



future
leaders
of
nowhere

Emily O'Beirne



Part One: Finn

CHAPTER 1

As the bus veers onto the narrow bitumen road, Finn turns up her music, blocking out the noise so she can take in her new surroundings. Not that there's much to take in. The beige uniformity of the suburbs gave way to green about an hour ago, and the view has been an interminable, rainy sameness since. Wet, green paddocks stretch out on either side as far as she can see, and the horizon is a grassy nothingness, dotted with cows or sheep or some other kind of four-legged burger filler. This part wasn't in the brochure.

She actually likes nature, but the thought of being trapped this far from anywhere for weeks with no phones or laptops or best friend? Not so much. She wasn't sure about it when she packed her bags. And she's definitely not sure now that she's staring down the barrel of this no-man's-land reality.

Next to her, Amy grunts and snuffles. Her blue-streaked hair falls over Finn's shoulder. Finn pulls out her phone and sneaks a snap of her open-mouthed slumber. Amy's not going to love it, but Finn might need some leverage to keep her in line.

They are two of the seven kids her school has deemed sufficiently overachieving to cart off to this month-long camp. Trailing them on the highway is a caravan of minibuses packed with other schools' high performers. All total strangers. And for the zillionth time since leaving, Finn wishes her best friend, Dan, was with her instead of only Amy, who is fun and hilarious but hovers closer to long-term buddy/lab partner than friend. But Dan wasn't chosen. A fact he's proud of.

In the last half an hour, the hills start to close in, and trees huddle on the shoulder of the road, filtering the light a dull grey green. Bitumen fades to gravel, and they enter bona fide bush. Finn presses her face to the cold glass. Even in here, with the claustrophobic stink of stale sandwiches, worn upholstery, and too many kids in one

space pressed up close, she can imagine the smell of wet dirt and the peppery eucalyptus. At least there's that to look forward to.

And, of course, there's the break from the ugly chafe of things she'd prefer to ignore. Like bad life choices. Like the constant tension at home. Her parents couldn't get her out the door fast enough. She hopes they fight long and loud and get it all out of their systems. Maybe then the hard ball of guilt in Finn's stomach will finally dissolve. She doubts it, though. You can't leave your conscience behind, can you?

She yanks her headphones from her ears as the bus turns through a set of wooden gates, and the words *Live, learn, lead* shake their finger at her from a wooden arch.

She plucks at Amy's sleeve. "Hey, we're here."

CHAPTER 2

The first speaker wears a crisp navy suit. It screeches wank against the cracked linoleum and institutional green chic of the dining hall. It's as cold and damp in here as it is outside, and it smells like a thousand meaty meals cooked. Finn wonders if she should finally make that jump to vegetarianism while she's here.

The suit monologues like he's giving some kind of corporate TED talk, and Finn takes the moment to finally get a look at her group. What a bunch of randoms they are. She doesn't know much about them besides names. It's been her job as intermediate school captain to know people's names. There's Amy. Then there's Craig, as wide as he is tall. She sits next to him in maths sometimes—total numbers whizz and a giant smart ass. The good kind. He's the kind of guy who makes even the tough guys not afraid to laugh. The kind even teachers like. But she can only put vague social statuses and academic specialities to the other four. And she can't even do some stealth social media research. Another downside to this weird social experiment of a camp: restricted technology. She's going in blind.

The suit talking at them is some kind of CEO who dabbles in politics. His company is one of the big guns Finn's dad always writes about, whose factories in some Second or Third World country are still pouring toxic crap into the atmosphere while he tries to jump on board the climate-change train. Right now he's ranting about how occasions like this camp are just tests for tomorrow, how kids need to challenge themselves and to think outside the box. It's all kinds of self-help, life-coaching, psychobabble. Like they all need a lesson in stating the obvious.

"Anyway, I wish you luck," he says. "Tomorrow the particular challenges you face will be laid out for you, and it's going to be exciting. Think of it as the most challenging role-play game you've ever experienced in your life."

Finn's played precisely none, so that should be easy.

"It will test your ability to work together, to think laterally and deeply, and to apply real-world situations to your fictional one," the man says in this hushed-but-excited tone, as if he's trying to chip away at the patent lack of enthusiasm his speech has invoked.

"I know exactly how to survive," Craig mutters next to her. "By not doing this *Lord of the Flies* crap."

Finn smothers a laugh as Mr Pinstripe winds up his speech. His beatific smile invites them to take a moment with his wisdom, but all he gets is a dismissive scattering of applause.

The moment he retreats, the camp director, Gus, a be-plaided hipster with requisite beard and man-bun, bounces out of his seat. He looks right out of place here in the middle of nowhere. She'd bet good money that he ducks back to Melbourne for an appointment with the barber and a local microbrew every chance he gets.

"Okay," he says. "Tomorrow we introduce you to the project and to your future digs, but first you need to pick your team leaders. We don't care who you choose or how you choose—no violence please, though—but you must have your leader selected and ready for tomorrow, when you'll receive your assignments." His grin turns slightly evil. "And just to make the job of selecting one a little quicker, nobody eats until you've decided."

A groan echoes around the hall. Finn can't smother a sigh either. It's been a long time since the hurried honey toast in the car this morning.

"Okay, so Finn's our leader." Amy says it like it's a no-brainer.

Craig nods. "Yeah, you do it, Harlow. School captain default."

Finn stares at them. They're all supposed to be future leaders. Shouldn't they *all* want the job? "Shouldn't we vote?"

"We already voted you intermediate school captain, didn't we?" Amy raises an eyebrow. "What? You need *more* validation?"

Finn shoots her a look, but Amy ignores it. "You know you want to do it."

Trust Amy to throw her under the bus. She once tried to pin an incident involving Ivan Kale, revenge, and a Bunsen burner on her in Year 9.

"I didn't vote Finn for captain."

Heads turn.

It's Brian something-or-other. All lank and basketball shoe. He folds his arms over his chest. "I wanted Steve Dorsen."

"Well lucky for us nobody else wanted that stooge," Craig says. "*And* that girl-brains beat your sorry jock-boy patriarchy for once. That boy's scraping the bottom of the brain-cell barrel."

Finn holds up her hand. "Hey, no fighting. I'm totally happy for someone else to be leader."

A guy called Jessie leans forward and shoots her a grin. "See, now you have to do it. No one else is going to tell us not to fight."

Finn has no idea whether he's mocking her or not.

"And you're good at this stuff," a girl called Hana adds.

Brian frowns. "But why does she get to—"

"Tell me, do you want to throw *your* hand in, or do you just want to complain?" Jessie asks. "Because we can vote on this if you want. You against Finn." He says it like it's a threat. Like everyone already knows Brian has no hope of winning.

"I don't want to be leader," Brian mutters. "I don't even want to be here."

Finn's starting to wonder if any of them want to.

"Then what's your problem if Finn's in charge? No one else wants to do it." He turns to the others. "Do they?"

They all sit back like someone lit a fire in the middle of the table. There's a long, pointed silence.

Finn shakes her head. Wow. Just wow. "Um, I just want to throw out there that I don't remember saying I wanted to do it either."

No one pays any attention.

"Okay, people, enough crap. I'm starving." Amy sits up. "Hands up if you're happy for Finn to lead."

Everyone's hand goes up. Even Brian's, eventually.

It still stuns Finn when people choose her for things. Dan says it's because she's the good kind of bossy, because she makes decisions and gets things done without being a total dictator. He says she's figured out this adult thing way before everyone else. Finn definitely doesn't feel like that. Not lately. And this job? Does she even want this job, in charge of whatever this high school edition of *Survivor* she's landed herself in? "So, do I get a say in whether I do it?"

"Nope. You do not," Amy says. "Because now we get to eat."

Jessie gives her another small lip curl of a smile. She wonders what he's here for. Lit or Philosophy is her guess. He looks nerdy but kind of indie, too, with his skinny jeans and floppy hair.

Around them, some groups are exploding into raucous rounds of laughter, slapping tabletops. Another group's sitting in total, glum silence, as if they've had enough of each other already. They are going to have a fun month. She spies Mr Manopoulos, their teacher representative, on the other side of the room, dwarfed by the regular-sized teachers around him. Everyone at school calls him "The Hulk", because he's tiny and skinny and looks like he hasn't eaten in a year.

Gus drums loudly on a table. "Okay! Can the leader of each group please stand up?"

Why does Finn get the feeling she's going to live to regret this?

He makes a show of appraising them, arms across his chest. "Out of interest, hands up any of you who put *themselves* forward for leader?"

Only two people raise their hands. One's a solid guy with thick, dark curls. He's got this slight smirk, and she can't tell if it's his mood right now or a case of resting smug face. The second is the only other girl besides Finn who's standing. Pretty and intense, with an impeccable, dark ponytail and a sharp, scrutinising stare.

"So, why did you volunteer?" Gus asks her.

"Because no one else was willing."

Finn smiles. At least she's not the only one with woefully lazy teammates.

"Self-sacrifice, I see." Gus points at the guy. "You?"

The cocky one with the curls grins. "Power. I like it."

"What a dick," Amy mutters. Finn can always count on Amy to say what everyone's thinking. Personally, Finn usually likes to cut people slack until she knows them, but his response definitely lurched toward the red end of the douche meter.

"An opportunist. Interesting." Gus opens his arms wide. "Now tell me, chosen ones, what kind of leader do you plan on being? Because I know everyone *loves* getting this kind of question at short notice." He chuckles at his own joke and points at a lanky guy at the table next to Finn's. "You?"

The kid turns red. "A good one?"

"Well, for your group's sake, I hope so."

People laugh, and Finn feels a rush of pity for the kid.

Gus turns his pointed finger at Finn. “You, with the blonde bob. What about you?”

Scrambling, Finn channels her school captain speech. “I guess I’ll just try my best to represent everyone and their needs.”

“Good luck with that,” Gus jokes. “First rule of politics: you can’t please everyone.” He turns away, and the smirking guy smirks harder.

Why the hell did she agree to this? Oh, wait, that’s right. She didn’t. Finn shoots her group a dirty look, but no one’s looking.

Gus is pointing at the other girl now. “You? What kind of leader do you plan to be?”

The girl raises her chin a little. “That depends.”

“On?”

“On the task,” she says simply. “Until I know what we’re doing, how can I know how I am going to lead?”

Gus looks impressed. “Adaptive. I like it.”

That was the smart answer. Finn looks at her, curious, but the girl’s expression doesn’t shift from neutral as she sits down at a table full of girls.

“Okay, one last task before dinner...”

Craig moans. “What? To starve us into submission?”

“The leaders need to pick a deputy. Now, the other members of the group have no say in this at all. The leader chooses. Choose wisely, though, because this person will step in for you in the unlikely case of injury or illness. And they will also take over in the event of a no-confidence vote.” He rubs his hand together. “Spicy, huh?”

Amy shakes her head. “This guy is *way* too into whatever this is.”

“Does anyone else feel like we’re in some weird social experiment?” Jessie asks.

“Yeah, we’re probably the guinea pigs for his sociology PhD or something,” Hana says. “Look out for hidden cameras.”

When Finn sits down, Amy’s already firing up her best threatening look. “If you choose me, I will kill you. I mean it. I will wait until you least expect it, and I will exact revenge. Think of those tools in our dissection kits at school. Think how sharp—”

“Dude, stop. I’m not going to choose you.”

Amy pouts. “Well, now I’m a little hurt.”

Finn rolls her eyes.

“Joke. As if. I’m eternally grateful. Now choose someone. I’m dying of starvation here.”

Everyone is pointedly *not* looking at Finn. The only person who meets her eye is Jessie. But he shakes his head.

Please, she mouths at him.

Finally, he gives her a grudging nod.

“Jessie’s deputy.” She mouths a grateful *thank you* at him. He gives her an *of course* smile. She’s going to like this guy, she can tell.

“Great, let’s eat,” Brian grumbles.

“Why do I get the feeling that wasn’t a choice based entirely on his potential leadership qualities?” Amy mutters.

“Shut up.”

CHAPTER 3

The hardest part in the morning is remembering where she is. Then it all comes back. A cabin in the middle of nowhere. Fun. Finn huddles in the synthetic embrace of her sleeping bag, going about the gradual business of waking. Or, as her mother would say, avoiding the day.

It must be early, because no one is stirring, inside or out. At home, there'd be cars idling and neighbours slamming doors and the rumble of the 91 a block away on High Street. Instead, there's only a small, unruly chorus of mutters and shuffles. She blinks at the slats of the bunk above, where Amy is probably still sleeping like a sane person, and checks her watch. They've still got half an hour. But it's too late. The sleep window has closed.

Outside, the world is radiant. Sunshine ploughs through the trees, sending speckled light over the ugly brick cabin blocks. A complete, stark contrast from the gloom of yesterday. The air is brittle, though, and she zips her coat to her chin before skipping quietly down the wooden steps.

The only sounds in this sunstruck world are urgent, melodic magpie song and the rush of wind through the trees. She could get used to this. A series of cabins just like her own wind past before the path comes to an end at a small stretch of grass, surrounded by a stand of wizened peppercorn trees and a picnic area. She turns, and a new path meanders for a while. It borders some scrubby bushes and then stops at a fence overlooking another huge stretch of grass. A sports field. She clammers onto the fence, jams her hands into her pockets, and enjoys the bliss that is sunlight on her face.

On the other side of the field are more cabins. Fibro and decrepit, they are sadder than the ones on this side. Nearby, though, is an austere, double-storied brick house with a stretch of verandah running around both the top and bottom floors. She

wonders who it belongs to. On the other side, the world slants downward to where a clump of willow trees lean, sweeping the grass with their branches. There must be water down there somewhere.

It's hard to believe this will be her world for a month. Four whole weeks.

"Why, good morning, fearless leader."

She blinks into the brightness. It's Jessie, sweat stains blooming from his underarms to the hem of his T-shirt.

"Hello, reluctant deputy. I didn't pick you for a runner."

He stretches his leg against the bottom of the fence. "Ah, but you were thinking about me. That's good news."

Flirting this early? Seriously? She shakes her head. "Don't flatter yourself."

He vaults up onto the fence. "So if you didn't pick me for a runner, what did you pick me for?"

"Wow, you really like to talk about *you*, don't you?"

He just smiles. "So, let me guess. You picked me for maths genius? Because of the Asian?"

"No. I pegged you for Lit, Philosophy, that kind of thing. A bit of Dostoyevsky and Bukowski. Maybe some Nietzsche thrown in. Well-thumbed copy of *On the Road*, maybe?"

"That's rough. And, while I do enjoy the oeuvres of all these authors you've pinned on me, I'm actually a total history kid. Which is why I'm at geek boot camp."

"Close enough. So, what do you think this game is going to be like?"

"Not a clue," he says.

"Me either." They feast on the sun while the cold air makes clouds of their breath. She fights the urge to look at him, to take stock of him properly, because she's scared he'll take it the wrong way. Or maybe the right way.

"Actually, I think that might be your literature buff over there." He points.

It's the leader girl, strolling across the oval, a book clutched in her hand. "She kinda ran circles around you all last night," he says.

"Yeah."

"But with those legs it wouldn't be hard." He stares across the field.

"I *was* kind of put on the spot."

“So was she.”

“Hey, whose side are you on? Go see if Ms Legs wants you on her team if you like.”

He just grins. Unruffled seems to be his setting. “Don’t be like that. You chose me for your deputy, remember?”

“Only because you were the only one dumb enough to make eye contact.”

“True.” He swats at a persistent fly. “But I’m *your* fool deputy. And I happen to be stupidly loyal, so you’re stuck with me now. Besides, between us we’ve got pretty great pins.”

She kicks out her short legs. “I’ll give you one thing—you really are a fool.” Not many guys could pull off this kind of flirt-banter without being highly annoying. It helps that she can tell he doesn’t believe any of the things he’s saying, either.

“Told you.” He launches himself off the fence and lands lightly on the grass. “I better get back before one of my bunkies finds my after-run food stash.”

“And find a shower too. You smell like a wildebeest.”

“Yeah, yeah. See you later, boss lady.” He turns and strides away, whistling softly.

Finn should go, too, but she doesn’t want to leave this pocket of peace and sunshine just yet. Or face this day full of unknowns. So instead she locks her eyes on the one thing moving on her horizon. The girl’s arms swing gently at her sides as she walks. And when she reaches the dead centre of the field, she stops and tips her face to the sun, caught up in some sort of ultraviolet reverie, before she drops to the ground with her book. She looks so light and content, a world away from the stiff-backed girl of last night. Finn wishes she felt like that, instead of jagged and misplaced. The same way she’s felt for weeks.

This is not her life. Finn’s used to walking through her world like she’s in a play that she wrote the lines for. One where she’s worked hard to make sure she’s always ready to deliver. Not anymore.

She wishes she could call Dan, so she could wallow in some familiarity for a minute. But mobile phones were handed over last night, and they’re only allowed to use the public phones and the internet in designated communication times.

Even with all the tension, she’d settle for the comfort of home. Right now Dad will be waiting for the coffee machine to warm up, hunched over the paper at the end of the kitchen bench that catches the most morning light. He usually narrates every single thing

he reads in the paper while Finn makes her lunch. Her teachers are always impressed by how well she is across current affairs. They don't know that she has no choice.

Behind her, voices start to call out into the morning, and her sunny world is slowly invaded. She watches the girl climb to her feet and walk towards her, as if she, too, has sensed the moment's over.

Curious, Finn waits for her to get closer before she climbs down from her perch. The girl frowns as she walks, like she's thinking hard. Her runners are pristine and her ponytail as perfect as last night. She gives Finn a fraction of a smile as she passes, a glance long enough for Finn to notice her eyes are a light amber, bright against the darkness of her skin.

Finn returns the smile a second too late, and she's gone.

CHAPTER 4

It must be Finn's lucky day. Her first partner for speed acquaintance making is the cocky guy who said he liked power. He slouches opposite her, his face in full smirk mode.

She makes an effort, though. "Hey, I'm Finn."

"Weird name." He stares around the room, like there are ten thousand things more interesting than her.

Nope. Proven douche. She no longer curbs the sass. "In my experience, in polite society names are usually *exchanged*. I mean, I'd hate to put you out or anything. It must be hard to converse while honing this effortlessly casual thing you've got going on."

His gaze slides back to her.

She smiles sweetly. "It's just I know you boys find multi-tasking a bit tricky."

The corner of his lips turn up as his eyes narrow, dancing a line between bitter and amused.

Before he can reply, Gus yells from his makeshift table podium. "Okay, first pairs, it's time!" He rings a bell above his head. "Get to your questions!"

The volume in the room triples as Finn scans the list. "Okay, favourite subject at school?"

"None."

"You must be good at something to get in here."

"I didn't say I'm not good at anything. I just said I don't *like* anything." His gaze roams the room again. "The modern education system is a waste of time."

"Right, of course." She rolls her eyes and scans the list. "If you could live anywhere in the world, where would you live?"

"A giant loft in New York."

"Favourite film genre?"

"Anything with zombies. I dig realism." The bell rings for them to swap. He leans forward and plucks the paper out of her hand. "Okay, my turn."

She braces herself for the worst. Or worse, for the obvious.

"So, got a boyfriend, Finn?"

And there it is. "Somehow I don't think that's on the list."

"Do share, though."

She just stares at him, wondering how to play him.

"Or is it a girlfriend?" He looks incredibly pleased with himself.

"I have neither, actually. Now ask me a question from the list."

"It makes sense, I guess." He reclines in his seat, considering her. "You do seem kinda uptight to be getting any."

She sets her face at pleasant-neutral and waits for the next question.

Finally, he gives up. "Do you believe in a higher power?" he reads in a dull voice.

"But I don't even know your name," she says, all innocence. "And I'm way too uptight to talk about something as deep as my beliefs without knowing someone's name."

"Why do you want to know my name so bad? So you can scratch it into a tree under yours?"

"I want it so I can warn the other girls about you." She leans forward and smiles sweetly again. "Or the boys, of course."

He opens his mouth, but the bell clangs loudly, stopping him.

She gives him a smile and a wave. "Bye, now."

He slouches off to his next victim.

Next is a girl from her team. It's probably the first time she's ever spoken to Zaki without Zaki's best friend Hana there too. In fact, she's never seen them apart. Around school they're known as this totally inseparable, comically opposing duo. Zaki is small and buzzy, with wide, brown eyes and the voice and body of a little girl. Hana is all curves and round cheeks, with this mumsy, middle-aged thing going on. She's one of those girls who's talked like an adult since she was ten and moves around like she's always on a mission to go tell someone something important. They look nothing alike, but they think and do everything together. They wear matching friendship bracelets, eye shadow, and hijabs every single day, and in the five minutes Zaki talks a mile a

minute at her, Finn also learns that they volunteer at a cat shelter and worship Taylor Swift non-ironically together. A bff match made in heaven.

When the bell rings, Zaki smiles through her braces at her. “Hana and I both voted for you for school captain. You always seem like you’re nice to everyone. I know it’s not ‘cool’ to be nice, but...” She shrugs.

Finn just blinks at her for a moment. This girl is all kinds of sweet. “Thank you,” she stutters.

She’s still blushing when the girl leader sits down in front of her.

Her smile is tight. Guarded. “Hi. I’m Willa.”

“Hey, I’m Finn.” She smiles, but the moment feels loaded somehow. Then she remembers that they’re opponents. Of course it’s weird. They sit there, appraising each other as they wait. Finn’s distance reading of her last night proves to be just as true up close: Willa’s lovely but intense. Her mouth and eyes are languorously wide, but the thin press of her lips tells a different, sterner story.

The bell makes Finn jump. Flustered, she reads the first question off the list, an epically mundane one. “Which school do you go to?”

“Gandry Park.”

Well that explains the crazy-good posture. Gandry girls probably take classes in it.

“You?” Willa asks.

“Brunswick Hill.”

“I live near there.”

“Really? Then your parents must have *really* wanted you to go to Gandry.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are so many closer schools.”

“I’m on a scholarship.”

“Oh. Wow. So you’re crazy smart too.”

Willa shrugs, but her cheeks pink. “I don’t know. I work hard.” She looks down at her own list. “What’s your proudest academic achievement?”

“Um, I won a state essay competition last year.”

“What did you write about?”

“Why our politicians need to start believing in climate change, and fast.”

Willa pauses, considering her. “So, do you think you’re going to like this place?”

"Hey, that's not on the list."

She frowns and leans over the paper.

Wow, this girl is *so* serious. "I'm kidding," Finn says. "I really don't know what to expect yet. You?"

"Me either. I came so I could put it on uni applications. I *have* to do well."

"Well, I don't *have* to do well, but..." Finn tips her head in the direction of the idiot boy. By the expression on his latest partner's face, his conversation skills haven't improved. "I wouldn't mind doing better than him."

Willa follows her gaze. "Oh yes, him. I haven't had the pleasure of meeting the leader who *loves power*." She doesn't roll her eyes, but she's close.

"Oh, you're going to love him. I promise."

"I don't believe you for a second." Her eyes betray the smile she won't commit to. She opens her mouth to speak, but the bell stops her.

Finn flinches. "That guy is way too enthusiastic with that thing."

"He does seem to like it." Willa's smile is shy as she stands to leave. "It was nice to meet you."

"You too." Finn stares at her, surprised, as she strides away. Who knew that the girl who called out Gus for asking a stupid question in front of a roomful of people could do shy?

CHAPTER 5

Amy rubs her hands together. “Come on, Finn, get us something good.”

Finn reaches in and pulls out a card from the hat Gus is holding out.

“Good luck,” he says, sounding all solemn and ceremonious before moving down the line of leaders. When everyone has a card, he turns the hat upside down and spins it on his finger. “Okay, grab a map from the table, and go back to your groups. You’ve got five minutes to read over the cards before we explain the rules.”

They sit in a tight huddle in the corner. Finn scrutinises the card, feeling her stomach sink.

Hana tugs on her sleeve. “What does it say?”

“Something tells me this is not good,” Finn mutters.

“Oh God, what?” Amy leans in, trying to read over her shoulder.

“You are allotted no territory. You and your people are looking for a new place to settle. You have no land and thus no viable industry or income or—”

“What?” Jessie frowns. “I thought the point of this was we were all going to be given some territory?”

“Not us, apparently,” Brian says.

Hana flaps a hand at him to shut him up. “Keep going, Finn.”

“You must either seek refuge, find unclaimed land to live on, or find a way to gain land from other territories. You cannot camp in designated common areas. You cannot—”

“Camp?” Craig is wide-eyed. “Who said anything about camping?”

“I think it’s just metaphorical. We have cabins.” Zaki says nervously. “Right?”

“Well, if you’ll let Finn finish, maybe we’ll find out,” Amy tells her.

“Your people are predominantly skilled migrants and intellectuals who have been forced from their homes because of political beliefs that are in conflict with the current regime. You have fled to avoid persecution or imprisonment. You must attempt to create your lives here. You function as a democracy.”

Amy frowns. “So, basically, we’re asylum seekers?”

“I guess?”

Jessie rolls his eyes. “Great, because we all know how well *they’re* treated.”

“Oh, goodie.” Zaki rolls her eyes. “Being poor, overskilled, underpaid refugees. My parents already did this. Now I get a turn. Yay.”

“What else does it say?” Brian asks.

Finn turns the cards over a couple of times. “Nothing.”

Amy snatches the card out of Finn’s hand and reads it again.

Jessie nudges Finn. “Don’t worry. Maybe there’ll be other groups even worse off than us?”

Maybe. Finn looks around at the other groups in the hall, trying to gauge the mood. One group looks positively miserable. But they’re the same group that looked miserable last night, so it’s hard to tell if it’s specific misery. She looks around for the idiot boy, praying that his fate is worse than hers. He’s in the corner, leaning back on his elbows, chatting away to his group. She can’t tell if the look on his face is just his usual pleased-with-himself sneer or not. Willa and the Gandry girls are huddled together, composed and serious. But they always look like that.

Her fears are confirmed when Gus makes them all stand and read their cards. There’s a definite murmur of sympathy as she reads.

Gus nods. “Ah, our wildcard group. You guys will have to be extra inventive.”

“I thought getting a wildcard was supposed to be a good thing,” Craig says. “You know, it gets you into Wimbledon. Or wins Uno.”

When it’s her turn, Willa stands and reads her card in a steady voice. “You own territory one. You have the largest territory and population.” A few girls in her group give out little self-satisfied hoots. “Your workforce and economy are based on agriculture and cottage industry. You do not possess the industry to process the grain you grow. It is sold to Territory Three for processing and sold back to you. Your territory functions under a dictatorship.”

Finn's eyes widen. This stuff is going to be complex. It's lucky that Craig's already scribbling notes in his exercise book next to her.

Next up is the idiot boy, Drew. "You possess Territory Three, a monarchy. You have the smallest territory, which is very densely populated. It has a rich populace, with a booming industrial sector. Due to your small geographical size, you rely on other territories for nearly all your food imports and water." He turns to Willa. "Thanks for that, darl."

Willa just looks at Drew, her face completely impassive, and then looks away.

As the others read their cards, Jessie turns to Finn. "What are we going to do?"

Finn shakes her head. Because the only thing she knows right now is that she has somehow managed to draw her group the worst possible card in that hat.

CHAPTER 6

All kinds of outdoorsy stuff are being flung from the deep, dark supplies cupboard onto the floor in front of them. Dusty tents and extra sleeping bags and tarpaulins and things Finn doesn't even recognise join the growing pile. She looks uneasily at her group.

Zaki's eyes are bug-wide. "I've never camped in my life."

"I'm just going to put this out there. I hate this place," Amy says.

Hana nods fervently. "It's definitely not my favourite thing that ever happened so far in my life."

"When the brochure said there might be some camping, I thought they were talking about an overnight hike or something." Craig shakes his head. "Not being subject to actual exile."

Gus slaps his hands free of dust and smiles broadly at them. "Chins up, guys. You can have a lot of fun with this if you try. Remember, the game is all about using your initiative and thinking laterally. This card really gives you a chance to do that."

"Oh, I feel so much better now that I know this will help me grow as a person," Amy mutters. Finn elbows her.

Gus pays no attention. He probably gets this every time. Finn wonders how many schoolkids have been tortured like this before.

"You can come back and get this stuff when you've figured out where you're going to set up camp," he tells them. "And let your teacher know, because he has to camp with you."

The Hulk bounces in his runners. "This is going to be great. Give you city kids some fresh air and some survival skills."

This is the most enthusiastic Finn's ever seen him about anything. Even Chemistry. And he teaches it.

“I *have* survival skills,” Amy tells him. “I can get on any peak-hour tram or train, no matter how packed it is. *And* I can stay up for forty hours straight before exams and live to tell the tale.”

He chuckles. “Not quite what I was talking about, Amy.”

Amy just grunts.

“Suck it up, princess,” Brian tells her.

“I am *not* a princess.”

“You sound like one right now.”

“Well, your face is about to become much, much better acquainted with my fist if you don’t shut up.”

“Come on guys, enough fighting,” Finn tells them for what already feels like the millionth time. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 7

Amy stares at the house on the hill. “Look at it. It’s huge. Maybe not a mansion, but it’s at least *mansion-esque*.”

It’s the big brick house Finn saw yesterday morning.

“I *cannot* believe that place is part of the game territory.” Amy shakes her head. “And I cannot believe that turd guy and his friends get to stay in it.”

“While we freeze in tents.” Hana throws her apple core into some shrubs. A bird flies out, squawking. “This sucks.”

“I know, but maybe we should just focus on what we’re going to do.” Finn gazes at the map. The whole camp is divided up into sections, surrounded by differently coloured lines, outlining the territory each group owns. The game starts officially tomorrow, but tonight they have to move to their designated territories, an exercise designed to “enhance the experience of the game,” says Gus.

“Designed to torture,” says Amy.

Willa’s group is sleeping in the same cabins as last night, while another group stays in a bunch of older ones that remained when the camp upgraded. Some people are staying in rough huts in the bush area behind the scrub on the other side of the oval, while Drew and his gang have the huge house. Only Finn’s group is forced to camp.

“We need to worry about where we’re going to sleep tonight.”

“I say we kill turd boy and his friends and sleep in there.” Amy points at the house.

“Agreed.” Hana gives her a fist bump.

“I’m pretty sure murder’s not in the game rules, Ames,” Finn says.

Amy flops on her back and spreads her arms out across the grass. “I vote we do whatever is the fastest means of getting back into a building with plumbing.”

“Hear, hear!” Hana cheers.

“There are a lot of rules, actually,” Craig says, turning over the handout. “And a lot of homework for something called a *game*. We have to write every single thing up. Reports, analyses, proposals.”

Brian spins his apple on his fingertip. “Why can’t we just kick it old school and invade some territory. Colonise?”

“Yeah, let’s take someone down.” Amy rubs her hand together. “The idiot kid with the mansion.”

“The idiot kid whose nation has a military and a huge population?” Finn pats Amy’s leg. “Did you not listen this morning? We’re supposed to be a small population of mostly educated intelligentsia kicked out of our lands for opposing political views. What do you plan to scare them into submission with? We going to stab them with our degrees?”

“Now, there’s a point.” Jessie holds out half a sandwich to Finn.

She stares at it blankly.

“Eat up, fearless leader. You haven’t had any lunch.”

“No thanks.” Being responsible for all this is making her stomach churny. She looks around at the scattering of kids on the grass, peering at maps and reading handouts. No one looks as miserable as they do. Not even the misery kids.

“Besides, look how well that worked out,” Jessie says to Brian. “Places like Australia, Canada, America. Colonisers basically destroyed entire populations of people who already lived there already, remember? Even if we had the means, would we really want to be *that guy*?”

“Yeah, that guy kind of sucks.” A grin spreads across Craig’s face. “Did you know that in Tonga, where my dad’s from, they’re super proud because they’re the only Polynesian island nation that *wasn’t* colonised? He says it’s because warriors used to ride out in their boats and terrify explorers away before they could even get close to land.”

“Sound methodology.” Amy nods approvingly.

“And do you know what their tourist slogan is now?” He looks around at them, grinning.

“What?”

“The Friendly Islands.”

Hana fires off a delighted laugh. “Perfect.”

"I still say we try it," Brian says. "Mess with the mansion group and move in."

"I do not enjoy the fact that I agree with you," Amy tells him. "About the mansion part, anyway."

"Did you not just hear Finn?" Hana says. "We don't have the means to do that."

"We don't need resources. We just need brute strength," Brian retorts.

"Tell me, do you enjoy being a moron? Do you even understand this game? We don't actually go in and pummel them ourselves. How did you even get into this camp?"

He shrugs. "Basketball captain."

"Sport. Helpful."

"Yeah, shut it, ball boy," Amy adds. "Your jock status has no worth here."

"Well, if I'd known we'd be playing some Dungeons and Dragons crap, I wouldn't even be here."

"None of us would be, idiot." Hana screws up her sandwich wrapper and tosses it at his head.

"What's Dungeons and Dragons?" Zaki asks.

No one answers.

Finn sighs. "Sorry, Brian, I'm one of those boring, peace-loving types who doesn't like killing and pillaging. I think the only way we're going to get out of tents is by begging for asylum. Or we can suck it up, settle somewhere, and figure out a way to strengthen our resources and gain territory."

"All right. If we can't go for the mansion option, I'm for the first," Amy says. "We figure out what some group needs and fulfil it if they'll give us mattresses."

"I know what everyone wants." Brian grins. "We could become the prostitute nation."

Hana shakes her head. "It's official. You're a moron."

"But everyone wants sex, right?"

"I repeat, *moron*."

"Prude."

CHAPTER 8

The sun beats down on Finn's neck and shoulders as she leans over the map. *Again.* She's been staring at it all day. But no matter how long she stares, nothing changes. The rest of the group is lying around, chatting about anything but the game.

She nudges Jessie. He's picking apart a dandelion and staring into the middle distance. "So, where's the east fence line?" she asks. "Is it the creek?"

He shakes his head, dragging himself back to Earth, and leans in. His finger slowly traces the creek. "Nope, it's a bit beyond. See?"

"Thanks."

"I never thought those years in Boy Scouts would pay off, but apparently I can still read a map."

"Scouts? I didn't think they even existed anymore."

"I don't know about in the city, but in the backwaters of this fine nation, the Scout movement is alive and well."

"You're a country kid?"

"Used to be." He tosses the shredded flower away. "Until two years ago."

"Why'd you leave?"

"Good old-fashioned divorce."

"Oh." She gives him a sympathetic smile. "I'm really sorry."

"It is what it is."

"I think my parents might be headed that way," she says quietly. "Divorce, I mean."

"Really?"

"They fight all the time."

"Yep. That's how it starts."

She nods, not telling him that they fight because of her, because of what she did. That makes the feelings close in.

"You have a lot to look forward to. Highly recommend it. Five-star experience."

"Oh goodie." She returns to the map. "Okay, we seriously need to start looking for a place to camp."

"And then we have to figure out how to get out. I mean, I'm okay with the whole tent thing, former Boy Scout and all, but a few of these guys are going to riot after a few nights of sleeping rough."

"I know." She sighs and runs her finger over the large section of territory that encompasses the cabins. "Hey, Craig?" she calls out.

He's flat on his back on the grass, using his notebook as a sun visor. "Huh?"

"Who has the big bit of land, again?"

He pulls the notebook from his head and scans it. "That serious chick."

"The *serious chick's* name is Willa," she tells him.

She looks over at Willa and her group. All the girls in her group are *so* Gandry Girls High. Impeccably dressed, even for camp. Even tans and on-trend everything, from shoes to hats to sunglasses. They're a magazine spread waiting to happen. Except for Willa. No sunglasses, no sunhat, no fuss. Still, she's the most likely to grace a magazine spread of them all. Finn wonders if it bothers the other girls. They're all trying so hard to look as good as Willa just naturally does.

"But she's *so* serious. I've never seen her smile." Craig shakes his head. "Not once."

"Maybe she just doesn't smile at *you*, Craigus," Jessie says. "And I don't think Finn's taking umbrage with the serious part."

"Yeah, don't call girls 'chicks'," Hana says sleepily from somewhere under the tangle of sunglasses and scarf that is she and Zaki hiding from the sun.

"Don't call us girls, either," Zaki adds. "We're women."

"Women?" Hana elbows her. "You brought a stuffed monkey here to sleep with."

"Shut up."

"Who's Territory Three, again?" Finn asks.

"Jeez, lady. Chill," Brian says. "We'll find someone to take us in. It can't be that hard."

Finn flops back on the grass, giving up the impossible task of getting them to stay on topic. She shuts her eyes against the sun and takes in a deep, slow breath.

“Allow me to take this short break to regale you with a tale of great humiliation from my scouting days.” Jessie’s voice is close to her ear. “It’s a good one.”

She smiles. She gets the feeling she’s always going to be able to rely on Jessie to lighten the mood. “Go right ahead.”

CHAPTER 9

“Are you people even supposed to be on my grass?”

It’s Drew, the guy with the mouth, swaggering over from the big house. His group is from some rich, ancient, inner-east boys’ school that Finn’s mother talks about sometimes because she’s vice-principal of a rival school. These guys are all expensive haircuts, T-shirt logos, and self-satisfied smiles.

One of the Gandry girls lifts her sunglasses, followed by an eyebrow. “It’s not your grass.”

“Um, I believe it is.” He turns to Willa, his arms folded. “I’m thinking this territory is mine, Right, sweetheart?”

“Actually I’m thinking you don’t know how to read a map,” she says.

Finn catches Jessie’s eye and smiles.

“Is that so?” Drew points at one of his clones, who’s holding the map. “Well, my friend here says it’s our territory.”

“Then I stand corrected,” she says calmly. “Your friend doesn’t know how to read a map.”

Amy sits up. “Ooh, I *am* enjoying Ms Legs’ super-chill takedown method.” She taps her finger against her chin. “I shall call her method *ice sass*.”

“Come on, you guys.” Finn clambers to her feet. “We’d better go find some place to camp.”

“You all better get going, actually,” Drew says. “Unless you want to breach game rules.” He turns to her. “Is that what you want, *Finn*?” He says it in this familiar voice, like they’re old friends.

Finn pulls on her knapsack and sighs loudly. “Drew, buy a clue. Willa’s right. Either you guys can’t read a map, or you’re colour blind.” She holds the map up in front of him

and traces her index finger over the purple line surrounding the small patch of land around the brick palace that he and his friends now call home. “See this part here? That’s your territory, and...” she runs her finger around the black line containing the amenities and the football field and rec areas, including the lawn they are sitting on now, “*this* is common territory. Gus said no one can claim it or live on it.”

“Got it, genius?” Amy jabs a finger in his direction as she stalks past. “You owe us a geography lesson.”

Drew delivers a give-no-craps smile. “What do I care about a little patch of grass? You guys can have it. We’ve got *that*.” He points at the house.

For a second, Finn thinks she’s going to have to hold Amy back.

“Sucks for you homeless folk, doesn’t it?” he says. “Finding somewhere to exist in your sad, cold tents.”

“Oh, we’ll be fine,” Finn tells him much more confidently than she feels. “We’ll find somewhere. We can read a map.”

She catches Willa’s eye. They trade small smiles. “Come on, guys. Let’s do it.”

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BY EMILY O'BEIRNE

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