

November 1, 2015

My name is Allegra Complex. I am twenty-two years old. I am committed at the J. S. Greenberg Hospital for the Mentally Unstable. And I deserve to be here.

They told me to write in this journal. They seem to think that I should describe my condition. They think it will help me sort through my feelings. That it will give me a better idea where I stand, which will help me move forward. That sounded like bullshit to me. But at this point, I would try anything. Even bullshit.

I have Mental Acuity and Destructive Need for Engineering and Science Syndrome. MADNESS. Some shrink must have been really proud of himself after he came up with that. MADNESS means that my brain is constantly fixating on new ideas. Since I picked up this journal, I had an idea for a solar-powered car, an algorithm to convert between good and bad handwriting, and a genetic modification that would let me constantly replenish my pluripotent stem cells, so I could regrow lost limbs in a matter of weeks.

Damn. I shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have written my ideas down. Now, I can't stop thinking. I can't stop working on them. I'm thinking about three things at once, and it hurts, but I can't stop. And I don't want to stop. But I wish I wanted to stop.

When MADNESS first started cropping up, about twelve years ago, everyone thought it was great. MADs were lauded and incredible geniuses, and heroes in this new age of science and technology. People didn't even think MADNESS was a disease. They just noticed that random people were spontaneously reaching incredible levels of intelligence, especially in science and engineering.

MADs back then got cool codenames like Spawn and Oberon and Aegis. They were snapped up by government and business. And the greatest geniuses ever to be born were put to work solving the energy crisis, curing cancer, and hunting down terrorists.

Now, they're afraid of us. And they should be. We don't get codenames anymore. We get numbers. I am AC-1044-91330.

They told me to write about why I'm here. No. No, I can't do that. But... I can't stop thinking about it. Damndamndamndamndamn. Don't they know that? Don't they know I'm going to hurt someone? I didn't mean to. I just needed a way to change the DNA of the prokaryotes in my lab. I didn't know the virus would make it into the wild. And I was almost right. It was almost harmless. But... it wasn't harmless enough. And now I'm a murderer. And I can't stop thinking about it. I can't stop thinking about it...

And we're back! I'm cool, calm and collected. Totally. My mind is clear, I'm feeling fine, and I'm ready to write about my day.

Doctor Vendman came over to talk today. I like him. Most of the staff here, you can tell they're afraid of us. Whereas Vendman is different. If he is afraid of us, he at least has the courtesy to hide it.

He walked up to me. In my cell. No, my room. It isn't a cell. It's a very nice room. He walked up to me, with his notebook. He spoke to me in his psychoanalysis voice. "And how is Allegra Complex today?" I hate my name. It makes me sound like a mental illness. I suppose you could call that prophetic.

"I'm doing well. Focusing on my reading." Tolkien. No science in *Lord of the Rings*. Nothing for my brain to fixate on.

"That's wonderful news." He jotted something down. "Are you looking forward to the big move?" He did his best to smile..

"No, I'm not. I have family here in Boston. I don't know anybody in Poughkeepsie."

“Oh, that reminds me. They’re coming to visit you tomorrow.”

“All three?” My father hadn’t been able to make it last time.

“All three.”

I narrowed my eyes. “When did you find out about this?”

“I found out about it earlier today.”

“Interesting. And when did the asylum find out about this?”

“They scheduled the meeting six weeks ago. I’m sure you were notified.”

“I have an eidetic memory. If I were told, I would remember.” I sighed. No point in getting worked up about bureaucracy. “Well, I suppose it’s the last time I’ll see them for quite a while.”

“I’m sure they’ll still come to visit you once you’ve settled in in Poughkeepsie.” Right. The isolated small town where I couldn’t do any harm even if I did escape. They said they are bringing me there because that’s where the best doctors are. But I have a hard time believing the best doctors in the world show up in Poughkeepsie without someone telling them to.

I didn’t want to be cut off from my family. “If you let me have a phone... or a computer...”

“You know we can’t do that. Maybe one day, if you continue to improve.” Vendman gave me his best ‘I’m-pretending-to-believe-in-you’ smile.

“Other MADs are allowed lab time. They get to do science.”

Vendman sighed. “Allegra. We’ve gone through this. One of the conditions of your internment is that an impartial board determines whether you are fit to do research. They have said no, and you have exhausted your appeals. You have the right to appeal again in-”

“Two years, one-hundred-and-nineteen days, fourteen hours, and twenty-one minutes. And... you’re right. They’re right. It’s too dangerous.” I felt ashamed. I had tried to put my recovery at risk- put lives at risk- just so that I could indulge my own MADNESS.

“Exactly. So why don’t you focus your big brain on something else, like getting better?”

That was the wrong thing to say. The perfect sentence that encapsulated exactly how little he understood us. Looking back, he only appears more foolish, and more ignorant.

I've never focused my 'big brain' on anything. I've heard that some MADs can, but I never could. It was always one idea after another, each one interrupting the one before it. A steady stream of scientific questions clawing their way into my brain, too quickly for me to solve.

But that wasn't the worst part of what Dr. Vendman said. He thought that even if I could focus, I would focus on something other than getting better. He thought that some part of me likes being MAD. That I wanted this. That, somehow, being MAD is a choice I would happily make.

I tried to get back to the conversation. I tried not to focus on what he had said. I avoided thinking about how much I wished I could be normal. How I wished there was some way I could remove whatever it was that separated me from the rest of mankind.

Oh, no. Here it comes. The biggest problem, the most important idea, that every MAD thinks about every day. How can I get better? Is there a combination of drugs? Electricity? No, I'm going about it wrong. We first need to pinpoint where in the brain the MADNESS originates. Assuming it has a point source. But even if it is distributed... I'll get back to writing later. Right now, I need to think.

I shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have succumbed to my MADNESS. I should have taken a deep breath, counted to five thousand, and held it in. Because that always works.

I was pacing around the room, practically foaming at the mouth, when two orderlies came into the room to stop me. I didn't want to stop. They reminded me that there were things more important than obsessing about a science problem. They asked me to think about my family. That didn't work, so they sedated me. I hadn't needed to be sedated in forty-four days and three hours. I ruined my streak because of stupid Dr. Vendman. No, that's not true. I ruined my streak because of stupid me.

When I first woke up, my mind was clear, it was wonderful. I savored those few moments before the science returned. I rushed to read Tolkien. I finished that, and went on to my next fantasy book. I was on the third book when my mind started to cloud again with those horrible formulas and equations and diagrams and scientific questions that would be so interesting to investigate...

I played tetris for an hour today. I know, it's silly. A waste of time. But there aren't that many things I can do that are safe. They find that games are one of the best ways of taking our minds off science for as long as possible. Give us a computer full of addicting games, bolt it down so we can't try to take it apart, and make sure that it doesn't have access to the internet. Of course, it's only a matter of time before I start designing an artificial intelligence to play tetris. I suppose then they'll bring in another game.

I keep saying 'they'. I'm sure that says something really profound about my condition, and I'm sure Vendman could tell me what it is. Part of me knows exactly who 'they' are. 'They' are the staff of the J. S. Greenberg Hospital for the Mentally Unstable. Doctors Vendman, Curtis, and Josephson. Director Loomis. This orderly, that maid. But, no. 'They' reaches higher up the scale than that. 'They' includes the Bureau of Superscientific Affairs. 'They' includes the President, and Congress, and probably every single voter.

Ugh. Politics. I don't get much news here. Mostly silly human interest stories. But every now and then someone fills me in on the political landscape. I support Walsh, of course. He agrees with me on the only issue I cared about: MAD rights.

Unfortunately, the public doesn't. Nobody can give me any numbers (of course) but they say Walsh is losing in the polls. Bad news. We still don't know who the Republicans will nominate, of course, but three of the candidates would have killer MADs like me executed. Can I blame them? I don't know. I am dangerous. People claim I'm not, people who mean well. But they're wrong. I have killed people. I have killed innocent people.

Can I get better? I hope so, but I can see why the government wouldn't bank on it. In the twelve years since MADs started showing up, there have been no convincing rehabilitations.

It makes politics different. Before I was diagnosed, elections felt far away. Abstract. I might have preferred one candidate over the other, but at the end of the day, I knew I would get to live my life basically the same way no matter who won.

But now, the person who sits in the Oval Office can and will change my life. They might even end it. They could decide that to put me to work curing malaria (I have soooo many ideas), or decide to keep me locked up in J. S. Greenberg for the rest of my days, or decide to put me in the electric chair for six counts of murder.

Unless I get better.

November 2, 2015

Today, I saw the only three people in the world who still care about me. Jason Complex, my father. Mia Jiminez-Complex, my mother. And Gabriel Complex, my baby brother.

I used to have friends. Three years ago, I was a normal girl, enjoying her sophomore year of college. I had friends. Good friends, close friends. But none of them made an effort to stay in touch after I was revealed to be a MAD.

Back to my family. The people who did stick with me. I woke up at seven thirty-four. I was scheduled to see my family at noon. Allowing eight minutes for transport, that allowed me four hours and eighteen minutes to prepare. I got dressed in my finest hospital scrubs. I was allowed to request makeup. I would need to return it within ten minutes, however. And if there was something missing... it would not be good. I decided to put off any cosmetic adventures until closer the actual meeting.

I enjoyed a famous Greenberg Hospital breakfast of burnt toast and eggs that tasted like polyethylene. That got me thinking about the chemistry of cooking. I calmed down enough to organize my ideas. Maybe if I tried to explain this stuff it to the orderlies someone in the kitchen staff would actually implement it. Because I'm sure MAD cooking is a major priority here.

I compiled a list of possible conversation topics. I wouldn't see my family again for a long time. This meeting was important, and would only be thirty minutes long. I wasn't going to waste time on empty silences. Instead, we would be talking about such things as Lord of the Rings, Gabriel's college search, and the J. S. Greenberg Volleyball Tournament. Oh, and I would need to ask them about politics. At ten sixteen, Dr. Josephson knocked on my door. "Come in," I said. I didn't move to actually open the door. He was the one with the key.

Why was he here? Did my family arrive early? It seemed hard to believe that the meeting could be rescheduled on such short notice. What were other possible explanations?

“I’m going to need you to fill out some forms,” Josephson said.

Of course. Before any meetings, I needed to sign through some papers saying that I wasn't planning on taking my family hostage, and that I was mentally competent to carry out the meeting, and that I was eating my vegetables and flossing twice a day.

I took the papers, and scanned the contents. “No.”

“Excuse me?”

“No. You can’t do this. Not today.”

“I’m afraid the guidelines given to me were quite specific. You need to fill out this paperwork as soon as possible.”

I looked at the first item. ‘Describe, in as much detail as possible, how you structured the capsid so it would remain inert unless placed in a specific chemical equilibrium.’

“I don’t want to think about this,” I said, as I started to think about it.

“It is important for your treatment that-”

“How is your understanding a failed microbiology experiment important for my treatment?”

“I’m sorry, but my orders come from the Bureau of Superscientific Affairs. They are quite clear, You will not be allowed to see your family until these forms are satisfactorily completed.”

A thought struck me. “You want to understand my research because you think it could be useful! You think it could help people!”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that possibility.”

I needed to rein in my enthusiasm. I had killed human beings. That was settled. It was in the past. But now, there was just a glimmer of hope. Those people hadn’t died in vain. Back when I had done my research, I had had a thousand hypotheses as to where it might lead. It might be able to kill tumors. Or aid



in gene splicing. Remove genetic diseases from embryos by modifying the F-pathway in the endocytotic... No. No. I couldn't think that way. I needed to get better. I couldn't think about what I had done. The certainty that it would drive me mad outweighed any vague glimmers of hope that my work could be applied.

Josephson thrust the clipboard into my hand. "If you do not fill out these forms, it is unclear when you will next have visitors."

I finished in time to see my parents. My hand was all cramped up, and was covered in ink. My head was still swimming with ideas. Things I could have done differently. No. I needed to stop. I tried to clear my head, as I navigated the halls of J. S. Greenberg, an armed guard in tow. I focused on my surroundings. Nice, safe, and sterile. No, not sterile. Clean. Nobody dipped my surroundings in ethyl alcohol before putting them in a petri dish and using them to grow a modified MR-289 virus that-

"Hey." It was Perry Nugent, another MAD. A friend of mine. He was being escorted away from the meeting room. "You look stressed. Relax. You're about to see your family."

"Thanks," I called after him.

We were there. I was in a room with nobody but the three people who mattered most to me, a security guard, and Dr. Vendman.

"You know the drill," Vendman announced. "Allegra has been diagnosed with level four MADNESS. You three have taken the training course, so you are allowed to speak to her, provided you stay within the official conversational guidelines. If I think the conversation is becoming dangerous, I will put a stop to it." He smiled his psychiatrist smile. "But I'm sure it won't come to that."

I wasn't ready to have this conversation. I was still in a daze from filling out that form. Fortunately, my mother was on the ball.

"So, on our end, the big news on our end is that your father is back in the workforce."

“Oh,” I said. A part of my mind began to shift gear, moving away from the DNA of prokaryotes.

“Perhaps we shouldn’t talk about my job,” Dad said, anticipating a comment from Vendman. Dad was an engineer. Not a good conversation topic. “Gabriel has found quite a few colleges he likes.”

Gabriel had spent all of sophomore year actively not thinking about what college he would attend. But now that he was in eleventh grade, he had consented to visit a few schools, and he had a couple that he liked. “Gabe, tell your sister which colleges you liked.”

“Well, Cornell is great.”

“Glad to hear it,” I said. “What made it great?” Focus on the conversation, I told myself. Don’t think about science.

Gabe was at a stage in his life where just about every adult he met was asking him about colleges. He gave his perfunctory answer. “Cornell just had this really accepting environment.” I tried to coax more information out of him. He acted like the very existence of Cornell was a closely guarded secret, and did his best not to succumb to my interrogation techniques. Sometimes I suspect my little brother doesn’t enjoy discussing his college search.

But my father did. “Oh, and we visited some schools near DC.”

“We went there over a three-day weekend,” my mom explained.

“Tell your sister about it,” my father ordered.

“University of Maryland seemed nice,” Gabe said. “William and Mary was good. Georgetown was meh. Oh, and Columbia is off the list, of course.”

Last I had heard, Columbia had been his dream school. I shot Gabe a questioning look. “Oh. They didn’t tell you?” Gabe gave Vendman the eyeroll he had spent his entire teenage life perfecting.

“Columbia is screening all potential students for MADNESS. Not only is that unconstitutional, it is a blatantly bigoted policy.”

“The courts didn’t think it was unconstitutional,” my father cautioned.

“The courts are a bunch of madophobes. I, for one, will not attend a school that would treat my sister as a second class citizen.”

I was torn. I admired that my brother was standing up for something, but I didn’t want him giving up his dream school on my account.

“I still think Gabriel should apply,” my mother said.

My father nodded.

I could tell my brother was about to say something unwise. Even by his standards. I tore my brain away from DNA replication long enough to engineer a subject change. “So, we had our annual volleyball tournament last week.”

“Good,” my father said. “I was worried you wouldn’t get enough exercise here.”

“No, I practice three times a week. It’s fun.”

“Do they have a volleyball league in Poughkeepsie?” mom asked. The move is tomorrow.

“Do they have anything in Poughkeepsie?” Gabe added. Way to make me enthusiastic about my future home, Gabe.

“It’s not all bad,” I said. “They have a wax museum just two miles away from the facility.”

Gabe was not impressed. “First of all, wax museums are lame. Nobody likes wax museums. Second of all, perhaps because of this, the Poughkeepsie wax museum closed two months ago. Which, and I didn’t know this was possible, made it even more lame. So, no. I wouldn’t bank on that as your main source of entertainment.”

“What have you been doing for fun?” my dad asked.

“Reading *The Fellowship of the Ring*, for the most part.” I mentioned my other hobbies. There weren’t very many of them.

We discussed movies. Gabe was very enthusiastic about the new James Bond. “Easily one of the top seven films in the franchise.” My mom was enjoying her period pieces. Dad recommended a documentary about the rise and fall of the Persian Empire.

“This is stupid,” Gabe said. “Are we really going to sit here and make nice and not talk about what Allegra was doing.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.” I did have some hypotheses.

“Oh,” said Gabe. “Is that why your eyes are dilated? Is that why your cheeks were red when you came in?”

“Gabriel,” my father warned.

“It’s obvious. You were thinking about science before you came to see us. Frankly, I would be disappointed in you, except your hands are stained. Which means somebody decided to give you a pen.”

I wanted to avoid this conversation. “I- I have a pen for writing my journal.” I wondered if Gabe would catch my lie.

“Oh, yes. The journal. The latest fad in MAD. rehabilitation. But the Ortega Protocols say that all writing utensils given to level fours like yourself for rehabilitation purposes be pencils, so that they can control when you sharpen it, and monitor your writing. So, you were given a blue pen, and asked to do science.” Gabe turned around. “Explain that, Vendman.”

“That is a rather lengthy string of deductions.”

“Well, easy enough to test. Allegra, did-”

I judged that avoiding this conversation was no longer an option. “Josephson came in this morning. He asked me about my experiment, the one that killed people. I didn’t want to answer. I know I’m not supposed to think about those things.” Immediately after speaking, I began to doubt myself. I had just added some more fuel to the fire of Gabriel’s rage. But if he could use whatever psychology he read on the internet to stop them from doing that to me again, it might be worth it.

“Well,” my little brother smirked. “That might be remotely legal, if my sister were level three. I guess that means you’ll have to demote her. Vendman, get over here.” My brother read the orderly’s name tag. “Rafael, could you go print us out an R-233 form? Oh, and get Doctor Curtis. We’ll need his signature too.”

Vendman did come closer. “Gabriel. It is admirable that you have taken such an interest in your sister’s well-being. I fully encourage you to read more about Allegra’s condition. Perhaps even study it in college. But for now, Gabe, you don’t tell me how to do my job.”

“I know. Only politicians can do that.”

Well. It seemed like my brother had given up on Operation Secure-Allegra’s-Rights and moved into Operation Piss-Off-The-Guy-Who-Control’s-Allegra’s-Access-To-Television. I cautioned him.

“Gabriel, getting into this fight won’t help anyone.”

I felt like someone flipped a coin inside my brother’s brain. For a second, I waited to see how the coin would land. “Sorry, I just got a little frustrated is all,” he said, making a token effort to sound apologetic. I guess the coin came up in my favor.

Vendman glanced at his watch. “And on that note, let’s wrap this meeting up.”

There was quite a bit of hugging and kissing, and promising to come visit me in Poughkeepsie.

This was ten hours and four minutes ago. And since then, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about my fateful experiment. It looks like I’m going to spend my last night at J. S. Greenberg huddled up trying to control my thoughts without resorting to pharmaceuticals. I tried playing tetris, but couldn’t push those six casualties out of my mind. I tried reading a fantasy book, but kept thinking about DNA viruses. Even as I write in my journal, I can’t stop thinking about how I could have done things differently. Done them better. I could have added another layer to the protein sheaf. No, that’s crazy, but what if I changed things so it couldn’t penetrate the nuclear membrane? No. No. No!



November 3, 2015

I don't know what to do. My existence wasn't the epitome of comfort yesterday, but today, it was turned upside down. I am scared and confused and there is a reasonable chance I will not be alive in twenty-four hours. So why am I still keeping a diary? I don't know. Maybe I'm hoping if I write it all down, the events of today will make sense. Maybe I still believe that meticulously jotting down my thoughts will aid in my recovery. Maybe it's because I have nothing better to do.

Today was moving day. A nice four hour drive to Poughkeepsie. We were supposed to leave at eleven. This gave me plenty of time to pack up my belongings. My belongings, in this case, included this journal, a worn-down pencil (they said they would have a sharp one on the bus), a picture of my family, and three fantasy books. They were supposed to have a different dress code there, so I didn't bring any clothes besides the ones I was wearing.

I was led onto a small bus, and introduced to my traveling companions. There were three other MADs making the move with me. There was Daniel O'Connor. I knew him from the volleyball tournament. He seemed stable enough, at least on the outside. But I'd heard a rumor he tried to build a nuclear weapon. And he was bad at volleyball.

There was Perry Nugent. I had liked Perry. He was a few years older than me, and he had been MAD a lot longer. Even after spending a third of his life in Greenberg, he had always been upbeat. He had cheered me up a few times during some of my darker moments. I knew that the BSA allowed him to do limited research. He could handle doing full-blown science once every few weeks. He was a chemical engineer. Synthesizing better plastics, based on the one time we had talked about his work. And he was actually good at volleyball.

There was Norm Baxter. Look. I know that I released a genetically modified virus into a populated area. I know I'm no saint. But I also know that Norm Baxter is the devil. He had been committed a year before I was, so I saw it on the news. His thing was kidnapping people, and switching their body parts. He didn't have the time or interest to screen for things like blood type, or sew everything shut, so most of his victims died in agony. Actually, they all did. But not before providing some useful data.

Watching over our merry quartet of crazies was Doctor Vendman. Then there was a driver named Phil Roberts, and six security guards named Antonio Barrera, Louis D'Monica, Caldwell Jones, Rosie and Justin Beck, and Galloway Smith.

We filed onto the bus. Looking around, it was clear the bus had been designed by the Bureau of Superscientific affairs to allow us to be carefully monitored. I spotted two cameras, and the seats were arranged so that the guards would have a nice view of the prisoners at all times. The three MADs sat down. The guards sat down around us. I noticed their guns. Special BSA designs. Fingerprint reader in the trigger. If the authorized user held it, a green light would go on, and the gun would function as normal. If one of us MADs got our hands on it, it would be completely ineffective.

The drive started off uneventful. I talked with Perry and Daniel. Vendman watched us the way a shrink watches his patients. The guards watched us the way a security guard watches a particularly suspicious customer. Norm watched us the way a serial killer watches his potential victims.

"Read anything interesting lately?" I asked.

Perry looked at me. "I keep trying to read, but no. I can't focus on fiction. Lose my train of thought after a couple of sentences."



“Sorry. Must be rough. Daniel?”

“I am not especially interested in fiction.”

Wow. Okay. “So, think they have a volleyball league in Poughkeepsie?”

"I estimate the probability that they have a volleyball league at the Poughkeepsie Detention Center for Persons Affected by MADNESS at 0.2 percent," Daniel said.

"It is certainly higher than that," I countered. "There is easily a fifteen percent chance that they have some sort of competitive athletics. Given that, volleyball is one of the most likely options." We bickered for a few minutes, arguing about probabilities. Norm licked his lips. Did I mention that I found him creepy?

I'm stalling. That's what I'm doing. I'm writing about my conversations. Like that's what mattered today. Like today's most important event was me talking about whether they have a volleyball league in Poughkeepsie.

First we got a flat tire. That's when things started to go wrong. "There's a spare in the back," the driver said, after getting us off the road and going outside to take a look. "Justin, want to give me a hand?"

Justin started to stand up. He didn't get very far. There was a crash, the sound of gunfire, and, very soon, every person on that bus who wasn't suffering from MADNESS was suffering from five or six bullet holes. Justin managed to draw his gun before falling on the floor.

It took me 1.7 seconds to take in what had happened. To realize that Doctor Vendman was dead. To realize that the floor was a rapidly deepening pool of blood. I was handcuffed to the seat. I couldn't escape. I screamed for someone to save me. Perry screamed for a paramedic. Daniel screamed from fear. Norm cackled.

A robot materialized in front of the bus. It must have been cloaked. Invisible. Had it been invisible from all directions, or just from ours? And did any of that technology even exist?

The robot flew into the air, crashing through the already bullet-riddled windshield. “Norman Baxter, Allegra Complex, Perry Nugent, Daniel O’Connor. Your sentences have been commuted.” The robot began to shift. It wasn’t a robot at all. It was a suit of mechanized armor. With a human inside. Or, at least, almost a human.

I stared at him in horror. He didn’t have a mouth. A nose. His eyes were featureless black spheres, staring at everything and nothing, and there was a golden loop encircling his head, embedded in his flesh. I knew who this man was. I knew who it was who would inflict such changes upon himself.

Oberon wasn't the first MAD. He was the eighth. Fourth to be diagnosed in the United States. Everyone had thought he was amazing. His real identity is a government secret, even today, but he kept quite a public profile. Every month I'd read about him designing this or that space station for NASA. There were rumors that he was involved in everything from stealth planes to weather prediction to cybersecurity. Very well-founded rumors.

Of course, after Topeka, the government made all the MADs in their employ take a series of mental stability tests. Oberon didn't pass the tests. And he didn't take rejection well.

For almost a decade now, he has been a renegade. He had invented technology decades or centuries ahead of what the rest of the planet has. He had learned change his biology. He used his superhuman resources to express his very strong opinions about MAD rights.

He argued that MADs were smarter and better, and should reign supreme. He liked to prove how much smarter and better we were by killing people who disagreed with him. And he was standing in the broken wreckage of a bus, preparing to make a broken wreckage of my life.

Oberon walked up to us, snapping our handcuffs like they were toothpicks. Interesting. He must have replaced his muscles with mechanical servos. What was powering them?

I was afraid. Terrified of this scientific monster. Even as my brain struggled with the largest number of scientific problems I had ever seen rolled into one man, I buried myself in Perry's arms. "It's okay," he whispered. "It is going to be okay."

"It will indeed be okay," Oberon said. How did he talk? How did he breathe? "Your neurotypical oppressors are dead. Now spread your wings and create."

Nobody moved. Oberon looked at us with something that verged on curiosity. "You are incredibly unresponsive."

Perry was the first to speak. "W-what if we don't want to leave?"

"Why would you want to stay in a burned out bus? But regardless, I plan on blowing it up in about six minutes."

Clever. The authorities would think that the four MADs had perished along with the other eight passengers. There would be no manhunt.

"You know what I meant," he said. "We don't want to be unleashed into the world. We want to stay here. We want to get better."

"Better? What do you mean by better? Do you truly think those dead bodies were better than you? Primitive minds cowered in the dark for ten thousand years before one of them thought to make a lightbulb. Does that sound better? There are children starving in the mud, because the neurotypical mind can't figure out how to feed them. But we have no such restrictions. We could reach the stars. People like us, we have the power to change the world, our brains flying through theories the greatest neurotypical so-called-genius couldn't crawl through. So tell me. Who is better?"

I saw Perry's hand moving. He was reaching for the corpse of Caldwell Jones. Going for his pocket. He was reaching for a phone!

I was scared. I had just watched Oberon gun down eight people. His inhuman face made it impossible to read him, but his screaming robotic voice made it obvious that he was angry.

But Perry needed a distraction. I needed to be that distraction.

“It hurts,” I said. “It hurts when I think about three things at once. It hurts when you walk up to me, with your mechanical armor that must house an artificial intelligence, and how did you make it invisible? And how did you connect your mechanical eyes to your brain? And how do you function without breathing? And don’t answer that, it hurts.”

Oberon laughed. I wondered how he accomplished that. “It hurts because you fight it. It hurts because neurotypicals tell you to think slow, that using your mind is dangerous. But if you drop the inhibitions they have forced upon you, you will see that your beautiful, brilliant mind was meant to be used.”

I glanced at Perry. He was holding the phone.

But I wasn’t the only one watching him. The cyborg spoke with a calm menace. “Placing a call, Mr. Nugent?”

Perry couldn’t think of a convincing lie.

Oberon casually picked up a gun off a dead guard. “Interesting design. Looks to be the work of Thomas Markovitz. But I don’t mean to interrupt you, Perry. Tell me, why are you so afraid of your own magnificence that you would jeopardize not just your own freedom, but the freedom of these other three innocents?”

Perry knew what he was facing. “I- I won’t do it. I won’t call. I swear. Please don’t kill me.” His voice cracked.

Oberon pressed the barrel of the gun against Perry’s head. I held my breath. He shouldn’t be able to fire it. He didn’t have the right fingerprint.

“Don’t do it,” I screamed. “You can trust him. Don’t kill him!”

“It is a fairly simple matter to detect if someone is lying,” Oberon said, his fingers clenching around the gun. “Breathing rates, skin temperatures, perspiration. Unfortunately, Perry. You don’t pass that test. Goodbye.”

I stared into Perry’s eyes, just ten inches from my own. The gun’s green light lit up. Oberon fired. Perry was dead, and I was splattered in his blood. I cried, cradling his body. I didn’t pay attention to anything else. I didn’t pay attention to Oberon staring at me, boring into me with his mechanical eyes. I didn’t pay attention as Daniel quaked in fear, or as Norm pocketed a gun he couldn’t possibly use. I only paid attention once I heard a booming inhuman voice.

“I think the three of you should leave,” Oberon commanded. “The bus explodes in two minutes. You do not want to be onboard when that occurs.”

We didn't need to be told again. We grabbed our worldly possessions. We looked at the corpses. And we ran away from the bus. I could feel the heat of the flames at my back as the deafening explosion knocked me off my feet. I got up, and kept on running.

Somehow, we managed to stay together. So we were faced with a decision. "I say we go to New York," Norm suggested. "Plenty of people there."

"B-Boston is closer," Daniel replied.

"Thirty-four miles," I said. "That way."

"How do you know that?" Norm asked.

"How can Daniel take the cube root of a twenty digit number?"

"So it's settled," Daniel said hopefully. "We're going to Boston?"

"We are," I asserted. I thought through my mental map. It had been years since I had consciously done that. "There is a town four miles that way," I said, pointing away from the road. "The people

investigating the explosion will stick to the highway, they won't investigate," I struggled for the name of the town, "Spencer."

It is interesting that we chose to stick together. I didn't especially care for Daniel, and I actively disliked Norm. But the three of us had been locked away from the world for years, before being thrust into it. We weren't quite ready to fly solo.

So we walked. I tried to enjoy myself. I tried not to think of the technological terror that had torn me from my previous life. I tried not to think about how I was covered in my friend's blood.

I looked at my surroundings. It wasn't the rain-forest, but it was my first time walking through nature in years. We got to Spencer, and together we deduced how to pick pockets. We called a cab, and arrived in Boston.

Right now, I'm in a chair in Boston's cheapest flea-bag hotel. I'm staring at a digital clock even though I already know the time, because I'm obsessed figuring out how it works. Meanwhile a psychopath literally sharpens his knife next to me, and a man who wanted to sell a nuke is probably thinking about how to do it again. Part of me wants to finish what Perry started. To steal a phone and call the police on the three of us. We're dangerous. I'd rather spend the rest of my life in the most boring cell in Poughkeepsie than have another death on my hands.

Or should I visit my family? They must think I'm dead. But if I tell them I'm alive, they'll be criminals if they don't turn me in. They might be locked up just as long as me. I don't know what to do. I hope I know in the morning. You know, if Norm doesn't kill me first, and Oberon doesn't hunt me down.

November 4, 2015

When I woke up this morning, I had a lot to sort through. I needed to decide whether or not to tell my parents I was alive. Whether or not to tell the authorities I was alive. I needed to decide whether I could trust Daniel, and how much I should distrust Norm. I had a lot to sort through. But the one thing I couldn't stop thinking about was how Oberon's invisible armor must work. I tried to drown out the question, but I couldn't.

I remembered Oberon's advice, delivered one minute and twelve seconds before he shot Perry. To stop fighting my MADNESS. To embrace it.

I had never done that before. Even before being committed, I had still known what I was doing was dangerous. Never once had I tried to think. To *really* think. Never once had I attempted to use the full capacity of my superhuman brain. I was curious. What could I accomplish? Would I finally be able to answer the thousands of questions which I couldn't get out of my mind?

No.

I couldn't risk it. What if I abandoned my inhibitions and couldn't get them back? What if I stopped being me? What if I hurt someone? What if I hurt hundreds of people?

This was not the day to try to become one with my MADNESS. I needed to focus on the moment. I couldn't turn myself in. Because if I did, I would be turning in Norm and Daniel. And as unappreciative they would be, the person I really didn't want to disappoint was Oberon. I doubted he would take kindly to me undoing his hard work. And I couldn't risk him paying my family a visit to express his disapproval. He would make what happened to Perry seem like a walk in the park.

No. No, that was a silly rationalization. Oberon had bigger things to do than follow me around. This was my decision. And it was obvious. I knew I needed help. And even if I didn't need help. I needed

to be contained. I am dangerous. I am a menace. I picked up the phone, ready to dial nine-one-one and turn myself in.

I took a breath. My last true breath of freedom. And it reminded me of something. For the first time in years, I had a real choice. Not choosing what fantasy novel to read today and which to read tomorrow, but a real choice. Perhaps I should wait. Deliberate before making what could possibly be the most important decision of my life.

I gave myself a day to decide. Could I trust myself on this? Could I trust my mentally unstable brain to make the right choice? Could I trust the decision I would make in 24 hours? I... probably could.

So I'm a free woman. At least for the time being. I decided that my first order of business would be acquiring clothes. I was still wearing a hospital gown. And a splattering of blood, an explosion, a four mile walk through the woods, and twenty-six hours and fourteen minutes of continuous use hadn't exactly improved that gown's condition.

I glanced at my companions. Daniel seemed to be asleep. Norm seemed to be envisioning his next murder. Neither was paying me any notice.

I inventoried my possessions. I had the contents of my backpack: this journal, some light reading, a picture of my family, and some fantasy books. I had three wallets, courtesy of the good people of Spencer, New York. I had a total of sixty-three dollars twenty-two cents remaining. I left the hotel room, and hailed a cab. The driver gave me a strange look. "Late Halloween party," I explained. Best I could come up with on November fourth.

He drove me to a thrift shop. I was faced with a new conundrum: choosing my own clothes. Not something I had done recently. I closed my eyes, and remembered the clothes I had worn before going MAD. It was difficult to dredge up memories transcribed by a neurotypical brain. One small perk of MADNESS was that I no longer had to do that very often.



In the end, my preferences were pretty much irrelevant. The thrift shop wasn't exactly bursting with options for a five-foot-ten female in Boston in November.

I crossed the street and ate breakfast at McDonalds. Not gourmet, but I'd been eating hospital food for years. I visited the bathroom, and changed into my new wardrobe.

My next order of business would be visiting my family. During the cab ride, I thought about how one might design a car engine to run on butane. For the record, it's a bad idea.

I had the cab drop me off exactly a mile from where my parents and brother lived, in the suburb of Brookline.

I walked toward my parents' house. I had grown up in that neighborhood. In my years in confinement, I had frequently traversed it in my mind. It was somewhat jarring to see what had changed in two years. Every altered detail stuck out painfully. That tire swing was new. So was that fire hydrant. And what happened to the ugly fence between those two houses? Did the Cohen's and the Hurwitz's stop fighting? How dare they do so without informing me?

As I got closer to my family's house, I began to worry about a neighbor recognizing me. There were only about five neighbors who I expected would remember my face. Only two would likely be present at eleven o'clock on a Wednesday. As I turned onto my family's street, I glanced at their houses. Nobody home.

I rang what was once my doorbell. I waited. After eighty-three seconds, Gabe answered. He gave me the once over. He gave me the twice over. Just to be sure, he gave me the three times over. Then, he grinned.

He dragged me inside and closed the door. "Mom," he shouted. "Dad. Get down here." My parents trekked down the stairs. They were, as expected, surprised that I was alive. My mom rushed to hug me. My dad just stood there.

"What happened," Gabe asked. "You didn't break out. Somebody else must have sprung you. Another inmate? No. Oberon. Jackson Romero? Xingxi Yu?"

"Oberon."

"So Perry Nugent and Norm Baxter and Daniel O'Connor survived as well?"

"Norm and Daniel are still alive. Perry..." I didn't want to talk about it.

"What is your plan now?" he asked. "Are you going to stay with us?"

"No. Our parents are already secretly harboring one MAD. They shouldn't have to harbor two."

"What?"

Well. That was embarrassing. I thought that it was fairly obvious that Gabe was a MAD. I assumed the reason my family had never explicitly mentioned it to me was that they knew our talks were monitored. The same went for you, diary. I didn't tell you earlier because I was worried a psychologist might read this. Wouldn't that be an embarrassing way for my brother to be discovered? Speaking of embarrassing:

"Mom? Dad? You knew about this, right?" I couldn't have been the only one to figure it out.

"Are you saying..."

"Yes. I'm saying that Gabe is MAD."

"That's not possible," Gabe said. "I'm perfectly sane. I mean, no offense to you Allegra, but-"

"You know as well as I that there's a spectrum. A range of behaviors. With any luck, you won't move any further down it."

"You're wrong," Gabe said. "You've only been seeing me an hour a month. How could you know more about this than I do?"

"I'm not wrong," I said. *Was I wrong*, I thought. I reviewed what I knew of Gabe's behavior. No. No, I was right.

"How long have you known,? my mother asked.

"About two months. It started when you began quoting specific passages from the Ortega Protocols. They're about two thousand pages, last I heard. Not something you would have memorized. Unless your memory was enhanced."

"Okay. So maybe my memory is a little better. Maybe I've started taking my classes more seriously. That doesn't prove anything. I'm teenager. My personality changes all the time."

"What were you doing before I rang the doorbell? You were on the computer. Looking at footage of the wreckage, right. Trying to figure out how exactly I died?"

"How... how did you know?"

"Your pupils were dilated when you opened the door."

"No. This isn't possible. I don't do things like you. I'm not like you. I'm not." My little brother stormed away.

I didn't know what to say. I had just come back to life, and already I was bringing trouble. The last thing I wanted was to bring more. "I should leave. I should get out of here."

"What is your plan?" my dad asked.

"You should stay the night," my mother suggested.

"I can't. I'm a fugitive. If they track me here, you could go to prison. Gabe could be looked in a hospital for the rest of his life. But on top of that, I am dangerous. I could kill people. I could kill you. Earlier today I was thinking about synthesizing a plastic from an explosive mixture of hydrocarbons. What if I had done that here? What if I had blown up the house?"

"You would never do that," mom said.

“That’s the problem. I would. That’s what MADNESS is. It means that I do these things. I don’t think about the danger. I just do.” I tried not to scream. I tried not to let my voice crack. I tried to hold back my tears. Two out of three isn’t so bad. I wiped my eyes.

I was a menace. And as fun as it was for me to walk the streets and pretend to be normal, I was endangering lives. Every time I saw someone using their phone, I thought of all the the scientific advances that must have happened in the last two years. I had to fight the urge to grab it, read everything I could, and then try to make it in a basement. I couldn't fight that urge for my entire life. But I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in confinement. And yes, I knew it would be the rest of my life. No MAD had ever been rehabilitated. Maybe, just maybe, they would invent some drug, some surgery, but... no, I couldn't think about that. I had to stop thinking about that. Think about something normal! Talk to your parents!

"I... I just..."

"Spend the rest of the day here," my mom offered. "Spend the night. We haven't seen nearly enough of you these past two years. We'll decide what to do in the morning." I knew my presence presented a slight danger to my parents. But how could I refuse an offer like that?

"We never repainted your room," my dad said.

Twenty-eight months ago, I had covered the walls in calculations trying to determine the structure of a protein.

"I can sleep on the couch."

I spent the day talking to them. Really talking, not those rushed snippets I was allowed at J. S. Greenberg. We talked about trivial things. We talked about important things. We talked about Uncle Augustine and his new girlfriend. We talked about the Red Sox. We talked about the Patriots. We talked about Walsh's chance of actually winning the election. "Frankly, most people agree with him on the economy. But they think he's too soft on MADs. Especially after Clydesdale."

"Clydesdale?" I asked. "Never mind. I doubt I want to know."

"You probably don't," my dad agreed.

My mother cooked a tremendous dinner. "Cooking for four again," she giggled. I tried to help, but mom made me stop after she caught me trying to measure the viscosity of the eggs.

I spoke briefly with Gabe. He didn't want to talk, except to assure me that he wasn't MAD. "I want to make it clear. I don't think there is anything wrong with MADs. I just happen not to be one." I didn't have the heart to tell him he was wrong on both counts.

November 5, 2015

"Allegra, wake up."

It always takes me some time to get going in the morning, even after I am technically awake. But I sensed urgency in my mother's voice. "What is it?" I asked, not opening my eyes.

"Gabe. He's gone."

I shot out of bed. Or, more accurately, out of couch. "I assume he didn't leave a note or any other sort of indication of where he is." I took my dad's half second of silence as confirmation. "Well, the way I see it, the three possibilities, in decreasing order of likelihood, are running away, kidnapping, and out with friends."

My parents looked confused. "You're right. Out with friends seems improbable on a Thursday morning. Nobody has impromptu Wednesday night sleepovers."

I rushed up the stairs, my mind racing. Running away seemed entirely plausible. I really should have told him about his MADNESS more carefully. If this was my fault...

I burst into his room. It looked roughly as it should. About three days worth of clothing were on the floor, both computers were on, and his bed was disheveled. It was just missing an occupant.

"Gabe only owns one pair of shoes, right? One pair that he actually wears, I mean."

"I think so," mom asked. "Why-"

"Because I see a shoe sticking out from out of his bed. Unlikely he would have run away without it. That means we are looking at a kidnapping."

"I don't understand," my mom said. "Why would someone kidnap our Gabriel?"

"Gabe is MAD."

My parents didn't understand.

"A MAD is worth millions of dollars to the right buyer. Tech companies. Banks. Rogue states."

"Does that actually happen?"

"Of course it happens." I heard stories about it all the time in J.S. Greenberg.

"Presumably they found out last night. Which means that they were listening in on our conversation," Dad said.

Mom looked scared. "You think our house is bugged?"

I sighed. "Really? Someone breaks into our house and implants an invisibly small transmitting audio and video recorder with a battery life of weeks or months? No," I said, as I sat down in front of Gabe's laptop. "Probably some sort of spyware."

Anyone looking for MADs in the Boston area would have identified Gabe as a candidate. He was a former C student whose grades and test scores had gone through the roof. He read about MAD-related topics online. And, most importantly, he was my brother. Although nobody could predict the onset of MADNESS there was undoubtedly a genetic component.

I checked his internet usage over the past twenty-four hours. Online tests for MADNESS, forums for the recently diagnosed, and hundreds upon hundreds of Wikipedia articles, mostly on neurology. I looked at the timestamps. He wasn't spending more than forty or fifty seconds on any article. Typical for a MAD.

"Presumably, our kidnapper placed the spyware on the computer itself. At least, that's the most likely option. Let's see what we can see."

I cracked open the computer's anti-virus software. It was primitive, but a start. I began modifying it, specializing it. I ran into some issues. Some of the components of the program were unfamiliar to me. Likely innovations made in the last two years. Some quick perusing of the internet elucidated their purposes.

"Allegra," my mom cautioned. "Should you be doing this?"

"Is that what you're worried about?" I asked, not losing focus.

"Maybe you should be letting the police find Gabriel."

"You can call them if you like. But if the kidnapper left a residue on this computer, I want to know about it. Speaking of residue, does either of you know how to extract fingerprints?"

I walked my parents through the process, still focusing on the computer. "More importantly, see if you can get a DNA sample." If the computer thing failed, I could use the DNA to figure out the kidnapper's probable eye color, hair color, age, gender, ethnicity, and blood type. Looking at other parts of the cell, I could probably learn other things as well. There were only about four million people in the Boston area. I could probably write a program to read through their Facebook pages, eliminate most of them. Then, we look at hospital records and bank statements. Eh, those might be difficult to get.

"Alright," I directed. "We aren't going to be able to sequence this fellow's genome with what we have on hand." I explained to my father how he should go about procuring what I needed.

"But, that will cost hundreds of dollars," he said.

A trifling amount. "If it really matters, I'm sure I could produce the money for you somehow. But, honestly, who cares about a few hundred dollars? In twenty-four hours, Gabe might be in Iran. So if you could go out and get me some DNA polymerase, it would be most appreciated." I didn't mean to snap at my father. I considered apologizing, but he had already left the room.

"Bingo." I had it. Not bingo, I mean. I had identified what piece of software was sending out reports every time Gabe looked at a new webpage. Or every time I looked at a new webpage on his computer. I took four minutes to read through the code. It was elegant, a clever architecture. I suspected it was the work of another MAD, one with much more computer experience than myself. Another past victim of our kidnapper, I suspected, if not the kidnapper himself.

I didn't disable the program. On the contrary, I opened new tabs, raced across the web, giving the snitch program more to report. I chased down the little packets of data. It wasn't especially difficult.



Whoever had written this bug clearly hadn't tried to cover their tracks. If they had, I doubt the likes of me could have uncovered them.

The packets were being sent to a rather large house in the suburbs. Large enough to contain one or possibly several captives, as well as at least one rather well-to-do human trafficking enthusiast? Absolutely.

On a hunch, I opened up the program this kidnapper had used to spy on Gabe. Perhaps I could use it to spy on him. Of course, the kidnapper likely had some sort of artificial intelligence reading through the results, but I could monitor this guy by hand.

I walked over to my parents. They were botching the DNA sequencing. "Come on," I said. "It isn't that hard." I took over the operation, occasionally checking Gabe's laptop for news about his captors.

I felt my father's hand on my shoulder. "Allegra. You need to slow down."

"Slow down? It has been fourteen hours. The police aren't willing to help because they don't think MAD traffickers exist. So, why, exactly, should I not be using every resource at my disposal to get Gabe back as quickly as possible?"

"Look around you. The last time you got yourself into this much of a frenzy, six people died." I looked around the room. It was littered with lab equipment. I had started scavenging one of the computers for parts. To my father, it must have looked like a scene from two years ago. But it was completely different.

Two years ago, I had been holding myself back. I was trying my absolute hardest to be normal, easy-going, doesn't-do-dangerous-science-experiments Allegra. Today, I had no such inhibitions. I had embraced my MADNESS. I had used my mentally ill brain to its fullest extent. Oberon would be proud. And he would have understood. This is what I'm supposed to be. This is what I'm supposed to do. Create

everything I can, and use it for genuine good. Create everything I can, as fast as I can. No room for 'slowing down.'

"I will do this," I said. "I can do this. I know how. I know where he is located. 11236 Amsbury Way. It will take me twenty-four minutes to get there. There is only one conspirator, with eighty-five percent confidence, and I have his DNA. So I simply transmit the virus, and-"

"Did you say virus?"

"Yes. A specially designed one. Only capable of bonding to his genome. Well, possibly if he has some brothers-"

"You engineered another supervirus!" My father couldn't understand anything I did. But he did know that viruses were bad news. "Allegra, you realize that is the exact same thing that got you into so much trouble last time."

Honestly, I don't know whether I had realized that. If I had, it was only briefly. I hadn't been focused on the past. I hadn't been focused on the future. I don't know if I had even been focused on finding Gabe. I had been focusing on the science. On how good it felt to finally use what I had been given without fear of consequences. But the consequences exist, whether I fear them or not.

"I- I..."

"Allegra, put down the vial. Clean up this lab. You haven't eaten all day. Why don't we all calm down, you'll take some time to make sure you haven't made anything dangerous, and we can think about it in the morning."

Delaying difficult actions until the following morning. It was becoming a bit of a theme with my parents. But, for the first time today, I didn't have a better idea.

For the rest of the day, I was drained. More exhausted than I had been in my entire life. My mind was numb, to the point where I could walk right past the impromptu laboratory I had set up in Gabe's

room without thinking about science. I barely spoke, I just stared straight ahead. All the nagging voices in my mind, constantly drawing up blueprints and forcing me to think and make and design, they are quiet as I write this. My mind is clear, cleared without the use of drugs, without the use of surgery. But I'm writing this as a reminder that it wasn't worth it. That I am still dangerous. A reminder to never again let my mind roam free. Some day in the future I may think it necessary. I may think that letting myself loose is worth the risk. But it isn't. MADNESS is a curse, and I need to keep it buried, if not for my sake, then for the sake of every other human on Earth.

November 6, 2015

My brother's kidnapper was named Samuel R. Barton. He was twenty-six years old, which struck me as rather young for someone in the human trafficking business. And he had booked a flight on a charter plane, leaving at four o'clock today. At eleven eighteen, I rang his doorbell.

It took him forty-three seconds to answer.

"Hi," I said. "My name is Amy, and I want a moment of your time to talk about next year's elections." I thrust a Walsh pen into his hand, as well as a brochure, a pin, and a bumper sticker.

"Sorry," he said. "I have a flight leaving soon. I'm not sure I have time."

"Well, when election day rolls 'round, be sure to consider President Walsh. He's the only candidate who's not afraid to stand up to big business."

I circled around the block, then pulled out my brother's laptop. The pen and pin both had embedded cameras and microphones. And it appeared that he had kept the pen in his pocket, which meant, among other things, that I could monitor his heartbeat.

I ran my hand over the keyboard, all the knowledge in the world at my fingertips. That was something new. During the two years I had been isolated from the world, a MAD named Thomas Markovitz had developed some new sort of Wi-Fi broadcaster, and his company had provided free internet for the entire country. I wanted so much to find out the details. But I restrained myself.

I told myself that it could be useful. Finding this Barton guy had required quite a bit of computer work, who was to say whether I might need to know about our magic new Wi-Fi? But I knew a rationalization when I saw one.

The experience today and yesterday of wrestling with my MAD nature reminded me of something. Back when I was first diagnosed with MADNESS, I considered it to be a separate person who

had taken up residence in my head. I was the reasonable one. I wanted to chat with friends. My MADNESS was the crazy one. My MADNESS wanted to stay at home and take apart a television set and see if she could use it to make antimatter.

But I realized that was silly. Nobody ever says that they are committed to losing weight, only their appetite wants to eat junk food. What gave me the right to blame my weakness on some other entity inside of my brain?

My MADNESS is part of me. Or maybe not. Maybe it's a property of me. Is that the same thing? I don't know. What I do know is that as my personality changed, as every facet of my identity was altered, from my sense of humor to my favorite ice cream flavor, it became abundantly clear that my worst characteristic was wholly and entirely part of who I was.

I checked on my laptop. Barton's heart rate was up. There were only three things that could bring it to that level. And I would hear if he were working out or having sex.

I didn't know his phone number. At least, I wasn't sure. So, instead, I would become the first person in history to conduct hostage negotiations over Facebook chat.

*Getting sweaty, Sam?*

No, of course I wasn't using my actual account.

*who is this*

No reason for me to answer that truthfully.

*We had our eyes set on a certain MAD whom you abducted. We would like him returned.*

*y would i do that*

*Because you are sweating. Your heart is beating faster than it should. Your gums will likely start bleeding soon. You will continue to deteriorate until you give us what we want.*

Facebook actually has a policy that you need to use your real name. I suppose that means that technically what I did today violated some rules.

*wat do u want*

Didn't I already tell him that?

*You will release Gabriel Complex. We will send a courier to pick him up from your house.*

Gabe would recognize me, of course. I would need him to play along.

*You will inform him that the organization protecting him has sent an agent to retrieve him.*

*k*

A one-letter response? Really? I began to understand why Facebook chat was not the go-to avenue for most hostage negotiators.

*u got a cure 4 whatever poisobn you gave me*

Poisobn? I sincerely hoped he was typing on his phone. Otherwise, this would be inexcusable.

*Yes. We will send a second courier to deliver it after Gabriel Complex's wellness has been ascertained.*

*im just supposed to trust u?*

*You have no other option.*

*fine. when is ur guy coming*

*She will arrive at your residence in four minutes, on foot. We trust that Gabriel will be able to walk. If that is not the case, inform us now and we will make other arrangements*

*he can walk fine*

As I approached Barton's house, I considered the things that could go wrong.

Well, first of all, he might recognize me from when I canvassed his house earlier. I wasn't sure what problems could stem from that, but it would give him information, and information is power. Ideally, one of my parents would be fulfilling this role. But I didn't involve them because I didn't want to

put them at risk. I didn't want to drag them into this danger. No, that's a lie. It was because I knew they wouldn't approve of my plan.

There were other risks. Sam might have other MAD technology, which allowed him to neutralize the virus. Or he might be an irrational fool, who would get both of us killed in some failed attempt to bargain with an organization that didn't exist.

For the second time today, I rang Sam Barton's doorbell. He answered it. I didn't see Gabe. Sam punched me in the gut, knocking the wind out of me. He dragged me into his house, and slammed me against the wall.

"Allegra Complex. How nice of you to hand-deliver your pretty little brain."

I wish I had said something clever. 'Still bigger than yours' would have been nice, although perhaps a little silly since I was the one being beaten up. 'You really think I'm pretty' would have been cool. Or something classic, like 'you'll never get away with this'. Frankly, anything that wasn't stunned silence would have been an improvement.

Sam half-walked, half-dragged me into his basement. It was a laboratory after my wildest dreams. I could spend the rest of my life in a room like that. There was a nonzero chance that I *would* spend the rest of my life in a room like that.

"You will be sharing this first-rate research facility with a man named Daniel O'Connor. I believe you already know him."

"How did you get here?" I asked Daniel. I didn't actually care. I was focused entirely on the machines around me. But hopefully some story time could drag me away from my scientific reverie.

"Once I got out, I tried to reconnect with some old contacts. It didn't go very well."

"And if he had you, he knew I was alive. Was that why he went after Gabe?"

"Just a bonus," Sam said. "I didn't know about you until I asked my Daniel what was wrong with me. He thought it might have been your doing. So I did some searching, found a picture of you, and, sure enough, found you had paid a visit earlier today." Sam cleared his throat. "Do you have any cure for the virus you gave me?"

"No."

"Didn't think so. Well, that's unfortunate for both of us. But you're going to find away to keep me alive. I don't think I need to tell you this, but if I go, that means you go, your brother goes, and, if I have time, your parents go too."

I thought ahead. The virus would likely kill him by internal bleeding. It would burn out in, say five hours. I could keep Sam alive through that. It would just be a matter of incredible luck and skill. "I trust you have an extremely well-equipped medicine cupboard."

"I do. Oh, and one other thing." Sam picked some sort of tube off of a table. "This is going to hurt. Quite a bit, honestly." He grabbed my arm. "A cyanide capsule. It will release its payload at midnight, unless I type in the code to delay it twenty four hours. And, as I'm sure you've guessed, any attempt at tampering will cause it all to release." I felt a stabbing pain in my arm. "I'm hoping you know how to patch that up."

"Of course, although knowing and being able to do it one-handed are slightly different things."

I did it. I kept Sam alive. By ten o'clock at night, he was walking and talking again. "I must admit, I'm impressed," he said. "You know, a part of me wants to kill you. Yes, I know you're worth millions of dollars, but you tried to infect me with a genetically engineered virus." I wasn't sure how to respond to that. "Part of me wants to kill you. But most of me is just full of respect. Your kind- the things you do- you are amazing."



I rolled my eyes. "I'm flattered. Honestly, the respect you show for us really is gratifying. You know, most fans wouldn't bother to visit someone's home just to kidnap them, but your admiration just runs so deep."

"I know, I know. But honestly, I think I'm doing you a favor. If I hadn't come across you, you would have ended up back in prison within a year, probably with a pile of bodies to your name. But I can find you work where you will actually be useful. You could save thousands of lives. You can live a long and happy and productive life."

"Not many people would kidnap someone, sell them, and then expect a hand-written thank-you note and a cure for cancer."

"Hate me all you want. It doesn't change the fact that I'm right."

"If you really believe this is what I want, why do I have a cyanide capsule in my arm?"

"You don't know what you want," Sam said. "You don't realize it yet, but today was the best day of your life."

"Buddy, it isn't even cracking to top eight thousand."

November 7, 2015

This mess was all my fault. I was impetuous. I was foolish. I had thought that somehow, after being locked away for two years, I was ready to take on professional-tough guys who dealt with MADs for a living. I should have tried harder to call the police. Or the army. Or even goddamn Oberon.

As much as I hate this situation, as much as I hate Sam Barton, I have to admit that if he were a hotel, he would absolutely have a five-star rating. He had about a week's worth of clothing for me, in the right sizes, just lying around. "I bought it for someone else," he admitted. "She's working for the Chinese space agency now."

One thing that I didn't realize was how much work Sam had, just taking care of his captives. There were four of us, and we weren't allowed to leave our rooms, save on special occasions. So Sam brought us all three meals a day, of surprisingly high quality.

He walked in, tray in hand, the door locking behind him. It was quite an impressive lock. No keyhole, no passcode. He opened it by tapping it with his wallet. Likely some sort of ID card in there. He gave me what he must have thought was a cool, roguish smile. "I've been told my grilled cheese sandwiches are excellent," he said.

"I want to see my brother."

"Why?"

"Why do I want to see my brother? Because he shares about half my genome, and I've known him his entire life, and he's probably scared out of his mind by now."

Sam seemed to think for a moment. "You can talk to him for five minutes. But I will be in the room. After that, I have important business to attend to."

Sam unlocked the door, and led me through his home. I knew he had a gun in his right pocket, and that I wouldn't stand a chance against him even if he didn't have the gun, and that I had no chance of taking his gun, and that even if I did have his gun my odds were iffy. He was a muscular man who spent his time breaking into houses. My most intense physical workout had been volleyball practice three times a week.

Sam opened a door, again, by tapping his wallet against the locking mechanism. Could I take his wallet? I had spent a few hours deducing how to be a good pickpocket. But there is a difference between robbing some random pedestrian and stealing from the kidnapping bounty hunter who is already on his guard. Plus, at the end of the day, there was still a cyanide capsule in my arm.

Gabe turned around and saw me. "You know, I thought you might come to save me. I just sort of assumed you would be better at it."

I smiled. MAD or not, he was still Gabe. "Wouldn't have been necessary if you'd been a little less obvious with your late-night Googling, little brother." I hugged him. "How are you holding up?"

"Eh. He has a tablet with all of Wikipedia on it that he lets me use. I got bored, and started writing a chess algorithm, then I got bored of that before I could finish, and tried to write a program to get from one Wiki article to another in the fewest number of links. Got bored of that, and started thinking about what goes into a really cool skyscraper. Then I got bored of that, and was in the middle of writing this really cool computer virus when you showed up. Why, what have you done today?"

"I finished 'The Fellowship of the Ring!'."

"Really? That's it? No science or anything? You're not locked up any more Allegra. Well, you are locked up, but by someone who's totally fine with you using your gifts."

"If I used my 'gifts', you know what would happen? I would think of all the cool ways you could modify a bacterium to grow faster. Then, it would get released into the wild, and start infecting the local wildlife. That happened to someone I met in J.S. Greenberg. Or maybe I'd steer clear of biology, try to

make a nice set of flame-retardant clothes for firemen. But I'm busy, and can't focus, and I end up releasing toxic chemicals into the environment. Also happened to someone I know. Or maybe I try to modify a bacteriophage virus to change the genome in a specific bacterium. But I'm sloppy, and it also affects humans, and it kills six people. We aren't careful, Gabe. It's our nature to take things too fast. And when you take things too fast, you make mistakes, and people get hurt."

"But how do you do it?" Gabe asked. I thought I heard his voice cracking. "There's just so much to think about. How can you push it all out of your mind?"

"Well, it helps to find a really long-winded fantasy story." I did get caught up trying to figure out how to make a real-life dragon, but it was a scientific dead-end. Nothing that big could possibly fly and shoot fire. Energy constraints.

"Does it stop hurting? The constant flood of ideas, supplanting one another?"

"Sometimes."

Gabe nodded. "So," he said, "how did you find me?"

Diary, you're probably surprised that I'd be willing to answer that with the bounty hunter listening. But he already extracted all that information from me the previous day. He would probably have one of his other victims rectify the problem soon enough. "Sam was monitoring you with a piece of spyware on your computer. I just tracked it back here."

"Hmm. Okay, I think I see how that would work. And you wouldn't just have barged in without a plan. What, did you threaten to blow us all up with a bomb, and then Sam called your bluff?"

"No. Virus designed only to affect your kidnapper."

"Cool."

Sam's watch started beeping. "Let's move out, Allegra."

"Bye, Gabe. Don't worry, I'll get us out of here."

"Who knows. Maybe I'll get us out of here first."

"You'll be out of here soon enough," Sam said.

Sam came into my again, later, at six twenty-three. "I was thinking everyone could play a few hands of poker. You interested?"

I looked at the book I was reading. Robert Jordan. Classic high fantasy. It could wait.

Sam brought me down to some sort of living room. Gabe and Daniel were already there, along with a woman I didn't recognize. She was an adult, about my mother's age. She looked tired. Not tired like she had had a long day, but tired like she had had a long life. "Allegra, this is Joanne Peterson. Joanne, this is Allegra Complex."

"Hey," she said.

"Hi," I responded.

Sam sat down. "Texas Hold'em. You all know the rules, right?"

We nodded.

"Great. Five thousand dollar buy in." Sam handed us each a pile of chips.

"I don't have that kind of money on me," Gabe said. "I must have left my wallet at home when you abducted me."

Sam laughed. "Don't worry. I'll spot you the cash. And at the end of the night, I'll have all my money back."

"And if you don't?" Gabe asked. "Do we get twenty-five grand?"

"If you can beat me, and everyone else at this table, sure, you're entitled to it."

We played a few hands. I took stock of what I had observed. Daniel was too aggressive. Joanne was too conservative. Gabe was good, although he was always trying to count cards. "You know he shuffles them, right," Daniel asked.

"That does make it difficult," Gabe said. "Probably why you can't pull it off."

"I can calculate probabilities to eleven decimal places."

"Wow," Gabe said. "That's really impressive. I bet you'll never run out of chips in the eleventh decimal place."

We played some more. One time, there were three hearts on the table, and I had a heart in hand. I decided to bluff a flush. I threw a thousand dollars into the pot. Sam called me.

My heart pounded. What if he had an actual flush? Or, really, anything? My hand was garbage in actuality. Gabe threw his money in too.

Another round of betting. This time, it was Sam who threw money into the pot. I didn't know what to do, so I folded my hand. "I'll call you on that," Gabe said, looking at his captor with the calm assurance of a TV action hero. They showed their hands. Gabe had a triple, Sam had a two pair.

"You have a tell," he told me. "You do too, Sam. I mean, a real tell, in addition to the fake tell you're trying to use to throw me off. You aren't fooling anyone with that rubbing-between-your-eyes routine."

"Sam was rubbing between his eyes?" Joanne asked.

"Yup. Whenever he thinks someone is watching."

The game wore on. Daniel's stack of chips began to dwindle. "It's luck," he explained. "I calculated the probabilities. I am just unlucky."

"You know," Gabe said, "I once wrote an artificial intelligence to play this game. It was significantly more artificially intelligent than you."

"Gabe," I said. "No need to be rude."

He rolled his eyes. "Just making some innocent conversation."

We played some more. Daniel ran out of money. Joanne wasn't doing so well either. I was still in, although I had no illusions about my chances against the likes of Sam and Gabe.

We played some more. Joanne ran out too. "You know," Sam said. "I can't help but comment that Gabe has a rather larger insight into Allegra's psychology than I do."

"Yeah. Possibly because I don't trail her by a hundred IQ points."

Sam frowned a bit.

"Don't worry. I was just kidding. IQ isn't a valid measure of intelligence once you're as far up the scale as we are."

I love Gabe, and he's my brother. But he has been known to be a little obnoxious on occasion.

Anyways, the game wore on some more. Pretty soon, I was broke. "Ooh," Gabe commented. "This is it. The final showdown between good and evil. Oppressed and oppressor. The clever, brave hero, and his big stupid captor. Quick poll of the audience, who's rooting for me?"

I raised my hand. Joanne's hand followed. Daniel's stayed solidly down. "Cool. Sixty-six percent support. Actually, Daniel, could you calculate it out to eleven decimal places for me?"

Sam had fourteen thousand, two hundred dollars. Gabe had the remaining ten thousand eight hundred. Certainly not a decisive advantage, but still noticeable. They played some more, Sam slowly widening his lead. Eventually, Gabe thrust his entire pile of chips into the center. "All in," he said.

"That's eight thousand six hundred. If you match it, you'll have seventy-eight hundred in the bank." He thought for a second. "Actually, Daniel, could you do me a favor and check that to eleven decimal places?"

Sam matched Gabe. They showed their hands. Gabe had a straight. Sam had another two-pair.

"Hahahaha," Gabe said. "Muahahaha. Hahahaha. Cower before me, mortal."

"I think that constitutes excessive celebration," I said. "As well as an offensive stereotype."

They played some more. After his setback, Sam got back on the ball, to building up his stack, bit by bit. Pretty soon, they were even again. Eventually, Sam was in the lead. "Let's try this again," Gabe said. "Another all-in."

"Well, you can't get lucky twice," Sam said, matching my brother.

"You actually can," Daniel corrected. "I estimate the probability of his winning this hand at fifty-four point eight three six percent."

"First of all," Gabe said, "that wasn't even close to eleven digits. Second of all, if you could actually do that, you wouldn't have been the first person to go out."

Sam won that hand, thus winning him the game. "Sorry to disappoint ladies," Gabe said. "I'm sure I'll strike a greater blow against our hated captor next time. Heck, I'll take everyone out to dinner with my winnings."

One by one, we were escorted back to our quarters. I was the last to be moved. "Allegra," Sam asked, after I sat down on my bed, "I doubt you have the expertise in the field that I do, but who do you think would be interesting in purchasing your services? And how much do you imagine they would offer?"

"Probably a biotech company. Or maybe some country's military would want me to make biological weapons."

"I wouldn't force you to do that," Sam said, sitting down next to me. "I know you don't like to hurt people with your inventions."

"Wow, you are so sweet. And to answer your second question, I imagine that I could fetch around five or six million dollars."

"Well," Sam said, "that's what I was expecting too. So I'm wondering if you have any insight as to why XCom would offer me ten times that amount."

"The semiconductor manufacturer? No idea. Maybe Tom Markovitz wants to branch out. I mean, the whole company has been built on his inventions. Maybe he wants to bring in a new type of MAD. Although that wouldn't explain the interest in me, specifically."



"Well," Sam said. "I hope you have fun there. The handoff is in about a week. You'll be working in a town near San Francisco."

"Will Gabe be coming with me? I imagine a company like XCom would have an interest in a mad like him."

"No such luck," Sam said. "No such luck."

*This continues for a great many more pages, but I'm limited in how much I can submit.*