

PLAYING A DANGEROUS GAME

Prologue

I pulled the letter free of the envelope to look at it once more, still unable to fully allow the words to sink in.

Congratulations!

You have been selected to participate in this seasons, "Airblade Extreme!" During your audition you displayed the desired characteristics of a protector. Registration takes place July 28th at 3:00. Please do not be late. For cancelations please call....

The rest of the letter trailed off. It was just so unbelievable that I had gotten picked out of all the contestants. It's not that Airblade was something that I had always wanted to do, I just needed money and I had heard from a good friend that racers who win make big money. I mean big money. I was tired of living in that rat hole of an apartment. It was time for a change. The rail train came to a stop and I picked up my bag of all my belongings and stepped into the world of wonderment.

I had known that New Alexandria was the technological hub of, well, Europe, but it never occurred to me just how much technology could be in one place. Chrome shone everywhere and the people looked as if they had never seen a speck of dirt in their life. I examined a group of people walking by me all dressed in either lab coats or suits. Suddenly, my simple green t-shirt top and brown cargo pants with tennis shoes seemed out of place. I even considered buttoning my shirt all the way up, but decided that I didn't really care and the feeling passed as soon as it came. I pulled out the map that came with the letter and began my trek up into the building that towered before me.

When I entered the building the scent of fresh air hit my nose. It was so overwhelming that I coughed and didn't even notice the woman who was beside me.

"May I help you?" When my coughing fit was over I finally was able to look at the person who had addressed me. She was pudgy female donkey wearing glasses. She too was in classy wear. She raised a single eyebrow. "May I help you?" Only then did I realize that I hadn't said anything.

"Oh! Uh-" I stammered fumbling around looking for my letter, "I'm here to register." I announced and held up my envelope like it was a trophy. She looked at me for a moment then turned away from me.

"Follow me please." She commanded. I followed her out of the crowded lobby and into an office room. Once I was inside she shut the door and took her place behind the computer on the desk. "Name please."

"Um, Lance." I hesitated. She looked up from the computer with a "*are you kidding me?*" look.

"Full name. Please." She stated rather dryly.

"Oh." I stood there for a moment. "Just Lance." She looked at me with eyes that could spit fire.

"Can I see your team badge please?" And she stuck out her hand. Even though the question itself was polite, there was anger in it.

"My team bad-" She scowled. Suddenly, I knew what she was talking about. "Oh my teams badge!" I started to fumble in my army duffle bag hanging on my shoulder. When I took more than five seconds she began to drum her fingers on the desk. "It's in here somewhere. Ah! Here it is." I pulled it out and held it out to her. She rolled her eyes and reached for the badge. When her eyes finally looked at it she jumped up out of the chair. "Oh! Your white team!" She exclaimed. "Please. Right this way!" She then rushed out of the room. I stood there for a few moments with my hand still extended like I was still trying to give her the badge. I brought it closer to me.

What's so special about this team badge? I thought to myself. *No time to worry about that right now*, I stuffed the badge back into my bag and hurried out the door after the woman.

We walked for what seemed like miles. Finally the hall broke and we were on this massive viewing platform. Beneath us, I recognized the Airblade track. "You can wait here for your partner." She said just before scurrying off. I set my duffle bag down and walked to the viewing glass. The amazing thing about this sport to me was the fact that the shoes used for racing at the high speeds ran on air! Then it occurred to me that's probably why the air seemed so fresh here.

"Like the view?" My thoughts were suddenly interrupted. I turned to my right to see a little mouse boy there.

"Oh yeah, It's awesome." I gushed. I wasn't showing off or anything because the kid was cute, it really was awesome.

"Yeah it takes a lot of work to keep these things up." He tapped on the glass with his knuckle. "These Airblade tracks are some of the highest technological requirements in the world." I turned to him.

"So are you my partner?" He looked at me for a moment before answering.

"Oh no. I'm not. He should be coming around the bend in," he looked at his watch, "three, two, and one." As if on cue, there was a figure racing around the corner. It was a magnificent sight to behold. The person was racing crouched like a person using rollerblades would and at, what I would have guessed, to be well over one hundred miles per hour. He even had a massive plume of air behind him. The magnificence of the scene was soon interrupted with the track springing to life. Turrets, saw-blades, trap doors, and even long claws sprouted from the walls and floor. The mystery person just rushed on unphased, even ignoring the turret bolts zooming inches from him and the saws that swiped at him. He dodged them all with eloquent flips and dives; dodged every single one. When he passed the finish line, electricity rippled across the track stopping him.

"James, what was the time?" I looked around to see the mouse boy beside me reading his watch.

"Five minutes and three seconds, a new record!" He seemed massively excited at this fact and even ran over to a monitor to watch, what I assume, was the finish shot. I was about to go over and be nosy when the doors on the far side of the platform opened. Out stepped the mystery person. I found myself staring so much that I came to a conclusion that he was a she based on how she walked and carried herself. To be honest, I was massively disappointed. The suit that she was wearing was white and black and really sleek. As I was looking the suit over, I noticed the startling absence of breasts. So that means-

"Sir we have your time." My thoughts were interrupted by James who was speaking to the jumpsuit person. I watched as they reached up and with a hiss of released air, took off HIS helmet. So it was a he along. I found myself doing a sigh of relief. He was a traditional fox, sporting red and white fur features but what shone through on this particular boy, was his hazel eyes. Even from where I was standing and even the fact that he wasn't looking at me, I could tell they were beautiful. I was so entranced by this person that I didn't even notice that there was a conversation going on.

"-and I don't care. I'm going to have to be even faster than that." His voice was musical. How he enunciated every single syllable in perfect harmony, like he could persuade anyone to do anything, like he could make me to do anything.

"Oh and sir, your new Protector is here." And for the first time he looked at me. Gods those eyes. They seemed to cut straight through me, see into my soul. How I wanted to take him and get lost in them.

"Hum, so you're Lance with no last name." I couldn't answer, so I just nodded. He reached up and pulled something out of his hair. Later as brown hair cascaded down, only then did I realize it was a scrunchie. He then looked at James. "Is this a joke?" The first thing that entered my head was *what the hell?*

"Uh no sir," James stammered, "He's really your assigned Protector. Is there something wrong with him?" The fox sighed.

"Yes James, there is. I can look at him and tell he knows nothing of this sport. He's muscular sure but he's *soft*." I just stood there dumbfounded.

"He..He passed regulations sir. He's quail-," The fox interrupted.

"Qualifications? Ha! That means nothing. All that means is that he," the fox then pointed to me, " was the best of the worst." Best of the worst? Alright that did.

"Excuse me, but I don't think you've given me a chance." He then looked at me, his eyes like ice.

"You want a chance? In this sport there are no chances. You have to be ruthless, or else. You know what happened to my last protector?" I shook my head, "He died. Right out there." He then pointed to the track. "So you see, you need more than just muscle, you need the right stuff." He hesitated and the air for the first time seemed stagnant. "But, if you truly want a chance. Come back tomorrow, I'll do a simulation run with you." I shifted on my feet.

"I can't come back tomorrow." He looked at me confused so I continued to explain. "I tried out for this sport for money. I don't have anything to go back to. So if I need to prove myself I'll do it now." I set down my duffle bag. He held up a gloved hand.

"Wait. So you're telling me all you own is in that bag and on your fur?" He said as if it was the strangest thing he ever said in his life.

"Yeah that's right." He then began to shake his head.

"Oh no no no, that just simply won't do." He then looked at me with amusement in his eyes. Those gorgeous eyes... "James," he said rather sweetly, "ready the car, we're going shopping."