments. Primers would feel loved, but must also know that they would inevitably move on.

Mallory's eyes lifted to the time in the corner of her book's screen. Five minutes until lunch. She glanced at the school grounds before her and saw a scramble of blindfolded Sixes and Sevens feeling their way around the bushes and equipment sheds. Most of the Sevens congregated together, whispering their advice, but her Sixes had dispersed. Mallory felt a smugness at their independence. Blind "search-and-find" typically resulted in a horde of angry primers, disgruntled that they'd spent an hour stumbling around in search of their opponents using hearing alone. Her Sixes never complained. Well, perhaps Koleman, on occasion, but his classmates were quick to rebuke him.

She blew the whistle still wedged between her teeth and resumed her reading. The break in concentration told her how wet the whistle had

become. She let it fall to her lap and saw, in her peripheral, it stop short in its plummet. The whistle floated sideways and out of her sight.

"A token of Mallory Pikes," came Brenden's drawl.

Mallory set her teeth, burrowed herself deeper into her chair, and reinvested her attention in the book.

"I wonder what doors this DNA will unlock?" Brenden said.

"The same doors you already have access to." Mallory's fingers clenched, but he'd succeeded in distracting her, so she glanced his way.

"Return my whistle."

"But then you'll resume your determined avoidance of me." Brenden Lewis wore his typical smirk as he twirled the whistle in the air above his finger. The Sevens traditor hardly cared that his class of nearly two dozen students had found such a tough competition in their inferiors. Instead of monitoring his class, he monitored Mallory.

Traditor Brenden wore yellow, the color of the Sevens, and he knew how nicely his clothing complemented his rich, dark complexion. Dark eyes, dark skin, dark hair – and a pull so strong that even Mallory struggled to resist him. Yet she did, and each victory over his magnetism gave her a better feeling of glee than *he* ever could.

"Traditor Mallory?"

She whipped her attention from Brenden, rebuking herself for allowing it to linger for so long. Before her, just meeting her height in her chair, stood Sheedy. He still wore his blindfold and faced slightly off-center. She saw the wrinkles along his forehead. Already, at six years old, he had stress lines.

"What is it, Sheedy?" she said to him.

"We haven't found McFarland yet."

Mallory fought to withhold her sigh. Yes, she cared wholeheartedly about keeping her Sixes under tight scrutiny, but no one took Mallory's job more seriously than Sheedy. If she dropped dead in class, he'd spring to his feet without blinking and order his classmates to continue their lesson.

*He'll be leader one day, she thought to herself. If Grifters don't kill him first.*

"Have you checked all the trees?" she asked him.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Keep searching. We have two minutes left. She might be waiting until the last second."

Sheedy accidentally saluted Brenden, not her, then darted back into the

grounds.

"I hope that primer dies before he makes it to my class," Brenden said, not bothering to keep his voice down.

"That primer happens to be better than all twenty-one of your Sevens," Mallory replied. "You'd better hope he doesn't die, if you ever intend for your class to win a competition." She also found Sheedy overzealous, but she'd defend every ounce of him if it meant disagreeing with Brenden.

Before Brenden could quip back, Mallory summoned the loudspeaker at her feet and caught it out of the air. "McFarland, report to your traditor," boomed Mallory's voice.

"Probably doesn't want to go back to class," Brenden said.

"No, she's not the type to shirk. She likes following rules."

"Sounds similar to her traditor."

"I wonder why your tone suggests an insult?"

He smirked and edged his chair closer. His eyes were bright with a taunt. Mallory gathered her stiffness and turned her face away.

"Civilians say rules are meant to be broken," he murmured near her cheek.

"Sounds too bold for a civilian. My guess is you made that up."

"I wouldn't lie to *you*, Mallory."

"Just everyone else."

Brenden brought his hand a fraction away from hers. "Break one rule for me," he said. "A slight infraction. We'll make sure your record stays impeccable."

"I'm not convinced you're worth it, Lewis."

"I've been told I'm quite convincing when the need arises."

"Then I'll be sure to inform you if I ever need a ballad recited in my honor." Mallory stood, immediately registering the relief at the new space between Brenden and herself. "Sheedy!" she called.

Her student, listening to a tree trunk thirty yards away, spun in the vague direction of Mallory's voice.

"Still no sign of her?" Mallory said.

"No, ma'am," Sheedy answered.

Most likely, McFarland had chosen a more obscure hiding spot. All primers wore a tracker; Mallory merely needed to check McFarland's status. Unfortunately, Mallory carried a book while Brenden had the grid.

She forced her attention down toward Brenden. "Hand me your grid,"

she said, reach extended.

“And in exchange?” His eyes danced, and Mallory’s stomach twisted.

“In exchange,” she said, “I won’t report you for multiple *failed* attempts at fraternization.”

His expression finally soured, a deformation so unpleasant that Mallory grew the instantaneous realization that she’d never find herself attracted to him again. Not with the memory of his immaturity burned like iron in her thoughts. At last, she’d conquered.

“You’re going to have a very dull life, Pikes,” Brenden spat, spinning his grid toward her with intentional forcefulness.

Mallory caught the electronic screen with an easy smile. “You know what the civilians say, Brenden: we can’t have the best of both worlds.”

IF MCFARLAND WANTED to scale the wall, her legs would need to pump faster.

She’d started running toward the boundary wall as soon as Traditor Mallory blew the commence whistle. Half the group hid while the others searched, blindfolded. McFarland never had any trouble hearing; what frustrated her was finding a tricky enough spot to conceal the thump of her heart. The Sixes and Sevens always seemed to find her first. This time, she’d hide where no one would think to listen.

The primary school building sat in the center of their dormitories like a statue in a courtyard. A wall kept the structures secure from the civilian world. Ten feet high, the wall enclosed all twelve acres of mountainous land owned by the MTA. McFarland knew she lived in northern Georgia at a high elevation, but she understood little else about the geography around her. The towering trees did not interest her, nor did the slopes in the ground that caused her short legs to work harder.

She saw the border after several minutes. Squares of tan stone stacked upward, tall enough that McFarland glimpsed only more trees beyond it. Her legs ached and her stomach felt a stitch, but she plunged toward that wall with every ounce of energy she possessed. When she grew close enough, she leaped. The border came faster than expected. She covered her face right before smacking into the sheer mass of stone that knocked the breath from her. Gravity pulled her to the grass that roughly caught her bottom. McFarland lay on her back, dazed, and stared at the wall that now seemed taller than it had looked while she’d been running.

Even with minutes of a buildup, she still lacked the strength to make the jump.

Once her breath returned, she hopped to her feet. Her tailbone smarted, but she pushed the pain away and inspected the obstacle before her. She couldn't leap over it; what of climbing?

The cracks between the stone squares were too thin to hold her fingers. She tried pushing herself up the wall, and her arms refused to do more than trudge her up a few inches. The Tens could have done this so easily! McFarland rebuked her arms, rebuked the absence of muscle in her legs, and beat a fist against the insurmountable wall. That did nothing but bruise her hand.

With a grunt of frustration, McFarland spied the area for trees that might be more climbable than the wall. She saw only stumps and foliage too far away to make much use of. She could neither jump nor climb. Her strength had failed her, leaving her with one remaining skill that she feared would fail her, too. Telekinesis did not work on animate matter; she couldn't simply levitate herself over the wall. However... she could levitate something else. The trees offered plenty of leverage. Surely one branch had died, no life left to prevent her telekinesis from working.

McFarland mentally tugged at every branch in sight until one gave. Her arms shook at the effort of drawing it closer. Telekinesis relied on actual physical strength; McFarland couldn't move the whole tree, unless one day she grew strong enough. From yards away, the graying limb snapped off its tree and floated toward her, staggering each time McFarland blinked an eye. She knew Burnette could've done this gracefully. Burnette was the best telekinetic in the Sixes, maybe in the Sevens and Eights, too. McFarland, on the other hand, hated relying on something other than her own hands and feet.

At last, the branch reached her. She closed her eyes with exhaustion and heard it crash to the earth by her feet. After a moment, she regarded the limb again. It stretched a couple yards long, thinner than the length of her shoes, but she thought it would hold her weight. She bent over and grabbed hold. Head stooped so she'd have constant eye contact with the branch, she ordered it to lift. At first, she felt the resistance in her body, the zap of energy, and thought she might be too weak to levitate both the branch and herself. She lifted the branch above her head, now staring upward, and began jumping. After enough glaring, the branch unsteadily

rose. McFarland kept her gaze on it, mentally pushing it through the air, and thought of nothing else except the importance of elevating the dead limb. Her stomach trembled, and nausea swirled within it. Sweat dampened her neck. McFarland lifted the branch higher until her legs fully dangled. She hung in the air, this branch the only thing keeping her aloft. Her telekinesis worked!

She did not immediately realize that she'd passed the height of the wall. A bird passed through the sky, distracting her. She felt the branch sink. With a determined effort, McFarland found the wall. The limb dropped, and she flung herself forward. Over the wall she went, straight for a tree. She curled herself into a ball and smacked yet another painful surface. Only this time, when she landed, she did not stop moving. The property wall sat right at the beginning of a slope. The hill tossed McFarland down, hurling her over grass and crunchy leaves. She flailed her arms, too disoriented to figure out how to stop her momentum. The tumble lasted until she rolled off the earthen surface and suddenly found herself on something hard and black. She felt aches all over and coughed dirt out of her throat. Once she'd calmed, she lifted her head to inspect her surroundings.

The hill had dropped her onto a road. To her right, she saw the incline and, at its top, a shroud of trees that hid her home. She caught no glimpse of the property wall. To her left, a metal railing separated the asphalt road from the view beyond it. McFarland managed to stand. She realized then, standing in the center of the road covered in bramble and bruises, how small she was.

The road spanned ahead and curved around a craggy wall, the arm of the mountain that kept her primary school at its top. Over the metal railing, McFarland saw the roll of farmland, bales of hay, houses and fences and civilians that drove tractors. Such a wide world, too much to see all at once, with no wall confining it to a manageable size.

A sharp blaring shocked McFarland out of her inspection. She twisted around in time to spot an incoming car. She dashed sideways, in the direction of primary school, and found safety. Surely not for long, however. Another car might come soon. McFarland should make her hike back up toward the wall. After all, she'd meant only to hide on top of the wall until a primer found her.

Gentle mooing tugged her attention away from the direction of primary

school. She could see, beyond the metal railing, that the earth beyond it did not slope as steeply as the ground outside her home. Curiosity had never bogged her as much as, say, nosy Reynolds, but she could not deny the wonder that suddenly tickled her mind. Down there, civilians did not have the impending prospect of partnership, of Name Day, of vocation querying and Six's graduation and the eventual progress from primary school to a training academy. She had a month left before she turned seven and joined Traditor Brenden's class, and that day her life would change. January first would bring her a new traditor, class, partner, and name, all within the same hour. No one had ever asked her whether she *wanted* someone to suddenly rely upon in lessons. No one had inquired if she found the name "McFarland" dull and incomplete. She was already content! Why did turning seven need to mean so much change when she was perfectly fine with her autonomy? McFarland would rather work alone and never learn her first name if it meant she could carry on the way she was used to.

As quickly as it had come, the rush of questioning dissipated. McFarland did not see the use in entertaining the "Whys?" or "What-ifs?" She had been gone long enough; it was time to return home.

The tumble down the mountainside looked longer than it had felt. In her path lay oaks, pines, and birches, columns of bark that appeared the same to her; it seemed the mountains offered little variety. McFarland brushed the pine needles off her green uniform – a collared tunic over loose pants – and began her return journey. She knew she couldn't return exactly the way she'd come. There was still the matter of the insurmountable wall. Instead, she'd trek parallel to the border in search of its entrance. She'd seen it before; the security gate existed *somewhere* along the wall.

Her cloth shoes were filthy by the time she'd immersed herself in the trees. In the woods once more, McFarland felt big again. Here, she could see where space began and ended. Above her was only a tiny blip of sky, no longer the giant blue mass that had stretched above the highway. She felt the comfort of control. And, most times, being too comfortable leads straight into turbulence.

She was marching with purpose when the forest carried her around an unseen corner. Hidden in that corner crouched a bear. Its fur shone almost navy in the patch of sunlight it dug in. McFarland stopped short, but not without noise. The bear turned its snout from the dirt and found

McFarland mere feet from it.

For a moment, the two creatures simply stared. The bear with its wriggling nose, and McFarland with her stiffness. She was stunned, not fearful, and currently torn between running past the bear or standing still for hours. The bear spurred McFarland into action by rising in a swift move to its clunky feet. McFarland saw its long black belly and pointy claws raised for a swat. By the time the bear opened its mouth to roar, McFarland had already clambered halfway up the nearest tree.

From her vantage point, she heard the full force of the bear's rage. The throaty sound travelled right up McFarland's neck. It seemed to be panting in its anger, quick huffs of expelled air. The bear twisted around to find her, then dropped back on all fours. While she clung to the tree trunk, the bear circled the base. She didn't know whether it could see her, or perhaps smell her. It sniffed the ground, spewing dead leaves. The panting turned into a moan, low and drawn out. McFarland found the noise more cumbersome than frightening. Out of the bear's reach, she realized she wasn't afraid of it. She hadn't hidden in a move of wild panic, but because she knew the bear was likely stronger than her, and she had no desire to die today.

A minute passed, and the bear gave up its search. With an exhale of seeming resignation, it lumbered away from McFarland's tree. She could hear it padding along the leaves. It continued its sniffing of the ground while McFarland hung above it.

Time stretched, fogging McFarland's thoughts. It seemed she'd clung to the trunk for hours, that she'd crossed the wall days ago. Moths came and left the tip of her nose; birds started songs and carried them farther away. Her hands made homes for many ants and spiders. But those, too, left her. Only the bear stayed, sniffing and working and digging, and McFarland hated it for lingering so long. Her arms had grown tired, but she knew she needed to keep holding on to her tree, or else she'd slide right into the bear's trap below.

"McFarland?"

She whipped her head toward the source of her name. Late afternoon had already come; the mountain sun chose to leave quickly this late in the year. Below her stood a woman dressed all in black. How had she approached so quietly? The woman peered upward with a quizzical expression.



"There's a bear," McFarland told her.

"A bear?" The woman glanced side-to-side and must have missed the obvious, hulking shape. "Don't tell me you're afraid of something you can outsmart."

"I'm not afraid. It's stronger than me."

"Ah. You're a smart girl, aren't you?"

McFarland frowned. "You're not with the MTA."

"Of course I am. I'm an agent. Have you never seen an agent?"

McFarland had only heard of agents. They'd become somewhat of a myth in her imagination. The agents fought the Grifters and kept the world safe. If the woman below her was an agent, then she must not have had a very important job.

"Won't you tell me why you ran away?" the agent said; she had a way of wording everything as a question.

"I didn't run away," McFarland answered, jutting her chin as high as the tree trunk would allow.

"Then how did you arrive here?"

"We were playing search-and-find."

"This is certainly a good hiding spot. But you broke the rules. That wasn't very smart. Rules are what keep you safe."

"This world isn't dangerous."

"Yet you're in a tree, aren't you? Hiding from a bear." The agent waggled her eyebrows. "Time to come down, McFarland. Traditor Mallory is worried about you."

"No one needs to worry about me." McFarland felt the protest in her arms as she spoke, which spurred her to use a stronger voice for her next statement. "I kept myself safe. But there *is* a bear. Can't you see it?"

"I see nothing but the wind blowing some leaves. There's no bear, McFarland."

"I'm not lying."

"I'm sure you're not," the agent said, "and that's plenty fine. You need to come down. That's an order."

Bear or no bear, McFarland would follow orders. She treasured commands, found solace in their simple familiarity. She released her tree trunk without pushing herself far enough away to avoid the scratches from the bark. Scabby bark and twigs scraped the soft parts of her arms while she dropped. Her feet plopped onto the earth a moment later. McFarland

brushed her clothes of bramble before she inspected the shadows around her tree. A sapling thunked its head against another tree's stump, causing a scuffling sound each time. The mixture of leaves swirling in every exhale of the wind added to the noise. McFarland saw no bear. The agent had been right.

With furrowed frustration, McFarland eyed the agent. The woman seemed nearly as tall and sturdy as the tree. She had black hair and pearly skin like Traditor Mallory's. With a waving gesture, the agent directed McFarland forward. The older woman kept a pace beside her, making little noise with every step. McFarland grew aware of her own stomping and concentrated on taking quieter steps. They trekked through the woods in this fashion. Quiet McFarland, quieter agent.

"You'll be a Seven next month, won't you?" the agent said in her inquisitive way. "That's a big step. Name Day and your first partner."

McFarland said nothing and thought about her lack of desire for both a partner and a first name. She needed neither.

Though McFarland had kept her opinions to herself, the agent figured her out nonetheless. "You're not looking forward to January first?" the agent said. "Don't be silly. You need a name, McFarland, and a partner. I'll tell you why. There *is* a bear, and you're headed right for her."

McFarland slammed to a stop before the agent closed off her last consonant. Attention ahead, she scoured the winding path before her, searching every shadow, until her eyes found a grizzly shape with its nose once again in the dirt. She felt her heart bouncing inside like a ball trying to escape the gymnasium. The bear crouched less than twenty yards away! And McFarland had not noticed. The curve of the mountain kept them from the bear's sight, so it continued to dig without any awareness of their presence.

The agent knelt, meeting McFarland's height. "You would have kept walking," she said softly, "straight into her paws. She would've killed you in one strike. But I'm here, almost like your partner. I kept you safe, because that's what partners do. They protect each other from making silly mistakes. They teach each other things. Here." The woman, deftly and swiftly, slipped the elbow-length glove from her left arm. McFarland could not summon a name for the black accessory that seemed too bulky for a glove, with buttons that glowed blue and a seemingly hard exterior. The agent, still kneeling beside McFarland, let the accessory float toward

McFarland.

"This is a bracer," the agent said. "It's a computer and it's a weapon. The darts are made for Grifters, but two should work on the bear. You'll need to shoot her square in the head."

The agent wanted *her* to protect them! It was a show of trust, an honor, and McFarland did not hesitate to grasp the bracer from the air. It felt heavy as a brick. When she slid her hand into it, eyeing the agent's other arm for a comparison, the bracer swallowed her past her elbow. Her fingers felt loose in the spaces where they were meant to protrude from the bracer in the same fashion as a fingerless glove. She wiggled them about, suddenly feeling foolish. Her arms had no muscle, and this bracer made that overly evident.

However, the agent did not appear offended by McFarland's skinniness. "Good," she said, cupping McFarland's elbow and angling her arm higher. "You'll make a fist to release. First, find your target."

McFarland's earlier frustrations and doubt vanished. This moment swelled. It was the most important moment of her life. Her heart pattered in excitement, but she rebuked it and told herself to focus. She would rather hold her breath than let this agent down.

With the help of the agent, McFarland steered her arm until it pointed at the bear. She had to strain to keep her arm steady and aloft; the bear occupied a higher elevation, a spot between trees where the mountain began to curve upward. It shuffled around, groaning and sneezing and circling its area.

"Deep breath," the agent whispered. She crouched very close to McFarland now, a firm presence at her side, mouth near McFarland's ear. "Steady. Aim. And... squeeze."

McFarland formed a fist and felt a swoop of resistance in the bracer. The force caused her to reel backward, but the agent steadied her stumble and redirected her arm.

"Again," the agent said urgently.

McFarland, so busy pointing that she forgot to look, squeezed again. This time, ready for the weapon's discharge, she caught herself. McFarland heard a howl as she shot a third time, though the agent had not asked her to. She would have shot again, but the agent grabbed her arm.

"Very good shot, McFarland!" she said, standing. "I think you're a natural. You'd make a fine agent."

McFarland felt flush with excitement as she followed the agent's gaze. In the dip where the earth met the curve, the bear lay on its side, panting. Even though yards separated them and the light had grown dim, McFarland saw the spill of blood around its muzzle. Its paws were slack, its chest heaving, and it did not look as threatening as it had earlier.

"Grifters can't feel pain," the agent said, "but this mammal can. Bracer?"

Hiding her reluctance, McFarland parted with the bracer. Her arm felt naked without its cover.

The agent slipped the bracer back over her own arm. She aimed, and only needed to shoot once. The bear silenced.

The two metas resumed their walk. When they approached the bear, McFarland glanced down, though the agent continued up the hill. Its furry head was so big, with a mouth open enough to reveal its pink tongue and pointy teeth. Its eyes seemed the same shade as McFarland's.

Confusion tugged at her. Death did not look as tiny as McFarland would have predicted. Not that she had ever spent time pondering death; but, if she had, she would have guessed that it appeared cold and empty. This bear had a huge sprawl, even in death, and seemed warm enough to comfort McFarland's icy fingertips. Did Grifters take up as much space when they died?

The agent had continued, however, and McFarland did not want to linger. She caught up to her superior and forgot the bear. Soon, that patch of trees was far behind.

"Why do I need a first name?" she asked the agent.

"'McFarland' is what everyone else calls you. Your first name – that's *yours*, and you get to decide who knows it and who doesn't. It's your identity. Yours alone. Somewhat like another partner." The agent pointed east, and McFarland had a glimpse of the tan property wall. "I know your first name, McFarland," the agent said. "Your tracker is labeled with it. Would you like to be the first Six to learn her name, a full month before Name Day?"

The tickle of pride rose first, and then the reigning in brought on by prudence. McFarland could know something before the rest of her peers, but that hardly seemed fair. Besides, it was against the rules. She'd already bent enough for a lifetime. "No," she said simply.

"Why not?"

"I'm not supposed to know it."

The agent, whose pearly skin had darkened in the decline of sunlight, smiled. "Yes, you'll be a perfect agent. I follow the rules, too. It's why I haven't died yet."

TRADITOR MALLORY HUGGED McFarland when she saw her again. McFarland endured it, though part of her had already begun to dissect the differences in physical gestures that separated the MTA's occupations. An agent would never hug. McFarland's rescuer certainly hadn't. She'd never learned the agent's name, first or last.

When Name Day came and her new traditor, Brenden, called her into his office to present her with her first name, McFarland accepted the word as calmly as she'd accepted Traditor Mallory's hug.

"Brittney," Traditor Brenden told her.

Brittney. It didn't feel like much of an identity, but perhaps she could make one out of it.

*Agent Brittney McFarland*, she imagined. She thought it fit.