

SUPER GALAXY KNIGHTS **STARSTUFF STORIES**



Taskforce 

A black, unmarked, armored truck drove through a long, dark tunnel in a mountainside. At the end of the tunnel was a garage door, which opened automatically as the truck approached. The truck drove inside of a warehouse full of other trucks, and parked in an unoccupied space. Two men with collared black shirts, black denim pants, cyan shoes, and thick yellow gloves jumped out of the truck's cabin. They ran to the back door of the truck and opened it. The inside walls of the truck were completely frozen over. Sitting on the ice was a tall, muscular, teenage boy. His hands were handcuffed behind his back, and he had a blindfold over his eyes. The boy's skin was of a medium shade, and his hair was short, spiky, and blue. He wore a cotton white t-shirt, shining blue tights, and grey shoes.

The two men grabbed the boy's upper arms and pulled him out of the truck, careful not to let their bare skin touch either the boy or the nearby ice. The boy stood up as he landed on the ground. The men pulled the boy forward, and the three of them walked towards a door in the back of the room. As they walked, a trail of ice formed from the boy's footprints. The boy was led through a door in the back, then through a series of sectioned-off hallways. Each door they went through opened automatically as the three walked up to it. Eventually, they ended up in a hallway that led towards a single armored door. They arrived at the door, which opened automatically into a brightly-lit room. One man took off the boy's blindfold, and the other took off his handcuffs. They threw the boy into the room, then walked away as the door closed.

The boy blinked as his eyes adjusted to the light. The room was fairly large, with bright fluorescent lights on the ceiling. The walls and floor were plain white, and there was a grey set of bunk beds in the back of the room. Sitting in the top bunk was a tall, incredibly muscular, light-skinned man. The man was wearing a blue, cloud-patterned collared shirt, khaki shorts, and brown sandals. His hair was black and curly, as was the short beard that connected to it. The man looked up from the magazine he was reading (an issue of apple eaters monthly), and put down the apple he was eating before turning to look at the boy below.

“Hey kid,” said the man. “You all right?”

The boy looked up at the man, still blinking. “Huh?”

“Guess not. What's your name, kid?”

The boy stared at the man as he tried to collect himself.

“My name... is Galasi Foraste. What... what's your name?”

“You can call me Atalis. Atalis Mons. So, what're you in for?”

“In... for?”

“This is some kind of maximum security prison. What did you do for these guys to take you? For example, I got bagged for stealing a loaf of bread.”

“They locked you up in a maximum security prison for stealing one loaf of bread?!”

“Ok, so maybe it was more like an entire bakery's worth of bread.”

“Still, that's-”

“And it was more like an entire city's bakeries instead of just one.”

“That's a bit more-”

“Also by 'bakery' I mean 'bank' and by 'bread' I mean 'money'.”

“Oh. So, you're a bank robber.”

“A professional bank robber! I'm not just some hardened criminal though. I'm mainly in this business to provide for my little girl.”

Atalis took a small photograph out of his pocket. He stared at it and began to tear up.

“She's staying with my ex now, so I know she'll at least have a place to live,” said Atalis. “Still, I can't imagine what she must be going through without me. I never got a chance to say goodbye...”

A tear formed in Galasi's eyes. “How old is she?”

“Six. But she's still just a puppy in my eyes. Anyway, what did you do to get yourself snatched?”

Galasi's face fell. “It... it was an accident. I was supposed to watch my sister when we were at the park. But my hand slipped for just a second, and she ran out into the street, and I... I don't know what

happened next. I kept blacking out, and everything got covered in ice. Then the truck came and now... now I'm here.”

Atalis held out his hand as Galasi started to cry. “I'm sorry for your loss, kid. Just know that it wasn't-”

“Of course it was my fault!” shouted Galasi, the ground freezing around him. “It was my job to protect her! And now, I'll never get to see her again! I can't even imagine what my parents are thinking...”

“GALASI!” shouted Atalis as the frost approached his bed. Suddenly, the door opened. Galasi turned his head, and the frost stopped advancing. Standing at the door were two women and a man, all dressed in the same black uniforms as the men from earlier.

“Follow us,” said one of the women. Galasi slowly stood up and left the room with them. Atalis jumped from the top bunk and followed them out of the room, carefully avoiding the frozen floor.

The two were led down another complex series of hallways before arriving at a set of double doors. The escorts stood aside as the doors opened, motioning for Galasi and Atalis to head inside. The two stepped inside of the dark room. Inside there was an oval table, and a large screen at one end of the room. The table had six chairs around it, four of which were already filled by people who looked just as confused and worried as Galasi and Atalis. There was a small man with light skin, a shaved head, and a black uniform standing next to the screen, and he motioned towards the table.

“Please, sit down,” said the man. Galasi and Atalis did so, and sat in the two adjacent empty seats. The double doors closed, and the screen lit up. The screen was white, except for a black logo spelling out the letters “GRA”.

“Welcome,” said the small man, “To the Giduli Royal Army covert operations division.”

“Never heard of you,” said the teenage girl who was sitting to Galasi's left.

“Of course you haven't heard of us, silly girl,” said the man. “We wouldn't be very covert if you had. Now, to business. My name is Yana Perocusin- but you should all call me my codename, “Master”. I am the leader of this division's Taskforce G project- a project of which all of you are now a

part.”

There were murmurs around the table. Master clicked a button on a remote, and the screen advanced to a picture of another logo. This logo was blue, and in the shape of a stylized letter G.

“Let me explain,” said Yana. “Within the army, there are some jobs that nobody is willing to do- criminals that are too dangerous to catch. King Pikigu is also trying to reduce our reliance on the Galaxy Knights for stopping magical threats. This is where you all come in. You are the most dangerous magic-using criminals in the kingdom- or at least the ones that we got to before the Knights did. In other words, you're all disposable. Whenever a job is too dangerous for normal agents, we'll send in Taskforce G to get it done. Now, let's take a look at some of the people we have joining us today.”

Master clicked to advance the slide. This slide had a torso-up photograph of an olive-skinned woman with short, dark green hair, wearing a green apron. Galasi turned away from the screen, and noticed that this woman was sitting across from him. There was a series of bullet points next to the photograph, which Perocusin read aloud.

“Joli Greane. Female. Height: 182 cm. Weight: 73 kg. Blood Type: O-. Born April 22, 7085 – age 20. Found on Doveca Island. After being fired from her position at Tosu's Market, she killed her boss, followed serially by 21 of the higher-ups at the parent corporation.”

Another click. The picture on the next slide was of a man with long, silver hair, a square chin, and reddish-brown skin- wearing a grey striped suit. “Dide Vurst. Male. Height: 170 cm. Weight: 56 kg. Blood Type: A-. Born March 23, 7070 – age 35. Found outside Castle Pikigu. Hired by King Pikigu's brother, Lord Zonycu, to kill Prince Zebugu and Princess Zaxaty, along with their friends, Miraga, Ryno, and Qijevo. Dide decided against this, however, and just killed Zonycu before turning himself in. 30 confirmed kills during his career as a contract killer.”

Another click. “Atalis Mons. Male. Height: 203 cm. Weight: 100 kg. Blood Type: O+. Born July 15, 7079 – age 25. Found in Zoramo City. Robbed 1.7 billion Dojiti from banks around the city before being caught. Famously fought off 50 Galaxy Knights during one escape. 11 confirmed kills across all robberies.”

Another click. The man on screen was pale, with spiky, red hair. He was wearing no shirt, showing

off a number of burn marks and scars. “Damo Lisen. Male. Height: 162 cm. Weight: 54 kg. Blood Type: B+. Born September 3, 7083 – age 21. Found in Vepyxu City. An arsonist who torched 15 buildings over his career. 119 confirmed killed, with over one hundred more confirmed injured.”

Another click. The girl who spoke up earlier was on screen. She had dark skin, long brown hair shaved on one side, and a red plaid shirt. “Poly Henari. Female. Height: 193 cm. Weight: 82 kg. Blood Type: A+. Born June 17, 7089 – happy belated 16th birthday. Found in Fort Sikode. Killed her boyfriend after she caught him cheating, then became a hired assassin for others who were cheated on. 17 confirmed kills over the course of six months.”

Another click. Now, Galasi saw a picture of himself on screen- looking like it was taken by a CCTV camera in the middle of an icy apocalypse. “Galasi Foraste. Male. Height: 183 cm. Weight: 78 kg. Blood Type: A+. Born March 3, 7089 – age 16. Found in Vepyxu City. Killed 8 people and injured roughly 1200 in what seems to have been a random act of terror.”

Another click. Instead of a photograph, this slide had a painted portrait of Master.

“And that's me. Yana Perocusin. Height: 157 cm. Weight: 50 kg. Blood Type: O+. Born September 17, 7063 – age 41. Born and raised in Wasuze Village. I'm not a criminal, but I graduated at the top of my class in the GRA and have over 300 confirmed kills. So, uh, don't mess with me.”

Master pressed another button on his remote. The screen lifted up and the wall behind it spread apart, revealing a large hallway. Master beckoned, and the six criminals followed him. Lining the hallways were a series of doors, each with a large picture window next to them. Towards the back of the hallway were a pile of mannequins and targets attached to machinery.

“My superiors asked for a show of each of your strengths, so I figured I'd make a little game out of it. Each of these rooms has been set up based on our research into your abilities. You'll each have five minutes to complete a task. Whoever can complete their task the fastest will get a slice of chocolate cake for dessert with their dinner. There are cameras in each of the rooms, naturally, so my superiors can watch, although I and your new teammates will be watching through these windows. Any questions?”

“Finally, he asks that!” said Joli. “My question is- what if we don't want to join your taskforce?”

“Oh, naturally, you can opt out,” said Master. “This is an optional criminal rehabilitation program. Of course, if you choose to decline, you'll have to stand trial and face punishment for your crimes in the justice system- and I'm guessing you don't want to do that. So, first off is Dide. Mr. Vurst, if you will...”

Master motioned towards the nearest door. Reluctantly, Dide stepped inside. The lights in the room turned on, revealing a staff lying next to the door, a large timer on one wall with “05:00” displayed on it, three vents in the side of another wall, and ten mannequins scattered throughout the room. Dide picked up the staff, and looked out the window at Master. Master nodded, and pressed a button.

The timer began to count down from 5 minutes, and some sort of clear liquid poured out of the vents. Dide put one of his bare feet forward. Suddenly, blue bubbles sprouted out of his soles and palms, as if he had glued small candies onto them. Dide ran forward, stepping through the thin layer of liquid on the ground as if it were dry ground. He spun his staff, knocking off the heads of two of the mannequins. Dide had now arrived at the wall, but he didn't stop running. Instead, he walked up the wall, then turned to the side and ran forward. Running on the wall, Dide held out his staff and took out three more mannequins. He turned left and ran onto the ceiling. From this vantage point, he decapitated four more mannequins. He ran towards the final two dummies. Once he was close enough, his bubbles retracted. Dide jumped from the ceiling to the floor, landing on the two mannequins, their heads popping off as they hit the ground. The timer stopped. 2 minutes 12 seconds remaining. Dide took a deep breath, threw the staff to the side, and walked out the door.

“Excellent showing, Mr. Vurst,” said Master, as he led everyone to a door across the hall. “Next up is Atalis.”

Atalis squeezed through the door in front of them. His room also had a timer on one wall, similarly displaying “05:00”, and 10 mannequins scattered throughout. However, instead of vents, this room had a fist-sized hole in the back wall. Master held the remote up to his mouth and pressed a button. “Be ready, Miss Dify,” said Master.

The timer's countdown began. Immediately, a rainbow colored beam shot out of the hole. Atalis held up his right arm to the beam. The magic went up that arm, around his shoulders, and shot away from his left arm. Atalis aimed the beam at the mannequins, blasting them into pieces as he did. Once he hit all the mannequins he could reach, Atalis began to walk around the room, making sure to keep

his right arm to the beam's source. Finally, the last mannequin was destroyed, and the magic from the hole stopped. 3 minutes 4 seconds on the clock. Atalis walked back out of the door, grinning. The seven continued down the hallway, and Master motioned to the next door.

“Your go, Miss Greane,” said Master. Joli stepped into her room. There were no special openings on the wall in her room- just 10 mannequins and a timer. Next to the door were some assorted household objects- a phone receiver, a chair, a piece of lined paper, and a basketball.

The timer began once Joli picked up the paper. Three green protrusions grew out of the paper, as if something was taking root on the other side. Joli flicked the paper, and three carrots shot out towards one of the mannequins, one carrot sticking in the head and the other two in the chest. Joli ran towards that mannequin and pulled two of the carrots out, the third falling away with the mannequin's head. She held one carrot in each hand, and vines grew out of the ends until they were tied together. Joli ran towards one of the mannequins, swinging her carrots like nunchucks. She decapitated the dummy, breaking one of the carrots in the process. Joli threw the nunchucks to the side while running at a pair of mannequins. She crumpled up the paper and threw it in the air. Suddenly, the paper turned into a large pumpkin, falling on both mannequins, crushing them. Joli looked at the timer nervously, and ran towards another mannequin. She punched it, creating a green protrusion in its chest and sending it flying towards the remaining five mannequins. As soon as the dummy landed in the middle of his comrades, vines sprouted from its chest, laden with pea pods. The vines wrapped around the remaining mannequins, pulling them into the source forcefully, and ripping all their heads off in the process. The timer ended at 2 minutes 58 seconds. Joli sighed, clearly upset, and walked back outside. The crew stepped across the hall once again, arriving at the next door.

“Next up- Poly Henari,” said Master. Poly walked into her room. The lights went up, and it was clear there was something different about this challenge. The window overlooked an entire running track, around which the mannequins were scattered. There were stairs leading to the door, and a large sledgehammer and battleaxe at the bottom of the stairs. Instead of being built into one of the walls, the timer was set up on a platform in the middle of the field, once again with the time “05:00”.

Poly stood behind the two weapons and pointed forward, as the timer began to count down. A translucent blue ox formed behind her and ran forward. The ox's form was smoke-like at first, but it became solid once it passed the set of weapons. As the ox ran, it left behind a trail of glowing railroad tracks. Instead of being stationary, however, the train tracks seemed to move with the beast, matching

its speed. Similarly, as soon as the train tracks appeared under them, Poly and the weapons moved forward, following the ox. The ox turned to go through one of the mannequins, knocking it into the air. As the dummy flew overhead, Poly picked up the sledgehammer with both hands, and smashed it into pieces. The ox ran into another mannequin, and Poly repeated this process. She put the hammer on the railroad tracks behind her and picked up the axe as the ox ran towards a group of three dummies. Poly jumped onto the ox's back and squatted there. Instead of ramming into the mannequins, the blue ox swerved to go around them, and Poly took off all three of their heads with one sweep of her axe. She stood up on the ox, and threw the battleaxe at another trio of mannequins, knocking them to pieces. She jumped off the ox and ran over to the sledgehammer, which was still following on the moving tracks. Poly's ox drove its way through the two remaining dummies as she swung the sledgehammer. The mannequins were destroyed and the timer stopped- 3 minutes 40 seconds left. Poly smiled as both the ox and its train tracks faded away. She stepped out of the room and stuck out her tongue at a now saddened Atalis. The gang walked to the next room over, avoiding the mannequins and targets laying in the middle of the hallway.

“Ok, so Poly's in the lead now,” said Master. “Now, let's see what Damo can do!” Damo entered the room, and the lights turned on. This room was back to the normal size seen in the earlier challenges- however, the mannequins in this room were made from wood rather than plastic. There was an assortment of objects by the door- a bicycle horn, a snare drum with two drumsticks on top, and a referee's whistle.

The timer started counting down once Damo stepped past the objects. He touched his two index fingers together, and pulled away. As the fingers moved apart, a purple thread was formed in between them, sticking the two together. He grabbed the thread with his right hand, and continued to pull it out of his left index finger. Once he had a few feet of thread, he pressed the exposed end against the ground before letting go with his right hand. Damo walked in a big circle around all the mannequins. As soon as the thread touched the ground, it seemed to stick there. Once Damo reached the thread's starting point again, he stopped. He pressed his left thumb and index finger together, and the end of the thread dropped away. Damo caught the end with his right hand before placing it on top of the thread's start- fusing the thread into a continuous loop. Damo looked back at the objects next to the door, shook his head, and walked into the middle of his string-circle. He pulled a small tape player out of his pockets and placed it on the ground. Damo pressed play on the device. “The Military Can Go To Heck” by Electric Zebra began to play. Damo turned up the volume knob, to the point where even the ears of the

people outside the room were hurting.

“What's he doing?!” said Master nervously, hands to his ears. “He isn't supposed to have anything this loud!”

Damo stepped out of the circle, and cupped his right hand in front of him. A small detonator switch materialized in his hand. He pressed the red button on the top. The music faded away- and as it faded out, sparks appeared in the encircled area. The area these embers appeared in stretched from the floor to the ceiling- with the area nearest to the tape player filling the fastest. Soon these embers turned into flames, and then into a pure blinding light- with the room getting quieter as the fire got brighter. Even the onlookers outside could feel the heat from this pillar. Once all the sound in the circle was gone, the flames winked out of existence- it was all over. The thread was gone, as were all the mannequins and the tape player. The only evidence of the circle remaining was a pool of what looked like lava, where the heat had melted the stone floor. The timer stopped at 4 minutes 1 second. Damo walked out and stared at Master with a smirk.

“I'll ignore that for now...” said Yana, walking across the hallway to the final room. The others followed, stepping over the equipment in their way.

“Sorry about the mess, folks,” said Master. “We were planning on having another criminal in place of Galasi, but she was a bit... remote, and Mr. Foraste fell into our lap, so to speak.”

Galasi took a closer look at the equipment. The targets were on a track that seemed as if they would move back and forth. Most of the mannequins were free-standing, but a few were lined up on a small metal staircase. Galasi turned away and entered the room in front of him. The room was dark and refrigerated. Sitting in a holder on a table, spaced about one foot apart, were six ice cream cones. Master caught the door before it closed.

“Oh, one last thing,” said Master. “Your challenge is a bit different than the others. Instead of counting down from 5 minutes, the timer will count up from zero. If you can beat the current leader's time- 4 minutes and 1 second- without a single liquid drop of ice cream touching the table, you win. Understand?”

Hands shaking, Galasi nodded. The door closed, and a group of red lights came on in the ceiling. The temperature of the room immediately increased- making it feel like a hot summer's day. The timer

began its count up. Galasi held his right hand towards the ice cream cone just right of center.

“All right,” thought Galasi. *“I can do this. I just need to cycle between the ice cream cones as soon as the cold wears off.”*

A focused blast of mist shot out of Galasi's hand, shooting through the cone before hitting the back wall. The blast flash-froze the ice cream, along with the rest of the ice cream cones on the table. The table was also frozen, as were the walls, door, floor, ceiling, window, timer, and heat lamps. All the glass in the room, including the timer, shattered. Galasi looked down at his hand in shock. The group stared at him, mouths agape.

“Well... I guess those will stay frozen for at least four minutes,” said Master. “Congratulations, Mr. Foraste! You win the slice of cake!”

The others grumbled. Galasi continued to stare at his hand. The group followed Master through another door at the end of the hall, and Galasi followed them once he finally got his bearings. The group was led into a large room with a table to one side. The table had a metal briefcase on it, locked with a combination. Master motioned towards the wall across from the table, and the group lined up against the wall. Master opened the briefcase and pulled out six necklaces, each with the blue Taskforce G symbol on the end.

“As of now,” said Master. “You are all officially part of Taskforce G. You will receive these badges, to be worn at all times, and unique codenames.”

The group looked around as Master walked up to Dide, handing him a necklace.

“Your codename will be Not-Slip.”

Dide Vurst nodded, and put on the badge. Next up was Joli Greane.

“Your codename is Greengrocer.”

Joli grinned and accepted her badge. Next, Master walked to Atalis.

“You will be called Globe Carrier.”

Atalis Mons took the necklace, tossed it up, and caught it around his neck. Next in line was Damo Lisen.

“Your codename will be Silent But Deadly.”

Damo snatched the badge away from Master before he finished talking. Laughing, Damo shoved the necklace over his head. Next up was Poly.

“Your codename is Cattle Driver.”

With her expression unchanging, Poly Henari put her badge on. Last in the lineup was Galasi Foraste.

“You will be called Chill Bro.”

Galasi lifted an eyebrow in disbelief.

“Look, we had two hours to come up with it. Just take the stupid badge.”

Galasi took the badge from Master and put it on.

“Start getting used to referring to each other with your codenames,” said Master. “It's bad form to get caught on a mission using your real names. Additionally, while you are now government agents, you are also still criminals. Because of this, we have embedded a magical poison into your badges. If any of you step out of line, I just have to press a button on my remote, and the poison will be released.”

“WHAT?!” said Not-Slip, completely losing his cool demeanor. “Forget this! I'm out!”

Not-Slip grabbed his necklace and began to pull it back over his head. Before it got past his nose, however, Not-Slip gagged, loosened his grip on the necklace, and fell face-down on the floor. Master pulled the remote out from behind his back, still holding Not-Slip's button down. Dide Vurst was dead.

“Well, if there are no more objections, it's time for dinner. I won't be joining you, but I can see all your actions on the base's security cameras- so don't think you're safe from the poison. Well, have a good meal!”

Four security guards walked in through the exit of this room. The gang followed them down an

intricate series of hallways, until they ended up in a cafeteria. The eatery had over two dozen tables, but was vacant save for more security guards and a few food servers. The five criminals took trays of food, which each entailed a meat-like substance, small baked potatoes, steamed vegetables, and a hot cup of coffee. Chill Bro, as promised, was given a small plate with a piece of chocolate cake on it at the end of the line. They took utensils from a station, then sat down around a round table in the center of the room. Greengrocer picked up her meat-like substance with her fork.

“Hey, does anyone want my meat-like substance?” asked Greengrocer.

“I’ll take it,” said Cattle Driver. “I’m starving. Why don’t you want it? You on a diet or something?”

“Please, I don’t need to diet,” said Greengrocer, tossing the food across the table to Cattle Driver. “I just don’t eat meat. I’m a vegetarian, actually.”

“Oh?” said Cattle Driver, catching the food with her fork. “Religious reasons?”

“Ethical, actually. Meat is murder. If you support the meat industry, you’re supporting murder.”

Cattle Driver took a bite of her potatoes. “But didn’t *you* murder people?”

“So did you. So did everyone else at this table.”

“Yes, but we’re all eating meat, like normal murderers.”

Greengrocer shook her head. “Just forget it. There’s no point debating with someone who has no moral compass.”

“You know, if I punched you in the face, you’d probably end up in the hospital.”

“It don’t matter what you do,” chimed in Silent But Deadly. “She’s gonna die eventually anyway. We all came from ashes, and to ashes we shall return.”

“Geez, lighten up a bit, will you?” said Globe Carrier. “We’re all friends here, right guys?”

Everyone grumbled.

“So, speaking of murders,” said Globe Carrier. “Chill Bro actually hasn't murdered anyone. He killed all those people completely accidentally. Isn't that right, Chill Bro?”

Everyone turned and stared at Chill Bro.

“Uhh... well... yeah.”

The others gasped.

“So you were just taken here with no trial, and you didn't even murder anyone?” asked Greengrocer. “That's horrible! Does your family know where you are? What are you going to do if you get ordered to kill someone?”

“I don't know what's going on with my family. No idea what I'm going to do if I have to kill somebody. I guess I'll just avoid it as long as possible?”

“Avoid it?” said Cattle Driver. “So, 'Bro', you think you're better than us? You think we're all psychopaths or something, just because you're completely blameless?”

“Leave him alone-” started Greengrocer.

“No, all those deaths are my fault!” shouted Chill Bro. Tears appeared in his eyes, and the chair he sat on began to freeze over. “It was my job to watch my sister. If I had just been more careful, maybe I... she...”

“Hey, are you going to eat that?” asked Globe Carrier, pointing towards Chill Bro's cake.

“Huh?” said Chill Bro, his eyes opening. Droplets of melting ice began to appear on his chair. “I... I was planning to. Why, want a piece?”

“Sure!” said Globe Carrier. Chill Bro cleaned his plastic fork on his napkin, cut off a slice of cake, and flung it across the table. Globe Carrier caught the cake piece in his mouth and bit down, shattering it instantly. Undeterred, the giant man swallowed the cake shards with a pained expression. Suddenly, his lips began to turn blue. With a shocked expression, Globe Carrier took a large swig of his coffee, and his mouth returned to its normal color.

The three group members who weren't involved in this exchange burst into laughter. Chill Bro's face went sullen. The group calmed down.

“Look, kid,” said Cattle Driver, “It's perfectly natural to have little control over your powers early on. When I first got my powers, I was overeager for my first client to show up at my house. I was so hungry with anticipation, I broke the wall into my parents' room!”

“Kid?!” said Chill Bro indignantly. “According to those slides earlier, I'm three months older than you.”

“You know, if I punched you in the face, you'd probably end up in the hospital.”

“Sure, but so would you.”

The group laughed again, and continued to laugh and talk into the night. Late that night, Chill Bro lay awake in his bunk, listening to the sound of Globe Carrier's snores. Smiling for the first time since getting his powers, Chill Bro drifted to sleep, excited for the time he would spend with his new friends.

The fluorescent lights shined down on the Taskforce the next morning as they re-entered the briefing room. Master was already there, with another slideshow ready to play.

“How was everyone's rest?” said Master. The others grumbled. “Great! Today, we'll start preparing for your first mission.”

Master clicked a button. A picture of a large city showed up on-screen. Dozens of buildings lined the image- although eerily, the streets were empty.

“Cunoze City,” said Master. “The city takes up the entirety of Greater Cunoze Island. 24 square mile land area, 19 mile perimeter. Officially, the population is only 1,000, but that only includes people who are legally living at an actual address. According to our research, the population is more along the lines of 100,000- mainly composed of the city's criminal underworld. Thousands of residents of Cunoze City are killed by gang violence every year. Worst of all, the gangs keep the rent dirt cheap, attracting the kingdom's most vulnerable citizens, and using their families to feed the vicious cycle. It's considered too dangerous for even the military to visit. Your first mission will involve this city.”

The criminals turned to each other- some with shock in their eyes, others with excitement. “We cannot disclose your exact mission at this time- but we can start preparations. This first exercise will pit two teams of three against each other in a simulated urban environment. There will be a small stuffed bear in the middle of this simulated city. The first team to get the bear back to their entrance will be declared the winners- and EACH member will get a slice of cake with their meal. Greengrocer, you will be in a booth, running the comms for and monitoring the vital signs of your teammates – Chill Bro and Silent But Deadly.”

Greengrocer nodded, then looked at Chill Bro, who was also nodding, and Silent But Deadly, who was grinning.

“I planned on having a sixth person here, but I suppose we'll have to make do with what we have. Globe Carrier, Cattle Driver- I will be your support in the booth.”

Globe Carrier and Cattle Driver looked at each other with a combination of curiosity and fear. Two doors opened in the back of the room. Two security guards came in through one of the doors.

“Greengrocer, Chill Bro, and Silent But Deadly, go through that hallway to your entrance. You will have 15 minutes to make your preparations before the training starts. Globe Carrier, Cattle Driver, follow me.”

Master, Cattle Driver, and Globe Carrier went through the door that had no security guards. The remaining three went through the other hallway, following the guards. Chill Bro, Greengrocer, and Silent But Deadly arrived in front of a garage door with a red light above it. There was a small table with three earpieces on them. A staircase led to the side, presumably to the booth. The three took the earpieces and put them in. Greengrocer began to speak, and Chill Bro could hear her in his ear.

“Now, I can only create seeds and the like in my hands, but I have a higher range when it comes to making my plants grow. So here...”

Greengrocer created a large, flat seed and a green pea, before giving them to Chill Bro. She then gave a light brown seed and a round, black seed to a reluctant Silent But Deadly.

“Chill Bro, you have a pumpkin seed and a pea. SBD, you have a carrot seed and a cabbage seed. I don't know if I get cameras or not, but regardless, shout out when you need me to grow one of my

seeds and I'll do it.”

“Understood!” said Chill Bro.

“Sure, yeah,” said Silent But Deadly.

Greengrocer went up the stairs. A horn sounded, the garage door opened, and the light above it turned green. The doorway led into a warehouse- easily 2 miles across. The two couldn't see how deep the warehouse went, as their view was obscured by a forest of nearly life-size skyscrapers.

“SBD, go around the room and set up a perimeter with your ability,” said Greengrocer. “Chill Bro, head towards the middle, and be ready to freeze yourself and the bear once things pop off.”

Chill Bro rushed in, leaving a trail of frost wherever he stepped. He looked back for a moment, seeing Silent But Deadly pull the fuse out of his finger and place it on the ground. Chill Bro turned back around, and continued to run into the city center. Soon, the stuffed bear was in sight. Chill Bro attempted to stop running, but slipped on his own ice and fell. He stood up to the sound of Greengrocer giggling, and Silent But Deadly panting.

“SBD, what's going on?” said Greengrocer, calming down from Chill Bro's slapstick adventure. “The screens say you're running low on magic energy.”

“Three miles...” panted SBD. “I can't... I ain't strong enough...”

“Ok then, change of plan. Retract your string back in, and just encircle the center area, starting... let's say a third of a mile from the target. Chill Bro, any sign of the others?”

“No, not yet...” said Chill Bro. He looked around for Cattle Driver's railroad tracks, hoping to be able to discern the enemy team's position. Soon, he noticed the sound of a timpani, beating rhythmically. It was quiet at first, but slowly became louder, as if the instrument was approaching him. Suddenly, a hole appeared in the building across from Chill Bro. Through the rubble ran Cattle Driver's blue ox. The timpani now banged clear as day. Chill Bro jumped out of the way before the ox reached him, noting that the beast seemed to be much larger and faster than it was during Cattle Driver's demonstration. The ox passed, and Chill Bro saw both Cattle Driver and Globe Carrier riding on the railroad tracks. Cattle Driver was carrying a large sledgehammer in one hand and a battleaxe in

another. Globe Carrier stood in a battle stance, ready to redirect any magic aimed towards him. Both had bulging muscles, and blue electrical sparks arcing around them. Floating above each of their heads was a timpani, which was the source of the sound. Behind the drum floated a ghostly head, and two ghostly hands. The head was wearing a horned helmet, and the hands were each holding a mallet. Each time a mallet struck one of the timpani, a blue spark was released, and fell down to the fighter below. Chill Bro realized immediately that these drums must be Master's magic ability- or at least some part of it.

Steam blew out of the ox's nostrils as it turned to head back towards Chill Bro. Chill Bro avoided the spectral animal and ran to the train tracks, a good distance behind where the two enemies were standing. He almost tripped getting on to the rails, but was soon moving along with them. Once he got his footing, he ran along the tracks, towards Globe Carrier. Chill Bro shot out a blast of frost at his giant opponent. Globe Carrier caught the frost on the back of his left hand. He arced the ice attack around his shoulders, and shot it away from his right hand towards one of the buildings. Globe Carrier turned back around just as Chill Bro punched him in the stomach. Immediately Globe Carrier's flesh froze and shattered, the pieces falling onto the tracks. Globe Carrier winced, despite there being very little pain.

Suddenly, the spectral drummers changed their rhythm to a funkier style. The sparks created on each hit were yellow instead of blue, and the electric arcs around the two targets changed accordingly. The ox decreased in size, slowing down in the process, and both fighters' muscle definition returned to their normal levels. The hole in Globe Carrier's stomach grew new flesh, filling until it was just like new. Once Globe Carrier was healed, the drummers switched back to their original beat. The sparks returned to their blue color, the team's muscles were bulked up, and the ox was once again powered up.

Globe Carrier grabbed Chill Bro and threw him backwards over his head. Chill Bro landed on both his and the ox's back. Cattle Driver dropped the axe and raised the hammer, ready to bash her opponent. Chill Bro stood up and took a step backwards, dodging the hammer. He took a seed out of his pocket and threw it forward.

“PUMPKIN!” shouted Chill Bro. The seed flew forward and landed on Cattle Driver's head, where it shattered.

“Chill Bro,” said Greengrocer, “If you froze my seeds, then so help me-”

“Hey losers!” shouted Silent But Deadly. Cattle Driver, Globe Carrier, and Chill Bro looked up to see SBD standing on top of a building. He was carrying the bear in one hand, and his detonator in the other. “Come and get it!”

Cattle Driver angrily threw her sledgehammer to the side. The blue ox abruptly turned, heading towards the building that SBD was standing on. It smashed into the building's corner, causing the entire bottom floor to crumble apart. Silent But Deadly dropped the bear from the shock, and it fell towards Chill Bro and Cattle Driver. Once he had regained his footing somewhat, SBD jumped to the side, and clicked his detonator down.

“Bon Voyage!” shouted SBD. The sound of the crumbling building began to fade as the temperature rose. The drummers stopped playing. Cattle Driver's ox disappeared, and she looked up at the falling building in fear. Chill Bro grabbed the bear, then tackled Cattle Driver to the ground. He pointed his right hand to the side, creating a wall of ice. The wall arced above the two and became covered in snow, blocking the rubble and the sounds of its collisions. A silent fire blazed around Chill Bro and Cattle Driver as they hid beneath the slowly melting ice shield. The heat being generated by the two breaths and heartbeats was mostly counteracted by the cold radiating off of Chill Bro. A few seconds later, the fire ended. The ice was completely gone, leaving only a somewhat damp Chill Bro, holding a damp stuffed bear and lying on top of a damp Cattle Driver.

“You... saved me,” said Cattle Driver.

The two locked eyes. Chill Bro had never really looked at them before, or noticed how much they sparkled. Greengrocer said something in Chill Bro's ear, but he payed her no mind. Instead, his attention turned to Cattle Driver's lips. Were they always that full? It was almost as if they were pulling him in...

“GALASI FORASTE, I HAVE A SCREEN WITH YOUR HEART RATE ON IT!”

Chill Bro looked up at the sound of Greengrocer shouting. “Hm?” he said. Cattle Driver put a hand to Chill Bro's face, and he looked back down to her.

“You know, 'Bro” said Cattle Driver, “Whenever I've looked at a snowman, I've never thooaaaaAAAAGH!!!”

Cattle Driver suddenly shoved Chill Bro off of her and stood up. Cattle Driver stared at her frozen right hand, which was quickly spreading to become a frozen right arm.

“I’m sorry!” shouted Chill Bro. “I didn’t mean-”

“Oh, shut up!” retorted Cattle Driver, tears now in her eyes. She punched one of the still-standing walls, and her frozen arm shattered. “I don’t know why I ever trusted you!”

Cattle Driver ran off as her timpani started to beat once more. Chill Bro stood there, stunned. Suddenly, an air horn went off. Chill Bro looked to the side and noticed the stuffed bear was no longer there- someone must have taken it when he was distracted with Cattle Driver. His suspicions were confirmed when Master’s voice came in through his ear.

“Congratulations to Globe Carrier for completing the mission!” said Master. “Now, will all participants please return to the briefing room.”

Chill Bro walked out of the warehouse, and back down the hallway he came from into the meeting room. He was the last one there. Cattle Driver’s arm had completely regenerated. There were two guards at the door.

“Everyone, congratulations on a successful training session. I’m sure you all learned something. Globe Carrier, Cattle Driver, Greengrocer- you can head to lunch.”

The three left the room with the guards as Master turned to the other two.

“Chill Bro, Silent But Deadly, you’ll have to do some solo training before I can let you go. There are still some... kinks we have to work out in your abilities. Follow me.”

Master left the room. Chill Bro and SBD followed him. They walked through another series of hallways, and stopped next to a door.

“Silent But Deadly, wait in here,” said Master. “Your training will be explained in just a minute.”

SBD entered the door. Master and Chill Bro continued a short distance down the hallway before arriving at another door. Master motioned to the door, and Chill Bro stepped inside. The room inside was fairly large. The floor was normal on each end of the room, but a bed of flaming hot coals spanned

the width in the middle. Dozens of strange disk-like devices with blinking red lights hung on strings from the ceiling. A checkered flag stood on the floor across the room from Chill Bro.

“Your power,” said Master through Chill Bro's earpiece, “Is of the type that's most easily used in a large area of effect. With months of training people with abilities like yours can learn to control their magic more precisely. We don't have months. Your task is to retrieve the flag at the other side of the room and bring it back to the entrance door. You will have lunch once you've completed this task. Begin!”

Chill Bro walked towards the coals, focusing on making frost come out of his feet. He reached his hand forward as he took his first step onto the flames. Just then, a hanging device near his hand started to beep. A wave of pressurized air shot out of the device, blasting Chill Bro's right index and little fingers clean off. Chill Bro yelped and jumped backwards, then stared at his bleeding hand.

“Oh, I forgot to mention,” said Master. “Those are cold-sensing mines. If something below 0° Celsius passes within 10 feet of one of those devices, it'll send out a concussive blast, powerful enough to sever limbs at point blank. They also recharge after a few seconds of cool-down, so you shouldn't bother triggering them from a distance. Don't worry, you'll be healed of your injuries at the end of the task... assuming there's anything left to heal.”

Chill Bro looked up at his severed fingers, which were burning in the coals.

“This guy is insane!” thought Chill Bro. *“He uses metric and imperial units in the same sentence, AND he thinks I can complete this challenge without dying?”*

Chill Bro held his left hand out in front of him.

“Somehow, I was able to focus my cold into solid ice to block the rubble and the fire. I was also panicking then, so shouldn't I have been in less control than normal? Maybe it's a difference in emotional state. I've been spending all this time thinking about how I failed to protect my sister... maybe instead, I should think about how to protect myself and others more effectively!”

Chill Bro stared at his left hand, thinking about staying safe from future injuries. A layer of blue ice began to form around his skin. Soon, Chill Bro was covered in this ice armor. He ran towards the flag at the other side of the room. The coals froze beneath his feet. The mines shot out pressurized air

as he passed them, blasting off pieces of Chill Bro's armor. As soon as the ice was blasted away, however, replacement armor formed, keeping Chill Bro protected. Soon, he had brought the flag back to the entrance. Chill Bro walked outside, where Master was waiting. The armor fell away, and the flag was thrown to the ground.

“Congratulations!” said Master. “That's not quite how I expected you to beat that, but you got the job done. Here...”

Master pointed a glowing hand towards Chill Bro. A rhythmic pounding grew louder in Chill Bro's head- almost as if his eardrums were being struck directly. Within seconds, Chill Bro's fingers had grown back completely. The drumming faded away.

“Feel free to head to lunch now. You didn't take as long as expected, so I'm sure your teammates are still there. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to check on Mr. Deadly.”

Master opened the door to SBD's room and walked inside. Walking past, Chill Bro caught a glimpse of an incredibly large room with a spiral pattern on the floor. Every few feet on the spiral were marked with a black marking, with larger markings once every couple hundred smaller markings. Chill Bro heard the sound of wheezing coming from inside the room.

“Very nice improvement!” said Master. “You're well past the 18 mile mark. I think you can stop there- we may be missing a few buildings, but we should be able to cover the majority of the city with that thread.”

“I have... to admit, Master,” said Silent But Deadly, panting, “I hadn't pegged you... as the mass murder type. Still... it's a creative way to get rid of... the gang problem.”

“Me? A mass murderer? Nonsense,” said Master with a smirk. “I'm not the one pulling the trigger.”

“Fair 'nough. So... when do I set off?”

“I'll get a helicopter ready. Retract your fuse and meet me upstairs in 10 minutes.”

“Gotcha. Let's light this candle!”

Chill Bro's eyes opened wide. He broke into a mad dash for the cafeteria. He arrived at the doors and slammed them open.

“So I said to him, that's no Boston Terrier- that's my wife!”

“Wait, but aren't you divorced?”

“What's a 'Boston'?”

“Ugh, you guys just don't- oh hey, it's Chill Bro!”

Cattle Driver and Greengrocer turned around to see Chill Bro standing in the doorway.

“Oh hi Chill Bro.” said Greengrocer. “Solo training go well?”

“Yes, but that's not important right now,” said Chill Bro. “I just overheard Master talking with SBD. They're going to set fire to all of Cunoze City!”

Globe Carrier immediately stood up. “We have to stop them!”

“Hold up there, tiger,” said Cattle Driver to Globe Carrier. She turned to Chill Bro. “We're talking about Cunoze City here, right? The one filled with murdering gangsters?”

“Well, yeah,” said Chill Bro. “But there are a thousand innocent people living there!”

“Sucks to be them!”

“No, he's right, CD,” said Greengrocer, standing up. “We can't just let this happen. Killing people who deserve it is one thing, but innocent lives...”

Cattle Driver sighed. Slowly, she stood up. “Fine, I'm in. I guess I would feel bad if I let good people get killed. So, what's the plan?”

“First,” said Chill Bro, “We take out Master-”

“Yeah, I'm gonna stop you right there. Remember what we're parodying? If any of us make a move on Master, he presses his little remote button, and bye bye Taskforce!”

“Don't worry about that,” said Chill Bro. “I have a plan.”

Master stood alone in the briefing room, bagging up a sandwich. His remote was lying on the table in front of him, and his hand was lying on the remote. A large figure walked in through the door, his right hand balled in a fist in front of his chest. He closed the door behind him.

“So, Master,” said Globe Carrier, “Planning on going somewhere?”

“I'm just taking a bit of a leisure cruise with my good friend Silent But Deadly. Why do you ask?”

“You can't burn an entire city, Yana. Innocent lives will be lost!”

Globe Carrier took a step forward. Master put his finger on one of the remote buttons.

“Watch it, Mons. One more step and you're taken out of here in a body bag.”

“Ah, see, that's where you're wrong,” said Globe Carrier. He moved his right hand away from his chest, dragging the badge along with it. “You said the poison in this badge is magical in nature, correct? In that case, there's nothing you can do to me. Press that button, and your magical poison gets shot straight into the floor.”

Master chuckled. “It seems you've thought this through. But tell me this, Globe Carrier... what would happen if one of your friends was killed instead? What would you say to that?”

“I'd probably say... NOW!”

Globe Carrier jumped to the left. A hole appeared in the wall where the door used to be. A blue ox ran through the hole, then through the meeting table. The remote fell onto the blue railroad tracks, where it sat alongside a pile of fresh green peas. Master reached over to pick up the remote, but slipped on the ice sheet that was slowly covering the floor. Suddenly, the pile of peas that Master had landed face-down in grew vines. The vines wrapped around Master's neck, strangling him. Master was dead.

Chill Bro, Cattle Driver, and Greengrocer stepped into the room as their magic faded away. Globe Carrier picked up the remote and crushed it into pieces.

“Ok, so that's step one solved,” said Chill Bro. “Next we have to get to SBD and tell him that Master is dead. He was leaving by helicopter- maybe we'll be able to catch him before he takes off.”

The others nodded. The quartet ran down the hallways until they found a door labeled “helipad access”. They rushed through the door, up some stairs, and onto a helipad. However, there was no helicopter in sight. Globe Carrier looked around.

“I know where we are,” said Globe Carrier. “This complex is built into Wasuze mountain! Cunoze City should only be 35-ish miles southwest from here!”

“Well, what are we waiting for?!” shouted Cattle Driver. Her spectral ox appeared once more, and ran southwest. Cattle Driver jumped on the ox to ride on its back, while the other three followed behind on its tracks.

25 minutes later, the group arrived at a shoreline.

“CD? Can your ox run on water?” asked Greengrocer.

“No, but it can run on ice!” replied Cattle Driver.

Chill Bro clambered over to the ox and hoisted himself on. Cattle Driver helped Chill Bro navigate the ox's back, and held on to him once he was in front of her. Chill Bro pointed his arms out at the sea and shot out a blast of frost. The ox ran onto the ice as it formed, carrying them the rest of the way to the city.

The ox stopped in front of a purple thread pulled across a building, stretching to the side as far as the eye could see. Chill Bro jumped off of the ox.

“I'm going to tell SBD about what happened- but you three need to prepare the city just in case I don't get to him in time,” said Chill Bro. “Globe Carrier, go to the most crowded area you can find and be prepared to redirect the fire. Cattle Driver, try to evacuate people. Greengrocer, fill the streets with as many cotton plants as you can to dampen the sound.”

“Understood!” shouted the remaining three Taskforce members. The ox rode off into the city.

Chill Bro followed the string along the shore. Soon enough, he came across Silent But Deadly,

closing off the loop of string. A detonator appeared in his hand.

“DAMO!” shouted Chill Bro. SBD turned to look at him. Chill Bro walked closer. “Master is dead. The mission is over. You can put away the detonator now! You're free!”

Silent But Deadly looked at Chill Bro, chuckled, then turned back to the city. “See, I think we're working under somewhat of a misunderstandin'. You're under the impression that I'm only doing this because I was ordered to. You say I'm free? Fine. I'll just have to destroy this city in my spare time!”

Chill Bro stopped and stared. “You... you're insane!”

“What tipped ya off, the arson or the 119 confirmed kills?”

Frost circled around Chill Bro's hands. He began to run towards SBD. SBD passed the detonator over to his left hand, and stuck his right hand in his pocket.

“Oh, one last thing before you freeze me,” said Silent But Deadly. “You don't give our old boss the credit he deserves. See, he knew you were eavesdroppin' on our conversation, and he knew you'd probably come over here to try and stop me.”

Silent But Deadly pulled a gun out of his pocket. “That's why he gave me some... advance preparations.”

SBD fired the gun. Chill Bro swiped his left hand in front of him, creating a floating wall of ice. The ice blocked the bullet before falling to the ground and shattering. Chill Bro broke into a sprint. SBD fired again, at Chill Bro's chest. Chill Bro focused, and his shirt turned to ice. The bullet and shirt both shattered on impact. Chill Bro formed the ice armor he had used earlier. He continued to run towards SBD, who fired useless bullets at the armor. Once Chill Bro was in range, Damo smacked him in the head with his pistol. Immediately, the pistol froze over, followed by SBD's arm, torso, head, and entire body. The detonator faded away, as did the fuse. Damo Lisen was dead.

The ice armor fell away and melted as Cattle Driver, Globe Carrier, and Greengrocer rode out of the city. The ox disappeared, and the quartet stared at the frozen corpse.

“Well, 'Bro', it seems you take a different approach to diplomacy than most people,” said Cattle Driver.

“You know how it is, Bro,” replied Chill Bro. “You gotta do what you gotta do.”

“Hmph. I'd say I'm more of a 'Dudette' than a 'Bro',” said Poly. She leaned down and kissed Galasi on the cheek. She slowly pulled away, and gave a surprisingly warm smile.

“So, what are we going to do now?” asked Globe Carrier. “We may have gotten rid of Master, but the military won't let that slide easily. If we thought we were criminals at large before... what can we do about an entire army coming after us?”

“We stick around,” said Chill Bro. “The GRA is afraid to come to this island, remember? If we stay here and start our own gang, we can integrate into the culture, and nobody will be the wiser.”

The others looked around, then nodded in agreement.

“Just one question,” said Cattle Driver, “What are we gonna call our gang? We can't just keep going by Taskforce G forever.”

Chill Bro looked around at his friends- Globe Carrier and Cattle Driver towering over him, and Greengrocer breaking even. He looked around their necks, seeing the stylized 'G' badges, and smiled.

“I have an idea for a name,” said Chill Bro. “But fair warning- it's kind of a giant leap.”

THE END