

The Most Unusual Adventures of  
**Naomi Strange,**  
The Most Ordinary Girl in the World



Written by Benjamin J. Sommers

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Adventures of  
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*To my father for his unconditional support and for doing whatever it took to ensure our family was never in need.*

*To my mother for her constant encouragement to do better, to reach higher.*

*And to all those who toil in relative obscurity quietly making the world go round, this story is for you.*

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# A New Normal

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Scientists around the world weren't able to determine what caused the "Great Rift". It may have been a sudden mutation in the genetic code of human beings. Perhaps it was due to some secret government experiment. One that had escaped into the general population by mistake. Or maybe it was the result of a rapidly spreading virus. One that unlocked latent capabilities in the human brain. Whatever the cause, when the Great Rift occurred it triggered a seismic shift in the social order around the globe.

At the time of the Great Rift the world was a study in contrasts. There were entire geographic regions struggling in abject poverty. Not enough food. Not enough clean water. Not enough resources for adequate schools and housing. By comparison there were other areas of the world that were blessed with abundance. More than enough food, clean water, schools, and housing. Wars were fought. Crime was not uncommon. People tended to live and socialize with other people that looked and thought the same as themselves. After the Great Rift some things changed and some things did not.

One of the largest changes was that the Remarkables took over the world. Oh, please don't be alarmed! There were no horrible fights over food and water. No angry disputes over whose territory was whose. No terrible bombs from the skies that brought death and destruction. The takeover happened rather smoothly and quietly. More and more Remarkables appeared into the world and more and more regular people simply ceased to exist. It wasn't part of some sinister master

plan. It just sort of happened. Because the transition was spread over roughly seven years and no one seemed to be getting hurt, it felt to most people like something rather natural. Before you knew it there were more Remarkables everywhere you turned and fewer and fewer regular people to be found.

Interestingly the replacement of regular folks by Remarkables happened at a consistent pace all around the globe. It happened in Australia at the same rate that it happened in Mexico. It happened in Japan at the same rate that it happened in India. It happened in Brazil at the same rate that it happened in Switzerland. People of all ages just spontaneously transformed. Babies, children, teenagers, adults, the elderly - one day you were a normal human being and then the next day – POOF! You'd just developed spectacular abilities! Again, no one seemed too worried. And why? Because Remarkables were, well, so extraordinarily remarkable!

And how did this transition even begin? Well by all accounts it started in an extremely un-noteworthy location in the middle of a northern country. Somewhere where the people who lived on the country's coasts rarely bothered to visit the middle of their own nation. The people who lived on the coasts referred to the middle part of their country as "fly-over" territory. As in, they couldn't wait to "fly-over" it as fast as possible to get to where they were going. Heaven help them if they actually had to land and converse with the people that lived in "fly-over" territory. People of that country, folks that lived on the coasts and folks that lived inland alike, actually had more in common than they knew. They just couldn't be bothered to have a conversation about it.

Nevertheless the Remarkables emerged and quickly transformed how the world worked. The first Remarkables to



surface were the vampires. Until the Great Rift, vampires had been simply a myth. A myth propped up by over two centuries of vampire-related bestselling books. Then came the vampire movies out of Hollywood. The people who actually transformed into vampires for real soon became known as Pointies. The new name was coined as many other types of Remarkables began to appear. It was so much easier for people to categorize each type of Remarkable in an easy-to-say, easy-to-remember box. While the Pointies did have new and extraordinary abilities, many of the tales of their kind from books and from movies turned out to be rubbish.

For example Pointies didn't actually shrivel up and die in the sunlight. The truth was that they simply liked to sleep in late (who doesn't?) and they did their best thinking in the evenings after sundown. They worked quite hard actually, often late into the night. Another huge myth? Garlic did not harm them at all! The truth was that they just disliked the strong aroma of the stuff. Weirdly the Pointies actually seemed to enjoy the taste of garlic in their food.

And Pointies certainly did not drink the blood of their victims! The Pointies worked hard to maintain a steady diet of tomato soup, fruit juice, strawberries, red meat, and cherry Jell-O. The closest a Pointie ever got to justifying their bloodthirsty reputation was when a clumsy Pointie tripped, fell, and banged his teeth on the neck of famous actress. It had transpired at a major awards event. A photographer happened to snap a picture at the exact moment of the accidental bite and the media had a field day with their news coverage!

While the Pointies did possess certain superhuman powers such as enhanced strength and the ability to transform into various animals, some aspects of becoming a Pointy were most

annoying. For example, Pointies did not cast a reflection in a mirror. Imagine how difficult it would be to comb your hair before school? To put on make-up before the big dance? To see if that new cape looks as good on you as it had looked on the mannequin at the store?

To make matters worse Pointies also did not show up in photographs! Not in classroom photos, not in selfies, not in holiday celebrations with family and friends. It was all quite frustrating. But it did spawn an entirely new industry. Digital images that could be inserted (for a fee, of course) into photos to look like you were actually there. In truth the Pointies *were* actually there! It's just that they did not show up until after the photos were altered. However that was just one of the many trade-offs of the Great Rift and of the Remarkables appearing in the world.

Soon after the Pointies emerged many new categories of Remarkables popped into existence. Next came the Swappies. Swappies were people who could shapeshift into the appearance of almost anything. A cactus. A refrigerator. Even another person (although doing that often caused lots of problems for everyone involved!) Then there were the Mysties. Witches and Wizards who could cast spells and perform real magic. They were not able to do dangerous tasks such as make objects explode or cause someone to fall in love. But they could make water boil in a flash. And they could convince your sack lunch for school to prepare itself right out of the refrigerator!

Next there were people who could turn themselves invisible. That new group of Remarkables were known as Ghosties. Banks around the world had to alter their security tactics once the Ghosties emerged. Now to be fair, most Ghosties were good

and honest. But alas a small minority of them wanted to use their newfound powers for mischief.

New types of Remarkables continued to appear at an astonishing rate. Soon there were people who could run so fast that no one could even see them moving! They were called Swifties. Not long after there were people who emerged who were even stronger than Pointies. They could lift an entire car over their head without even breaking a sweat! They were named Mighties.

The Sighties had super-strong vision and could spot a four-leaf shamrock in a field of dense clovers from over 400 feet away. The Airies could hold their breath underwater for hours. No SCUBA lessons for them required! The Soaries could fly which proved to be quite a useful skill. The Burnies were most popular on camping trips when you needed to start a campfire from scratch. A Burnie could do that task in a jiffy. You just had to make sure they didn't burn your school down when they got upset from a bad grade on a test!

Shaggies ended up being one of the most common sort of Remarkable. For all practical purposes Shaggies were considered werewolves but like their vampire compatriots, virtually all of the lore surrounding werewolves turned out to be false. O.k. sure, the Shaggies did indeed grow long fingernails and become quite hairy when they transformed during a full moon. But they weren't violent. And they certainly didn't kill people! Shaggies were in fact quite mild-mannered. And if a person happened to be bitten by a Shaggie (which hardly ever happened), that person wouldn't themselves then become a werewolf. They might just have a nasty scratch. To be fair, it did indeed turn out that Shaggies had a penchant for howling at the moon. But only because unlike vampires werewolves liked

to get a good night's rest and a bright full moon often kept them awake.

Much less common were the Tellies. Tellies was a broad category that included Telepaths (i.e. mind readers), Telekinetics (i.e. ability to move objects without actually touching them), and Teleporters (i.e. transport across space and distance instantly). And the least common but most esteemed type of Remarkable were the Moddies. Moddies could reshape objects at an atomic level. They weren't able to create complex machines such as a car or a computer but they could transform a block of wood into a loaf of bread. The impact that the Moddies had on the farming and food production industries was immeasurable. In truth the impact that the Moddies had on the whole world was immeasurable. But we'll circle back to that later.

## Extra Ordinary

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In an average-sized house in an unremarkable part of town Naomi Strange opened her eyes. It was not quite dawn. Her alarm clock had not yet sounded but there was no way she would be able to fall back asleep. With a heavy sigh Naomi tossed back her covers. She shuffled to the bathroom. She did her business and then regarded herself in the mirror.

Straight brown hair that just grazed her shoulders. Commonplace brown eyes. She picked up a brush and began to work a few small kinks out of her hair. This day of the year was always quite challenging. Naomi tried to mentally prepare herself for what was to come.

She picked out a tasteful sweater and jeans combination for school. Not that it really mattered. Most students at Naomi's school wouldn't notice if she wasn't there. Often she felt more invisible than her Ghostie classmates, classmates who actually had the ability to vanish. It wasn't that the other students were mean to Naomi. It wasn't that they disliked her in any way. It's just that at school Naomi seemed an inconspicuous wall decoration. Present yes but thoroughly unnoticed. Wise people understand that the opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is actually indifference. And to Naomi's existence most of her classmates were completely indifferent. You see, Naomi was a Savage.

Oh don't misunderstand! Naomi was not vicious or brutal in any way. Nothing could have been further from the truth. What

happened was that as Remarkables had emerged and began to be categorized into groups, a popular term for those poor non-remarkable people caught on. As the population of normal people dwindled they soon were considered to be *sub-average*. Sub-average compared to their extraordinary peers. They did not possess any exciting new abilities. And over time the moniker sub-average was simply shortened to Savage. It was easier for Remarkables to use a shorter and more convenient definition.

At thirteen-years-old and now in the seventh grade, Naomi typically made her own breakfast. Most days it was just an ordinary bowl of cereal with milk. Sometimes toast and oatmeal. Her father, Mr. Thomas Strange, occasionally made her chocolate chip pancakes but that was only on Saturdays. Today was a school day.

Naomi headed downstairs, opened the cupboard, and considered her options. After a brief pause she opted for a bowl of cereal. She poured the milk and took a tentative bite. On this particular morning Naomi didn't have much of an appetite. She found, however, that following a daily routine was soothing. She glanced at the stairs. Her father had not yet descended from his bedroom. Naomi and her father had breakfast together almost every morning but this day of the year was especially hard. For both of them.

In almost all respects Naomi was an exceptionally ordinary girl. She earned average grades at school. She was of middling height and was so-so at sports. She participated in a few extracurricular clubs with her classmates but she did not hold any club leadership positions. She played the violin but her skills were passable. If Naomi was to be considered unusual or

special in any way, well then it was for the saddest of reasons. And that reason was *not* that Naomi was a Savage.

When Naomi was just six years old her mother died in a tragic car accident. It had happened on your average, ordinary Tuesday morning. Naomi's mother drove her to summer school, gave her a hug, and told Naomi to have a good day. "Go learn something!" her mother had called out with a smile as she drove away. From the summer school Naomi's mother began her usual commute to work. Just a few miles from the school a large petrochemical truck was rolling into town.

The driver of the truck had not been drinking or doing drugs. He was actually one of the company's most reliable drivers. He had not surpassed the legal limit of driving for more than eleven hours in a single shift. But he'd began his shift at 10:00 p.m. the night before, he'd driven all through the night, and he was arriving into town at the same time that Naomi's mother was approaching her office. What transpired next occurs from time to time. A chance happening to be sure. A most unlucky coincidence. Entirely by accident the truck driver, unable to keep his eyes open any longer, simply fell asleep at the wheel.

With no warning his massive truck swerved across the dividing lines on a local thoroughfare. At the same time Naomi's mother was approaching from the opposite direction. Car and truck struck head-on in a massive collision. Despite seatbelt and airbag protections Naomi's mother did not survive the crash. As if the fact offered any consolation the doctors had informed Naomi and her father that her mother's death had been instantaneous. The doctor's said that there'd been no pain. And that may have been true for Naomi's mother. But Naomi and her father had since been living in pain for years ever since.

Losing a wife and a mother, and so unexpectedly, left a void in the Strange household that was impossible to fill. Thomas and Keiko Strange had been married for twelve years before they decided to start a family. They had been focused on their careers and on seeing the world. When they did eventually decide to have a baby, Keiko was no longer a young woman. After three years of trying with much disappointment, little Naomi finally arrived! Keiko often referred to Naomi as her “tiny miracle”. Both Thomas and Keiko loved Naomi more than anything in the world. The Strange household was a happy place. Until the accident.

From the kitchen table Naomi spied a family photo hanging on the wall. Over in the living room just above the mantle. Naomi, her mother, and her father were all smiles. An enormous pumpkin patch stretched out for miles behind them. Naomi must have been around six years old in the photo. She vaguely recalled selecting a pumpkin that was about the same size as she was. The memory made her smile.

After her mother’s untimely passing, Naomi and her father got on the best that they could. Mr. Strange managed to secure a steady job with NexPhaze Enterprises. NexPhaze Enterprises had become the largest and most profitable company in the world. Because land around Naomi’s town was not very expensive and taxes were low, NexPhaze had decided to build their corporate headquarters there. Like Naomi, her father was also a Savage.

He’d gotten a job with NexPhaze as a Teleportation Traffic Controller (TTC). Working as a TTC was a necessary but fairly unglamorous job. Once Teleporters emerged and began transporting packages and people, an entire new industry was born. Oversight was needed to ensure that no one accidentally



teleported into the exact same spot. When that happened the consequences could be catastrophic. Even deadly. Avoiding such an outcome was Mr. Strange's role. Making sure that people and packages arrived safely at their destinations.

Teleporters could transport instantaneously whatever they held in their hands. Two envelopes, two boxes, even two people. Teleporter training typically started with just one small item. Perhaps a candy bar or a pack of gum. Gradually they worked up to larger objects. Only the most highly trained Teleporters were qualified to actually transport other people. But those Teleporters who could were in extraordinarily high demand. Why bother driving a car when you could arrive at your destination in seconds? Why bother taking a flight when you could appear where you wanted in the blink of an eye? Admittedly teleportation transport prices were quite high but those services were in constant demand.

In slow deliberate steps Naomi's father descended the staircase. Naomi looked up from her cereal. Father and daughter regarded one another. Thomas Strange gave his little girl a broad smile but his eyes told a different story. They were puffy and red. "He's been crying again," thought Naomi. That happened from time to time. Usually around the holidays. Without fail it always happened on this day. Today would have been her mother's birthday celebration.

## Managing

“Good morning Baby Girl!” bellowed Mr. Strange. “Did you sleep alright? Are you all ready for your big test today?”

“I’m not a baby and your buttons are all messed up” replied Naomi.

Mr. Strange looked down and sure enough Naomi was right. He’d missed a button on his work shirt. His collar was sticking up an inch too high. And one side at the bottom of his shirt-front was dangling an inch too low. NexPhaze Enterprises adorned the back of his shirt in bright blue stitching. All employees at NexPhaze were encouraged but not required to wear their company-issued attire. Most did and Mr. Strange fell in line. As a Savage in a Remarkable world it was best not to make waves.

Naomi’s father unbuttoned his shirt, fixed his error, and buttoned back up again. He pulled up a chair and sat next to Naomi at the kitchen table. “I know you know what today is. And I know that you know that I know what today is.” He paused and thought about what he’d just said. Yes, the logic checked out. He grasped his daughter’s hand. “We just need to be strong. Stronger together.”

Naomi nodded and thought of the picture of the pumpkin patch hanging in the other room. Of course she was sad that her mother had passed away. But what was most disturbing was that because the crash had happened when Naomi was just six years old, memories of her mother had begun to fade. Without

all the pictures to remind her of their adventures together, Naomi may have had trouble conjuring up an accurate image of her mother's face. A small tear escaped and trickled down Naomi's cheek. She turned her head and hastily rubbed it away. If her father saw her crying it was likely to set him off as well.

Naomi rose from the table and turned back to her father. "I'll be as strong as I can. You do the same and we'll manage. Like we always do." She gave her father a reluctant smile. "As for that big test today, I did study for over an hour last night. But I'll probably get a B, like I always do."

Mr. Strange stood up and embraced his daughter. "Just do the best that you can. That's all anyone can ask." He stepped back and placed his hands on Naomi's shoulders. He smirked. "Well, unless you can convince Sara to just surf on over into your teacher's thoughts, pluck out the test answers, and then beam those answers on over into your head..."

"Come on! You know that's against the rules! And besides, the teachers all wear their Thought Blockers on big test days. They wear them on most days actually."

"I know, I know. I was just teasing." And for the first time that day Mr. Strange favored Naomi with a genuine smile. "Have a great day, Baby Girl. I'll see you this evening when I get home from work. I believe I'm on deck for cooking dinner tonight. Just grab a snack from the pantry if you get hungry before I get home. Do you have your key?"

Naomi patted the front pocket of her jeans. She'd been a latchkey kid for some time. That is, she'd been walking home by herself from school and letting herself into the house since the second grade.

“Well, off you go then!” proclaimed Mr. Strange. “I’ll see you this evening for dinner. He paused before continuing. “Oh, and please don’t let Xavier teleport you off to some romantic tropical island during lunch period!” He winked cheekily and Naomi gave her father a solid punch to the shoulder. Teleporting was strictly forbidden during school hours and Xavier was absolutely just a friend.

Naomi grabbed her backpack and hustled out the door. Since school buses were no longer in use most students simply teleported with a friend or a parent to school. There was a set schedule with designated arrival times and landing zones. Because Naomi lived not far from the school she opted to walk. Walking could be annoying if there was inclement weather. Snow or rain were not uncommon. But it did give her twenty minutes each morning of quiet time for herself. It also served as a daily reminder that she, Naomi Strange, was not a Remarkable.

Naomi’s school was called Glenbrook North Middle School and taught grades six through eight. By all accounts, Naomi’s school was quite normal. Well, except that virtually all the students and teachers were Remarkables. In fact, there was precisely just one other student in the school who was a Savage. He was one grade older than Naomi. They were actually the only two Savages in the entire town. You might have thought that they were good friends, being the only Savages in the area. But Diego was a quiet fellow. He mostly kept to himself. It was unclear if Diego actually had any friends at all. Which was most peculiar because Diego’s parents were one of the most famous couples in the world.

Diego’s Father, Rodrigo Ruiz, was a world-renowned Teleporter. He had made headlines as the first Remarkable to

successfully teleport to the moon. Once he proved he could make the journey he began to teleport all kinds of materials so a proper outpost on the moon could be built. He brought steel, he brought seeds, he brought solar panels to harness the power of the sun. Eventually he brought other astronauts to build the first sustainable base on the moon.

He was currently in training to be the first Remarkable to make the interplanetary journey to Mars. If successful he could pave the way for the first human colony on the red planet. Now you might think that teleporting to another planet would be a fairly straightforward task. Well then you'd be mistaken. Dead wrong in fact. While teleportation does indeed happen instantaneously you have to remember that the Earth and Mars are not standing still in space. Mars orbits the sun at roughly 54,000 miles per hour! And Earth orbits the sun at a whopping 67,000 miles per hour! Precise calculations are required to ensure the planets are properly aligned for the journey. Not to mention the distance you have to travel. 163 million miles! That would strain the capacity of even the strongest of Teleporters.

Diego's mother, Veronica Jones-Ruiz, was perhaps the most famous Moddie in the world. She was one of the first Moddies to appear and she was responsible for helping to eliminate hunger all around the world. She single-handedly transformed portions of the Sahara desert into food for millions. She transformed sand into clean water. She repeated the feat in India and in China. Thirst and starvation were virtually eliminated. The Ruiz family lived on a massive estate just on the outskirts of town. They would have been welcomed to live anywhere in the world but both parents preferred to live close by their offices. You see, they both worked at NexPhaze Enterprises.

Since the Great Rift it seemed that all the most talented Remarkables had gone to work for NexPhaze. Doctor Alexander Ivey, the Chief Executive Officer of NexPhaze, had recruited Remarkables to join his company as soon as they began to emerge in the world. He'd quickly built a monopoly of sorts and was now presumed to be the richest man in the world. Doctor Ivey was hard to pin down though. He rarely held interviews and almost never made public appearances. He insisted on conducting all business via video conference. The President of NexPhaze Enterprises and Doctor Ivey's chief lieutenant was Ms. Addison Irving. She was almost as enigmatic as her boss. She was assumed to be the richest woman in the world.

Not rich and not particularly special in any way, Naomi Strange headed out the door. A light drizzle fell. Naomi shifted her backpack and turned up the collar on her jacket. With an ache in her chest that never fully receded it was time to get through another day of school. A school full of Remarkables who wouldn't notice or care if she turned up at all.

## Glenbrook North Middle School

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Twenty minutes later Naomi arrived onto the school grounds. The drizzle had lessened. A few glimpses of sunshine peeked out. Naomi made her way over to the designated teleportation arrival area. Any minute now Naomi's two best friends (her only friends actually) would materialize. Sara Brennan and Xavier Williams lived on the other side of town, not far from one another. Because Xavier was a Teleporter they often journeyed to school together. Naomi spied zone twenty-six. There lay a bright red circle on the ground about six feet across. The number twenty-six was emblazoned in the center. Sturdy steel fencing surrounded each landing area. Teleportation Traffic Controllers dressed in bright orange vests monitored the morning arrivals. Naomi glanced down at her watch when all of a sudden a sharp CRACK sounded! Where there had been nothing but empty space not a moment ago now stood Naomi's friends. The three regarded one another with soft smiles. Then all three fell together in a tight hug.

"How are you doing today?" asked Sara cautiously. "And how's your dad?"

The group embrace ended and Naomi considered for a moment. "He tried to be cheery and positive but I could tell he'd been crying. As for me, I'm doing o.k. I guess. I'm always thinking of my mom but this day is one of the hardest. I wish more than anything to have her back. But sometimes I also wish there was a Remarkable out there who could just erase her from my memory completely."

“Don’t say that!” exclaimed Xavier.

“Don’t even *think* that!” insisted Sara.

“Easy for them to say” mused Naomi with a touch of bitterness. Maybe even a flash of envy. Xavier’s parents along with Sara’s parents were all alive and well. Looking up Naomi met Sara’s gaze. Naomi was no telepath (that was actually Sara’s special ability) but she sensed a bit of pain in Sara’s eyes. Pain that had nothing to do with Naomi’s mother.

Sara was tall, fair-skinned, and boasted a plume of cascading red hair. A few scattered freckles dotted her nose and cheeks. Although she was a Telepath she rarely used her special ability. When asked about it Sara would always give the same reply. More often than not she didn’t particularly like the thoughts she found floating in other people’s minds.

Sara also lived under a black cloud of embarrassment. If she chose to use telepathy amongst her fellow students she knew from experience what she’d find. The first thought people had when they saw her was usually about Sara’s father. You see her father was a Moddie and he was currently serving a five-year prison sentence for forgery. He’d been caught counterfeiting hundred dollar bills. After a string of unusual and luxurious purchases, government agents had secured a warrant to search Mr. and Mrs. Brennan’s house. There they found reams of paper, a paper cutter, and stacks upon stacks of hundred dollar bills. Mrs. Brennan, Sara’s mother, had been completely unaware of the scam so she remained free. However with Sara’s father now in prison that left Mrs. Brennan alone to care for both Sara and her little brother, Patrick. So in different but similarly painful ways, both Naomi and Sara were deprived of one of their parents. The difference of course was that one day Sara’s father would return. Naomi’s mother would not.



Xavier attempted to lighten the mood. “Come on you guys, I have a surprise that is totally going to cheer you up!”

Naomi and Sara turned to look at him. He flashed a broad white smile that contrasted handsomely with his dark hair and dark complexion. Xavier reached down into his backpack. Out he pulled an official looking envelope adorned with pictures of werewolves.

“No way!” cried Naomi. Her eyes went wide. Thoughts of her mother and of Sara’s father temporarily flew from her mind.

“How?” queried Sara in disbelief. “That’s impossible. I heard they sold out months ago. And if you wanted to buy them on a secondary marketplace, the least expensive were ten thousand dollars apiece!”

Xavier didn’t reply. He just kept beaming at them with his Cheshire cat grin. Slowly and carefully he tore the top edge of the envelope. He tipped the envelope toward the ground and a glint of gilded paper slid out. The paper flashed brightly in the sunlight now that the clouds above had cleared. He held three small rectangles out to Naomi and Sara reverently like an offering to a deity.

“Behold!” he proclaimed. “Three tickets to this weekend’s Fuzzball Bowl!”

After the Shaggies had emerged, as with most other variety of Remarkable, entirely new types of sports were created. With so many superhuman abilities now commonplace, new teams and new leagues were formed. If Swifties wanted to compete in a race, they could do so but only against other Swifties. In those races special high-speed cameras were required to determine who actually won. Using one’s remarkable abilities during a sporting match was typically illegal and referees had to be on

their toes. A famous goalkeeper in professional soccer had just been accused of employing teleportation to stop a crucial penalty kick. So some sports continued to thrive while others faded away. But nothing could compare to the gargantuan popularity of Fuzzball.

And why? Because it was wildly entertaining. It featured some of the most violent collisions imaginable. It seemed that even in a world primarily populated by Remarkables, people still could not resist watching top athletes putting their health (and sometimes their lives) on the line for sporting glory. Fuzzball matches were held once a month on the night of a full moon. Teams of Shaggies were pitted against one another, doing battle as teams of werewolves in what could only be described as some combination of rugby, basketball, and American football. The object of the game was simple. Score more points than your opponent.

While the players did wear helmets and padding, injuries were common. Occasionally athletes did die during play but not frequently. It was just part of the deal. Athletes knew what they were signing up for if they opted to participate. The rewards for top Fuzzball players was enormous. Wealth. Fame. Endorsements. Lavish attention in the media. Most Shaggies dreamed of joining one of the country's top Fuzzball clubs but few ever climbed to such elite ranks. Once a year the two top Fuzzball teams clashed in the highly-anticipated Fuzzball Bowl.

Still in awe, Sara repeated "How? The Arctic Fangs vs. the Rumbling Growlers? It's the match-up everyone's dreamed of seeing. They're calling it the match of the decade."

"Well clear your calendars for Saturday night because we're going to be there in person!" replied Xavier. "Us three plus my little sister. We've got four tickets in total."

The curiosity was getting to Naomi as well. “Hurry up and tell us how you got them! The school bell will be ringing any minute.”

“Well, you know how my mom is a Soarie instructor?”

“Come on, Xavier, your mom is not a sorry instructor. I hear she’s a wonderful instructor!” teased Naomi.

Xavier rolled his eyes. He’d heard that joke a million times and he also knew that Naomi was a big fan of bad puns. Any play on words amused her. Xavier continued.

“It was all a matter of chance. A truly random and amazingly lucky series of events. You guys know the name Roland Zazzle?”

“Of course” replied Sara. “The President of the WWF, the Worldwide Werewolf Federation. Do you actually know him somehow?”

“I wish! Well apparently Mr. Zazzle had gifted four tickets to his executive assistant as a special thank you for five years of excellent work. However, not wanting to make the long trip to the match, Mr. Zazzle’s assistant had re-gifted the tickets to her brother. The assistant’s brother then had a last minute conflict. A business trip was scheduled and he was going to be out of town the night of the match. It just so happens that the executive assistant’s brother lives right here in town. And his daughter is a Soarie in my mom’s class. His daughter’s name is Cecelia. Well during yesterday’s lesson Cecelia managed to fly an entire loop around the city and land flawlessly back at class. Her father was so very pleased. Since he was going to be out of town on business and since Cecelia doesn’t really follow Fuzzball, he offered the tickets to my mom.

“Unbelievable!” cried Naomi.

“I know, right?” agreed Xavier.

“What a lucky break. I can’t believe we’re actually going to the Fuzzball Bowl.” Sara still seemed in shock. “And it’s right here in town at the new NexPhaze Arena. I wonder if we’ll be on television?”

“Only if you decide to wear your full-body werewolf paint!” joked Xavier.

Sara socked Xavier on the arm. Much like Naomi had belted her father earlier that morning. The school bell sounded and kids began funneling toward the wide front doors. First period was history class. Next came language arts, social studies, and science. That gave Naomi a little more time to fret about her upcoming math test.

The three friends joined the incoming throng of students. They were surrounded by Shaggies who all looked quite normal. That would not be the case the following Saturday when the full moon arose. Pointies and Airies filed in. As did Sighties, Burnies, and the school’s few Tellies. Glenbrook North Middle School had no students who were Moddies. Again, Moddies were very rare.

A few Soaries decided to show off by flying into school. They sailed down the hallway above everyone’s heads. Two Mysties playfully shot streams of purple sparks at them as they glided above. Mighties had to be careful not to accidentally jostle anyone in the morning rush. The last time that happened had seen a poor student rushed to the hospital with a broken arm. Swifties often showed up in class at the very last second. Why? Because they could.

Sara and Xavier led their small triad of friends towards the entrance. Naomi followed just a step behind. They were about to enter the school when Naomi underwent a most peculiar experience. She suddenly found herself floating outside of her body. She hovered in the air peering down upon herself.

## A Day of Tests

For a second or two Naomi was gazing down at the top of her own head. Her whole body had gone rigid. She could see her humdrum brown hair parted routinely down the middle. Then the sensation passed as she was swept back down into her body. She teetered for a moment focusing hard not to faint.

“Honestly, Jared! Can’t you watch where you’re going?!” admonished a classmate. Sara and Xavier turned to see what had happened. Naomi steadied herself as a firm hand grasped her elbow.

“My apologies, my apologies!” responded Jared. I honestly didn’t even see her!” Then he vanished again. Looking up, Naomi noticed who had come to her aid.

“How did you even know it was Jared?” she asked.

“Who else would it be? He’s the most careless Ghostie in the entire school.” Diego Ruiz removed his hand from Naomi’s elbow as Sara and Xavier rejoined their friend.

“Are you o.k.?” Sara was concerned.

“Isn’t that like the third time this month?” inquired Xavier.

“I think it’s the fourth time actually. I’m fine. It’s just such an eerie feeling when a Ghostie glides right through you.” Naomi took a deep breath. Then another. She thanked Diego and he nodded in return. It was easy to see that Diego had inherited his eminent father’s jet black hair and his celebrated

mother's bright blue eyes. Diego had a trim but athletic build. He turned to head off to class. As he strode down the hallway he spoke to no one and no one spoke to him. It wouldn't be accurate to say that Diego and Naomi were friends. And it wasn't exactly the case that Diego and Naomi were *not* friends. More like acquaintances. Diego was one grade above her and they didn't share any of the same classes. But being the only two Savage kids in town did forge a common bond between them, even if it was an awkward bond.

Naomi's first period history class passed by quickly. It was an interesting lesson on ancient Egypt. For forty-five minutes Naomi was immersed in a land teeming with pyramids, pharaohs, slaves, and unsolved construction riddles. Language arts was a bit slower though still thought-provoking. The students were tasked with writing a report on a classic novel that told an adventurous tale of wizards, elves, dragons, and treasure. Social studies was all about current events. A Burnie had accidentally started a forest fire that was rapidly spreading in the western part of the country. A group of Airies had just opened a self-sustaining underwater hotel. A Mystie had developed an innovative new spell to mend teeth troubles. No more needles or drills required! Pointies were most pleased to hear the news.

Science class was all about ecosystems. Ecosystems had changed quite a bit since Moddies had emerged. It was important that all students learn about how Remarkable activity impacted biodiversity. Lunch passed quickly and soon Naomi found herself outside Ms. Hathaway's classroom. Sara joined as well as both Naomi and Sara had Ms. Hathaway for math class. Ms. Hathaway had a passion for numbers and she worked hard to instill that same passion in her students. She taught all grades at the school, grades six through eight. The bell rang and students traded places as some filed into the classroom while

others filed out. Diego said a quick hello as he passed by Naomi. He attended Ms. Hathaway's class during period just before Naomi. Rumor had it that although Diego was a Savage, he was a whiz with numbers. He was actually a straight A student across all subjects, including math.

Teens took their seats and Ms. Hathaway began a quick roll call. The math teacher was a Pointie. You could tell by her sharp incisor teeth. Impossible to ignore whenever she opened her mouth to speak. When she got to the last name on the list, Felix Zhang, no one answered. Ms. Hathaway looked up and scanned the room. She was missing one student but had somehow gained one new school desk.

“Very amusing, Felix. But I'm afraid adding to our classroom's furniture inventory is not going help you escape today's test.”

In the back of the room a school desk quickly transformed back into a thirteen year old boy. The class snickered.

“I figured it was worth a shot” replied Felix as he slunk back to his unoccupied station. As a Swappie, Felix had attempted such tactics before. They almost never worked. Just as Felix was about to sit down his classmate Samantha pushed his chair in from behind. Not with her hands but with her mind. She was the only telekinetic in class. Felix turned her way and winked.

“Thanks for the assist.”

Ms. Hathaway stepped to the first column of seated students. Setting a stack of papers on the first desk she made a familiar announcement. “Take one and pass them back.” She placed additional copies at the tops of columns two, three, and four.



“You will have forty minutes to complete the exam. You should have more than enough time so be sure to go back and check your work. Remember to illustrate how you arrived at your solution. Partial credit may be given where your work demonstrates you understand the key concepts but did not arrive at the correct final answer. Harness what you have learned. Do your best. And remember, no use of any remarkable powers! Telepaths – keep your thoughts to your own heads please. Burnies – do not light anything on fire if you don’t know the answer. Sighties – keep your eyes on your own paper.” As an added precaution Ms. Hathaway placed a spherical purple helmet atop her head. Her Thought Blocker. All the Telepaths at school had signed an honor code but it didn’t hurt to be safe. Ms. Hathaway glanced up at the large clock on the wall. “And begin!”

Sara peeked over at Naomi and gave her a thumbs up. She silently mouthed the words “good luck.” Naomi returned the thumbs up and glanced down at her paper. Pencil in hand she began to wrestle the first problem. For the past semester the class had been tackling the math category known as algebra. It was Naomi’s first experience where the problems to solve included not only numbers but letters as well. Solve for  $x$  when  $x + 5 = 12$ . Piece of cake thought Naomi as she quickly arrived at  $x = 7$ .

The questions became more and more difficult as the minute hand crept round the wall clock. She got stumped on the final word problem about two trains heading towards one another from opposite directions. They were traveling at different speeds and Naomi was supposed to solve for the specific time that the trains would pass one another.

“Pencils down! Time’s up!” announced Ms. Hathaway.

Naomi did as she was told and considered her test paper. The final problem remained unsolved. Disappointment seeped in. She had studied for more than an hour last night! Nonetheless Naomi felt good about her answers on all the other questions. She might even score a B+. That happened from time to time. A's were much harder to come by.

“What did you think?” Sara asked as the bell rang signaling the end of class. “That last question about the trains was a little tricky but I think I figured it out.”

“Of course you did” Naomi thought to herself. Not in a jealous way. Just matter-of-factly. Like Diego, Sara was pretty good with numbers. Math came fairly easy to her and she almost always aced Ms. Hathaway's math tests.

“That last question tripped me up but I think I did alright on the other ones.” Ready to leave the math test behind Naomi paced ahead down the hallway. She called back to Sara. “Last one to music class is a Shaggie's beard!”

That evening back at home Naomi told her father the sensational news. The news about the Fuzzball Bowl tickets.

“What an amazing coincidence about Xavier's mother and her Soarie student, Cecelia! I'm so excited for you, Naomi! And a little jealous I might add. Wow, the Fuzzball Bowl! I've never been. What good luck that it's also right here in town. I can drive you all to the stadium for the match on Saturday evening.”

“No need for that, dad. Xavier can just teleport us there one or two at a time.”

“Oh. I forgot. Still, it might be fun just to be near all the excitement. I can just pop into a nearby pub and watch all the

action on television. Maybe I'll even see you guys up on screen!"

"Only if Sara wears her full-body werewolf paint" replied Naomi with a smile.

Before bed Naomi's father plopped down in the large comfy recliner in the living room. It was his favorite chair. He often enjoyed watching television for a little while before bed. Nothing too stimulating. Usually just comedy shows or old movies he'd seen before.

He flipped on the TV and poured himself a generous amount of liquid from a bottle sitting on a nearby end table. Two cubes of ice clinked in the glass. The liquid was light brown in color and emitted a powerful aroma. After Naomi's mother had died her father seemed to drink more of this particular beverage than he used to. Especially on emotional days like this one.

When she was six years old Naomi didn't know what the mysterious liquid was. All she knew was that consuming it made her father a bit erratic. Sometimes he became quite jovial. Other times he became tearful and melancholy. On the label she could make out the letters and recognized the first as a W. As her reading skills improved Naomi was eventually able to read the full label. It was a substance named "whiskey".

On nights like this Naomi would often find her father asleep in his recliner. His snores often woke her up. When that happened she would creep downstairs and cover him up with a blanket.

He never missed work the next day and he never mistreated her. Nonetheless Naomi became suspicious of the light brown liquid at a very young age. She preferred those nights when her father abstained. She kissed him on the cheek, said goodnight,

and climbed up to her bedroom. As sleep took her she felt quite certain that she'd be placing a blanket on him sometime later in the night.

## 6

# Simulations

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As Naomi was closing her eyes across town Doctor Alexander Ivey paced his corner office. Perched high atop the glimmering NexPhaze Enterprises skyscraper he paused to gaze out his 99<sup>th</sup> floor window. The town lay spread out below him. Specks of light shone where people were still awake in houses and in shops far below. Up above the sky was clear as countless stars pondered the infinite.

Not far away from NexPhaze Tower stood NexPhaze Arena. NexPhaze Arena was a state-of-the-art Fuzzball stadium but it hosted many other events as well. Constructed just three years prior it boasted a retractable roof and seated over 100,000 spectators. Around NexPhaze Arena hundreds of stores and restaurants had sprung up. Four luxury hotels had been constructed. The whole area of town was a veritable mecca of commerce. It was 10:00 p.m. and Doctor Ivey was working late. As was his President and close confidant, Ms. Addison Irving. Doctor Ivey spoke towards an intercom on his desk. “Addison, may I see you in my office please?”

“Of course, Alexander. I’m just completing a simulation. I’ll be there in two minutes.”

“Thanks. See you in one hundred twenty seconds”

Doctor Ivey regarded his office. No expense had been spared in outfitting his workspace with the most advanced technology available. Stacks of computer equipment lined the walls. Miniature cameras lined the ceiling. Doctor Ivey had direct

digital connections to every country on the planet. World leaders would accept his call before even the second ring had sounded. NexPhaze satellites monitored activity on earth soundlessly from space. Some satellites the government knew about, some they did not.

One large section of Doctor Ivey's office had been dedicated to his current project. He confided in Addison that it was the most important project he'd ever worked on. Robots of all sizes scurried about. Some robots were the same size as people. Others were the size of ants. Some were even smaller. Doctor Ivey controlled them all himself and they all had a very specific purpose.

At the end of a long table a lone test tube hung in isolation from steel clasps. From a thin funnel above, tiny droplets of liquid slowly dripped. As the drops coalesced in the test tube below, the concoction turned purple. Then it turned green. It was as if the cryptic substance was unsure what color it wanted to be.

Moments later a small black box in the center of the room whirred to life. A holographic image of Ms. Addison Irving shimmered into existence.

“You wanted to see me, Alexander?”

Doctor Ivey stepped towards Addison's projection. The doctor was clad in his typical office attire. White lab coat with NexPhaze Enterprises embroidered on the back. Wireframe spectacles. Locks of wavy grey hair tumbled to his shoulders. No one was entirely sure how old the doctor was. He never talked much about his childhood and he didn't seem to celebrate his birthday. Judging by his appearance, most folks thought him to be around sixty years old. “Yes. I think it's time.”

“And you’re sure you have the serum inputs correct? If we get this wrong the consequences could be disastrous. For our champion and possibly for the world.”

“I’ve run the projections countless times. I have 99.8 percent confidence that the serum will work. It would be best to reach 100 percent accuracy but I’m afraid this is the best we can do.”

“And you’re sure about the age range?”

“With 98% confidence, yes. It must be a young adult aged either thirteen or fourteen. A girl may be slightly better but that would depend on the girl. A boy would be fine too provided he has the proper constitution. The impact on their brain will be profound and irreversible. And besides, they’ll only be able to travel twice. To do so a third time would be deadly. The first two journeys will be hard enough.”

“And how do we know our champion will follow your instructions?”

“We don’t. But hopefully the tournament will enable the worthiest of competitors to rise to the top.”

“Do you think it will be a Telepath? Their minds already operate on a different level.”

“It’s hard to say. My last simulation showed fairly even odds across the Remarkable population.”

“And what of the Savage population?”

“Almost no chance” replied Doctor Ivey. “And besides, wouldn’t selecting a Savage place a team at a competitive disadvantage in the tournament? Each team will require a Teleporter and we’ll be limiting the teams to no more than four members. I’d be surprised if a Savage is selected by us to

participate. I'd be even more surprised if a Remarkable chooses a Savage teammate to participate.”

In silence they observed the strange liquid in the test tube. It bubbled as it transformed from purple to green and then back to purple.

“When will you make the announcement?” asked Addison.

“This coming Saturday evening. During halftime of the Fuzzball Bowl. I calculated which event would reach the most people with the news and the Fuzzball Bowl was at the top of the list. Televisions, computers, and mobile devices all around the world will be glued to the game.”

“Did you suspect that all along? Is that why you built NexPhaze Arena? Why you lobbied to host the Fuzzball Bowl this year? To have control over the venue and our announcement?”

The corners of Doctor Ivey's mouth twitched. “No, I could not have known for sure. We constructed the Arena years ago just as we were beginning work on the serum. It seems the timing is just a very happy coincidence.”

“Will you appear at the event itself?”

Doctor Ivey pondered the question for a moment. He rarely appeared at events. “No, I think it's best if I beam in from my office. I'd like to show everyone a visual of the serum. Let them know what they'll be competing for.”

“But you're still not planning to reveal the serum's purpose?”

“Absolutely not. Too risky. If people find out what we've created this office would be overrun. In the wrong hands the serum's consequences would be catastrophic. Even in the right



hands the serum's consequences could be catastrophic as well. We need to trust our process. Trust in the strength of our champion. And speaking of our process, have all the logistics been organized? Is the support team in place?"

"Yes we have NexPhaze employees onsite as we speak. They'll be monitoring the competition on the ground at our first location. They have instructions to help avoid competitor death if at all possible but that cannot be guaranteed. There's an element of chance in all of this."

"I understand. And are our teams of Teleporters and Moddies at the ready?"

"Yes. They'll be traveling with the teams and providing food and drink. The housing division will be responsible for securing adequate shelter wherever the teams choose to travel. We'll be monitoring the competition but the teams themselves will be in charge. And what of all the parents of the competitors?"

"We'll share constant updates of each team's progress. And of course we'll need the parents to sign a waiver. There will be danger but the reward will far outweigh the risks. We can display a leaderboard online. Another on the Jumbo Screen at NexPhaze Arena."

"But we can't disclose each team's location."

"Of course not. That would sully the competition."

"And have you completed the clues?"

"I have. Our process must ensure we choose the right person. Once they take the serum they'll be no going back."

Ms. Addison Irving paused for a moment before tentatively asking "Once the deed is done, will we still exist?"

Doctor Ivey contemplated her question yet again. “Yes, I believe we will. But NexPhaze Enterprises surely will not. I’ll admit that no simulation I’ve run provides reliable data on what will become of the two of us.”

“And yet you still want to proceed?”

“We must. We have no choice.”

Addison’s holographic image flickered as she severed the video connection.

“We always have a choice.”

## The Fuzzball Bowl

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Saturday arrived and the town was abuzz. Banners announcing the epic clash of the Arctic Fangs vs. the Rumbling Growlers were everywhere. Grey and black banners for the Fangs. Red and gold banners for the Growlers. The town was teeming with out-of-town visitors. Teleportation Transport areas were bursting at the seams and Naomi's father had never been busier. He worked until midnight both nights before the big game in order to secure Saturday off so he could take Naomi and her friends to the match. Plus he wanted to watch the contest just as much as everyone else.

Everybody who was anybody wanted to attend. Celebrities, athletes, politicians, movie stars, corporate executives. Everyday fans of each team struggled to get tickets but that was nothing new. The price of Fuzzball Bowl tickets had skyrocketed in the days leading up to the match and Naomi still couldn't believe their good luck.

In the early afternoon television crews filmed the teams arriving at the stadium. Luxurious motor coaches transported the players from their hotels to the arena. The teams could have teleported of course but everyone relished in the hoopla of catching a glimpse of the star athletes. The teams were comprised of Shaggies, both men and women. Most days the Shaggies appeared quite normal. This evening however, as the full moon emerged, they would transform. They were amongst the world's top athletes. Chiseled with muscle they resembled

Renaissance sculptures. Already imposing in stature they would grow even more fearsome in a few short hours.

Sunset was at 7:00 p.m. and the match would start promptly at eight. Not wanting to take any chances with traffic Naomi's father dropped Naomi and her friends at the stadium just a little after five. He needn't have worried. Most folks were just teleporting to NexPhase Arena and automobile traffic was surprisingly light. Foot traffic around the stadium though was substantial. Dense throngs of people crowded the arena grounds. Some were ticket holders attending the big match. Most others just wanted to be a part of the spectacle.

"Remember kids," instructed Naomi's father. "Have an amazing time but be sure to stick together. I don't want to receive any calls about one of you wandering off and getting lost." He nodded to a pub across the street from the arena. "That will be our meeting point. On the sidewalk out front. I'll go park the car and will watch the match from that pub. After the match is over feel free to stay for a while to take photos. Maybe you'll meet a celebrity or two! You all have my mobile number if you need me for anything." A police car's siren whooped and lights flashed from behind. They were signaling Naomi's father to get a move on. He waved and pulled away to look for parking. "Have fun! Make good choices!" he cried as he drove off.

Naomi rolled her eyes as she, Sara, Xavier, and Xavier's little sister, Imani, navigated the crowd. Remarkable street performers were everywhere showcasing their talents. A Mystic wizard was getting laughs by casting spells on unsuspecting fans heading into the arena. With a crack of his wand he transformed Arctic Fangs fan's jerseys into Rumbling Growlers jerseys. For

those fans sporting Rumbling Growlers jerseys the mischievous Mystie was zapping their shirts into Arctic Fangs uniforms.

Mighties were earning quite a few donations by demonstrating impressive feats of strength. Two were juggling motorcycles back and forth between them. Another spun a garbage truck over his head as if making a pizza. There were no Teleporter street performers. Teleportation was not allowed within 400 meters of the stadium except in designated arrival and departure areas. A Swappie was being escorted out of the stadium by arena security. Apparently he had transformed himself into a garbage can and had tried to sneak in to see the match. He'd been discovered when security observed the garbage can suspiciously sliding towards a large viewing platform overlooking the Fuzzball field.

Weaving through the swarm of bodies the four of them found their seats. Xavier whistled through his teeth. "Unbelievable! We're right at midfield!" He turned and looked behind him. "And we're not even halfway up! These seats are brilliant! And look at that field! Have you ever seen grass so perfect?!"

Xavier was not wrong. The one hundred meter field was manicured to pristine conditions. Turning from the beautiful turf, Naomi gazed up behind her. Rows and rows of seats circled the arena. At the top and ringing the entire stadium were the luxury suites. Only the rich or the well-connected had secured one of those suites. Food and drinks were included, provided with white glove service up in that section. Naomi was about to turn back to the field when she spied Diego. He was seated in a luxury suite, out on a balcony and by himself. He looked less than pleased for a kid who was about to witness the biggest sporting event of the year. Inside the suite his

famous parents were laughing and shaking hands with society's upper crust.

Imani looked to Sara. "O.k. Tell me the rules again."

"I've told you a million times already!" exclaimed an exasperated Xavier.

"Pay your brother no mind" instructed Sara. "Let's start at the top. First they drop the Warble in the middle of the field. The Warble is an oblong leather ball similar to an American football or rugby ball. Next comes the Smash. Because each team starts the game in their own end zone, once the Warble is dropped players from opposite ends of the field race to the center to gain possession of the Warble."

"Why is it called the Smash?"

"Because that's what happens when you have ten massive Shaggies from each team collide at top speed. Most Smashes end with at least a couple of injured players."

"And what happens when one team gains possession of the Warble?"

"Then play is paused until the Quest begins."

"The Quest?"

"Exactly. The team that first possesses the Warble then has three chances to advance the Warble into the other teams Slash Zone. Usually the teams contrive creative plays to advance the Warble against their opponents. If they're able to cross the Warble into the Slash Zone (that's called a Howl Down) they net themselves five points. They can earn up to five more points if, once entering the Slash Zone, they then manage to toss the Warble through one of the other team's Rumble Rings."

Imani's head was spinning a bit but she seemed to be following. "Why is it called the Slash Zone? And remind me again about the Rumble Rings."

"It's called the Slash Zone because that's where some of the most brutal action in Fuzzball occurs. Whichever player just scored the Howl Down then goes head to head with a player from the opposite team. The player who just scored attempts to heave the Warble through one of the three Rumble Rings. The defending player does their best to ensure that doesn't happen. After a Howl Down the game is paused again. The defense is allowed to pick any Shaggie from their team to defend the Rumble Rings. They usually select their largest, most vicious player. Other than the Smash, the Rumble Rings are frequently where you see the most injuries. The offense tries to score through a Rumble Ring and the defender can employ almost any tactic to stop them. Do you see those three poles in each Slash Zone?"

"I do. They look a bit like basketball hoops. But why are they different heights?"

"Great question. One of the hoops is ten feet high. If you score the Warble through that hoop, you gain one additional point for your team. The middle hoop is fifteen feet high. If you manage to toss the Warble through that hoop, you gain three points. The last hoop, that one in far corner of the Slash Zone is worth five additional points. It's twenty feet off the ground and positioned in the corner. Being tucked in the corner and so high in the air it's easier to defend and much harder to score. Once the Warble leaves the players hand by any means, even if knocked away by the defender, the attempt is on. The attempt is called The Stab. You can shoot the Warble at the ring from distance. You can even try to slam dunk it."

“A slam dunk on a twenty foot hoop?”

“You’d be amazed what Shaggies can do once they’ve transformed. And these are some of the most athletic Shaggies in the world! Once the Stab is complete the game pauses once again. Both teams retreat to their respective Slash Zones. Then they drop the Warble in the middle of the field for another Smash. The game lasts a total of 60 minutes but the clock is suspended during stoppages of play. For example at half time, after a Howl Down, prior to The Stab, or during injuries while players receive medical attention.”

“While players receive medical attention?”

“Indeed. Fuzzball is entertaining but it’s also quite violent. I don’t expect we’ll see anyone die tonight but it’s certainly possible.” At that Imani went silent. Naomi said nothing as well. Neither did Xavier nor Sara. They were all sharing the very same thought. As excited as they were to be at the Fuzzball Bowl, they didn’t want to see anyone die on the field that night.



## The Announcement

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“Nachos! Get your nachos here! Melted cheese! Jalapeno peppers that will make you ooze with sweat!” An arena vendor was climbing up the aisle between the stadium seats.

“Ooooo! I’ll take one!” called out Naomi. She reached to grab a few folded bills from her back pocket. She earned a little spending money from her part-time gig at the local library. Well, technically Naomi was a volunteer but the head librarian always found a way to channel a few donation dollars to her favorite assistant.

Naomi loved to read and a job that surrounded her by books didn’t feel like a job at all. Her love of reading didn’t always translate into high marks at school but to Naomi, that wasn’t the point. The point was learning about the world. Being transported to places and times that existed in the past or to places and times that never existed at all. “Extra jalapeno peppers please.” Bills were exchanged for nachos.

Sara wrinkled her nose. “How can you stomach those things?”

“Because she is one...ah...spicy...meat...ah...ball!” replied Xavier in a terrible Italian accent. Sara whacked his shoulder.

The background music in the stadium faded. The announcer’s voice echoed round the high fidelity speakers embedded throughout NexPhaze Arena.

“Greetings one and all to the Fuzzball Bowl! Please remove your hats and stand if you’re able for our National Anthem.”

Fans stood at attention, held their hands to their hearts, and regarded their country’s flag. It rippled in the breeze atop a flagpole high above NexPhaze Arena. Two short minutes later the melody ended and the crowd was ready for action.

“Here they come!” bellowed Xavier. And sure enough from a tunnel down at field level the first team of Shaggies emerged. The Arctic Fangs were clad head to toe in their signature grey and black uniforms. They wore thick padding for their legs and for their shoulders. They sported helmets with facemasks. The facemasks were to protect their heads and also to protect against any nasty bites, either intentional or unintentional. The players were enormous. At least eight feet tall and bulging with hairy muscles.

Next appeared the Rumbling Growlers. Bright red jerseys, yellow leggings, and shiny gold helmets. Like the Arctic Fangs the team’s players were colossal. Thick fur couldn’t hide the undulating power underneath their pads.

“Do you know why they wear red uniforms?” Xavier whispered to Naomi.

“No, why?”

“Rumor is that they chose red so it would hide the blood. Their own blood or the other team’s blood.” The Rumbling Growlers had sent more of their opponents to the hospital than any other team in the league.

The team captains met in the middle of the field for the coin toss. The coin toss would determine which Slash Zone each team would be attacking and which zone they would be

defending. At halftime the teams reversed directions. With fantastic weather and very little wind the coin toss would be mostly ceremonial. Except for the bettors. You could bet on almost anything when it came to the Fuzzball Bowl. Millions of dollars were wagered on whether the coin would come up heads or come up tails.

Moments later it was time for the first Smash of the game. The head referee placed the Warble at midfield. The teams took their positions in their respective Slash Zones. Players placed one fuzzy paw on the ground taking up sprinter positions. A whistle sounded and the match was underway!

The teams collided at the center of the field in a sickening crunch. One player from each team broke bones and had to be substituted out. By halftime the Arctic Fangs had built a modest lead behind a brilliant aerial attack with the Warble. They'd also converted a rare five-pointer in the Rumble Rings after their second Howl Down. The roar of the crowd was deafening and as the halftime whistle sounded Naomi found that her ears were ringing from the noise. She turned to the other three. "Do you guys know who's performing during the halftime show?"

Typically the halftime show at the Fuzzball Bowl drew the most popular entertainers in the world. They put on elaborate acts with dancing, lights, and costumes. Even lasers and pyrotechnics. The halftime artist was usually named months in advance. Then the show was hyped right up until the time of the performance. This year, however, no entertainer had been named. The silence and mystery of it all only heightened interest. Naomi and her friends noticed that no stage was being erected on the field. That was unusual. They began to wonder if the star performer had suffered some sort of mishap. Then all of a sudden the star performer arrived.

The arena's massive Jumbo Screen crackled to life and the face of Doctor Alexander Ivey swam into view. He was beaming into the arena from his office high atop NexPhaze Tower.

“Greetings Fuzzball fans around the world! An exciting first half to be sure!” Fans queuing at the restrooms and at the concession stands paused their conversations to listen. An appearance by the Chief Executive Officer of NexPhaze was most unexpected. Typically a musician of some sort would be performing by now. Aside from the crowd in the arena, millions of additional viewers were tuned in on computers, televisions, and mobile devices around the globe.

“But I promise what I have to share with you now will be even more exciting!” Doctor Ivey paused for effect. “I’m so pleased to announce that on the first of July, NexPhaze Enterprises will be sponsoring a tournament! A very special tournament! A tournament the likes of which the world has never known! But first a few logistics. Only thirteen or fourteen year old girls and boys will be eligible to enter. To enter all you need to do is drop me a brief line describing why you’d like to be considered for the competition.”

Naomi and her two friends looked at one another eyes wide. They were in the proper age range. Being too young for consideration Imani frowned.

“From all the entries I receive, four team captains will be chosen. Those four team captains can then select up to three additional teammates for the tournament.”

Doctor Ivey held up a hand with three digits extended.

“Some additional guidance. Each team *must* include a Teleporter. Tasks that need solving will include world travel.

Please note that the tasks will not be for the faint of heart. There may be danger. Parents will need to sign off on a legal waiver for their children to participate. Other than ensuring you include a Teleporter on your team the make-up of each team's roster will be at the captain's discretion."

Doctor Ivey paused and adjusted his camera angle. Rapt observers of his halftime announcement now had a better view into his office. Clearly visible on a table near the doctor rested a small test tube filled with purple liquid. The liquid turned green, then back to purple.

"You're probably all wondering what prize awaits the winning team. Well that's where things get a bit sticky. You see, should a team solve the final challenge, only one team member will receive this prize!" The camera zoomed in on the mysterious vial.

"The winning team will have to decide who among them is destined to change the world. This miraculous serum will endow its host with a Remarkable ability that until now has never existed. What ability you ask? Well that knowledge can only be shared with the tournament's champion. But I can assure you this Remarkable skill will yield limitless power. This amazing new ability will alter the course of humanity altogether." Doctor Ivey paused again endowing his next words with substantial gravity. "An enormous opportunity to be sure...but also a weighty responsibility."

"There are more details to come but I'll now let everyone get back to the game! I expect to hear from all interested thirteen and fourteen year olds by June 1st. Remember, please just drop me a line explaining why you'd like to be considered for the competition. You'll see a submission form on the NexPhaze Enterprises website. Team captains will be chosen on June 1<sup>st</sup>

and the tournament will begin promptly one month later. I don't expect the competition will last more than one week. Perhaps two weeks at the most. All food and lodging for tournament contestants will be provided by NexPhaze Enterprises. And remember, parents will need to provide written approval for their children to participate. Good luck to all! And to all who can hear the sound of my voice, this coming July our remarkable world will never be the same!"

## Chosen Ones

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Doctor Ivey's image faded and the Jumbo Screen went blank. A momentary silence gave way to thousands of chattering voices. Excitement in the arena had already been high. Now it was approaching feverish levels. The second half of the Fuzzball Bowl passed in a blur. The Rumbling Growlers took the lead with two minutes to go only to surrender an Arctic Fang's Howl Down in the waning seconds of the game. Arctic Fangs fans were delirious. Rumbling Growlers fans were devastated. But overshadowing the riveting match was Doctor Ivey's halftime announcement.

On the drive home Doctor Ivey's proclamation was all the kids and Naomi's father could talk about. Why was the tournament only open to thirteen and fourteen year olds? What sorts of tasks would competitors undertake? And most curious of all, what type of remarkable ability would that mysterious liquid unlock?

"I bet it's the ability to control the weather" Xavier offered. "Imagine what type of influence that would yield!"

Sara looked unconvinced. "I doubt it's anything like that. I bet it's some kind of combination of all types of Remarkable abilities. Imagine if you could fly like a Soarie, start fires like a Burnie, have the strength of a Mightie, and be able to modify matter like a Moddie?" As Remarkables had begun to appear it was exceedingly rare to find a Remarkable with more than one

special ability. They did exist though. Remarkables who showcased two distinctive talents were known as R-Squares.

Imani was still in a bit of a huff since she was not yet old enough to be considered for the tournament. Stiffly she asked “Are you three going to submit a letter to NexPhaze? And if you do complete a submission what will you say?”

Naomi contemplated the question. There must be thousands, no probably millions of boys and girls her age who planned to offer their names for selection. It seemed like a lottery with extremely long odds. Plus she was a Savage and Doctor Ivey had mentioned at least one member of each team must be a Teleporter. That requirement alone locked up one spot on each team for a Remarkable with a talent she did not have.

“I’m pretty sure that door is closed to me. But Sara and Xavier could have a real shot.”

“I don’t even like to use my telepathy, you know that. But Xavier’s one the most experienced Teleporters out there.”

It was true. Xavier had transformed into a Teleporter near the beginning of the Great Rift. He’d been honing his skills for the last seven years. He’d likely be working for NexPhaze Enterprises already if not for the fact that he was still in middle school.

“I guess I’ll give it a go” Xavier pondered aloud. “Extraordinarily small chance of being selected but even less of a chance if you don’t submit your name in the first place.” Awed, he continued. “Imagine. A gateway to limitless power.”

Having been an ordinary girl her entire life, Naomi couldn’t quite wrap her head around the idea. Doctor Ivey’s announcement had mentioned team captains were to be selected



on June 1<sup>st</sup>. That was just a few weeks away which gave tournament hopefuls very little time to craft their submissions.

Xavier got to work right away. He convinced Sara to write up a draft as well. Both completed their online submissions well ahead of time. Naomi chose not to bother.

Days passed and the calendar turned to Friday, June 1<sup>st</sup>. Countries around the world had dubbed it “Selection Day”. Team captains would be announced at noon from NexPhaze headquarters. Of course noon at NexPhaze was the middle of the night for folks on the other side of the planet. However even those far away people were glued to their devices to learn who’d been chosen.

Naomi and her friends would be watching from school. The teachers had agreed to pause all classes so students could learn in real-time which lucky teenagers would be captaining teams in the tournament. Noon just happened to coincide with Naomi, Sara, and Xavier’s lunch period. They sat together at a table outdoors enjoying the late spring sunshine.

“Nuts!” Naomi exclaimed. Her thermos of soup had gone cold.

A classmate named Sophia walked by and Naomi shyly asked if Sophia wouldn’t mind giving her soup a quick warm-up. Sophia was a Burnie and she happily obliged. Burnies rarely got to use their skills at school. Warming up one’s lunch was an exception.

Naomi could have asked a Mystie instead to conjure a spell to warm up her lunch. Alas, all the Mysties were on the other side of the courtyard trying to turn a raven into a kitten. Naomi thanked Sophia and turned to her friends. “What will you do if one of you is actually chosen?”

“I was talking to my mom last night and she told me to go for it.” Sara wrinkled her nose as she noticed her turkey sandwich had gotten squished in her backpack. “Even if the tasks are dangerous she said she’d sign the permission form.” Sara’s face fell. “I guess we’d have to figure out how to get my dad’s signature as well.” Sara missed her father terribly but she never enjoyed the process of visiting him in prison.

Although she had not submitted anything to NexPhaze Enterprises Naomi chimed in. “If there’s danger involved in the tasks I’m not sure my father would even provide his approval.” Naomi was his only daughter and it was just the two of them now. Her father was quite protective of her. He always had been protective but he was even more so now with Naomi’s mother gone.

“You guys, it’s almost time!” Xavier removed his mobile phone from his pants pocket. Mobile phones could not be used in class but they were permitted during lunch period. He navigated to the home page of NexPhaze Enterprises. The company would be livestreaming Doctor Alexander Ivey as he announced the names of the four team captains. “Look! There he is!”

Naomi and Sara crowded on either side of Xavier to get a better view of his phone. Doctor Ivey appeared in his office once again, a benevolent smile on his face.

“Greetings! Greetings one and all! First off, a huge thank-you to all the amazing teens who submitted a message on why they should be considered for our tournament! Your messages have proven most inspiring! That is except for those letters submitted by deceitful individuals attempting to game the system. We’ve done quite a bit of work to confirm that our chosen ones are truly thirteen or fourteen years old!”

“Myself, Ms. Addison Irving, and the NexPhaze team have evaluated all the submissions. We have made our selections for the four team captains. We have also chosen alternates. Alternates may be required if any team captain chooses not to participate in the tournament. That may happen as players and parents learn more details about what’s to come. We truly appreciate the vibrant effort that went into your letters and we’re excited to get the tournament underway! Remember that captains need not be Teleporters themselves but each team of up to four will require a Teleporter on their team. Because many children actually share the same name, I’ll be citing each contestant’s name, school, and online submission confirmation code. And now without further ado I’m pleased to name the first captain!”

“Ling Li! Guongmen Middle School, confirmation code 072679.”

Xavier went to go search for more information on the Internet about Ling Li but Sara slapped his hand. “What are you doing? We need to hear the other three names!”

“Oh, right.” Xavier navigated back to the livestream of Doctor Ivey.

“The next captain to announce is “Travis Wilson! Winston Churchill Middle School, confirmation code 080416.”

“I wonder what they wrote in their letters?” Naomi enquired.

“Ssshhh!” replied both Sara and Xavier together.

“The third captain to announce is Aanya Singh, Indira International Middle School, confirmation code 071413.”

“Well, that’s three. Only one more to go” Naomi declared.

“Ssshhh” replied both Sara and Xavier together.

“And our last and final captain to announce!” continued Doctor Ivey. “Diego Ruiz, Glenbrook North Middle School. No confirmation code as Diego’s submission did not come in via our website.”

All eyes in the school courtyard shifted to Diego. He sat alone at a table, a sandwich in his hands. He’d paused mid-bite, his mouth slightly agape. The weight of his classmate’s stares was immense. And Diego looked just as surprised as everyone else.

## Sunglasses at Night

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Doctor Ivey began to wrap up his broadcast. “Congratulations to all the team captains! Should you choose to participate you’ll have until July 1<sup>st</sup> to form your teams. Remember my previous instructions! Each captain can select up to three additional team members. Each team must be comprised of thirteen or fourteen year olds *only*. Failure to comply will result in immediate disqualification. Each team *must* include a Teleporter. The tournament tasks will require international transport. I leave it to the team captains to select which types of remarkable abilities they most value in their teammates!”

“The tournament will begin on the morning of July 1<sup>st</sup> right here at NexPhaze headquarters. 9:00 a.m. sharp. Be sure to have all parental waivers completed by then.” Doctor Ivey’s voice turned serious. “I know people must be very excited about this competition. After all, the winner will receive a special talent the likes of which the world has never seen. I want everyone to understand the importance of what I say. Our champion will be gifted with nothing less than the fate of humanity. It is not a responsibility to take lightly!”

With that he signed off and Xavier’s phone went dark. Seconds later Diego was mobbed by his classmates. There was thunderous applause and cries of encouragement. Not to mention a tad of jealousy mixed in as well. After all, Diego was a Savage in a world of Remarkables and yet he’d somehow secured one of the four coveted captain’s slots.

“How did you do it?”

“What did you write about?”

“Who are you going to choose as your teammates?”

“Are you going to compete at all?”

“Why didn’t you have a submission number?”

“What do you think the special ability will be?”

The questions were pelting Diego fast and furious. He looked like he’d rather be somewhere else. Without a word he packed up his lunch, snagged his backpack, and bolted to the school’s front office. Citing illness a call was placed to Diego’s parents. Minutes later a large black car pulled up to the school. Diego jumped into the backseat and was whisked away. He did not return to school that day.

Over the weekend the news coverage was of nothing but the tournament. People wanted to know as much as possible about the captains. Who were they? Why were they chosen? What had they written about?

Ling Li gave the first interview. She was fluent in both Mandarin and in English. Ling was thirteen years old and a 7<sup>th</sup> grade student in a vast metropolis in Eastern Asia. She had flowing black hair and fierce brown eyes. Her parents were both Remarkables and after the Great Rift, Ling had transformed into an incredibly rare R-Square. She was both a Teleporter and a Burnie. While she fielded most questions with aplomb, when it came to what information was in her submission letter she demurred. “That’s between me and Doctor Ivey.”

Travis Wilson was the next to speak with reporters. Born and raised in a tiny village in Western Europe, Travis was now

fourteen years old and in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. He was tall for his age with sandy blond hair and blue-green eyes. His small town threw an enormous party in his honor as a tournament captain. Travis, like Xavier, had transformed into a Teleporter at an early age. He'd been one of the youngest Teleporters to successfully complete international travel. Travis shared that his dream was to become a part of NexPhaze Enterprises' space exploration program.

On Sunday evening Aanya Singh was the third to speak publicly. She was an extremely gifted Swappie. During her interview she transformed from a thirteen year old girl into a mailbox, then a fawn, then a bicycle, and then back into a thirteen year old girl. She had chin-length brown hair and twinkling hazel eyes. Aanya also had a twin brother named Arjun who was a Teleporter. Aanya had already named Arjun as a teammate for the tournament but she was still deciding on her final two spots.

School let out for the summer two weeks later. Diego had not returned to class but apparently he'd kept up with all his assignments from his estate on the edge of town. He had not yet given any interviews despite the many news vans and cameras lining the fence surrounding the Ruiz family home. Everyone knew who his parents were. Now the world was anxious to learn more about Diego. However he clearly did not seem interested in talking.

Since Doctor Ivey's announcement Naomi, Sara, and Xavier could talk of nothing else. Now that school was out for the summer they all had a bit more spare time. Naomi picked up additional volunteer hours at the public library. As she left the library one evening to go meet Sara and Xavier at a nearby shopping mall, she failed to notice a figure following her. The

unknown party kept to the shadows. Wearing sunglasses and a hoodie the tracker trailed silently behind.

Naomi spied her friends just outside the movie theater. She was about to call out a greeting when a voice just behind her whispered “Pssst! Naomi!” Naomi nearly jumped out of her skin. She spun and observed a teenage boy concealed behind dark glasses and a hooded sweatshirt. She looked closely.

“Diego?”

“Ssshhh! Not so loud!”

“What are you doing here? Why aren’t you out giving interviews? Or choosing your teammates? The tournament is just a couple weeks away!”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“How did you even know where to find me?”

Even under his hood she could see Diego blush. “Umm...I followed you from the library. I knew you volunteered there. The much more difficult part was getting out of my house undetected. Either by my parents or by all those camera crews lining the streets.”

Sara and Xavier observed their friend engaged by a mysterious stranger. They walked over to investigate. As Sara approached she recognized her schoolmate.

“Diego!”

“Ssshhh! Not so loud!”

“But everyone’s been looking for you for weeks! Where have you been?”



“I’ve been thinking. Thinking if I even want to do this. Thinking that submitting my letter was maybe a mistake.”

“A mistake? You were one of four teenagers in the world to have been selected!” Xavier was incredulous. “How could you not want to do this?”

“It all just feels a bit overwhelming. And besides I haven’t even asked anyone yet to be my teammates.”

“Were you following Naomi?” Sara asked, abruptly changing the subject.

Diego blushed even pinker. “Umm...yes, I was. I was hoping to talk to her. Actually I was hoping to talk to all of you.”

“The three of us?” Naomi inquired. “But why? Shouldn’t you have more important things to be focused on? Like the upcoming tournament? Like selecting your team?”

“Well that’s the funny thing. That’s actually why I’m here. That’s why I was following Naomi.” Diego took a deep breath before continuing. “I was wondering if the three of you might like to be on my team.”

Naomi and her friends were flabbergasted. “What in the world are you talking about?!” Naomi asked. “Why would you want the three of us on your team?! Granted Xavier is a talented Teleporter but Sara doesn’t even like using her abilities. And I’m just an ordinary Savage like you. We’d stand no chance whatsoever!”

Diego contemplated the ground. He looked slightly ashamed. “Well, it’s just that you three are the only ones who ever even talk to me at school. Xavier is a Teleporter, which every team needs. Sara’s telepathy might come in handy. Who

knows? There might even be a need somehow for another Savage.” He glanced at Naomi briefly before continuing. “And the honest truth is...I have no one else to ask.”

“Is that Diego Ruiz?” a passerby inquired. Another person stopped to look. “It is! There he is everyone! There he is! It’s the fourth tournament captain!” Quickly a crowd formed. People began to snap photos.

“Where has he been?”

“Has he chosen a team?”

“Why hasn’t he given any interviews?”

“How in the world was he selected? He’s just a Savage. Nothing like his amazing parents.”

Diego glanced at Naomi, Sara, and Xavier in turn. “Please just think about it.” Then he took off at a full sprint seeking to avoid the pursuing crowd and their eager cameras.

## The Randos

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“He’s crazy” Sara muttered.

“Absolutely insane” Naomi echoed.

Xavier said nothing. His eyes were distant, lost in thought. The herd who had taken off after Diego had left the three of them alone in a welcome silence. It was never this quiet at the shopping mall. No one was even in the queue to buy movie tickets. Xavier turned to his friends.

“We should do it.”

“You’re as crazy as Diego!” Sara rolled her eyes.

“What does my mother say? Before every Soarie lesson?”

Naomi and Sara knew the words but this was different.

“What does she *say*?!” Xavier looked determined. Actually, he seemed to be teetering on the verge of anger.

“She says that *humans were never meant to have wings but that doesn’t mean that we weren’t meant to fly.*” Naomi had learned the mantra years ago even though she was not a Soarie. Soaries could fly using just the power of their minds. They had no need of wings. “What are you saying, Xavier?”

“I’m saying we should do it. Maybe together we can fly!”

Naomi contemplated the idea. Two Savages, one Teleporter, and one Telepath. While short on Remarkables they checked each box of Doctor Ivey’s requirements. Assuming of course

that all their parents signed off on the tournament permission forms. Naomi and her friends had also been following the news coverage of the other team captains from around the world. Those captains had been selecting extraordinarily talented Remarkable teammates. Unsurprisingly not a single Savage among them. If the upcoming tasks were to be challenging and potentially dangerous, what possible value could a Savage add?

“And here I thought that door was closed to me. I hadn’t even entered a submission online.”

“I entered a submission” Sara replied. “But clearly I wasn’t chosen.”

“Well Diego is choosing us now. I say we get back to him and tell him we’re in.” Xavier pulled out his mobile phone. “Does anyone have his number?”

Sara and Naomi looked at one another. They did not. But Diego’s parents’ number should be easy to find. And besides, they would need to clear everything with their parents first.

That evening at dinner Naomi shared the news with her father. The news that, out of the blue Diego had asked her, Sara, and Xavier to team up for the tournament. While initially excited about the prospect of his only daughter competing to win a world-altering remarkable ability, Mr. Strange remembered Doctor Ivey’s announcement at the Fuzzball Bowl. *The tasks will not be for the faint of heart. There may be danger.*

“I don’t know Naomi.”

Naomi had expected this. “I’m sure the people over at NexPhaze won’t let anyone get hurt. At least not too badly.” Naomi’s father looked skeptical as Naomi went on. “Xavier

really wants us to do it. Sara seems on board as well. Both already received parental permission. Sara even had to go visit her dad in...well, you know where. I don't think Diego or I will add much value being Savages and all, but..." Naomi's father cut her off.

"Please don't use that term."

"*Everyone* uses that term."

"Well I don't like it. People without Remarkable powers are not savages. And we're certainly not sub-average. Before the Great Rift most people in the world were quite normal. Throughout time there have been gifted individuals. People with special talents. It might be a talent for singing. It might be art. It might be that you were a shrewd business person. It might be athletics. All these talented individuals get the most attention, to be sure. But the world worked because of the efforts of ordinary people. People who go about their business and get essential tasks done. They deliver your mail. They serve food in restaurants. They build houses. They repair roads. Even the work that I do now as a Teleportation Traffic Controller."

Now Naomi was the one looking skeptical. "Dad, you know I would never make fun of your work but come on. The TTC? It's not like we're Moddies out there curing world hunger or something."

"No, we're not. But that doesn't make us any less important. I keep people safe when they're travelling via teleportation. It's a critical job. Does it make the headlines? No. But it doesn't need to. I find the work interesting. We have food on our table. We live in a home that meets our needs."

“I know, I know. It’s just hard when everyone around you has a special talent. I’ve always been just so...so...*ordinary*.”

Naomi’s father favored her with a smile. “Baby Girl that just makes you all the more special. You’ve always been the most remarkable thing in my life. And that’s why I’m worried about you participating in this tournament. You know I would never recover if something were to happen to you.” His eyes wandered unconsciously to where his bottle of whiskey sat.

Naomi returned his smile but her manner betrayed a hint of sorrow. “Well nothing special ever really happens to me. Why should it start now?”

Mr. Strange slumped back in his chair. He regarded his only daughter. More than anything he wanted to keep her safe. Naomi was just thirteen years old and she’d already lost one of the most important people in her life. They both had.

“Make me a promise. If I agree for you to compete in this tournament then you won’t take any unnecessary risks. If something seems too dangerous you’ll bow out. You’ll return home safe to me.”

Naomi readily concurred but her mind turned to Diego, Sara, and Xavier. If Naomi quit the competition what would become of her teammates? While not a Remarkable she nevertheless didn’t want to let them down.

The next day the newly formed team met at their school’s central courtyard. Xavier’s mother had dialed Diego’s parents. She had explained the offer from Diego to join his team. His parents agreed to pass along Diego’s mobile number and the four teens arranged a place and time to meet up in person. The school was officially closed but families and children came and went during the summer months. Access remained open to the

school grounds including the tennis courts, playground, basketball courts, and Fuzzball fields.

Xavier kicked off the conversation. “We’re in.”

Diego grinned. “What convinced you?”

“It was all Xavier. Sara and I were unsure but he hit us with some powerful Soarie wisdom. Even after we decided to do it I was barely able to get permission from my dad. He’s quite paranoid that something awful might happen to me.” Naomi’s brow furrowed but her demeanor was hopeful.

“Never!” Xavier replied. “If we get into a spot of trouble I’ll simply teleport us out. Or maybe Sara can see it coming with that telepathic brain of hers.” Sara swatted him. She knew that he knew that she preferred not to utilize her telepathic abilities.

“What are we going to call ourselves?” Diego asked the group. “Apparently every team needs to have a squad name. There’s going to be some sort of a scoreboard indicating each team’s progress through the tasks.”

“How about the Fearsome Foursome?” Sara offered.

“We feel more like a Quirky Quartet to me” Naomi countered.

Xavier eyed Diego. “Come on team captain, what have you got?”

“Well, I haven’t given it a ton of thought.” Diego paused. Suddenly inspiration struck. “I’ve got it! Our team name will be The Randos!” Xavier and Sara laughed but Naomi was confused.

“The Randos?”

“You can’t tell me you’ve never heard that term before?” Diego asked in disbelief. “It’s a slang term for the word random. Often it’s used to describe a random person. Seems like a perfect fit for our group here. After all, it was impossibly random that my submission was even selected in the first place. And incredibly random that the four of us will be teaming up. Certainly random that we’ll be the only team of two Remarkables and... um...two Un-Remarkables.” Like Naomi’s father, Diego had never been fond of the term Savage.

“What did you write in your letter anyway?” Xavier asked the question that they were all dying to know.

Diego hesitated before replying. “I promise I’ll tell you if we make it to the tournament finals.”

Per competition rules one team would be eliminated after each task until just two teams remained. They would be getting more details from Doctor Ivey when the tournament kicked off on July 1<sup>st</sup>.

“The Randos it is!” proclaimed Sara. “All hands in the center.” Sara blushed slightly as Diego laid his hand atop hers. “The Randos on three. One! Two! Three!”

“THE RANDOS!”

Eight hands flung up in the air and an unlikely team was born.



## The First Task

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The morning of July 1<sup>st</sup> arrived and with it came a torrent of global anticipation. News teams from around the world surrounded NexPhaze Enterprises headquarters. Cameras were at the ready. Reporters dotted the company perimeter microphones in hand. The NexPhaze Tower gleamed and twinkled in the morning sunshine. Floor upon floor of shimmering glass reflected the clear blue sky above in perfect symmetry.

The temperature was already quite warm. Summer heat had been rising year after year and this first day of July would be no different. Like the cause of the Great Rift, scientists could not agree on the cause of the increase in global temperatures. But the fact that the earth was slowly warming was undeniable. The Moddies were doing their part by transforming frigid arctic water back into arctic ice. But that was just a temporary fix as the ice would eventually melt again in time. Huge blocks of arctic ice had been calving into the ocean faster than the Moddies had been able to mend them. Moddies were fastening bandages as quickly as possible to a wound that refused to heal.

Security was tight as the four teams arrived at the NexPhaze campus. Accompanied by a police escort Ling Li and her team, the Flying Dragons, arrived first. They were quickly processed through the tower's main entrance. Reporters snapped photos but no one caught even a glimpse of the competitors themselves. The team could have teleported onto campus instead of arriving

by car but teleportation at NexPhaze headquarters was strictly limited to NexPhaze employees only.

The next team to arrive was the Terrible Tigers. Captained by Aanya Singh, the Terrible Tigers arrived at the tournament with high expectations. Interestingly now that the rosters of each team had become known, wagers were being placed on which team and which individual would win the competition. Being the only team with two Savages, Team Randos boasted the longest odds. The chances of either Diego Ruiz or Naomi Strange winning the competition were listed at one thousand to one.

Travis Wilson and his crew was the third squad to arrive. The Gregarious Gunners were comprised of some of the most accomplished Remarkables from their home country. In truth, once each captain had been announced, significant governmental resources had been deployed to locate talented teammates for Ling, for Aanya, and for Travis. Diego had refused such assistance. Instead he opted for his rag-tag group of randos. That was one of the many reasons their team was facing such long odds to win the tournament.

Team Randos arrived last. Being local and having no police escort they'd gotten stuck in traffic. Like at the Fuzzball Bowl, Naomi's father had insisted on serving as their driver. No parents were allowed past the secure gates of NexPhaze Enterprises so when they finally arrived, Mr. Strange parked near the campus entrance.

“Well I'd wish you good luck!” he proclaimed. “But something tells me you're the type of team that makes your own luck. Now get in there and show the world what you can do!”

As Naomi exited the front seat her father reached for her hand. Naomi hesitated and looked back.

“Remember your promise Naomi. If there’s ever a moment where your safety is in jeopardy. Where your life is in peril. Then *quit*. Quit the competition and come back to me.” He fixed Naomi with a beseeching gaze. “Please.”

“I will. I love you dad” came Naomi’s reply.

“I love you too Baby Girl.”

But as she turned to follow her teammates into the massive grounds of NexPhaze Enterprises, Naomi wasn’t quite sure what she might do in the face of danger. Would she shrink from it? Would she face it head on? It was hard to say. And why? Because it had never really happened. Her thirteen years on planet earth had thus far been quite ordinary. Oh how things were about to change.

Once through security the four teams were escorted by NexPhaze employees to a plush conference room high atop NexPhaze Tower. The competitors eyed one another sizing each other up. Nobody paid much mind to Team Randos. With two Savages on the team no one expected much from that group. Travis Wilson was the only one who even spoke to them. He politely introduced himself and shook hands all around.

“I know this is a competition but don’t listen to a word they’re saying about you all. We don’t know what kind of challenges are coming.” Travis glanced at Diego and at Naomi. “I know remarkable abilities will be important in this tournament but my mum has a saying. Belief in yourself is the most remarkable ability in the world.”

“Seems like a decent fellow” observed Diego as Travis rejoined his team. “Of course it’s easy for him to say since he can teleport whenever and wherever he wants.”

As the teams were seated around a large mahogany conference table, the holographic image of Doctor Alexander Ivey flickered into view. He stood at the head of the table with his arms spread wide.

“Greetings! Greetings my esteemed guests and competitors! I’m so pleased to welcome you to a tournament such that the world has never known! I do apologize that I’m not able to be with you today in person but I ran into...logistical challenges. The tasks that lie ahead will determine who among you is worthy of being named our champion. Worthy to receive a remarkable ability that will alter the course of every person on this planet!”

The competitors regarded one another and absorbed this weighty information. The esteemed doctor continued.

“Everything has been arranged. We expect the contest to last multiple days. Perhaps as much as a week. Maybe two. NexPhaze employees will accompany you on your journeys. They will ensure that you have proper food and lodging during the course of the tournament. They will do their best to ensure your safety but as your parental waivers specified, we can provide no guarantees.”

“Because the competition will span multiple days the tournament will be active from 8:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. each day. The rule will apply to whatever country and time zone you may find yourselves in. You’re still welcome to conduct research and sort out clues outside of active competition hours but no teleportation will be allowed during that time. We want

to make sure competitors take proper time to rest. I'm going to turn the floor over now to our President of NexPhase Enterprises, Ms. Addison Irving." The holographic aura of Doctor Ivey disappeared and was replaced by the glimmering image of Ms. Irving.

"The rules of the tournament are quite simple" she stated. "You'll be given three clues. Each clue will lead you to a specific task and to a specific location in the world. Whichever team is last to find the clue in each round will be *eliminated*." Her statement brought looks of concern in many competitors around the room.

Planning for travel abroad, Naomi and her team had jumped through many hoops to ensure that their passports were up to date ahead of the tournament. Despite the short notice Xavier was now cleared to teleport teammates to almost any country in the world.

Ms. Irving continued. "Please note that Remarkables have free reign to utilize the best of your abilities to solve the tasks at hand. Deceit of any kind will not be tolerated and will be cause for disqualification from the competition."

The image of Ms. Addison Irving rotated slightly. She noted Team Rados for a moment. It was hard to mistake the tone of disdain in her voice. "Savages are encouraged *not* to hinder the efforts of their teammates or of the other teams of Remarkables."

She turned back to address the broader room of hopefuls. "You'll be given a printout of what I'm about to say so no need to jot down notes. I'll now be sharing your very first clue. Good luck to all and may the world be grateful for your efforts."

In a no-nonsense voice Ms. Addison Irving delivered the first clue.

*Amazing adventures are awaiting you. 1*

*Miles of ocean and depths of blue.*

*Billions of creatures under the sky, 7.*

*Energy everywhere, please don't be shy.*

*Rally your team, get ready to go. 1*

*Got to hurry and find your flow. 8*

*It's not hard to guess but this is a race.*

*Sometimes such structures can be seen from space. 5*

*Corals they say are fading away. 5*

*Absolutely not! They're here to stay! N*

*You might think that you've solved this clue. 8*

*Even the cleverest one of you. 7.*

*But don't be fooled by what you see.*

*Eyes can deceive, set your mind free. 3*

*Lose yourself in the beginnings. 2*

*In the digits your mind will be spinning.*

*Zeal is needed. You must be hardcore. 4*

*Earth requires you to open the door. W*

## The Land Down Under

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While she was not a Remarkable, Naomi's first thought was the same as everyone else's. *What in the heck is Ms. Irving talking about?*

“Alright teams. Please head to your respective debriefing rooms. NexPhaze employees will be at the ready to assist you in your journeys. Please inform your designated Teleportation Deputy of your wishes regarding travel. Your Deputy will accompany you at all times although they've been instructed to offer no assistance related to clue locations. They will help coordinate your travel with local authorities depending on the global locations you select.”

The Randos filed out of the conference room and into a smaller private office, office number four. Naomi canvassed with The Randos as they received printed copies of the clue. Their Teleportation Deputy introduced himself as he handed copies of the clue all around.

“Darryl's the name and world travel is my game.” He winked at the group. Darryl was of average height and was dressed in a standard NexPhaze Enterprises uniform with bright blue stitching on the back. He had straight brown hair, cut fairly short and thinning a bit in the back. He had the build of an athlete that had once been chiseled with muscle before tallying a number of pounds of softness in middle age. “I'm looking forward to teleporting with you all over these next few days but remember what Ms. Irving said. I'm just here to ensure you

travel safely. No help whatsoever on the clues. You have to solve those on your own. Just ring the intercom if and when you decide you're ready to travel." And with that he quietly exited the room and closed the door.

As soon as the door clicked shut Sara addressed her teammates. "It's pretty obvious, isn't it?" Sara asked excitedly. "Aren't we supposed to go to the Great Barrier Reef?" Her teammates waited for her to go on. "Didn't you listen to the clue? *Corals they say are fading away?* No coral reef is fading faster than the Great Barrier Reef down in Australia."

While she'd never been there herself Naomi had read all about the Great Barrier Reef. It was the world's largest coral reef system. It stretched off the coast of Australia for hundreds of miles. It could be seen from outer space and was the world's largest structure made by living organisms. A major news network had actually labelled the reef as one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World.

While a major attraction for tourism, in recent years people had begun to realize the damage occurring at the reef. Fishing, manmade pollutants, changes in the climate, coral bleaching, and the dumping of dredging sludge had done great damage over the years. The Australian government was working hard to protect large sections of the reef to help it recover.

Teeming with activity just below the surface, the Great Barrier Reef supported an extraordinary diversity of life, including many vulnerable or endangered species. Sea turtles, dolphins, and humpback whales all called the reef home. Over a thousand species of fish lived at the reef, along with sea snakes, sharks, birds, crocodiles, jellyfish, clams, frogs, and seahorses.



Diego rubbed his jaw. “You know I think Sara may be on to something.” She favored him with a shy smile.

“But what do all those numbers mean?” Xavier wondered aloud. “The ones at the ends of the lines in the clue?” The group silently read the clue over again hoping for inspiration. When none arrived Diego voiced a suggestion.

“The clock is ticking and it’s possible some of the other teams have already teleported. Why don’t we get ourselves down to Australia and figure out the rest of the clue after we get there?”

It seemed like a reasonable proposal but Australia is an awfully big country. Where to begin? Bringing up a map of the reef on his phone Xavier pointed to the screen. “How about there?” He pointed to the image of a small town in the far north of Queensland, Australia.

“Port Douglas? I’ve actually read about that town” remarked Naomi. “It’s fairly central along the reef and is a popular jumping off point for tourists who visit the area. Not that we’ll have a lot of leisure time but there are supposed to be beautiful beaches along with a famous rainforest.”

Sara was impressed. “How do you know all that?”

“I just read a lot, I guess. I volunteer in a library after all!”

“Are we agreed then?” asked Diego. “We’ll get started in Port Douglas, Australia?” His three teammates nodded their ascent. Diego rang the intercom. Seconds later Darryl appeared at the door.

“You all have a destination in mind already?”

“We do indeed” answered Diego. “We’d like to teleport to Port Douglas, Australia.” He turned to Xavier. “Have you ever teleported that far?”

“Actually, yes. Just last year I teleported my entire family to South Africa. We went on safari which was amazing by the way. I was tired for a few days after we arrived though. Teleporting that long of a distance takes a lot out of you.”

“Port Douglas Australia it is. I’ll make the necessary arrangements with the authorities and locate the most convenient teleportation landing zone. We’ll arrange for food, lodging, and any clothing requirements once you arrive. Did you all remember to bring your backpacks?”

Tournament contestants had been allowed one small backpack each. Naomi had packed hers with just the basics. Toothbrush and toothpaste. Change of underwear. Hairbrush and a few snacks. If they were going to be exploring the Great Barrier Reef she was going to need a swimsuit. She hadn’t expected to be in a swimsuit in front of Diego and her friends but this wasn’t the time to get all self-conscious. The team nodded and Darryl clapped his hands together.

“O.k., just give me a few minutes and we’ll be on our way. Who’s leaving first?”

Xavier could teleport just two people at a time. The trick was to keep a firm grip on each other’s hands. If your hands unclasped somehow, Teleporter and travel companions could become separated. It wouldn’t do to end up in Thailand when Australia was your destination. That’s why Teleporters with passengers almost always travelled with Wrist Locks.

“Why don’t I take Naomi first? Then I’ll come back for Sara and Diego on the second trip.”

Darryl nodded and began to loop the Wrist Locks between Xavier and Naomi's hands. He provided Xavier instructions on locating their preferred landing zone in Port Douglas.

Xavier glanced at his friend. "You ready to go? It's quite a long distance but we'll be there before you can say Shaggie three times fast."

Naomi confirmed she was ready. Traveling by teleportation always made Naomi a bit queasy. The sensation was most peculiar and somewhat difficult to describe. It felt as if your entire body was being squeezed in a vise down to nothingness. For a moment the world went dark. You couldn't breathe. Then it suddenly felt like your body was rapidly re-inflated with an invisible bicycle pump. With a squeeze of her hand Xavier and Naomi made the jump.

Seconds later they popped into existence thousands of miles and an ocean away.

"Clear the zone, please! Clear the zone!"

Dazed, Naomi opened her eyes and surveyed their destination. Xavier had already begun to unharness their Wrist Locks to journey back to collect Diego and Sara. They were on a platform littered with bright red circles on the ground. Each circle was surrounded by the same steel mesh as the landing area outside their school. Travelers were popping into and out of existence all around them. Teleportation Traffic Controllers monitored the comings and goings. Their NexPhaze escort, Darryl, materialized in the next circle over.

The TTC officer repeated her command. "Clear the zone, please! Clear the zone!"

Naomi did as she was told and Xavier was approved for his return journey. He disappeared and not thirty seconds later he reappeared with Diego and Sara, each holding a hand secured via Wrist Locks. While they'd departed NexPhaze Tower close to midday, because of the time difference between NexPhaze headquarters and Port Douglas, Australia, it was now nighttime and also the following day! Not quite time travel but still quite disorienting.

Xavier was exhausted from the effort of such lengthy travel so Darryl guided the team to their nearby hotel. It was a quaint little inn in downtown Port Douglas called the Cozy Kangaroo. The air was humid and they could smell sea salt on the breeze. Being on the other side of the equator it was currently winter in Australia instead of summer. However Port Douglas was far north on the continent and quite comfortable, even in wintertime.

Darryl checked his watch. "The sun will be up in a few short hours. Try to get some rest." From the look of his slumped shoulders and drooping eyelids that would be no problem for Xavier. "Let's plan to meet at 9:00 a.m. for breakfast. We can chat then about your plans for the day."

## The Search is on

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The team retired to their respective rooms. Naomi noticed that her dresser and her closet were already supplied with numerous changes of clothing. Hopefully they wouldn't be in Port Douglas for too long though. Other teams were on the hunt for the next clue and as Doctor Ivey had said, this tournament was a race to the finish. Time was critical and their team still had no idea where to begin the search along hundreds of miles of reef. Only Xavier was able to get a little shut-eye. The rest of Team Randos was too excited. None had ever been to Australia before and dawn would be arriving soon.

Lying down on her bed for a moment, Naomi texted her father back home. She let him know they'd received the first clue. Mr. Strange almost fell out of his chair at work when Naomi shared where she was.

“YOU'RE IN AUSTRALIA?!” he'd texted in all caps. “You're not doing anything dangerous are you?”

“No, don't worry. We're just resting for a bit at a cute hotel called the Cozy Kangaroo.”

“How in the world did you end up all the way out in Australia?”

“It's a long story but it's because of Doctor Ivey's first clue. It mentioned miles of ocean and corals that are fading away. We're just off the coast of the Great Barrier Reef.”

“Are you sure you're in the right place?”

“We think so but the team is getting together in a few hours to put our heads together.”

“Well good luck and stay safe. I need to get back to work. I love you Baby Girl.”

“Bye dad. Love you too.”

Naomi tossed her mobile phone onto the nightstand. She lay awake atop the covers contemplating the seemingly random series of events that had led her to this quaint hotel on the other side of the world. Too restless to sleep Naomi decided to go for a short walk. She nabbed her phone and donned one of the comfortable fuzzy sweaters the NexPhaze employees had left in her room. In the early morning it would be pleasantly cool outside. And in a few short hours the sun would be up. The forecast called for clear skies and a high temperature of 80 degrees. Hard to believe that’s what passed for a winter day in Port Douglas, Australia.

Out in the hallway Naomi pulled her door shut behind her. The lock clicked. The door to another room slammed shut at the end of the hall. Startled, Naomi nearly jumped out of her skin. Who else would be out and about at such an hour? Peering down the hallway Naomi received her answer. It was Travis Wilson from the Gregarious Gunners.

“What are the odds?” he asked. “I guess great minds *do* think alike!” It couldn’t be coincidence that both teams had selected Port Douglas, Australia as their first destination. Suddenly Naomi felt better. More confident. Seeing another team present must mean they were on the right track.

“I guess it’s fair now to say good morning.” Naomi glanced out a nearby window where the first rays of sunshine were just peeking over the horizon.

Travis rubbed his eyes. He looked exhausted. “I’m not sure there’s anything good about it. I was already tired from first teleporting from home to NexPhaze headquarters. Then I teleported my team all the way here. I’m beat.”

“Then why aren’t you sleeping?”

“I tried but all these time changes are wreaking havoc with my system. I can’t tell day from night.” He rubbed his eyes again. “Why are you up so early?”

“Same. The time difference. It still feels like midday yesterday to me. I was planning to take a quick walk before the rest of team convenes for breakfast.”

“Fancy some company? I know we’re competitors and all that but we’re kind of on a timeout right now until the day starts, right?”

Naomi considered. Her father probably wouldn’t want her wandering the streets of an unfamiliar town in a foreign country on her own. And Travis seemed like a decent sort. He was the only one who had even talked to her and her teammates as the competition began. She nodded and they headed to the exit.

Naomi picked up her end of the conversation. “So, what do you think this special new ability is going to be? I’m sure it won’t be mine but it’s all the team can talk about.”

“I’m not sure” replied Travis. “And to be honest, I’m not even sure I want it. The power and responsibility to change the world? That sounds pretty heavy. But my parents really wanted me to enter a submission. I couldn’t believe it when I was actually chosen.”

They stepped out into the cool morning air. As the sun rose the early morning cloud cover was already beginning to burn

off. They ambled past shops that were stirring to life. Even in an Australian winter tourism was strong. Hotels were busy and restaurants were full. The scent of the ocean was on the air and many people from all over the world would soon be experiencing the beauty and the wonder of the Great Barrier Reef.

“So you guys have cracked the code? How come you picked Port Douglas?”

Naomi wasn't sure how much she should say. “Well, to be honest we're only partway there. We figured the next clue was here at the reef. It must just be coincidence that both our teams chose Port Douglas as our jumping off point.”

“I'm not sure I believe in coincidences. All events serve a larger purpose. Even if we fail to understand at the time.” Travis sheepishly observed the sidewalk before continuing. “Well, at least that's what my parents say.”

All of a sudden Naomi thought of her mother. The random set of coincidences that tragically aligned to result in her car accident. Naomi and Travis reached the end of the block, crossed the street, and began making their way back to the hotel.

Naomi broke the silence and asked the question that all tournament captains had been fielding since their names had been announced by Doctor Ivey. “So do you know why you were chosen?” Slightly different than asking directly what was written in his submission but not all that different.

Travis pondered for a moment before replying. “I don't. I really don't. I have been teleporting since the age of seven so maybe that had something to do with it.”



Naomi sensed Travis was holding something back. After all, Xavier was likewise a skilled teleporter. He too had been teleporting since the beginning of the Great Rift. And yet Xavier had not been selected as a captain.

They arrived back in the hotel lobby just as Diego was exiting the elevator. “Ah, there you are Naomi! I’d knocked on your door but no one answered. Now I see why. You’re consorting with the competition!” He gave Naomi and Travis a playful smile. Naomi blushed.

“Morning, Travis. Fancy seeing you here. Of all the cities in all the world, we all just happen to have found the Cozy Kangaroo!” Secretly Diego had the same reaction as Naomi upon spying a member of a competing team. It actually made Diego feel better about their choice. If two teams were both in Port Douglas then they must be on the right track. “Let’s go, Naomi. Darryl has arranged for breakfast for the team. Hope you got a little rest, it’s going to be a big day!”

But it wasn’t. Nor was the day after that. By day three in Port Douglas the team was getting antsy. They’d rented a boat and sailed up and down miles and miles of reef. Xavier had teleported to and from many of the small islands dotted throughout the colossal mass of coral. They still weren’t even really sure what they were looking for.

The Gregarious Gunners were faring no better. It was a Herculean task. So much area to explore and no sighting of either of the two other teams, the Flying Dragons or the Terrible Tigers. Back at their hotel on the evening of day three a dejected team of randos sat down to dinner together. They’d chosen a small restaurant not far from their hotel that served delicious seafood sourced from local waters. Xavier’s mobile phone chimed.

“A text?” asked Sara.

“Uh huh. From my mom.” Xavier looked at his phone and his face fell.

“What is it?” asked Naomi.

Xavier didn’t say a word. He turned his phone around so his teammates could read the message.

“Bad news, son. It’s all over the news. The Terrible Tigers just found the second clue.”

## Course Correction

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“I knew we were missing something” lamented Diego. Over the last seventy two hours they’d not caught a glimpse of anyone from the Terrible Tigers or the Flying Dragons. They had bumped into members of the Gregarious Gunners from time to time out on the water or at the hotel. NexPhaze employees were continuously monitoring the two teams of course. And the fact that the Gregarious Gunners had checked out of the hotel earlier that afternoon made the team even more nervous.

Xavier slammed his phone down on the table almost hard enough to break it. “I could’ve sworn we were in the right place. Especially with the Gunners here too.”

Everyone on the team took up their printed copy of Ms. Irving’s cryptic first clue. They’d reviewed the rhyming cipher time and again.

“I still think there something to those strange numbers” mused Sara. “They must mean something.”

Diego agreed. “I’ve thought the same thing. And *lose yourself in the beginnings*, what in the world does that mean?”

“Are you all ready to order?” Their server had returned to the table.

They’d forgotten to even look at the menu. Naomi picked hers up off the table and quickly scanned her options. “I’ll go with the grilled barramundi with lemon butter glaze.” Her stomach rumbled. They’d been so focused on their search,

NexPhaze overseers had to frequently remind the teammates to eat.

Naomi set her menu down atop her copy of the first clue. Her teammates went round the table placing their orders.

“I’ll take those menus out of your way.” The server extended an open palm.

Naomi glanced back down at her menu sitting before her. She was about to snatch it up and return it to the server before spotting something most unusual. The menu lay almost directly atop her clue. A tiny portion of the clue, however, peeked out from underneath.

If the menu wasn’t positioned exactly as it was Naomi never would have seen it. She aligned the menu resting on the clue more carefully to be sure. Just the first letter of each line of the clue was now visible. From top to bottom Naomi could read what was hidden.

*Amazing adventures are awaiting you. 1*

*Miles of ocean and depths of blue.*

*Billions of creatures under the sky, 7.*

*Energy everywhere, please don’t be shy.*

*Rally your team, get ready to go. 1*

*Got to hurry and find your flow. 8*

*It’s not hard to guess but this is a race.*

*Sometimes such structures can be seen from space. 5*

*Corals they say are fading away. 5*  
*Absolutely not! They're here to stay! N*  
*You might think that you've solved this clue. 8*  
*Even the cleverest one of you. 7.*  
*But don't be fooled by what you see.*  
*Eyes can deceive, set your mind free. 3*  
*Lose yourself in the beginnings. 2*  
*In the digits your mind will be spinning.*  
*Zeal is needed. You must be hardcore. 4*  
*Earth requires you to open the door. W*

## **AMBERGRIS CAYE BELIZE**

Naomi wasn't sure she'd heard of Ambergris Caye but she'd certainly heard of the country Belize. Belize was located on the northeast corner of Central America. The Randos couldn't be any farther from where the clue had been pointing them.

"You guys!" Naomi knocked over her water glass in excitement. The server looked annoyed and went to fetch a towel. "I've figured it out!"

"What? Just now? How?" Sara's mouth hung agape.

"It was the strangest thing. I'd just randomly set my menu down here on the table. Atop the clue. A total coincidence but I

could just see the first part of each line poking out. Look at the first letter of each line.” Each teammate picked up their paper. “Start at the top and read downwards.”

“Ambergris Caye Belize?” read Diego slowly. “It was right in front of us the whole time!”

“How could we miss that?! *Lose yourself in the beginnings?* Now I get it. But we still don’t know what those numbers mean.” Those pesky digits had been bugging Sara from the start.

“We can work on those later. There’s not a moment to lose! We’ve got to get ourselves to Belize! I can transport Naomi first again and then come back for you and Diego.”

Diego heaved a mighty sigh. “We can’t. At least not right now.”

“What are you talking about? I’m totally rested and ready to go! We just need to let Darryl know our plans so he can help with our transport itinerary and clearing customs once we arrive.”

“Don’t you remember what Doctor Ivey said at the beginning of the tournament? Before Ms. Irving read the first clue? No teleportation is allowed after 6:00 p.m. in the evening.”

Xavier glanced at his watch and sure enough, Diego was right. It was 6:30 p.m. in Port Douglas. They’d be stuck here until 8:00 a.m. the next morning at the earliest.

“Let’s just enjoy our dinner and try to get some rest” Sara advised pragmatically. “We’ve got to make some serious progress in Belize tomorrow. And I really wish people would stop taking photos and video everywhere we go.”

Sure enough a few of the other restaurant patrons had their mobile phones out and were filming Team Randos. That had been happening everywhere they went in Port Douglas and it was most annoying. Alas the tournament had captured the world's curiosity and privacy for any of the competitors had proven hard to come by. The server shooed the looky-loos away and minutes later dinner arrived. The team dug in and retired to their rooms after a delicious meal.

Sleep eventually took Naomi, Xavier, and Sara. But for Diego, it wouldn't come. Like Sara, the mysterious numbers in the clue were eating at him. They must mean something. It was like a splinter in his mind. He slid out of bed and flipped on his desk's reading lamp. Taking out the printed copy of his clue, he regarded those hanging digits for the umpteenth time. Something about them seemed familiar. Particularly the "N" and the "W" that finished off the tenth line and the last line of the clue respectively. Grabbing a Cozy Kangaroo hotel pen from the desk Diego jotted down just the series of numbers and letters.

1718055N87324W

It looked like meaningless gobbledygook at first. But as Diego stared at the string of letters and numbers understanding struck in a flash. He booted up his computer. He wanted to be sure. Opening up a mapping application Diego plugged in the combination of digits and letters.

17°18'55" N

87°32'4" W

A well-known location just off the coast of Belize popped up on his screen. Diego had learned the concepts of latitude and longitude all the way back in third grade. But with the onset of

advanced geolocation devices most people never had a need for such archaic information as coordinates. Sure the Teleportation Traffic Controllers used them for ensuring safe travel but Remarkables and Savages alike rarely had a need for coordinates in everyday life.

A broad smile spread slowly across Diego's face. He would share this new information with Darryl and with his teammates first thing in the morning. They now knew the precise location of their destination off the coast of Ambergris Caye in Belize. Diego's computer glowed softly in his darkened room. A brilliant image of crystal clear water encircling a dark shadowy blue disc shone on his screen. Bold words at the top declared their destination for tomorrow: **Great Blue Hole**.

Diego laid down in bed and pulled up the covers. He closed his eyes and thought of his parents. Of what they might think if his team could actually pull this off. Of how proud they would be of him, especially if he was the one chosen to receive Doctor Ivey's world-changing serum. While they never said or did anything to indicate as much, Diego always suspected they were a bit embarrassed of him. Who wouldn't be? Two famous, successful Remarkables with an only son that turned out to be a Savage? It was a disgrace Diego bore like a lead weight every waking hour of every day. A shame that even visited him at night in his dreams.



## The Beautiful Island

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At dawn the next morning Diego roused his teammates. He rapped loudly on each of their doors in turn.

“Up and at ‘em! We’re off to San Pedro right after breakfast!”

After dinner the previous evening The Randos had agreed upon their destination of choice. The small town of San Pedro on Ambergris Caye. They’d had to research what the word caye even meant. A caye, also spelled cay or key, was a small sandy island on the surface of a coral reef. Cayes occurred in tropical environments throughout the Pacific, Atlantic, and Indian Oceans. They also formed in the Caribbean, on the Great Barrier Reef, and in their new destination, the country of Belize.

Apparently there had been a catchy pop song written decades ago about Ambergris Caye. The song reached number one on the charts and sold millions of copies. No one on Team Randos was even alive at the time but Naomi’s father knew the song well. To this day Thomas Strange still maintained a digital copy on his exercise music playlist.

Sara was the first to emerge from her room. “What’s all the racket? We can’t teleport until 8:00 a.m.” She glanced back to the clock beside her bed. “It’s only 6:45.”

Xavier emerged next. “What’s with all the noise? We still have plenty of time before we need to teleport. And I need to be fresh and ready to go.”

Naomi appeared last rubbing her eyes. She had not slept well. It was the conversation with Travis about coincidences. The discussion had reminded Naomi of her mother's accident and those terrible events kept replaying in her mind.

Diego spread his arms wide. He flashed a rakish grin. They were the only people in the hallway. It was quite early in the morning after all.

"I know exactly where we're headed. I solved the second part of the clue!"

For a moment no one said a word.

Sara was the first to respond. "Was it the numbers? It was the numbers, wasn't it?"

Diego's grin widened. "It was the numbers indeed! Those and the suspicious placement of the letters 'N' and 'W'."

"Well, out with it!" demanded Xavier. "What did you figure out?!"

Diego went on to explain how he had determined the enigmatic numbers and letters in the clue were referring to a specific latitude and longitude. Naomi had discovered the hidden country and island where the second clue was located. Diego had discovered the precise location to target once they were in-country.

"It's pointing us to an area about 50 miles off the coast of San Pedro. Much too dangerous to teleport there directly."

One of the cardinal rules of teleporting was to not teleport out over open water. And never, *ever*, teleport underwater. Diego continued. "It's a giant marine sinkhole called the Great Blue Hole. It lies near the center of a large reef called Lighthouse

Reef, which is a part of the giant Belize Barrier Reef. It's the second biggest reef in the world and the largest in the northern hemisphere. The clue was never referring to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. It was Belize all along!"

"What's a marine sinkhole?" inquired Naomi.

"You know I looked that up after I figured out that the numbers in the clue were coordinates. Apparently it's some type of enormous underwater cave. Cylindrical in shape, over a thousand feet wide, and over 400 feet deep. Apparently all kinds of fish and even sharks live there. It's a super popular tourist spot, especially with divers."

"I wonder what we're supposed to do there?" Sara pondered aloud.

"Only one way to find out! Let's get some breakfast and tell Darryl where we're headed." Xavier was more than ready to be on their way. The entire team felt that while Port Douglas and the Great Barrier Reef had been quite interesting, they were falling further and further behind in the race to find clue number two. "Darryl will have to make sure the teleportation zone in San Pedro is ready for our arrival." He turned to Naomi. "You o.k. to go with me first? Then I'll come back for Diego and Sara?"

Naomi nodded.

"O.k., everyone pack up your things. Let's plan to be making the jump at 8:00 a.m. on the dot."

About an hour later Darryl helped attach the Wrist Locks between Naomi and Xavier. "Alright, given the distance and the time difference between Australia and Belize, we'll be arriving

at 4:00 p.m. in the afternoon. Oh, and it will be the day before today in Australia.”

The Randos looked at one another. They had just begun to get used to the new time zone in Australia. Now they were about to be thrown for another loop.

“So, you’re saying it’s still yesterday in Belize?” asked Xavier.

“Yes indeed. Similar experience to when it seemed you’d warped ahead in time when you teleported to Australia. This time we’re going back in time. If you want to do any exploring, you’ll only have a couple of hours before the 6:00 p.m. daily competition shut down.”

“Were you able to secure us a fast boat?” Given how far their team might be behind in the race for clue number two, Diego had requested that Darryl arrange for water transportation to the Great Blue Hole as soon as they arrived. No time for dilly-dallying. With the Terrible Tigers having already found clue number two, they couldn’t afford another night on the sidelines.

“I have. Captain’s name is Antonio Flowers. He knows the route from San Pedro to the Great Blue Hole forwards and backwards. If the seas are calm and you clear customs quickly upon arrival, he could have you at your destination by roughly 5:30 p.m. local time. 30 minutes to figure out what you need to accomplish. Traveling by boat at that speed, even over smooth water, will be quite a bumpy ride. Do any of you get seasick?”

The group regarded one another. “I sure hope not” joked Sara. “Can you imagine the mess we’ll make if we throw up skimming along the waves at forty miles per hour?!”

“Gross!” replied Naomi. “You’d leave a trail of vomit a hundred feet long!”

“At least! But it’s just more free food for the fish!” added Xavier gleefully. “Well, assuming you barfed overboard and not on top of your own feet.” Naomi swatted him.

“Or if you hurled all over your teammates” Darryl suggested with a wink. “O.k., once we arrive in San Pedro we’ll hustle over to Captain Flowers’ boat as soon as possible. We’ll get you to Great Blue Hole with roughly half an hour to explore. If we haven’t found anything by 6:00 p.m. you know the rules. We’ll be forced to head back to the mainland until 8:00 a.m. the following morning.”

“I don’t know about you guys but my gut tells me we’re running out of time.” Naomi, Xavier, and Sara all nodded their ascent. Diego went on. “If Aanya and the Terrible Tigers have this much of a head start, we’ve got to get clue number two today.” While global news had reported that neither the Gregarious Gunners nor the Flying Dragons had yet acquired the next clue, those two teams must be getting close.

Diego had no idea of how right he was. After a lengthy teleportation journey the next morning, first with Naomi and then with Diego and Sara, the bedraggled team found themselves gliding atop sapphire waters under the lead of their indigenous skipper, Captain Antonio Flowers.

“Just another ten minutes or so!”

It was difficult to hear Captain Flowers over the noise of the engines. The spray of ocean water was soaking everyone and everything inside their rented transportation. Most times tourists journeying from San Pedro to the Great Blue Hole took a leisurely two and a half hours to arrive at their destination. As

the light began to fade over the horizon, Xavier exhorted Captain Flowers to push their small boat even faster.

Thankfully no one had thrown-up yet. But given the jerky, swerving ride, each member of Team Randos was not far away from chucking their last meal into the ocean.

With a sudden jolt the boat's engines quieted. They slowed to a leisurely drift.

“We’re here!” announced Captain Flowers.

Golden light flickered above in the skies and reflected all around them on the surface of the shimmering ocean water. They had arrived at the Great Blue Hole but with limited time to spare. And why? Because the Gregarious Gunners and the Flying Dragons had already arrived. Team Randos was clearly the last ones to the party.

## Into the Depths

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Not only were the Gregarious Gunners and the Flying Dragons present but so was a host of NexPhaze employees. Some were skimming about in company-branded fishing boats. Others were dressed in diver gear. Above hovered a NexPhaze Enterprises helicopter. Actually two of them. They were monitoring all the action below at the Great Blue Hole. Now that the last three teams had arrived at the correct destination to locate clue number two, NexPhaze Enterprises had decided to livestream the action to gawkers around the world.

Clearly Team Randos was behind. Last to arrive, Naomi caught just a glimpse of Travis out on the water. Clustered near the center of the Great Blue Hole were three buoys. Each buoy glowed brightly and boasted the name of the teams still alive in the tournament. Suspended from each buoy by way of a cable were wooden chests. They resembled small treasure chests and they emitted pulses of white light from the watery depths below. The Terrible Tigers team buoy was missing. Presumably because they'd already solved the first clue and had collected their chest. The Tigers were likely well on their way towards solving the second clue. Remaining were three buoys proclaiming teams still in the hunt for clue number two.

Spying each other from fifty feet away, Travis favored Naomi with a dignified salute. Seconds later he began to descend under the water's surface. He did not teleport through the water. That would be far too dangerous. Instead his strategy was to doggy-paddle while his teammate Seamus, an

accomplished Telekinetic, simply moved the ocean water aside a gallon at a time. To people on the surface, it looked as if Travis was travelling casually down a tubular elevator made of water on all sides. A cylinder of air kept Travis safe in the center as he made the descent towards their chest.

Seamus was a picture of concentration. If he were to lose control of the ocean water with Travis fifty feet below the surface the results could be disastrous. Perhaps even deadly. A short time later Travis set his hands on the chest holding clue number two. A cheer went up from the Gregarious Gunners. Two teams would be advancing to the second task. Seamus elevated Travis back up their innovative column of air and water. Travis climbed into their boat and the Gregarious Gunners were soon winging it back to dry land.

Not far away it became clear that Ling Li and her teammates were having an argument. As a Teleporter and as a Burnie they were encouraging Ling to take drastic action. Team Randos had arrived on the scene and their twinkling buoy was bobbing tantalizingly close to Team Flying Dragons.

“How do we get down there?” Xavier asked. “That chest must be at least 50 feet deep. I’m already spent from the effort of teleporting us all the way here. And if I’ve learned anything from teleportation classes these last seven years, you never, *ever* teleport underwater.”

Sara and Diego looked at one another.

“You don’t have to read my thoughts, Sara” said Diego. “I’ve never learned how to swim and I’d hoped that you all would never find that out.”



Sara regarded Diego with compassion. “Yes, I can read other people’s thoughts. But I can’t swim well either. Certainly not down to the depths of that chest.”

“So apparently we’re in the same boat” thought Diego. Sara picked up his thoughts without even trying.

“Yes, I suppose we are” Sara sent right back. She gave him an encouraging smile.

Naomi slowly voiced her thoughts. “So if Diego and Sara are unavailable and Xavier cannot teleport underwater I suppose we should officially forfeit the competition?”

“Not unless one of you knows how to SCUBA dive?”

Everyone turned to Captain Flowers. “I’ve got all the gear below decks but I reckon you lot are too young to have been dive certified.”

“Not a chance” replied Sara.

“I’m a fair swimmer” offered Xavier. “But I’ve never been SCUBA certified.”

“And now you all know yet another reason why I’m considered a Savage. Can’t swim and certainly can’t dive.” Diego looked miserable. Sara put an arm around his shoulders.

Slowly Naomi raised her hand. Addressing Captain Flowers she timidly offered “I actually am dive certified.”

Her team’s jaws hit the deck of their boat.

“Last summer. My dad and I took a trip to Hawaii. He’d always wanted to take us when my mom was...well, you know. Anyhow we went for a week during summer vacation. Sara, you remember, when we went to the island of Maui?”

“I *do* remember your trip but you never mentioned taking SCUBA training!”

“Before our trip we started with the basics at our local neighborhood swimming pool. We had a very nice instructor. She was an Airie. By the end of the trip in Hawaii we’d worked our way up to diving in the open ocean water off the coast.”

Naomi thought back to her trip the previous summer. She and her father had seen such amazing marine life up close. Monk seals, sea urchins, spinner dolphins, reef triggerfish, manta rays. Even a whitetip reef shark! Of all that they’d seen, Naomi liked the large green sea turtles the best. They were so serene gliding along the currents. It seemed as if they had not a care in the world.

More commotion from Ling Li and the Flying Dragon’s boat snapped Naomi’s mind back to the present. She addressed Captain Flowers. “If you have all the gear I guess I can give it a shot. Fifty feet down is a long ways but I think I can make it.”

“You got it. Wetsuits haven’t been used in a while so they’re nice and dry. Should be pretty quick to climb into. Tanks are full so you’ll have plenty of air. Standard mix. 21% oxygen, 79% nitrogen.”

“I always thought air tanks were 100% oxygen?” asked Xavier.

“Common misconception” replied Captain Flowers as he helped zip up the back of Naomi’s wetsuit. He cast a surveying look over at the Flying Dragons. “I reckon you’ll reach the chest first. Looks like they can’t decide how to get down there and I’ll bet none of them are dive certified. I suppose there’s no harm in telling you now. You know how that first team, the Terrible Tigers, retrieved their chest? It was all the talk here in

Belize. Turns out they had an Airie on their team. Piece of cake for them to hold their breath underwater.”

“That’s right! I’d read about that” replied Diego. “I thought it a surprising choice at the time given all the other types of Remarkable abilities.”

“I wasn’t surprised in the least.” Captain Flowers adjusted the tanks of compressed air now hanging from Naomi’s back. “Makes a ton of sense if you think about it. Over 70 percent of the world is covered in water. Why would tournament tasks only take place on land?”

No one on Team Randos had thought about that. Captain Flowers handed Naomi a mask.

“Off you go and you better hurry! Last team to their chest gets eliminated!”

Ling Li and her team of Flying Dragons looked on in dismay as Naomi fell backwards into the depths of the Great Blue Hole. The Flying Dragons still hadn’t worked out how to retrieve their clue. Naomi began a steady descent through the warm Caribbean Sea. Visibility was good. What appeared to be a school of midnight parrotfish darted away at Naomi’s approach.

Ten feet down. Twenty feet down. She swallowed to relieve the pressure building in her ears. Thirty feet down. She could see the chest’s soft white glow. She kept her breathing steady. That was one of SCUBA diving’s most important rules.

Only ten feet to go when Naomi noticed movement near the chest of the Flying Dragons. Ling Li had suddenly appeared. She must have teleported from her boat up above.

Ling Li placed her hands on their team's chest. Then quite unintentionally her mouth opened and a torrent of unforgiving ocean water gushed in to fill the void.

## Eliminated

Naomi and Ling's eyes locked for a moment. Even at a distance Naomi could see the fear and distress there. Water filling her lungs Ling began to panic. She flailed towards the surface desperate for breath. From fifty feet down the distance was too great. She would never make it. Heart racing with panic Naomi waved wildly to the NexPhaze Airies who were monitoring the chests underwater. Two of them took off towards Ling as fast as their fins would take them. Naomi could see Ling's arms and legs twitch and go still. She must have lost consciousness.

After what felt like an eternity, the NexPhaze employees reached a motionless Ling. Her lifeless body had begun to drift downwards into the depths of the Great Blue Hole. The Airies grasped Ling under her arms and bore her quickly upwards toward the boats bobbing above. In her horror at what she'd just witnessed, Naomi hardly remembered taking hold of her team's chest. Naomi swam back to the surface in a daze, the chest in tow. Had she just witnessed the drowning death of Ling Li?

Captain Antonio Flowers and the Rados teammates helped pull Naomi back up on deck. She held the chest in her hands but was unable to speak. Captain Flowers removed her mask and began unbuckling the tanks.

"You got it!" Xavier was over the moon. "Did you grab our chest before the Flying Dragons captured theirs?"

Naomi still said nothing. Across the water medical teams began administering CPR to the unconscious body of Ling Li.

“What happened down there?!” asked Diego. Still Naomi was incapable of speech.

“Wait. Hold on a second.” Xavier saw what was happening across the water as NexPhaze employees were desperately trying to revive Ling Li. “Oh no. She didn’t. Did she actually teleport *underwater*?”

Teleporting underwater was one of the riskiest undertakings a Teleporter could embark upon. Only second to teleporting into outer space. When a Remarkable teleported anywhere it was almost impossible to control one’s breathing upon arrival. Breathing was a necessary part of life. Once you arrived at your destination, Teleporters needed oxygen flowing into their taxed brains as soon as possible. And compared to the effort of disappearing and reappearing in another location, holding one’s breath was near impossible, especially upon arrival. Ling had taken an awful risk.

The Randos observed the revival efforts in stunned silence. Their chest holding clue number two was forgotten for now. After much effort a NexPhaze employee was able to clear the water from Ling’s lungs. He indicated her heartbeat was weak but had been restored. She remained unconscious. A harness was lowered from one of the NexPhaze helicopters hovering above. Ling was carefully loaded and lifted up as the Flying Dragons looked on in shock. As soon as Ling was secured in the helicopter it swooped off towards land at top speed. Presumably to seek additional medical attention.

From his office on the 99<sup>th</sup> floor of NexPhaze Tower, Doctor Alexander Ivey had observed the entire episode. As had millions of viewers on mobile devices around the world.

Doctor Ivey spoke towards an intercom on his desk. “Addison, may I see you in my office please?”

“Of course, Alexander. I’m just completing a new simulation. I’ll be there in one minute.”

“Thanks. See you in sixty seconds.”

Moments later a small black box in the center of the room buzzed to life. A holographic image of Ms. Addison Irving shimmered into existence.

“You wanted to see me, Alexander?”

Doctor Ivey stepped towards Addison’s projection. “Do you have an update on the girl’s current condition?”

“She’s breathing on her own but she’s still unconscious. Heartbeat has been restored but the pulse is fragile. If she regains consciousness there may still be lasting damage.”

“How long until she reaches the hospital in Belize City?”

“Approximately 27 minutes. Hospital staff are aware of the incident and are awaiting Ms. Li’s arrival.” Belize City was the largest city in the country but even then it was home to just over 60,000 people. Doctor Ivey would have preferred a larger more well-resourced treatment facility but in his knowledge of drowning victims, time to receive professional medical care was the most important factor. The hospital in Belize City was Ling Li’s best option.

“Have her parents been informed?”

“Yes, I’ve already been in touch. We’re helping arrange teleportation services for them to join Ms. Li at the hospital in Belize City. Are you sure such risks are necessary for our tournament? They’re just children after all.”

Doctor Ivey pondered the question for a moment. “You’ve seen the same simulation results that I have. Certain traits are quite essential in our tournament champion. The stakes are just too high.”

“And you’re positive about the age requirements? Just thirteen and fourteen-year olds?”

“Addison, we’ve been over this already. And no, I’m not positive. But the simulations have shown that particular age range to be the most likely to carry out the task. Old enough to have formed a core set of values. To have set a direction for their moral compass. But not old enough to be lured by the temptations and pitfalls of adulthood. To misuse the serum for their own personal gain.”

“And what if Ms. Li is unable to carry on in the competition?”

“Even if she feels physically able which is unlikely, I doubt her parents will want her to continue. We still don’t know the extent of the damage. Each second the human brain is deprived of oxygen can be critical. She’s lucky to have survived at all.”

“So what will become of the Flying Dragons? Ms. Li technically reached the chest before Ms. Strange.”

“I suppose the Flying Dragons must be removed from the competition. We’ll forge ahead with the remaining three teams. Ms. Li was her team’s Teleporter. They won’t be able to travel for the next two tasks.”



“And we can’t allow them a substitute? Team Randos includes two Savages after all.” Doctor Ivey detected a hint of disdain in Addison’s voice.

“We have no choice. Team captains were chosen with great care. And besides it was actually Naomi Strange who was able to retrieve their team’s chest. While not a Remarkable it was a smart idea to employ her SCUBA diving skills.”

“I’ll inform the competitors. The Terrible Tigers, The Gregarious Gunners, and The Randos will proceed in the competition. The Flying Dragons will be eliminated by default.” Ms. Irving’s holographic image flickered for a moment. “Remember Alexander, we always have a choice.” Seconds later her image dissolved.

Alone in silence Doctor Ivey regarded the town below. Four contestants eliminated. Twelve remaining hopefuls. Surely one of the competitors would emerge victorious to be entrusted with the enormous task at hand.

He’d run the simulation countless times. It had to be a thirteen-year-old or fourteen-year-old. Even for Doctor Ivey it was hard to fathom the responsibility that would befall their champion. There was but one choice to be made but randomness could exist in even the most perfect equation. Doctor Ivey would know. On a table near the doctor rested a small test tube filled with the mysterious liquid. In the silence of Doctor Ivey’s office the fluid bubbled softly. It turned from purple to green. Then back to purple.

## The Second Task

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The evening light was fading as Team Randos sailed back towards San Pedro. The team was still in shock from what they'd just witnessed. Especially Naomi who wasn't yet speaking. They'd been warned that the tournament tasks might be dangerous. No one expected however that someone might actually die. The chest Naomi had recovered from the Deep Blue Hole lay forgotten on the deck.

Captain Flowers broke the silence. "I reckon she'll be alright." Four hopeful faces looked up at Antonio. "I've been a captain in these waters for over thirty years. I've seen far worse. The divers got to her quickly. She'll receive excellent care in Belize City. It might be a small town compared to some of the places you've all visited but we have a first rate hospital and excellent doctors. She'll be in good hands."

While this was a competition the captain's words instilled a measure of relief amongst the members of Team Randos.

"She made a decision," Captain Flowers remarked. "We all have to make decisions in life. Sometimes they work out. Sometimes they don't. Even when they don't, it's better than just standing on the sidelines. Remember that."

Captain Flowers maneuvered his boat into port. "I wish you good luck and God speed Team Randos!" He tipped them a wink and gave a slight bow. "It's been a pleasure to know you." Naomi, Diego, Xavier, and Sara stepped off onto the wooden planks connecting ocean to land. Antonio guided his boat away

from the docks. He beamed and saluted as he steered toward open water. The sun was just disappearing under the horizon. Water and sky glowed red and gold like fireworks exploding up above and down below with little distance to separate one from another.

Darryl awaited the team at the docks.

“I’ve gotten you all checked in. Very nice rooms at Hotel Tapir in San Pedro.”

“Can’t we just teleport there?” Xavier was spent from the day, emotionally and physically. The whole team was spent. But he had enough left in the tank to transport the team to their hotel if it was nearby.

“You could.” Darryl nodded. “But it’s just a half a mile bike ride. The fresh air may help clear your heads.” Darryl noticed the unopened chest holding the next clue to task number two.

“Make sure to load up that cargo. I know you may not be feeling your best in this moment.” He clasped his hands behind his back and addressed the team. “I’ll be honest. Very few people, Remarkables and Savages alike, expected you to make it past the first task. And without Ling Li’s accident you’d all be headed back home. But sometimes things happen for a reason. I think there’s more of your story yet to be told.”

Darryl stepped away from the group. Apparently he was preparing to teleport himself to the hotel ahead of the team.

“Why are we riding bikes?” Sara was tired but intrigued. “Aren’t there roads and taxis here on Ambergris Caye?”

“Yes, but very few. Golf carts and bicycles are the most popular method of conveyance. Actually, water taxis are the easiest way to make your way around the island but our hotel is

not far from here. Stick to that path over there.” Darryl pointed. “Mind the bumps, roots, and stones. It wouldn’t do to take a tumble. And don’t forget that chest. Hotel Tapir lies a short ride north from here. I’ll make sure dinner is on the table when you arrive.” Without another word Darryl vanished.

All four bicycles conveniently housed wire mesh baskets attached to the handlebars. Still not speaking Naomi placed the small chest holding clue number two into her basket. All thoughts were still on the health of Ling Li but the boat captain’s words had been encouraging. Not ten minutes later the bedraggled group arrived at Hotel Tapir.

The use of the word “hotel” turned out to be generous. The establishment housed no more than thirty rooms and all seemed fully booked. The Terrible Tigers were present. The Gregarious Gunners were staying there as well. The remaining three teammates of the Flying Dragons who were not currently unconscious at a hospital would likewise be staying the night.

At dinner, all the teams were seated in the same dining room. The close quarters proved slightly awkward since they were in the middle of a tournament after all. One that might determine the fate of the world.

“Pssst!!” Travis addressed Naomi under his breath as he walked by. “What happened down there? Did Ling really try to teleport underwater?”

Naomi finally broke. “What happened down there? What happened?!!” Her voice rose. “I watched Ling Li drown!” That’s what happened!” Heads turned from the other tables at the commotion. “Tell me Travis, have you ever watched someone die right in front of your eyes?”

Travis had not and he had no reply. Naomi's unexpected outburst had startled him and thrust him on his heels. He was just trying to be friendly. The room fell silent. Travis gawked as Naomi rose from her chair and strode out of the dining area. She hadn't eaten a speck of food. The chest revealing the second clue rested on the table next to Naomi's untouched dinner.

Diego got up to follow her. Sara stayed him with a firm grip on his shoulder. "No. Let her be." No stranger to trauma Sara knew it was best to give Naomi a little bit of space. Sara thought of her father locked away in prison. She thought of Naomi's mother taken from this world years earlier in that freak automobile accident. Sara could have read Naomi's thoughts in the moment but that wouldn't be right. In fact reading other people's thoughts had never felt right to Sara. People's thoughts should remain their own. It was only when other people voiced those thoughts aloud should there be consequences, for good or for ill. Well, at least according to Sara.

Travis sheepishly returned to his table and Diego sat back down. Looking to change the subject Xavier grabbed the small wooden chest Naomi had retrieved from the depths. It had no lock. Glancing at the door that Naomi had just exited Xavier queried his remaining teammates. "Do you think we should open it? Or should we wait for Naomi?" The Randos were the only team who had yet to review their chest's contents. All the other teams had their heads together as they examined the next cipher.

Diego checked his watch. "Well, it's after 6:00 p.m. No chance to teleport until tomorrow morning at the earliest. I don't think Naomi would mind if we took a peek at the next clue. We can fill her in later on any progress we make."

Concerned for Naomi but not wanting to lose any more time, Sara and Diego nodded their assent. Xavier unlatched the clasp holding the chest shut. The cover swung open easily on hinges made of gold. The group peered inside. There were four sets of headphones along with a curious black box with no markings. A small scrap of paper held instructions.

PLEASE PUT ON THESE HEADPHONES AND  
INSTRUCT THE HOLOCOM TO ACTIVATE.

“A Holocom?” Sara was confused but Diego had seen them before.

“My parents use them all the time in their work. They can project a high resolution three dimensional image of a person. You can use them to communicate live anywhere in the world. It appears as if you’re right there in the room even if you’re image is beaming in from miles away. You also can use them to create recordings.”

The teammates donned the headsets. At other tables around the dining hall the competing teams were doing the same.

“How does it work?” Xavier wanted to know.

“It responds to voice commands. But not to just anyone’s voice commands. This Holocom must be programmed to only respond to our team’s voices. It’s a part of the device’s security settings. I’m guessing whatever message it holds will flow wirelessly through our headsets. Diego addressed the small black box directly. Slowly and clearly he declared “Begin Holocom Transmission.”

At Diego’s command the little box stirred to life. A crisp, three dimensional image of Ms. Addison Irving radiated from

the Holocom. No more than a foot high (this was clearly a recorded message) the image was nonetheless extremely lifelike.

“Congratulations Team Randos!” Her enthusiasm seemed somewhat forced.

“You have completed the first task. You will continue on in the competition. But your journey is just beginning. I will now recite the second clue. As before, printed copies will be provided to you so no need to take written notes.”

A ping sounded from inside the wooden chest. Next to the Holocom a small compartment revealed itself. Diego reached inside and retrieved a manila folder which held the promised printed copies of the clue. The glowing image of Ms. Irving continued.

*As a team, you'll touch the sky.*

*A tower rises, a cloud floats by.*

*To find your next clue, climb the stairs.*

*Home to travelers, home to fairs.*

*Bidding adieu, you'll then be on to task three.*

*Free your mind up, victorious you shall be.*

*Taking years to build, it took the labor of many.*

*Quite academic, but peers? It has not any.*

*Mind your middles, check again your clue.*

*Do large chateaus lie, high at your venue?*

*Plainly not nouveau, yet there's history here.*

*Ascend up and up, your goal will be near.*

*Stairs are aplenty, elevators are rare.*

*The views are amazing, reaching up in the air.*

*Without a snafu, and you will land there.*



## On the Road Again

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The recorded message from Ms. Irving ended and her image disappeared. Diego, Sara, and Xavier sat in silence for a moment. Xavier removed his headphones and his teammates followed suit.

“It can’t be that easy. It just can’t.” Xavier sounded gobsmacked.

“What are you talking about?” Diego had not gleaned a thing from the first reading of the clue.

“Come. Look at this.” Sara and Diego crowded around Xavier. Xavier’s printed copy of the clue lay on the table in front of them.

“Check out these words and phrases.” Xavier kept his voice low so the other competitors would not overhear him. With a pen Xavier circled specific sections of the clue.

*A tower rises*

*climb the stairs*

*Home to travelers*

*Bidding adieu*

*Taking years to build*

*large chateaus*

*not nouveau*

Sara began to see what he was getting at. “I think you could be on to something, Xavier. We learned all about it in both my history class and in my French class.”

“About what?!!” An exasperated Diego still had not connected the dots.

Sara and Xavier looked around to make sure no one was eavesdropping. Together in a whisper they shared their guess.

“*The Eiffel Tower.*”

“In Paris, France” added Xavier.

Alone in her room Naomi’s stomach was roiling. Partially from not having eaten her dinner but mostly from her underwater episode with Ling Li. Naomi texted her father that she was seriously thinking of leaving the competition. As Naomi awaited a reply back there was a soft knock on her door. Nothing against her teammates, she just didn’t really feel like talking right now.

The soft knock returned. With a sigh Naomi reluctantly trudged to the door and opened the latch. Alas it wasn’t her teammates standing there in the hallway. And it wasn’t Travis either. It was Darryl. He appeared to be holding a tray of food.

“Alright if I bring this in? I heard you hadn’t eaten a bite and if we’re to be teleporting around the world tomorrow you should have some food. It would look quite poor on my NexPhase performance report if I had a competitor pass out on my watch.”

Naomi stood by the door as Darryl set the tray down on her desk. Darryl exited the room and Naomi began to close the door. She still had not uttered a word.

“Oh, before I forget.”

Naomi held the door ajar.

“There’s been an update on Ms. Ling Li’s condition. She’s conscious. She’s aware of her surroundings. She’s speaking clearly. Unfortunately she will not be able to teleport anytime soon but she’s going to be alright. Thankfully there were a few talented Healies at the Belize City hospital.”

“Healies?” Naomi’s voice had returned. She had never heard of such a Remarkable.

“Yes, Healies. Not Remarkables in the traditional sense of the word, but remarkable people nonetheless. Highly capable nurses and doctors who do the best they can to help patients get well. Often not the people making headlines but behind the scenes they help make the world go. They have gotten Ling Li into stable condition. The prognosis is that she’s going to make a full recovery.”

It was if an enormous weight had been lifted from Naomi’s shoulders.

“She’s going to be o.k.?”

“Well she won’t be able to progress in the tournament. Nor will her team of Flying Dragons. Without Ling Li’s teleportation capabilities, her team will be withdrawn from the tournament. We consulted with Doctor Ivey and with Ms. Addison Irving. Apparently no substitute Teleporters are allowed to step in as replacements. NexPhaze Teleporters will be transporting Ling’s Flying Dragons teammates back home first thing tomorrow at eight o’clock.”

“So, Team Randos is...still in the running? We’ve still got a chance?” It was the first time Naomi had even thought of the competition following Ling’s accident.

“If you’ve got a seat at the table you always have a chance.” Darryl gave a slight bow, turned, and strode down the hotel hallway. “Oh and by the way. You might want to meet up with your team before breakfast tomorrow. Rumor has it they have a destination in mind. Au revoir Naomi and do get some rest.”

Rest for Naomi came easier that night. The fact that Ling Li was recovering well at the hospital in Belize City was extremely reassuring. They had been warned by Doctor Ivey that the stakes of the tournament were high and Naomi awoke the next day with a newfound vigor.

Before any of her teammates had awoken Naomi banged on their doors in turn. “Wakey, wakey! Up and at ‘em!”

“Blimey!” exclaimed Xavier unlocking his door in a daze. “You trying to raise the entire hotel? It’s still only six o’clock in the morning!”

Sara emerged next. She had slept well dreaming sweet dreams of baguettes, cheese, and gooey chocolate croissants. “Naomi! We’re so sorry. We weren’t sure what to say. About what happened with Ling Li and all.”

Sara could have easily read Naomi’s thoughts in the moment but she chose not to. At the young age of thirteen, Sara had already learned that the power of choice was a powerful thing.

“I’m feeling better” replied Naomi. “Much better. Darryl stopped by yesterday evening. Ling is going to be o.k.”

Diego exited his room in a stupor. “Why couldn’t you let me sleep in?”

Xavier piled on through a yawn. “I’m with Diego. And here I’ve got to teleport us across the ocean again just a little later this morning.”

“You what? Wait. Did you guys open the chest? Did you solve the clue?” Naomi quieted as she awaited an answer.

“Well we think we *may* have solved it” Sara replied cautiously. After all The Randos had ended up in Australia when the correct destination had been Belize. Diego, Sara, and Xavier filled Naomi in on the Holocom message from Ms. Irving. They handed over a copy of the printed clue.

Naomi looked to Diego. “No numbers this time. No latitude and longitude coordinates to reference.”

“I thought the same thing” said Diego glumly. He’d been so proud of his codebreaking on the first clue. Figuring out the significance of those seemingly random numbers had been a stroke of inspiration. It made him feel as if he were remarkable. Or a Remarkable. Unfortunately with this latest clue Doctor Ivey and Ms. Irving clearly had a few more tricks up their sleeves.

“Nevertheless” replied Xavier. “Sara and I think there’s enough to go on here to teleport today to Paris, France. It’s got to be the Eiffel Tower. I’ll confirm our plans with Darryl and we’ll be on our way just after eight o’clock. Let’s pack up and have some breakfast. We’ll soon be hiking the sturdy iron stairs to the top of one of the world’s most iconic cities!”

“Oui, oui! Bon matin!”

“Wee, wee? Bun matten?” Diego was confused again.

Sara patted him on the arm. “Bon matin. It’s French. It means good morning.”

“Oh.” Diego looked embarrassed. He had never taken a French class.

Brimming with a renewed sense of purpose Naomi rallied the troops. “It’s agreed then. Just after breakfast Xavier will teleport us all to Paris, France. Once we arrive we can take a shuttle to the Eiffel Tower. Way too many tourists to teleport anywhere closer. The time change is going to be a problem again. If we leave right at 8:00 a.m. here in Belize, we’ll arrive at 5:00 p.m. in Paris. Only one hour to ascend the Eiffel Tower and collect clue number three before the six o’clock curfew.”

“Let’s do this thing!” Naomi was feeling so much better knowing that Ling Li was going to be o.k. “Hands in. Team Randos on three!”

Hands of different shades interlocked in the center. Diego blushed slightly as Sara laid her hand atop his. Naomi led the charge. “One, two, three...Team Randos!”

## The Tower

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Arriving in the designated landing zones at Charles de Gaulle Airport in late afternoon left both Naomi and Xavier confused. After a hurried breakfast they'd departed the small town of San Pedro in Belize just as soon as their assigned teleportation stations were ready. Just outside Paris, Naomi removed her passport from her backpack. Everyone's passports would need to be cleared by French customs officials before the team could proceed to their destination. Sara and Diego would be following close behind as soon as Xavier could return to Belize. Then the three would teleport back here to French customs. Darryl had once again teleported ahead of the group. Team Randos had requested transport from the airport to the Eiffel Tower which Darryl was confirming.

“Avancez, s'il vous plait! Avancez, s'il vous plait!” The Teleportation Traffic Controller motioned with her hand. Naomi was puzzled.

The TTC Officer pulled an exasperated face and switched to English. “Clear the zone, please! Clear the zone, please!”

Naomi did not understand French. That was Sara's department.

Following the TTC Officer's instructions Naomi made her way out of the teleportation landing area. The zones were all clearly marked with sky blue squares. Different than the bright red circles that were used in the United States. Darryl

approached just as Xavier, Sara, and Diego materialized out of thin air.

They were shoed out of the landing zone and the group began making its way towards passport control. Darryl addressed the team.

“O.k., I’ve arranged for a shuttle bus to transport you all directly to the Eiffel Tower. Typically you’d need tickets to visit the tower but NexPhaze Enterprises has connections all over the world. We’ve arranged for your group to have unfettered access to the site until six o’clock this evening.” Darryl glanced at his watch before continuing.

“The Eiffel Tower sits approximately twenty miles from here. In late afternoon traffic I’m guessing we’ll arrive there in about thirty to forty minutes”

“Thirty to forty minutes? By the time we get through customs and make the drive that will leave us just minutes to explore!” Diego was flustered. “Why can’t Xavier just teleport us there?”

“Well after such a long journey I’m not sure Xavier’s up for it.” Xavier did indeed look quite drained. “After journeying from Belize to France I doubt he’d be able to teleport you to the house next door. And besides teleportation is very limited here in the city of Paris. It’s quite crowded and there have been accidents in the past. You’ll just have to do the best you can once we arrive at the tower. Besides you can always return tomorrow if you run out of time today.”

The team queued in a line for travelers not carrying French passports. A few minutes later the group was cleared and were now officially admitted into the country of France. They navigated the crowds in search of their shuttle bus.



“You should also know that the elevators from the ground level to the second floor are closed for repairs. You’ll need to make your initial ascent on foot. The elevator that runs from the second floor to the top of the tower should be in fine working order.”

“Closed for repairs?” repeated Xavier weakly. “Aren’t there hundreds and hundreds of steps at the Eiffel Tower?”

Darryl did some quick mental math. “Well, I read just yesterday that there are 327 steps from ground level to the first floor. And then another 347 steps from the first floor to the second. So, 674 steps in all. But you should be grateful that the elevator from the second floor to the top floor is functional. That’ll save you about another 1,000 steps!”

“Another 1,000 steps?” Xavier sounded even wearier.

“Yes indeed! A grand total of 1,665 steps to the peak of the Eiffel Tower. Of course, no visitors are allowed to climb from floor two to floor three.”

“Why not?” Sara inquired.

“Because it’s not safe. It’s only for trained maintenance workers. A stiff breeze might blow a person right over the railing and you’d plummet to your demise.” Darryl eyed Naomi who was studying her shoes. “In any case, it’s not something to worry about. If you lot want to get to the top floor of the Eiffel Tower before the 6:00 p.m. evening shutdown, you’d better stretch those legs. 674 stairs to climb before you reach the elevator that will take you up to the top level.”

The team arrived at the transport pick-up area just outside the airport terminal. The Randos loaded in single file. Their driver

was sporting standard NexPhaze employee attire and he favored the team with a welcoming smile.

“Bonne chance!” he declared as he shifted the van into gear. He pulled out into the bustling airport traffic on a mission and slammed the van’s horn as if celebrating Bastille Day.

As they made their way towards the Eiffel Tower, Xavier spoke up. “There’s no way I’ll be able to climb that many stairs. At least not in time before the competition breaks for the evening.”

“Me neither” replied Sara. At her height Sara was an imposing volleyball player but scrambling up almost 700 steps in short order was going to be quite a tall task. Naomi turned to Diego.

“I guess it’s up to you.”

“Up to me?”

“Yes, it’s up to you. You’re on the track team at school. You guys run hills all the time in training. The steps of the Eiffel Tower is just another hill to climb. As soon as we arrive, you take off. We’ll be right behind you. Well, probably slightly more than right behind you.” Naomi regarded Xavier whose eyes were drooping. He seemed more ready for bed than for a trek up the Eiffel Tower. “Just get to that third floor before the clock tolls six.”

Diego nodded and reached into his backpack. Out came his pair of running shoes. Kicking his day shoes aside Diego laced up his new pair of footwear. Outside the shuttle bus came the strangest of sounds. It was a siren of some sort but nothing like anyone on Team Randos had heard before.

“Eeeeennooo! Eeeeennooo!”

It didn't sound anything like the ambulance sirens in the United States. Much higher pitched and even the flashing lights were different.

“That’s just an ambulance.” Apparently the shuttle bus driver was fluent in English. “Hopefully the commotion up ahead won’t slow us down too much.” Naomi fell silent as their shuttle bus slowly slinked past two automobiles on the side of the road. There had been an accident but all passengers were seemingly unharmed. Two men and a woman (hard to say if they were Remarkables) milled about as a policeman jotted down notes and surveyed the damage.

Passing the accident the last few miles to the Eiffel Tower zipped by in a blur. The shuttle bus darted in and out of traffic. It seemed that the driver was aware of their evening deadline and was trying to afford them as much time as possible at the famous landmark. Road signs swam by in a language that Naomi, Diego, and Xavier could not understand. From time to time Sara Translated. “Arrete! That means stop. Serrez a droite. That means keep to the right. Le sens inderdit. That means no entry.”

As Darryl had predicted, roughly forty minutes later the shuttle bus arrived at the foot of the Eiffel Tower. Most vehicles were not allowed to park that closely but as Darryl had mentioned, NexPhaze Enterprises had connections in all countries on the planet.

Their driver tipped them as a wink as Team Randos exited his vehicle in a flurry. In a mix of fragmented French and English he exclaimed “Now allez! Reach for the etoiles! And may you trouve what you’re looking for!”

In a haze of foul exhaust the shuttle bus peeled away. Darryl pointed the way to the staircase that led up to floor one and then to floor two. The evening light had not begun to dim in the slightest. Sunset in Paris in the month of July wouldn't occur for at least another four hours.

Naomi turned to Diego who was cinching up the laces of his running shoes.

“Diego! Go! Go now!”

Diego's eyes went wide. Perhaps with excitement. Perhaps with nervousness. Possibly the anticipation of being the captain of the first tournament team to solve clue number two. Or perhaps it was the chance of claiming Doctor Ivey's magical serum. A cryptic concoction that would finally enable Diego to become a Remarkable. To step out from the lengthy shadow of his famous parents. A serum that would empower him to alter the fate of all humans around the world.

Diego offered his team a salute and took off towards the steps at a full sprint. As his teammates looked on and trailed behind, Diego bounded up the steps of the Eiffel Tower two at a time. He never looked back.

## The Middle

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For the first 200 steps Diego didn't feel a thing. Fueled by adrenaline and by the possibility of securing the second clue ahead of all the Remarkables in the tournament, Diego bounded upward in spring-loaded sneakers. As he reached the first floor (327 steps up) his calves and quads began making some noise.

“No time for that” Diego said out loud. He had just fifteen minutes more to scale from floor one to floor two with scant time to then take the elevator to the summit. Surely the top of the tower would be where the clue to the third task resided. NexPhaze employees monitored his progress. Soaries were monitoring the skies. They circled one of the most identifiable structures in all of France. One of the most identifiable structures in all the world. A NexPhaze helicopter hovered in the clouds above. Perceiving the large NexPhaze presence Diego couldn't help but think they were in the right place this time.

He began the ascent from the first floor to the second. His breathing became more labored. The muscles in his legs burned. “Better not get a cramp” Diego thought to himself as he continued to leap upwards two steps at a time. A few minutes later and completely winded, Diego reached the second level. He paused to catch his breath. The beautiful city of Paris lay out before him like a picture postcard. The river Seine meandered peacefully down below. It divided the world capital into the North Bank and the South Bank. The river also helped to serve as a natural boundary forming separate and distinct

neighborhoods across the city. Neighborhoods that Diego would later learn were called arrondissements. A crowd had begun to gather in the Eiffel Tower Gardens below. Word had quickly spread that a team from Doctor Ivey's tournament was in town and they were seeking the third clue up above.

Diego raced to the elevator doors. He was greeted by an elevator attendant wearing a baby blue vest and matching hat.

“Voudrez-vous monter?” The attendant pointed his finger towards the sky.

Diego understood. “Yes, yes. I'd like to go to the top please.”

“Allez, allez.” The attendant motioned for Diego to enter the elevator. “To zee summit we go!” the elevator operator proclaimed in accented English. Seconds later they'd risen more than 500 additional feet above ground. Far below Naomi, Sara, and Xavier were just reaching the first floor. Diego checked the time. He'd have no more than a couple of minutes to explore the summit before the six o'clock deadline.

“Bonne chance!” the elevator operator announced as the doors slid open. They'd heard the same phrase of encouragement from the shuttle bus driver.

“Thanks!” replied Diego as he bolted from the elevator. At just 820 square feet the Eiffel Tower Summit did not take long to explore. Diego raced in a circle completing a full lap around the dizzying platform. The evening was clear and fair. The temperature was in the mid-seventies. Visibility stretched for 50 miles in all directions.

After his mad dash up to the tower's second level Diego had perspired clean through his shirt. Beads of sweat sprinkled the

floor as Diego looped around the peak. At just over 900 feet above the ground the breeze at the summit was quite refreshing. Nevertheless as Diego circled around and around the small space a discouraging truth was becoming painfully clear.

*There was nothing there.*

Far below the bells of Notre Dame faithfully chimed six times. Constructed long ago the famous medieval Catholic cathedral had been marking the time for hundreds of years. A dejected Diego lumbered back to the elevator. It turned out that the sight of a NexPhaze helicopter and circling Airies had meant nothing after all.

“Rien?” inquired the elevator operator. “Zer was nothing ici?”

“It looks that way” replied Diego. The group had been so sure that the next clue resided here at the Eiffel Tower. Diego and the elevator operator rode earthward in silence. A ping sounded and the doors slid open. With a soft pat on the shoulder the elevator operator gave Diego an encouraging look.

“C’est un mécontentement. Je comprend. Mais n’abandonnez pas. Ne perdez pas espoir et ne jamais abandonnez!” The operator struggled to find the words in English. After a moment the translation for his last bit of advice came to him. “Don’t lose hope and never give up!”

“Never give up?!” Sara had arrived to the second floor of the Eiffel Tower just as Diego was exiting the elevator. Naomi and an extremely fatigued Xavier brought up the rear. “Does that mean you found the third clue?! That we’re on our way to our next destination?!”

Sara took a closer look at Diego's gloomy face and received her answer.

"I made it to the summit in time. I searched every square inch of that third floor. There simply wasn't anything up there. No signs, no glowing chests. Nothing."

The group's hopeful aspirations popped like a balloon. They'd truly thought they were on to something by teleporting here to Paris. Team Randos walked slowly to the railing and took in the view. At approximately 400 feet above the ground, the vista was quite stunning. Sara pointed out the various landmarks in the distance. She'd learned all about them in her French class. While her squad was in poor spirits, having the Eiffel Tower to yourselves for a few private moments proved rejuvenating. Typically the monument was teeming with visitors.

"Look over there." Sara pointed to the northeast. "It's the Sacré Cœur Basilica." The Sacré Cœur was one of the most beautiful churches ever built. Sitting atop a hill overlooking the north of the city the basilica rested majestically in the distance. "The name Sacré Cœur in French means the Sacred Heart."

"And there! The famous Musee D'Orsey!" Sara traced her finger across a section of water winding through the center of the city. Along the river Seine stood multiple entrances to the Musee D'Orsey. The art museum was where many Impressionist paintings resided for all time. Van Gogh. Monet. Renoir. Sometimes difficult to pronounce the names if you didn't speak French. Even more difficult to reserve a ticket for admission to the prestigious landmark.

Most challenging of all was to describe the beauty witnessed in the artist's work. A lucky few were able to visit the museum



in person. Most folks now experienced the world in digital format, if they experienced it all. No need to visit the Musée D'Orsey in Paris. The museum was at your fingertips. Just one click away on your mobile device. That was the beauty and the convenience of all things digital.

But once there'd been a time of physical objects only. Actual globs of paint splotted across an elaborate sketch. Starched white canvas fresh off the press. Brushes and oils mingling in a beautiful dance that only the artist and their genius could choreograph. With rapid advances in technology the once active industry of printed materials was in decline. Paper was less common. Paints even less so. The world had gone digital and it was not going back.

Sara continued to point out the many celebrated landmarks that peppered the city. The Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile. A massive limestone archway honoring all those who fought and died for France in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. The Arc de Triomphe displayed the names of all French victories and generals inscribed on its inner and outer surfaces. Cutting eastward from the monument traversed the most famous avenue in all of France, the Champs-Élysées. Foot traffic was high as Parisians and tourists alike browsed boutiques and dined at cafés along the renowned boulevard.

The street terminated in a large public square, the Place de la Concorde. Even from this height the team could spy fountains dotting the plaza and spewing jets of water into the air. Resting to the east of the square was perhaps the most famous museum in France. Perhaps the most famous museum in the world. A massive structure of cut stone and elongated windows. Surrounded on three sides by wings of the museum rested what could best be described as a pyramid erected of glass.

“That pyramid is actually the museum’s main entrance. I’ve never visited but apparently some of the most famous works of Western art are housed behind those walls. The Mona Lisa. The Venus de Milo. Countless more.”

“Enjoying the view?” Darryl startled the team as they broke from their reverie. “Well, did you find the third clue up there?” Darryl gestured upwards toward the summit of the tower.

“Actually, no. I made it with a few minutes to spare but I didn’t find anything.” Diego’s words of disappointment snapped the team back to reality.

“Well that just means that the search continues!” Darryl seemed upbeat. “Besides it’s now after six o’clock. Looks like we’ll be spending the night in Paris. There could be worse things. Come on. Let’s get you all checked into a hotel and track down a warm meal. You haven’t lived until you’ve dined at an outdoor café in Paris in the summertime!”

An hour later and nibbling on a baguette Naomi couldn’t get something out of her head. The team sat together at a café awaiting their entrées. Their server had recommended the house special, Coq au vin. A famous French dish of chicken braised with wine, bacon, mushrooms, and garlic.

Naomi kept returning to one specific line in the second clue.

*Mind your middles, recheck your clue*

Mind your middles? Well, if that meant addressing hungry tummies they were doing just that. After a very satisfying dinner that concluded with profiteroles for dessert (sweet pastry balls filled with ice cream) the team retired to their hotel to get some rest. Rooms at Hotel Lapin were cozy and well appointed. Naomi particularly enjoyed the silk pajamas that NexPhaze

employees had kindly hung in her closet. She texted her father an update on their progress (or lack thereof) and shut down her phone.

Naomi lay her head on her pillow and closed her eyes. The perplexing line from the second clue swam through her mind's eye. She knew there was something there. She just couldn't put her finger on it. Like a word or a thought teetering on the tip of your tongue that just wouldn't come. Drifting off to sleep Naomi knew what to do. First thing in the morning she would ask Sara to read her mind.

## Enter the Vortex

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First thing in the morning proved later than expected. Exhausted from whipsawing across time zones and the stress of the tournament, Naomi was first on her team to wake. The digital clock by her bedside read 10:00 a.m. She showered, dressed slowly, and then roused her teammates one by one. They groggily descended the hotel's main staircase in search of breakfast.

“Did you hear the news?” Xavier asked.

“What news?” Naomi had not checked her phone yet that morning.

“The Gregarious Gunners and the Terrible Tigers are here. They arrived into Paris earlier this morning. The authorities are granting both team's access to the Eiffel Tower at noon today.”

“Well they're going to find the same thing I found. Diego was morose. “Absolutely nothing.”

“Looks like we've all followed a bit of a red-herring.” Sara playfully nudged Diego in the ribs. “I know what will cheer everybody up!”

“Did you figure out the actual destination from the second clue?” Xavier asked hopefully.

“Nope. But I saw fresh-baked chocolate croissants were on the menu for breakfast!”

The team was seated at a small round table on the hotel's private back patio. The day was already warm and the birds were singing. High walls surrounded the courtyard and kept the team away from prying eyes. Curious bystanders were always looking to catch a glimpse of tournament competitors.

Team Randos glanced up from their food due to a commotion at the doorway as four familiar faces walked in. The teens were accompanied by a NexPhaze Teleporter by the name of Elizabeth. Apparently the Gregarious Gunners were going to grab a bite to eat before their noontime date with the Eiffel Tower. An awkward silence ensued as the two teams regarded one another. Elizabeth guided her group to a table on the other side of the courtyard. Naomi and her friends tucked back into their delicious chocolate croissants. Fork halfway to her mouth Naomi started at the tap on her shoulder.

Nervously shifting from one foot to the other, Travis stood just behind her. "Naomi? Could I please have a quick word?"

Naomi flushed. She remembered how she had blown up at Travis after the incident with Ling Li. He hadn't really provoked her. He'd simply asked what had happened underwater back at the Great Blue Hole in Belize. A fairly innocuous question but Naomi had just been so upset at the time by what she'd seen.

Naomi nodded and rose from the table. She and Travis walked side by side away from the others. Standing apart from their respective teams Naomi and Travis locked eyes. Each attempted to speak first and both of them failed.

"I'm so sorry." Words of regret were uttered by both Naomi and Travis at the exact same time.

“No, let me go first” Naomi insisted. “I’m sorry for jumping down your throat back in Belize. It was the stress of the moment. The terror I’d seen in her eyes. The way her arms jerked and then went limp. I thought I’d just seen her...”

Travis cut her off softly. “I know, I know. No explanations necessary.” He scratched the back of his head. “Our Teleporter, Elizabeth, shared that Ling’s going to make a full recovery. But without Ling’s teleportation skills it looks like we’re down to three teams. With a sarcastic smile he continued. “Some fun tournament so far, eh?”

“Yeah.” Naomi kicked at the pebbles on the ground. “Some fun tournament.” She looked from the pavement back up to Travis. “So you guys are going to check out the Eiffel Tower?”

“Indeed. We’ll be headed there at noon along with the four Remarkables on the Terrible Tigers. Travis caught himself. “I mean...along with the four competitors on the Terrible Tigers.”

After years of daily reminders of the stark differences between Savages and Remarkables Naomi was unbothered. She gazed up at the peak of the Eiffel Tower hovering high above the streets of Paris. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

“Well the fact that you lot are still here and haven’t teleported yet makes me think we might not. If the third clue was up at the tower you guys would be long gone.”

Naomi imparted a shy smile as she returned to her table. Over her shoulder she called “I wouldn’t spend too much time sightseeing up there!”

“Fraternizing with the enemy again?” teased Diego as Naomi sat back down. “You didn’t tell him what happened yesterday did you? That we didn’t find anything?”

“I didn’t have to. Because we’re all still here in Paris he figured it out on his own. They’ll probably head to the summit at noon just to make sure but then they’ll be back to square one same as we are.”

“It’s not a total loss” replied Xavier through a mouthful of chocolate croissant.

“You know, I had the strangest dream last night” mused Naomi aloud. “I was back up on the third level of the Eiffel Tower. The views were just as amazing as what we witnessed yesterday. I walked up to the railing. For some reason the protective wire mesh wasn’t in place. Holding a metal beam I climbed up atop of the railing. And then I jumped.”

Sara dropped her fork. She didn’t like the way this story was heading. “You...jumped?”

“It’s not what it sounds like. I didn’t plummet hundreds of feet to my demise on the ground below. Besides that’s when you wake up anyhow.”

“So then what happened?” Sara was curious.

“It turned out I could fly. I soared round and round the skies above Paris. I sailed through the clouds so quickly the wind whistled through my ears. It felt like I was traveling through time.”

Suddenly Naomi remembered a second dream from the previous night. “Hey, have you guys ever seen that old cartoon about a wizard mouse? The one where he bewitches a bunch of brooms and they all come to life?”

“I’ve seen it,” confirmed Xavier. “The brooms all multiply and flood the entire castle with buckets of water.”

“That’s the one” replied Naomi. I dreamt something similar last night but instead of brooms the troublemakers were giant commas.”

“Commas? You mean like the little curly mark that indicates a pause in a sentence? Who in the world dreams about punctuation?” Xavier’s question was a fair one.

Naomi shrugged her shoulders. Dreams hardly ever seemed to make sense when you tried to explain them the next day. She went on to explain the line in clue number two. A line she simply couldn’t purge from her brain.

*Mind your middles, recheck your clue*

“What do you suppose it means?”

The rest of the team had no idea.

“I feel like I’m onto something but the answer is stuck in my head. It’s in there, I just can’t seem to grasp it.” Naomi turned to her best friend. “You should read my mind.”

Sara was uneasy. “I don’t know, Naomi. You know how I hate poking around in other people’s thoughts.”

“I know, Sara. Believe me I do. But I swear the answer is in there. I just need you to dive in and grab it.”

Sara thought about it. “If we do this you’ll really have to concentrate. You’ll need to think of nothing but the clue.”

“I’ll do my best. But you know how stream of consciousness works. Any kind of thought could randomly pop in there.”

Sara smiled. She knew. On the limited occasions she’d employed her telepathic abilities she’d seen firsthand how people’s minds operated. Most people assumed the human mind



was like a colossal filing system. Rows and rows of cabinets, all neatly stacked and labeled. First day of fourth grade. Eleventh birthday party. Holiday vacation in Hawaii. In regards to a meticulously ordered mind, nothing could have been further from the truth.

In reality entering the mind of another person could best be described as floating in the eye of a massive hurricane. Thoughts, ideas, emotions, and memories swirled about in a tremendous vortex. One could go looking for certain items but the mind is a labyrinth of epic proportions. It was somewhat easier if a Telepath's subject was encouraged to focus on certain concepts. Those ideas would drift closer and closer to the center of the hurricane and could be plucked from the eddy.

“Alright, let's give it a shot. And I promise not to peek around for any thoughts about Travis.” Naomi flushed once again.

They returned to Naomi's room so there would be quiet. Best to remove distractions. Sitting side by side on the bed Sara spoke first. “O.k., close your eyes.” Naomi did. “You might feel a slight tickle in your head. Like a feather lightly dusting your cerebral cortex. That's perfectly normal. In fact it's a bit of a giveaway for when a Telepath is trying to enter someone's mind. Remember, think only of the clue. You know I'll be able to see other thoughts that might arise.”

“I know, I know. I'm ready. Let's do this.”

Sara gazed intently at her best friend. With a hint of reluctance, she unleashed her remarkable ability. One moment Sara was sitting next to Naomi in a hotel room in Paris. The next moment she was sailing through her friend's mind. The sum of Naomi's thirteen years on planet earth whirled about in a

churn. Images (some still, some in motion), words, colors (those were emotions), ideas, dreams, and all manner of thoughts surrounded Sara on all sides.

From the maelstrom a sentence emerged. It repeated itself again and again.

*Mind your middles, recheck your clue*

*Mind your middles, recheck your clue*

*Mind your middles, recheck your clue*

“Yes we know that already Naomi” thought Sara. The sentences faded. In their place arrived snippets from Naomi’s second dream the night before. She really had dreamt of giant dancing commas! They were scurrying to and fro, all toting giant buckets of water.

“Dreams are really weird” thought Sara. Abruptly the dancing commas faded and another thought emerged.

*Mmmm...those chocolate croissants were really tasty.*

And then another.

*I wonder if I’m going to need braces?*

Resting on the bed Sara rolled her eyes. Without moving her lips she messaged her friend. “Come on, Naomi, pull it together. Give me some help here please.”

Naomi refocused. A new image emerged. One that Sara had not seen before. It was a column of letters. Two letters per row, each letter separated by a comma.

“Hold that thought Naomi!” Sara retrieved pen and paper from the hotel desk. Before the impression faded from Naomi’s

mind Sara managed to jot down what she'd seen. Naomi felt a slight tickle in her mind as her friend's thoughts returned back into Sara's head only.

“Well, was there anything in there? I swear there's something, I just haven't been able to yank it out.”

Sara passed over the slip of paper. Naomi read what had been captured.

*m, y*

*s, a*

*e, c*

*s, h*

*u, y*

*p, v*

*d, i*

*c, b*

*s, c*

*e, h*

*u, y*

*p, y*

*y, e*

*g, r*

*u, a*

“Well, what does it mean?” Sara asked her best friend.

Naomi gawked back at Sara, the confusion plain on her face. “I haven’t the slightest idea!”

## Into the Heights

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“What do you mean you haven’t the slightest idea?! That jumble of letters was in *your* brain after all!”

“I really don’t know! That’s probably why I couldn’t pull anything out. Do you think it means anything?” Both girls regarded the strange series of letters and commas.

“Let’s show it to Diego and Xavier” Sara recommended. “If there’s something here maybe they can help figure it out.”

Naomi and Sara returned to the courtyard outside where the boys still lingered from breakfast. Travis and his team of Gregarious Gunners had gone. Presumably to take up the search at the Eiffel Tower.

Xavier called over to the pair. “Hey! Well out with it. What did you find?”

“I found that Naomi does indeed have a crush on Travis!” Sara replied with a laugh. In payment for her joke Naomi her friend a solid punch to the shoulder.

“Tell us something we didn’t already know!” teased Diego. Naomi raised her hand to thump him too but he wisely dodged out of reach.

“No seriously! Did you guys find anything *about the clue* knocking around in Naomi’s brain?”

“Actually, we did. But we can’t really make sense of it.” Sara passed over the sheet of paper listing the mysterious letters

and commas. “Naomi’s mind is hung up on that line from the clue. Mind your middles, recheck your clue. I also pulled out that series of letters you see before you.”

Something clicked in Diego’s head. “Hang on a second.” He unfolded his own copy of clue number two from his back pocket. Diego’s eyes darted swiftly from Sara’s slip of paper back to his own. “Look at this! The letters and commas you snatched from Naomi’s brain exactly match the center letters and commas from the clue.”

Xavier pointed out the obvious. “But it’s just gibberish. They don’t spell anything out.”

*m, y s, a e, c s, h u, y p, v d, i c, b s, c e, h u, y p, y y, e g, r u, a*

Reading the letters horizontally Xavier was not wrong.

“Maybe we’re looking at this the wrong way” offered Sara. “Look how everything is ordered. And remember the first clue? The correct location was found by reading not horizontally but from top to bottom.” Everyone crowded shoulder to shoulder around Naomi’s coded vision. “What if we start at the top and read downwards?”

*m s e s u p d...*

“It’s still gibberish” observed Naomi. An uneasy feeling washed over her. It felt as if she was just wasting everyone’s time.

Diego’s brow furrowed in concentration. His eyes scanned each row in turn. His finger traced a path from one letter pairing to the next. He gasped suddenly. “Oh my goodness Naomi! You did it!

“I did?”

“You did! The answer was in your head this entire time!”  
Naomi still wasn’t seeing it. Xavier and Sara weren’t seeing it either.

Diego set Sara’s paper on the table. “You do indeed start at the top and work your way downwards. At each row, however, you must make a choice. Here Sara, lend me your pen.” Sara handed it over. In deliberate strokes Diego highlighted one letter from each row. Completing his work he stepped back so the others could see the paper clearly.

***m, y***

***s, a***

***e, c***

***s, h***

***u, y***

***p, v***

***d, i***

***c, b***

***s, c***

***e, h***

***u, y***

***p, y***

***y, e***

***g, r***

***u, a***

“Machu Picchu, Peru?” Xavier voiced aloud. Reading vertically from top to bottom, he was actually familiar with the famous landmark having studied it in his Spanish class.

“Exactly!”

With Sara and Naomi’s help, Diego had cracked the code. “The clue was written to point us towards Paris but that was just a fake-out. Just like steering us to Australia when Belize was the right answer.” The misdirection in both the first and the second clues was surely no coincidence.

Off in the distance the celebrated bells of Notre Dame tolled twelve times.

“It’s twelve noon” noted Sara. “The other two teams will be arriving at the Eiffel Tower.”

“Well let’s not stick around to watch them flounder. We’ve got to be on our way to Peru!” Xavier was ready to roll. “Like before, I can teleport with Naomi first. Then I’ll return for Diego and Sara. Vámonos Team Randos!”

The group rushed off to find Darryl. They were not surprised when Darryl informed them that teleportation was not permitted directly into the ruins of the ancient city. The closest they could arrive would be in the nearby town of Aguas Calientes. Located in the Urubamba River Valley in southeast Peru, Aguas Calientes was known for its thermal baths and as a gateway to the nearby Inca ruins of Machu Picchu.

Darryl glanced at his watch. He seemed a bit sorry to be leaving Paris so soon. “It’s just past noon here. If I’m not mistaken we’re about seven hours ahead of Peruvian time. It’ll only be five in the morning when we arrive there. Looks like we’ll be going back in time again! Give me a few minutes to



locate accommodations for you all. It's also bound to be quite chilly there. Peru is in the southern hemisphere and July will be their wintertime. It's unlikely but there could even be snow on the ground."

The Randos had already been growing weary from their geography jumps and time changes. It appeared as if the global ping-ponging would continue. And now there was a possibility of snow in the forecast as well!

"I hope you all are in tip-top shape. Machu Picchu is at *extreme* elevation. I want to say about 8,000 feet above sea level. You'll be out of breath just carrying your backpacks up the stairs of your hotel!"

The team gathered their belongings from their rooms and convened in the lobby. A short time later Darryl met up with the group.

"O.k., the preparations are complete. Xavier, you're to teleport Naomi to this location just outside of town. Then return for Sara and Diego. Aguas Calientes doesn't actually have a commercial airport like the one we arrived at in Paris. We'll be teleporting to a designated area in the town's train terminal instead."

Roughly 1.5 million tourists visited the ruins of Machu Picchu each year. And almost all of them arrived by train. The city of Cusco, just over forty miles away, harbored the closest airport. A few thousand heartier souls arrived annually at Machu Picchu via the celebrated Inca Trail. The primitive road was constructed hundreds of years ago. It could only be traversed over three to four days of strenuous hiking.

Darryl helped Naomi and Xavier secure their Wrist Locks. "I'm sure going to miss the cuisine here in France but I hear that

Peruvian food is awfully tasty too. Wait at the terminal for my arrival. I'll then take the team to your hotel, the Casa Sumaq. It's about a twenty minute walk from Machu Picchu Station.

Having safeguarded their Wrist Locks, Darryl gave Xavier and Naomi a thumbs up. A moment later Naomi felt the now familiar sensation her body being squeezed from all sides into nothingness. In mere seconds she and Xavier had once again travelled thousands of miles.

“Salir de la zona! Salir de la zona!”

A Peruvian Teleportation Traffic Controller waved his arms at them. As the perception of her body being re-inflated waned, Naomi regarded her surroundings. She and Xavier had appeared under an awning that opened out to the crisp mountain air. The teleportation landing area was in the shape of a triangle and neon green in color.

“Salir de la zona!” The TTC switched to accented English. “Clear the zone please!”

Naomi did as she was bid as Xavier teleported back to retrieve Sara and Diego. Naomi shivered. While there was no snow on the ground it still couldn't be more than 40 degrees. Naomi exited the landing area and took in the scenery. Cliffs dotted with green trees rose up from the station on all sides. Bright blue trains with yellow lettering belched smoke as the station hummed with people, even at this early hour. A Peruvian band warmed up on pan flutes nearby. They'd be playing shortly for locals and for tourists alike in exchange for monetary donations.

The unlikely group was soon reunited as Xavier arrived with Sara and Diego in tow. The team was relieved to see Darryl approaching. He carried a stack of brightly colored cloth.

“Here, take these. They’re Alpaca wool ponchos. Traditional attire here in Peru but more importantly, they’ll keep you warm for our walk to the hotel.”

Darryl guided them along the narrow stone streets of Aguas Calientes. They wove through markets just showing signs of life as the day was dawning. Cresting a wooden bridge atop a roiling river below Naomi noticed she was already out of breath. Darryl wasn’t lying about the effects of 8,000 feet of elevation.

“How do we get up to the ruins of Machu Picchu?” she wheezed. “We don’t have to climb, do we?”

“We better not!” panted Diego. He was still gassed from the stairs at the Eiffel Tower. Darryl paused to catch his breath as well.

“Nah. I’ve made all the arrangements. You actually can hike up to the site but there’s a bus that runs up there as well. First shuttle is at 6:00 a.m. Sunrise will be upon us shortly and it’s actually an extremely popular time to visit the ruins. Thankfully NexPhaze was able to pull some strings to secure your transportation. You’ll have the site to yourself for six hours. That’s the best we could do. The country of Peru relies quite heavily on tourism and Machu Picchu is one of their most beloved attractions.”

A few minutes later the team arrived at their hotel. Another quaint little inn, not dissimilar from the Cozy Kangaroo back in Port Douglas, Australia.

“Alright! Stowe your gear, hit the restroom, and meet back here on the hotel steps in ten minutes.” Darryl pointed skywards where the famous historical landmark loomed high above. “I hope you’re ready to trek beyond the clouds!”

## Taking the Lead

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Ten minutes later the team was ready to go. Darryl led them a short distance to a nearby bus stop. Crowds began to build as word of the team's arrival quickly spread through town. Onlookers gawked and snapped photos on their mobile phones. Most people were excited to catch a glimpse of Team Randos. Most except the tourists who had been scheduled to visit Machu Picchu that same morning. Their tickets had all been bumped to afford the teens a bit of privacy at the ruins.

“Buenos dias mi amigos!” The bus driver welcomed the team aboard along with Darryl. “Treinta minutos a la cima!”

Xavier translated. “He says good morning and that it's thirty minutes to the top.”

With a hacking cough of backfire the small green shuttlebus began their ascent. The team was unusually quiet. It was difficult not to be awed by the wondrous surroundings. The bus wove back and forth in switchbacks up the mountainside. Naomi stared out the window at a magnificent cloud forest. She spied blooming begonias and orchids dotted here and there on the forest floor. Tree ferns were littered everywhere.

The driver pointed out the various types of trees as they climbed. Q'euña, intimpa, cedar, alder, pisonay. Suddenly a thick mist enveloped their transport. Their driver slowed down due to poor visibility. Eventually the bus punched through the cloudy haze into bright sunshine blazing above. The sky was clear, a brilliant shade of blue.

“So what’s the plan?” Diego broke the spell of silence.

“Why don’t we split up? We can explore different areas of the ruins and cover more ground that way.” Sara’s idea made sense.

“Hemos Llegado!” declared the driver. The bright green bus lurched to a halt.

“We’re here” Xavier translated. The team thanked their driver and made their way to a modern looking entrance gate. Entrance passes were not required as NexPhaze employees mingled with the Peruvians park rangers who maintained the Incan citadel. Helicopters and Soaries circled above as they’d done when the team had visited the Eiffel Tower. It wasn’t previously an indication of being in the right location but this time felt different.

Naomi asked the obvious. “So...now what do we do?”

“We go in and explore!” There was a buzz in the crisp morning air and Diego was reenergized.

A small shop lay at the city’s entrance selling all manner of Peruvian clothing and trinkets. The team purchased maps of the site and passed through the main entrance gate. Illustrating a view from above the ruins the map labeled many of the city’s historic structures. It also explained more of the history of the lost city of Machu Picchu.

“Huh. I didn’t know that Machu Picchu translates to *Old Mountain.*” Naomi was already beginning to lose her breath as the team scaled a dirt path leading up to the ruins. She read aloud. “Often referred to as the Lost City of the Incas, Machu Picchu is the most familiar icon of the Inca Empire. In 2007, Machu Picchu was voted one of the New Seven Wonders of the

World in a worldwide poll.” Stunning terraces of stone and grass cut deeply into the mountain on each side of the trail. The terraces had primarily been used for farming hundreds of years ago when the city was populated.

Naomi read on as she puffed up the hill. The names of restored structures around the site were curious. *Sun Temple. Water Mirrors. Three Gates. Sacred Plaza. Royal Tomb.* “Actually instead of dividing and conquering let’s all go here first.” Naomi pointed to a label on her map that read *Guardian’s House.* “It looks like we’ll have a great view of most of the city from up there.”

The group agreed and hoofed it another fifteen minutes uphill. Arriving at the Guardian’s House all four teammates gasped, wonderstruck at the spectacle of the ruins below. Standing above the clouds the scene before them was something from a fairytale story. Craggy green mountains reaching skyward jutted up all around them. Thousands of feet high peaks formed a jagged landscape of sheer cliffs and bottomless canyons. The Urubamba River churned furiously through the town of Aguas Calientes far below.

The citadel of Machu Picchu was a patchwork of beautiful stone structures. Apparently the site had once become overgrown by vegetation but Park Rangers had restored the site to illustrate how it had once appeared. None of the stone structures had retained their roofing. The walls and doorways of the ancient town however were clearly still visible.

Beyond the city an enormous monolith rose skywards. A neighboring mountain that overlooked Machu Picchu. Diego consulted his map and pointed. That over there is Huayna Picchu. The map says it rises 850 feet over Machu Picchu and was the residence for the high priest of the city. Only 200

visitors are allowed to hike the trail to the top each day. I wish we had more time but we've got to find that third clue!"

"Do you hear that noise?" asked Sara. It was hard to hear anything over the steady whump whumping from the helicopter rotors circling above. Soaries also kept swooping in and out of view as they made their rounds overhead. The team heard something approaching behind them. A soft braying noise followed, almost a moan. They turned and spied wildlife!

"That must be an alpaca. You remember. The animal whose wool was used to make our ponchos." Diego's breath was still visible in the chilly dawn air. He addressed the alpaca directly. "Thanks to your relatives for keeping us nice and warm!"

The alpaca eyed the team with a wary look and bounded down a nearby terrace with ease.

"No, that wasn't the sound I meant." From the Guardian's House above the city they had a fantastic view of the grounds. Sara pointed to a large structure midway across the ruins and slightly left of center. It was U-shaped with three thick stone walls rising up from the ground.

Naomi consulted her map. "I think that's the *Main Temple*, also known as *Wayrara*. And that flat area of stone in front of it is called the *Sacred Plaza*."

"And what lies behind it?"

Naomi checked her map again. "It doesn't look like anything lies directly behind it."

"Then why are there three drones hovering back there?"

The high-pitched whir of the drone motors was the suspicious noise that she'd identified. The group squinted their eyes. From

their vantage point they were able to discern four small crafts in flight. Each was hovering in place. And affixed to the main body of each drone appeared a thin cable dangling towards ground.

“Only one way to find out!” Diego’s legs were still sore from Paris and from the climb here in Machu Picchu but adrenaline took over. He leapt down the steps from the Guardian’s House two at a time. The team quickly followed as Sara yelled “Mind your footing!” She almost lost her balance on some loose gravel.

“You mind *you’re* footing!” Diego called back over his shoulder. The team sped by beautiful structures hundreds of years old. The splendor and history were forgotten in their quest to reach the mysterious drones and dangling cables.

In his haste, Diego was first to reach the Main Temple. He rounded the eastern wall closest to the main square. Looking up he realized they had located their quarry! Swaying from each cable floated a chest quite similar to the ones they’d located underwater at the Great Blue Hole in Belize. They pulsed with white light. The moniker of each team in the tournament was emblazoned across the underside of each chest.

Lungs heaving Naomi, Xavier, and Sara arrived. Not only had they found the chests holding clue number three, Team Randos was the first to arrive! The other two teams were probably still fumbling around in vain back at the Eiffel Tower.

Naomi glanced up at their goal. Hands on her knees she struggled to ask her question. “But how...how...will we get up there?” It was a fair inquiry. They had located their chest, to be sure, but the chest hovered at least fifteen feet off the ground. No one on their team could jump that high. Not even a



professional basketball player could jump that high. Maybe a Shaggie transformed on a full moon but that currently wasn't an option. And no one on the team was a Soarie.

“I could teleport up and snag it” offered Xavier.

“Yes, you could” replied Sara. “But then the drop back to earth would kill you!” The ground at the back of the Main Temple appeared to be a mix of stone and hardened clay.

Diego had an idea. “Could you teleport up, grab the chest, and then instantly teleport back to ground level?”

Xavier rubbed his chin. “Ah, you're talking about point-to-point-to-point teleportation. Extraordinarily difficult to pull off. I haven't learned how to do it yet. Very few actually ever learn. I'm pretty sure I could transport up to the chest, but then I'd have to take my chances with gravity from there.”

Naomi didn't want to witness any more injury in this tournament. “Too dangerous but I have an idea. Xavier, you come with me. Sara and Diego, you guys stay here with the chest.” Without further explanation she took off up the path leading back towards the main entrance to the ruins. Befuddled, Xavier had no choice but to follow.

## A Helping Hand

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“O.k., here’s what we’ll do.” Naomi attempted to explain her plan between labored breaths. “You remember that small shop back at the entrance? The one where we purchased our maps?”

“Yeah,” panted Xavier also struggling for oxygen.

“Well, I saw they were selling woven blankets. Some pretty large ones too.”

“Blankets? How is a blanket going to help me reach that chest?”

“It’s not going to help you reach it. It’s going to brace your fall when you crash back down to the ground!”

“Um, excuse me?”

“Haven’t you ever seen those old cartoons? Where the firefighters catch characters jumping from burning buildings on a small trampoline? I think it’s called a Life Sheet. Or a Jump Net. Or something like that. In any case we’ll just use a Peruvian blanket instead!”

“Between dancing broomsticks and vaulting from burning buildings I’d say you’ve seen too many cartoons.”

Naomi flushed. “You’re probably right. It’s my father’s influence. He watched them a lot when he was growing up and he revisits them from time to time. I guess I enjoyed watching along with him.”

“Do you think it will actually work?”

“Can you think of a better idea?”

Xavier could not. So off they went to secure a souvenir shop offering that might save Xavier from serious harm.

Back at the Main Temple, Diego and Sara awaited the return of their friends. Adjacent to the Main Temple sat the Temple of Three Windows. Tucking themselves into the middle window (just an open square of space carved into a massive rock wall) granted a modicum of privacy from the helicopters and Soaries circling above. The drones hummed nearby. Neither the Terrible Tigers nor the Gregarious Gunners had yet been spotted at Machu Picchu.

Despite their extraordinary adventures together these last few days, Diego and Sara had not really had time to talk. And least not just the two of them together. Diego broke the ice. “So, how long have you and Naomi been friends?”

Sara thought about it. “I’d say since we were five years old. We were both in Kindergarten and we were two of the youngest in the class.”

“So this was before the Great Rift?”

“That’s right.”

“And how did Naomi react after you, um...became a Remarkable?”

Sara bit her lip. “Naomi was probably the only person in the world who didn’t treat me any differently.”

“Even though you could now read her thoughts?”

“She used to joke about it. She used to say Sara, I’m the most ordinary girl in the world. Go ahead and read my mind anytime you want to. You won’t find anything interesting in there. At least, I think she was joking. Most other people became afraid of me. Always wondering if I was poking around in their heads. Discovering secrets they’d rather keep buried.”

“And you really don’t like using your special ability? Most people would give their right arm in exchange for such power.”

“I’d just as soon keep my right arm and give up my so-called remarkable status.”

Both were quiet for a moment as they listened to the engines of the drones across the way. The soft buzzing blended with the noisy rotors from NexPhaze helicopters up above. Diego spoke next.

“I believe I’m the opposite.” He was thinking of his Remarkable parents. “I think I’d give almost anything to be a Remarkable.”

“Is that what you told Doctor Ivey?”

Diego started as if jolted by an electric shock. His eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Are you reading my mind right now?” Sara shook her head.

“I just told you. I don’t enjoy inspecting other people’s thoughts. Call it intuition instead.”

Diego sighed, shoulders relaxing. “You know I haven’t told a soul what I wrote in my submission. Not the press. Not you guys. Not even my parents.”

“Well you certainly don’t have to tell me. What you submitted is between you and Doctor Ivey. I’m sure you were selected for a very good reason.”

“It probably was because of my famous parents. The most famous Teleporter and Moddie in the world! Despite being a Savage maybe he thought there was something in my blood.”

“But that’s not what you wrote about.” Sara’s intuition shone once again.

“No that’s not what I wrote about.” Diego paused for a moment before the truth came spilling out. “I wrote that I should to be selected for this tournament because I *wanted* it more. I was the hungriest. The most motivated. I figured most other teenagers selected would be Remarkables. Well they already possess some special ability. In the case of Ling Li, she has two! If Doctor Ivey was looking to endow someone with a special ability that would change the course human existence, why not select someone who wanted to fulfill that charge more than anyone else in the world?”

Sara pondered this revelation in silence. Out of the blue she thought of her father in prison. She knew firsthand that simply possessing a Remarkable ability was not necessarily the road to happiness. It could also lead you down a darker path.

“So how is that you didn’t have a confirmation number when you completed your submission?” A lack of a confirmation code for Diego’s entry had been baffling the world for weeks.

Sheepishly Diego replied “It’s because I didn’t submit anything online. I wrote a letter to Doctor Ivey directly.”

“A letter? You mean like an *actual* letter?”

“Yes indeed. With pen and paper and everything.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know. I thought that with thousands of submissions, actually probably millions of submissions, I wanted mine to stand out. I’m guessing no one else sent in a handwritten note.”

Diego continued. “You have to understand Sara. I believe I wanted it more than anyone else. And when you truly desire something the entire universe conspires to help you realize the beauty of your dreams.”

“The beauty of your dreams?” Surprised, Sara repeated Diego’s words back to him.

Diego demurred. “Oh, that’s not mine. I was paraphrasing from a book I once read.”

Shyly Sara took Diego’s hand. “Diego, I’m a telepath and I’ll just say this. While you’re dreaming do make sure that it’s *your* dreams that you’re dreaming. Not the dreams you believe others might have for you.”

“Guys! We’re back!” Xavier’s voice echoed round the Sacred Plaza.

“Don’t tell them what I said!” Diego scabbled to stand up.

Sara rose as well. On impulse she gave him a timid smile. And surprising even herself she brushed his cheek with a whisper of a kiss. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Hey where are you guys?” Naomi called out as she reached the Main Temple. Her hands were back on her knees as she struggled for breath. Running back and forth at 8,000 feet above sea-level was really taking its toll.

“Just resting out of sight of all those helicopters and Soaries!” Sara strode over from the Temple of the Three Windows. Diego trailed behind wondering what had just happened. He was short of breath but it wasn’t due to altitude. Sara inquired of her friends “Did you guys find a blanket we can use?”

“I sure hope so” Xavier responded.

Sara and Diego looked warily at the colorful pile of wool in Naomi’s arms.

“It’s about eight feet by eight feet. The largest one they had. Not the biggest of landing spots but provided you all are positioned right below the chest, I should be fine. Of course that’s assuming no one let’s go of their hold!”

The group positioned themselves beneath the pulsating chest labeled Team Randos. No doubt the NexPhaze cameras were streaming all the action for the world to see. Naomi, Sara, and Diego each grabbed a corner of the blanket. The fourth corner hung limply towards the ground. Spying Darryl observing from across the Sacred Plaza Naomi beckoned. “Hey! Darryl! Come grab this last corner of the blanket!”

Curious, Darryl padded over. Naomi repeated her request. “We need a fourth person to secure Xavier’s landing. Here, take this fourth corner.” Naomi nodded towards the section of blanket listing back towards the ground.

“Actually I don’t think I’m allowed to. My role is to ensure you teleport securely from point A to point B. And to make sure you move about safely while hunting clues in-country. I’m not supposed to aid you in retrieving the chests themselves.”

“Come on, Darryl. If this blanket doesn’t hold Xavier could really hurt himself.”

“I’m sorry Naomi. I wish I could but I might get into trouble. Maybe even fired.”

Inwardly though, Darryl had his doubts about their plan. He estimated Xavier to be at least 100 pounds. Even falling from a height of just 15 feet he’d be crashing back to earth with tremendous force. Highly unlikely that Team Randos would be able to catch him safely. Nevertheless Darryl stepped back as Xavier prepared to teleport up to the chest.

“O.k. guys, I’m ready to make the jump. The plan is simple. I’ll teleport up to the chest, snag it in midair, and you all break my fall with the blanket.” The team wrapped sections of the blanket around their hands for a better grip. “Three, two, one!”

One second Xavier had two feet planted on the ground. The next second his shoes dangled haphazardly in mid-air. He wrapped two hands around the small chest and hung for a split-second. Not unlike the characters in the old cartoons that had given Naomi this dubious idea in the first place.

“Oh hell.” Darryl reacted without thinking. He leapt forward and snatched the sagging corner of the blanket. Darryl was never the type of person who could stand idly by and watch someone get hurt. Even if helping might cost him his job. Less than a second later Xavier hurtled to the ground.

As Darryl had expected, even with four of them holding the blanket the force at impact was just too much. They arrested Xavier’s descent somewhat but the blanket was ripped from everyone’s hands. He hit the ground with a sickening thud.

“Xavier!” Sara screamed.



Xavier didn't respond. He couldn't. The collision between earth and teenager had completely knocked the wind from his lungs. Gasping for air he rolled on the ground. The chest toppled to the side as everyone gathered around their injured friend. Luckily he'd landed on his backside or the situation could have been much worse.

"Thanks...huhh...for...huuhh...catching me" he managed to get out.

"Are you hurt?!" asked Naomi. "Is anything broken?!"

Xavier slowly regained his breath. He massaged his arms and legs. Then his head. He turned on his side and rubbed his back. "I don't think I'll be able to sit for a week. I think I broke my tailbone."

"For real?" asked Diego.

"Nah, I don't think so. Probably just a nasty bone bruise." Xavier turned to Darryl. "I think it would have been a lot worse if you hadn't stepped in."

"My thoughts exactly" replied Darryl as NexPhaze employees stormed over.

A burly fellow wearing trademark NexPhaze attire stepped up to the team. Silver reflective sunglasses masked the watchful eyes beneath. He addressed the team's teleportation guide directly and in harsh tones. "Mr. Darryl Fields, you are officially relieved of duty."

## The Third Task

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The NexPhaze employees (who seemed more like soldiers) marched Darryl back towards the main entrance to Machu Picchu.

“Thanks again, Darryl!” hollered Xavier. He was still rubbing his tailbone but things could have gone quite differently.

“We’re so sorry!” Naomi called out. Darryl paused and turned back to the team.

“Don’t be. It was the right thing to do and I’d do it again. Don’t ever be ashamed of doing the right thing, consequences be damned. It’s been an honor to know you four.” Darryl clapped his hands and raised his palms. “Now go win this thing!”

As Darryl was escorted from the grounds, the burly NexPhaze worker addressed the team. “With Darryl’s dismissal I’ll be taking over as your Teleportation Deputy. Hendrik Vanbender is my name. My superiors call me Hendrik or Mr. Vanbender. All subordinates at NexPhaze refer to me as Dutch. Therefore you lot can refer to me as Dutch.”

Hendrik spoke sarcastically with a hint of a sneer. Almost as if he harbored an ill-disguised disdain for Team Randos. Plainly he resented being relegated into the role of Darryl’s replacement. Naomi, Sara, Diego, and Xavier all shared the

same thought. They didn't care much for Mr. Hendrik Vanbender, or "Dutch" as it were.

Seeking a bit of privacy the team walked a short distance south to the Temple of the Sun. Xavier limped gingerly. A thoughtful NexPhaze employee had retrieved an ice pack for Xavier's throbbing tailbone. Still no sign of the Terrible Tigers or the Gregarious Gunners. Team Randos couldn't believe their good luck at being first to locate the third clue.

"Well let's open it up" encouraged Diego. "Let's see what you broke your backside to find!" Sara smacked Diego on behalf of Xavier.

Slowly Xavier unfastened the chest's clasp. The cover swung open effortlessly on hinges of gold. The contents were remarkably similar to the previous chest. Four sets of headphones along with a small black box with no markings. A slip of paper held familiar instructions.

**PLEASE PUT ON THESE HEADPHONES AND  
INSTRUCT THE HOLOCOM TO ACTIVATE.**

As he had done the last time, Diego addressed the small black box directly. Slowly and clearly he uttered "Begin Holocom transmission."

The tiny box hummed to life. A crisp three dimensional image of Ms. Addison Irving radiated from the Holocom.

"Congratulations Team Randos!" Her enthusiasm seemed as forced as in the previous recording.

"You have completed the second task and will continue on in the competition. As your journey endures I will now recite the third clue. Once again printed copies will be provided to you so no need to take written notes."

A chime sounded from inside the wooden chest. Next to the Holocom a small compartment revealed itself. Diego reached inside and retrieved a manila folder which held the printed copies of the clue. The shimmering image of Ms. Irving continued.

*Time to return to where it all began.*

*Finding a champion has been the plan.*

*But first you must find something to prove your worth.*

*More valuable than any objects upon this earth.*

*Up in the clouds you will find a door.*

*You'll need to ascend ninety-nine floors.*

*The remarkable serum will be unfurled,*

*But first find the most valuable leaf in the world.*

*Produce this leaf and the future is yours.*

*To protect humanity you'll have the cures.*

*Noon, two days hence you'll make the climb.*

*Do be sure to be on time.*

*And please recall our guidance from the start.*

*An assignment not for the faint of heart.*

*At the door do not attempt your powers.*

*Disqualified you'll sit for hours.*

*Pure of heart and motives true*

*Are required to pass through.*

*Most difficult is it to understand,  
The future world and fate of man.*

The team digested Ms. Irving's words for a moment. This clue seemed a bit different from the others. Diego was the first to speak.

"I don't think this clue holds misdirection. Well at least not geographic misdirection like the other clues."

"I agree" echoed Sara. "Unless I'm really missing something the clue is pointing us back to Dr. Ivey's office at the summit of NexPhaze headquarters. Back where the tournament started."

It was hard to believe that the competition had begun less than a week ago. The team had traveled thousands and thousands of miles. They'd hopped across multiple time zones and between both hemispheres.

"While the location seems straightforward what do they mean by the *most valuable leaf in the world*?"

Before any of her teammates could respond to Sara's question a commotion emerged to the south. A few hundred meters away Travis Wilson crested the dirt path leading down into the ruins of Machu Picchu. He leapt down the steps towards Team Randos and the Sacred Plaza. Close on his heels three erstwhile members of the Gregarious Gunners followed. In a cloud of dust the group skidded to a stop in the courtyard.

Travis observed his team's chest hovering above. It dangled from a cable and emitted steady pulses of light.

With the chest hovering fifteen feet off the ground the Gunners were perplexed. How best to retrieve it safely?

Before they could decide another uproar arose to the south. All eyes turned towards the main gates to the city, the same gates the Gunners had passed through not moments ago. Aanya and her team of Terrible Tigers were now the ones topping the path. Spying the Randos and the Gunners down below in the plaza Aanya made a quick decision. One second she was an unassuming thirteen year old girl. In the next she had transformed into a brightly plumed falcon. In avian form Aanya swooped down from the sky. She sped towards her team's chest. With talons splayed widely she meant to snatch her prize from the air.

Watching the scene unfold before him Travis panicked. Without contemplating the consequences he teleported up into the air. He wrapped his arms around the Gregarious Gunners chest. He obtained the third clue just moments before Aanya's talons closed on her team's prize.

"We've done it! We've advanced!" Travis thought to himself. Right before he plummeted to the ground with nothing to break his fall.

Travis shifted his body mid-air. He tried desperately to land on his feet. He succeeded but as his legs met the hard-packed earth in the Sacred Plaza, the force at impact was simply too much. The snap of his left Fibula and Tibia bones sounded like the crack of a gunshot. Between his knee and ankle one of the bones (it was hard to tell which) had actually broken through the skin. It protruded nauseatingly amidst a newly formed hole in Travis's trousers. Blood began to seep from the wound.

Dutch, the newly assigned Teleportation Deputy for team Randos, spotted the injury. He placed a hand over his mouth. Alas the hand was ineffective in preventing what came next. Chunks of partially digested breakfast spewed through his fingers as he vomited all over his shoes. It seemed that Dutch wasn't such a tough guy after all.

After such a gruesome injury one would have expected Travis to be screaming at the top of his lungs. Surely he was in a tremendous amount of pain. But Travis didn't emit a sound. His eyes had gone glassy. His skin had gone pale. Travis Wilson, the fearless captain of the Gregarious Gunners, had gone into shock.

## Examining Value

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Naomi rushed over to check on Travis but she was quickly elbowed aside by NexPhaze employees.

“Quick! Radio the helicopters! We have to load him onto a stretcher. You there, stabilize his head.” A tall thin woman with flaxen hair tied back in a pony-tail took charge. The name ‘Kristin’ was embroidered on her company-issued shirt.

Within seconds a NexPhaze helicopter hovered above the Sacred Plaza. A medical stretcher winched down to ground level. Careful not to disturb his broken leg Travis was slid ever so gingerly into the harness.

His teammates surrounded him as he was strapped into the stretcher.

“What were you thinking mate?!” asked Seamus. There was tremendous concern in his voice for his friend and teammate. “I could’ve just use my telekinesis to pull the drone and the chest to the ground!”

“Or I could’ve just scorched the cable to ashes!” Another member of the Gregarious Gunners was a 14-year-old girl named Shannon O’Malley. She was a Burnie. “The chest would have fallen right into my arms!”

“I was just about to pick up one of those huge stones” voiced Henry. Henry Jones was a 13-year-old boy from London and rounded out the Gunners as the fourth member of the team. He was a Mightie. “I could have hurled the stone at the drone and



smashed it to bits. The chest would have dropped down right to us!”

Travis’s voice was thick and garbled. “Now you tell me.” Beads of perspiration budded on his forehead. “I just saw Aanya barreling down like a freight train of feathers. I had to make sure we captured the chest first. Otherwise we’d have been eliminated.”

Kristin dabbed Travis’s forehead with a damp washcloth. “Don’t talk. Try to relax. We’ll have you to the central hospital in Cusco in just a few minutes. The Clinica Runa del Cusco is the best facility in the country. They’ll reset the bones. After a few months of rehabilitation you’ll be doing handsprings!”

“Wonderful” replied Travis. He seemed to be wavering in and out of consciousness. “I’ve never been able to do handsprings before.”

Naomi clasped Travis’s hand before he was whisked away into the helicopter. They locked eyes for a moment. While neither was a telepath Naomi sent healing vibes of care and support. Travis returned a small smile through blurred vision. Message received. Seconds later he disappeared into the belly of the NexPhaze helicopter above. It whizzed off into the clouds and was soon out of sight.

Aanya and her team of Terrible Tigers trudged back towards the entrance to Machu Picchu. Unless the Gregarious Gunners forfeited, as had Ling Li and the Flying Dragons, the Terrible Tigers were now eliminated from the competition. Watching them depart Kristin addressed the remaining competitors.

“The decision to proceed or to bow out of the tournament remains yours. If Mr. Wilson’s leg is quickly stabilized, he may yet be able to serve as Teleporter for the Gunners.”

She addressed Seamus, Shannon, and Henry. “As you’ll learn upon opening your chest you actually have two days to complete the third task. If you’ll kindly accompany me I’ll arrange for transport to Cusco. You can monitor Travis’s recovery from there.”

Like ducks imprinting on their mother the team of Gunners trailed Kristin in a line. Dutch had recovered himself. He marched haughtily over to Team Randos.

“Have you solved the riddle yet? No? Well if you’re done sightseeing I could use some breakfast. I seem to have...um...misplaced mine. The shuttlebus can transport you lot back down the mountain to Aguas Calientes. I assume you can find your way back to your hotel from there.”

The group confirmed the plan and less than an hour later they found themselves back in the rustic halls of Casa Sumaq. There had been no updates yet on Travis’s condition.

“Well now that’s the second time we’ve seen someone airlifted to the hospital.” Diego was demoralized. “I’m starting to wish I’d never written in to Doctor Ivey.” Diego and Sara exchanged a quick glance. “It seems that with every task in this tournament I’m pushing us into more and more danger.”

“Not necessarily” Xavier replied evenly. “Both Ling and Travis were injured in their haste. Ling in her rush to teleport underwater to her chest. Travis in his hurry to capture his before Aanya could dive in from above.”

“Xavier’s right” chimed in Sara. “If only we had more time. All these clues could be solved eventually. All the tasks could be accomplished without injury. I’m not sure why Doctor Ivey organized this tournament as a race against the clock in addition to a race against each team.”

“And now we’re back on the clock” responded Diego. “We’ve got until noon, two days from now, to return to NexPhaze headquarters with the most valuable leaf in the world in tow.”

Naomi checked her mobile phone. It was almost noontime here in Aguas Calientes and she was way overdue in providing an update to her father. Surely he’d already seen the news that Team Randos and the Gregarious Gunners were the last two teams standing. Although they couldn’t be sure if Travis Wilson would ever stand again.

With nothing else to do the team turned their focus to the clue at hand. “We’re agreed on location then?” Sara inquired. Naomi, Diego, and Xavier all nodded. “O.k., so in two days’ time we return to NexPhaze headquarters. Back to Doctor Ivey’s offices up on the 99<sup>th</sup> floor.”

“But what’s the most valuable leaf in the world?” Naomi voiced the question that proved most vexing. All four teenagers reached for their mobile phones. When it came to research the Internet was certainly full of information.

“The trouble is that the term *leaf* is so ambiguous.” Xavier scrolled through his search results. “Do you think they mean some sort of plant?” He’d navigated to a page describing the most expensive plant ever sold. “The Variegated Monstera Varieties” Xavier read aloud. “Among plant collectors Variegated Monsteras are well regarded as status symbols. They are some of the most expensive houseplants in the world. A few years ago an *Adansonii Variegata* went for \$38,000. It set a world record as the most expensive plant ever sold.”

He flipped his phone around so his teammates could view an image of a strange green plant with pointed leaves. The leaves

had holes in them. It looked as if the plant was suffering some sort of fungal infection. That or it had decided to mold itself in the image of a block of Swiss cheese.

“What if they’re not talking about plants?” Diego’s search online had turned up very different results. “Have any of you ever heard of gold leaf?” The team shook their heads side to side in unison. It was Diego’s turn to read aloud.

“Made from actual gold, gold leaves sit atop extravagant desserts and are sometimes served in glasses of champagne. A prominent business magazine named gold leaf as the most valuable food by weight on the planet. It costs as much as \$15,000 per pound!”

“Or maybe it’s not a houseplant or gold leaf but some other type of leaf? As in a tea leaf.” Sara’s search results had turned up yet another category to consider.

“A tea leaf?” questioned Naomi. “How is the world would a tea leaf be valuable?” Naomi’s mother used to buy bags of tea from the grocery store. They came in boxes of 100 units for just five dollars per box.

“I don’t know. I don’t drink the stuff myself. I’m more of an iced Frappuccino girl. But listen to this description. A kilogram, or just over two pounds, of Da-Hong Pao Tea leaves is valued at \$1.2 million! And why? Because this type of tea dates back to the ancient Ming Dynasty in China.” Sara scrolled on her mobile phone and continued.

“In addition the tea has been declared a national treasure by the Chinese government. It is usually given as a gift to important individuals such as government dignitaries and celebrities. Shrouded in mystery the process of making Da-Hong Pao Tea remains a secret tightly guarded by the Chinese.”

The team continued their research online. It turned out that the phrase *the most valuable leaf in the world* could be interpreted in many different ways. Naomi stumbled across a link for 1948 Leaf-brand baseball cards. Apparently a single card in the series could sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Next she read about the Canadian Gold Maple Leaf coin. Tipping the scales at approximately 220 pounds apiece only six of the nearly pure gold coins had ever been made. Each coin had as a face value of \$1 million. They'd been officially certified as the world's largest gold coin. Measuring about 20 inches wide and just over an inch thick the coins had sold at auction for over \$4 million each.

The staggering dollar amounts troubled Naomi. "Even if we correctly identify the type of leaf the clue is referring to, how are we going to afford it?" Naomi, Xavier, and Sara all came from middle-class households. They didn't have that kind of money to spend. Three pairs of eyes rotated to Diego. He blushed pink.

"I guess I can talk to my parents." Being among the most accomplished Teleporters and Moddies in the world had its benefits. Because of Diego's remarkable parents the Ruiz clan was easily the wealthiest family in town.

## Phoning Home

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“Great. That’s settled then.” Sara wanted to change the subject as quickly as possible. The team had been hanging out in the lobby of Hotel Sumaq for hours. Their research had raised more questions than answers. Outside the sun was sinking behind the jagged peaks surrounding the Urubamba valley. The time was almost 6:00 p.m. “No time to teleport anywhere else this evening. Who else is getting hungry?” Three hands went up. The team realized that they’d completely missed lunch. “Alright, Darryl had mentioned that Peruvian food was mighty tasty. What do folks say we give it a try?”

Naomi was saddened at the mention of Darryl. Without his help Xavier surely would be in much worse shape. Everyone saw what had happened to poor Travis. Would Darryl be reprimanded? Maybe even fired? They hadn’t heard anything about his status since he was frog-marched out of Machu Picchu. “Normally Darryl was the one who helped arrange our restaurant reservations. I suppose we can ask Dutch for help instead?” No one was excited about the idea but Dutch was now their assigned Teleportation Deputy.

They found Dutch milling about by the hotel’s reception desk. He was ogling the cleaning staff and making eyes at the hotel concierge. All the staff seemed to be doing their absolute best to ignore him.

“Hey, Dutch!” Xavier took the lead. “Any chance you can help us with a restaurant for dinner?”

“What do I look like? Your own personal servant? My job here is one thing and one thing only. To make sure you teleport safely from place to place without killing yourselves...or anyone else for that matter. Would look terrible on my annual performance review.” Dutch strolled away. “You can fend for yourselves for dinner.” He was about to turn down a hotel corridor before halting abruptly. He rounded back on the team, a smirk on his face.

“Before I forgot. I have an update on how her *boyfriend* is doing.” Dutch pointed a crooked finger at Naomi. Despite her growing dislike for Dutch, Naomi was hungry for news. “Turns out they were able to stabilize his leg and reset the bones after all. Took three hours of surgery. Apparently Travis will be in a plaster cast for a couple months now.” Dutch seemed oddly pleased as he relayed the information.

“Will the Gregarious Gunners be withdrawing from the competition?” While concerned about the health of Travis, Diego also had practical matters in mind.

An obnoxious leer spread across Dutch’s face. “Nope! No such luck for you! Travis is planning to reassume teleportation duties first thing tomorrow. He won’t be able to walk of course. He’ll be in a wheelchair. But he will still be able to secure Wrist Locks with his teammates and transport them wherever they’d like to go. Looks like you all still have competition! And despite a damaged Teleporter my money is still on the team of four Remarkables.” Dutch eyed Team Randos up and down. “Certainly not on two Savages, a careless Teleporter, and a useless Telepath.”

Despite being much smaller in stature Diego stepped forward. His fingers balled into fists. “She’s not useless, she’s amazing. And without Xavier’s courage and skill, we never

would have made it this far. As for Naomi and me, call us Savages again. Just one...more...time.”

Dutch snorted derisively. “Oh sure. I punch your Savage face in. And then your famous mom shows up. She modifies me into a bowl of oatmeal. And then your ever-so-legendary father teleports me to the surface of Mars. No thank you. Save your feeble threats. You’ll need more than that to get past the door. No one’s ever been past the door. And the first to do it will most certainly not be *you!*”

Dutch spat and sauntered off.

The hotel concierge muttered under her breath. “Que idiota.” She had overheard the entire exchange. She addressed the team in polite accented English.

“If you’re looking for a wonderful place for dinner I can most certainly help. We have many options near the hotel. My personal favorite is Sami House Peruvian Cuisine. The Ceviche, Lomo Saltado, Papas a la Huancaína, and Pollo a la Brasa are all amazing.”

The team turned to Xavier to translate. “Don’t look at me. The only word I recognized was pollo which means chicken.”

The restaurant was just steps from the hotel. The hotel concierge made a reservation with ease. She also secured a private dining space for the team. Since arriving in Aguas Calientes more and more townspeople, along with all the tourists, had been hounding the tournament competitors for pictures and autographs. The team was grateful for a little quiet time together to talk about the third clue. And even more grateful for the amazing meal.



It turned out that Ceviche was a local fish dish comprised of sea bass marinated for just minutes in lime juice, onion, salt, and hot chilies. The Lomo Saltado came next. Juicy strips of soy-marinated beef, onions, tomatoes, and aji chilies. The ingredients were stir-fried until the beef was just cooked and the tomatoes and onions had started to form a robust meaty gravy. Also included were a dollop of rice and a handful of French fries.

By the time the Papas a la Huancaína and the Pollo a la Brasa arrived the team was already getting full. But it was impossible to say no to two more signature Peruvian dishes. Sliced yellow potatoes drenched in a purée of fresh cheese, aji chilies, amarillo, garlic, evaporated milk, lime juice and crackers. The Pollo a la Brasa proved mouthwatering. A whole chicken marinated in a powerful combination of garlic, herbs, and spices before roasting on a spit. The dish arrived boasting bronzed crispy skin. The flavor was otherworldly. Perhaps influenced by the Peruvian black mint sauce served on the side.

Two hours later the team waddled slowly back to Hotel Sumaq. For some reason their NexPhase-provided clothing now felt a smidgen too small. At dinner a decision had been made. Still not certain about it they'd agreed the most valuable leaf in the world must be referring to Da-Hong Pao Tea. While the Canadian Gold Maple Leaf coin had more overall face value, the tea leaves were much more valuable on a per-pound basis. Again, \$1.2 million for just two pounds of the stuff.

Later that evening Diego telephoned his parents. He described the clue and explained their reasoning. Being the famous Remarkables that they were, both Rodrigo Ruiz as well as his wife, Veronica Jones-Ruiz, possessed senior connections within the government of China.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Diego’s mother was concerned. “How in the world would Doctor Ivey expect a group of teenagers to come up with a million dollar bag of tea?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he’s just testing our resourcefulness.”

“You said it’s \$1.2 million for just a two-pound bag?”

Diego’s father was more used to requests from Diego for phone upgrades or new video games. A million-dollar sack of dried tea leaves was quite a departure from the norm.

“That’s right. We need it to pass through some type of door. And if I’m that person then I’ll finally become a Remarkable. One with more power than any other Remarkable on earth. One entrusted with the power to shape the future of the human race!”

Diego’s parents could feel the hunger in their only son’s voice. A hunger no amount of tasty Peruvian food could satiate. They found his passion inspiring but also disconcerting.

“I don’t know Diego. What if you’re wrong? What if this Da-Hong Pao Tea isn’t the correct answer?”

Diego had anticipated this concern. “Then we’re wrong! Nothing happens. And apparently demand for this type of tea is so strong we’ll easily be able to resell the bag. No problem at all. We won’t even open it.”

Diego’s parents regarded each other on the other end of this unusual phone call. His father was the first to speak as he addressed his wife.

“Aren’t you on good terms with the Premier?”

“I am. I’ve modified so much material across his country that generation upon generation will have food to spare. He may even gift us the tea for free.”

“I suppose I can teleport there tomorrow. I’ll retrieve the tea and can pass it along to Diego.” To his son, Mr. Ruiz asked “Diego, does that mean you’ll be coming home tomorrow? That you’ll be home for a night before heading to NexPhaze headquarters for this final task?”

“I suppose so. Unless our wonderful new Teleportation Deputy prefers we stay in a hotel. There are plenty near NexPhaze Arena and their company headquarters.”

“Well it will be wonderful to see you son.” Diego’s mother had been monitoring the competition closely. “We’ve missed you. And we’re so proud that you’ve made it this far.”

“Hopefully I can make it just a little bit further. For as long as I can remember all I’ve ever wanted was to be remarkable. Just like you two.”

Before his parents could reply Diego broke the connection. “Thanks so much for securing the tea! I’ll grab it from dad sometime tomorrow!”

## Reunions

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The next thirty-six hours whirled by in a blur. Just after eight o'clock in the morning Xavier effortlessly teleported Naomi, Sara, and Diego back to their hometown. And that was despite Dutch taking his sweet time while securing the team's Wrist Locks. He seemed to be hamming it up for the cameras. Media coverage had never been thicker. Just two teams remaining. Just one more task at hand.

Mobile phones, cameras, and microphones were ever-present. The entire world was caught up in the drama of the tournament. Much speculation centered on the activities of the Gregarious Gunners. Travis was still acting as the team's Teleporter. Apparently the four teammates had managed to secure something extremely valuable despite Travis's broken leg. Theories were circulating in the news. Governmental authorities had been summoned.

Scanning the headlines Naomi thought that there was little chance that Travis and his team would have broken the law. Then she remembered Travis teleporting up to their team's chest in Machu Picchu. He had done so with reckless abandon. As the headlines went where there was smoke there was frequently fire. Maybe Travis and his team had done something illegal after all?

Diego confirmed with Team Randos that his mother and father had managed to obtain the extremely expensive tea. \$1.2

million for just over two pounds of leaves. Hopefully they'd made the right choice.

The following day arrived with tremendous fanfare. Around the world people were talking about "Decision Day." Which of the eight remaining teenagers would be selected by Doctor Ivey? And what remarkable ability would be conferred upon the champion? Speculation was rampant. As Savages both Diego and Naomi were considered *extreme* longshots to emerge victorious.

Despite the hectic traffic Mr. Thomas Strange again insisted on driving the team to NexPhaze headquarters. With a million dollar bag of tea in hand NexPhaze security personnel had been deployed to escort Team Randos. Mighties manned vehicles both ahead and behind. Soaries glided above keeping an eye out for aerial threats. At the compound gates Mr. Strange was directed to park at the curb. No parents were allowed inside the secure borders of NexPhaze Enterprises.

"I'm so proud you all have made it this far!" Naomi's father could not hide his delight. "Who would have guessed it? You all are just one step away from making history!"

The team piled out of the car. All four teens were oddly silent. Despite all they'd been through over the last week it seemed their nerves were gaining the upper hand. All the crowds, cameras, reporters, and drones didn't help matters much.

Off to one side of the gated entrance stood Diego's parents, Rodrigo Ruiz and Veronica Jones-Ruiz. Curious at their appearance at NexPhaze, Diego approached his parents.

"Mom? Dad? What are you guys doing here?"

Diego's mother spoke first. "Your father and I weren't comfortable with how our last phone conversation ended."

"How our last phone conversation ended? You mean the call from two nights back?" Diego was puzzled.

"We probably should have talked about this years ago, son." Rodrigo Ruiz's brow furrowed as he addressed his only child. A befuddled Diego couldn't recall anything out of the ordinary from their brief chat the other night.

"We just wanted to tell you again how proud we are of you." His mother's voice was soft. "We've always been proud of you. Of course we're excited with how far you've come in this tournament. But please know that we don't care one iota about Doctor Ivey's peculiar serum. About this wondrous new remarkable ability. One that he proclaims will impact the future of the human race."

"What your mother is trying to say, Diego, is that to us you've *always* been remarkable. And you always will be. We don't care if you can teleport. We don't care if you can modify matter. All we care about is whether you're *happy*."

"And possessing a remarkable ability certainly does not equal happiness. Heck, if you're not a professional Fuzzball player then transforming into a werewolf once a month can be downright annoying."

Diego realized his mother had a good point. He thought of Sara's father. Behind bars in prison for using his remarkable ability to commit crime.

His mother continued. "We just want to make sure you're pursuing this goal for the right reasons. Not some purpose you think we or anyone else might have for you."

“Good luck to you son.” Mr. Ruiz embraced Diego tightly in a bear hug. “I know if and when the time comes you’ll make the right choice.” And with that sentiment of support Diego’s parents disappeared into the swelling crowd.

After some words of encouragement back in her father’s car, Naomi opened the passenger door to exit. Her father reached for her hand. Just as he’d done not one week ago. The last seven days had hardly seemed real. The clues. The teleporting. The tasks. All the various countries. Especially making new friends. Nothing about the previous week had been anything close to ordinary. Naomi paused and rounded on her dad.

“Forget your promise Naomi. If there’s even the slightest chance of you winning this thing then I want you to go for it.” He blinked and took a big breath. “But promise me something new. That you won’t be too disappointed if it doesn’t happen. You’ve made it to the final stage. You have so much to be proud of. You and your entire team.”

“How can I be disappointed when I never expected anything in the first place?” Naomi was genuinely perplexed. “I wasn’t even supposed to be here. It was random chance that Diego was selected. And certainly quite arbitrary that he chose Sara, Xavier, and me to join his team. It’s all just been one big coincidence.”

Naomi’s father peered off into the distance. “I’d thought that as well. But here’s the thing Naomi. I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s *not* coincidence after all. You were *meant* to be here. For good or for ill you still have a part to play. And whatever comes I know you’ll make the right choice.” Naomi’s father looked into her eyes.

“I love you Baby Girl.”

“I love you too, dad.”

“Make me proud! And who knows? Maybe you’re off to go change the world!”

Naomi exited the vehicle and was escorted by NexPhaze security to the building’s elevators. All four members of Team Randos crowded in.

“Which floor, please?” The elevator operator looked quite familiar.

“Darryl?!” Naomi could not believe her eyes.

“The one and only!”

“We thought you’d been fired!”

“Nah, not fired. Just officially reprimanded. I was offered a two week hiatus without pay. Or two weeks with half-pay if I agreed to ditch my teleportation skills for a spell and operate this here elevator. I chose the elevator. I was hoping I’d run into you lot again!”

“But why?” asked Naomi.

“Because.”

Darryl’s tone became serious. “Because there’s more up here than meets the eye. And because I’ve got a feeling. A feeling that some things are about to change.”

Naomi and team remained silent. The million-dollar bag of tea leaves in Diego’s backpack was on their minds. Surely it was the key to one of them moving on in the competition.

“99<sup>th</sup> floor I presume?” inquired Darryl.



Diego nodded. A few seconds later the elevator bell chimed as the team reached the zenith of NexPhaze headquarters. The doors slid open revealing a lengthy corridor lined with glass. At the end of the hallway stood the entryway to Doctor Alexander Ivey's top floor office. Presumably Doctor Ivey was present and ready to reveal his secretive new remarkable ability to the tournament champion.

"The Gregarious Gunners have already arrived. I escorted them up to the 99<sup>th</sup> floor not two minutes ago."

"Thanks again for everything Darryl." Naomi spoke for the entire team. "Without you we never would have come this far."

"Well perhaps one of you will be going just a little bit farther. On the other side of that door is Dr. Ivey's office lobby. You'll find tables and chairs along with beverages in the refrigerator. Do take a moment to enjoy the view. It's quite breathtaking. The fortified steel door you'll notice inside leads directly into Dr. Ivey's personal office. I've never actually met the man myself. Apparently you're to make yourself comfortable inside and await further instructions. Here I take my leave of you." Darryl doffed his NexPhaze elevator operator cap. "Perhaps for one of you this was meant to be!"

The elevator doors slid shut and Darryl descended. The team made the long walk down an eerily quiet corridor. Sara took Diego's hand. Naomi and Xavier noticed but didn't say anything. The team was about to enter the doorway at the end of the hall when a familiar face emerged.

"Travis!" Naomi exclaimed. It was Travis indeed and he was seated in a wheelchair. One leg was completely encased in a gleaming plaster cast.

“Good to see you mate.” Xavier patted Travis on the shoulder. “I hope they were able to set your leg back in order?”

“Seems so. Just a few hours of surgery and now a few months in this cast. I should be back on my feet sometime before the winter holidays. The pain medication makes me a little loopy so I try to stay off the stuff.”

“But what are you doing out here?” Sara inquired. “Aren’t you supposed to be in Doctor Ivey’s office with the rest of your team? It’s just a few minutes until noon. I imagine we’ll find out then which of our teams has managed to secure the most valuable leaf in the world.”

“Well that’s the thing.” Travis rubbed the back of his neck. He gazed up at the ceiling. “You see, I’ve resigned as captain of the Gregarious Gunners. I won’t be participating in this last phase of the tournament. My journey ends here.”

## Stepping Down

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No one on Team Randos knew what to say. Xavier went first. “Tough draw! Was it the injury?”

“Actually, no.” Travis looked away. “I’d kind of prefer not to talk about it.”

Xavier, Sara, and Diego wished him well and respected Travis’s wishes. They didn’t press him any further and proceeded down the hallway of glass. Naomi however wanted more answers. She remained behind. “What do you mean you’ve resigned?! You’re just up and quitting after all you’ve been through?”

“Quit is not the right word. I said I’ve *resigned*.”

“But why? You’re just steps from the finish line.”

Travis considered his reconstructed leg. “I fear I won’t be taking any steps for some time. It turns out that this tournament was just not for me.” Travis’s eyes grew moist. “Or I should say, I was not quite right for this tournament. I..I wasn’t strong enough.”

“Not strong enough? Because you fell fifteen feet and broke your leg? You were lucky it was just two bones!”

Travis hesitated. “Well I suppose you’ll find out eventually. I’m not talking about my broken leg.”

“What then?”

Travis exhaled slowly. “I just hope you won’t think less of me. It’s about the most valuable leaf in the world. Have you ever heard of Memory of Autumn Leaves & Dream of Autumn Leaves?” Naomi admitted that she had not.

“They must not have come up in your team’s research. Out of curiosity what did you bring in today for Doctor Ivey? What did you determine was the most valuable leaf in the world?” As it was almost noontime, Naomi figured there was no harm in sharing.

“We selected a bag of Da-Hong Pao Tea. Diego’s parents were able to procure two pounds directly from their contacts in China. It sells for over one million dollars per bag.” Travis whistled as he tugged at his collar.

“Might pricey indeed.” He looked up at the ceiling once again. “But not quite as expensive as what our team has brought. Memory of Autumn Leaves & Dream of Autumn Leaves. They are the most expensive earrings ever sold at auction. They’re similar in size and shape. One is a large blue diamond and the other is slightly larger and an intense shade of pink. They sold for over \$57 million in Switzerland a few years back. ”

“\$57 million!!” Naomi’s jaw hit the floor. “How could you ever have afforded something like that?!”

Travis flushed. Done examining the ceiling he now peered down at floor. “Well, we didn’t exactly purchase them. We kind of...um...*borrowed* them.”

“You *borrowed* them?!”

“With a little digging we were able to discover who had purchased them at auction. It was a reclusive Swiss

billionaire, Liam Brunner. My team and I teleported to his massive estate just outside Geneva, Switzerland. Mr. Brunner was familiar with the NexPhaze tournament. He graciously gave us an audience. We made our request. We asked to borrow the earrings for a couple of days and then promised their safe return.”

“And he agreed?”

Travis flushed an even deeper shade of red. “Not exactly. Maybe he was afraid we’d lose them. Or perhaps he was worried we’d keep them for ourselves. Possibly even try to sell them on the black market. Or conceivably NexPhaze Enterprises would keep them. Who knows? It’s possible he just didn’t want to get involved in the NexPhaze tournament at all. In any case he politely declined our request and showed us the door.”

“Did he later change his mind? How did you obtain them then?”

If Travis’s face turned any brighter the fire brigade would need to be called. “Uh, as I mentioned, we borrowed them. Seamus is a Telekinetic, right? He used his ability to jiggle open Mr. Brunner’s safe from just outside the house. There was an open window upstairs. Seamus guided the earrings out of the safe, down the hallway, and right out the open window. We left a note on the porch letting Mr. Brunner know not to worry. We definitely would return the earrings in a day or two. Then we teleported the heck out of there.”

“You mean you *stole* them?!!”

“That’s what Mr. Brunner told the Swiss authorities. I imagine they’ve already reached out to the government over here. I guess we were hoping that we’d get the earrings in

front of Doctor Ivey, win this maddening contest, and whisk the diamonds right on back to Mr. Brunner. And then everything would blow over. Especially once news got out about Doctor Ivey's remarkable new ability. Even more so if it was me or someone on my team who secured the serum."

"But that's insane!"

Travis finally met Naomi's eyes. "Yes, I came to that same conclusion. Eventually. Taking the earrings without Mr. Brunner's consent didn't sit well with me at the time. Even though we definitely meant to return them. The more I thought about it the more uncomfortable I became. I arrived with the team this morning but once we were outside Doctor Ivey's office, I made up my mind. Anyone who would steal wasn't worthy to be champion. I told my team as much when I resigned."

"Are they all still in there?"

"Actually yes. The temptation of that remarkable new ability seems too much. Seamus, Henry, and Shannon all chose to take their chances and continue on."

Travis's face had begun to return to its regular hue. "So do you think the worst of me? That I was a part of such an irresponsible act?"

Naomi shook her head. "Travis, I may be just thirteen years old but I've done plenty of reckless things in my life too." She smiled. "Granted, I've never stolen \$57 million earrings so you've got me beat there."

Travis returned her grin. "Well if I don't end up in jail, maybe you can visit me sometime later this summer? I can give you a tour of my hometown. He regarded his leg

encased in plaster along with his wheelchair. “A tour of the flat parts of town anyhow.”

Now it was Naomi’s turn to blush. “I’d like that.” She leaned over and gave Travis a quick hug. Then she strode down towards the door at the end of the hallway.

“Hey Naomi! One more thing!” Naomi turned. “What will you do if it’s you? If you’re the one who wins the remarkable serum?”

Naomi rolled her eyes. “No chance Travis. Once you get to know me better you’ll realize what everyone else already has. Things like that don’t happen to me. I’m the most ordinary girl in the world.” She turned back to the door and crossed the threshold. A clock tower hundreds of feet below began to toll. It was noon.

## The Door

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Naomi stepped through the doorway at the end of the hall. She noticed Doctor Ivey's anteroom was exactly as Darryl had described. Comfortable tables and chairs adorned open floorplan. A stainless steel refrigerator stood silently along the far wall. The views from the massive glass windows were stunning. Absently Naomi wondered how they kept the windows so clean way up here on the 99<sup>th</sup> floor.

The remaining six competitors had merged at one of two modern oak tables in the middle of the room. The Gregarious Gunners (minus Travis) sat together and Naomi's three teammates had assembled at the next table over. Some were drinking cans of sparkling water from the refrigerator. All seemed to be ignoring the views. They were too preoccupied with the formidable steel door before them. The same one that Darryl had also described. Apparently it led directly from this waiting area into Doctor Ivey's personal office. The imposing metal blockade looked more like something one would find guarding a nuclear stronghold.

Next to the steel door an odd contraption had been mounted atop a cart with four wheels. Cube shape in design and roughly three feet square in dimension. Hanging from the roof of the cube was an X-shaped bar, metallic in appearance. At each node of the X, a steady red-light pulsed. The front of the cube was translucent, forged from some type of glass or plastic. The light caused the inside of the cube to glow eerily with each beat. To Naomi the device resembled



one of those claw machines you might find in a video game arcade or at a carnival. Except this version didn't appear to have stuffed animals or candy inside. As best as she could tell the inside of the cube was completely bare.

“What the heck is that thing?” Xavier whispered to his tablemates.

As if Doctor Ivey along with Ms. Addison Irving had been waiting for just such a question two Holocoms positioned alongside the pulsating cube sprang to life. Brilliant shimmering images of the leaders of NexPhaze Enterprises rippled into existence. Doctor Ivey's back-drop was familiar. He had broadcast messages from the same location on many occasions. From the look of it he was seated at his desk. He was truly was beaming in from just the other side of the intimidating steel door.

“Greetings contestants! You have navigated substantial challenges and have done so with vigor! You've done so with creativity, with guile, with concentration.” He winked. “Maybe even with a little bit of luck! I welcome you all to NexPhaze headquarters! It's my sincere hope that in just a few short minutes one of you will be named tournament champion!”

Both the Gregarious Gunners and Team Randos were acutely aware that this entire encounter was being transmitted via live video feed around the world. Millions, if not billions, would be hanging on every word. Speculation on what kind of ability the Doctor's serum might unlock had reached a fever pitch.

Doctor Ivey continued. “You’ve made it this far. But now it’s time to see just who among you might make it a little farther. Ms. Irving, the details if you please.”

In businesslike tones Ms. Addison Irving took over. “You’ve all been tasked with attaining the most valuable leaf in the world. The cubic device you see before you is called a Determitron. Doctor Ivey and I have provided the device with precise evaluation criteria. Each team in turn is to open the intake door to the Determitron. Place your object or objects inside. Your submission will then be laser-scanned. In a few seconds the machine will report on your success or on your failure. Only if you’ve managed to secure the most valuable leaf in the world will a member of your team have the opportunity to pass through the door before you.”

Diego raised his hand. The holographic image of Ms. Irving gave a slight nod indicating that he proceed. “What if neither team has been able to obtain the most valuable leaf in the world?”

Doctor Ivey interjected. “You’ve all been extremely resourceful throughout the competition. Extraordinarily impressive. It’s my very strong hope that will not be the case.” He paused for a moment. “Nevertheless we do have contingency plans in place.”

“Contingency plans?” Diego repeated.

“Yes. We’ve run tournament simulations countless times and we realized it’s always best to have a back-up plan.” Ms. Irving’s eyes flickered imperceptibly as she nodded in agreement.

Shannon from the Gregarious Gunners raised her hand next. “Which team is to go first?”

“Ahhh! Eager to get going, eh?!” Doctor Ivey rubbed his palms together. “Can’t say I blame you. I can hardly stand the excitement myself! Well by random draw the first team to place their submission in the Determitron shall be...” Doctor Ivey paused for dramatic effect.

“TEAM RANDOS!”

Sara elbowed Diego in the ribs. “They’ve called our number. Now let’s see if this fancy tea your parents procured from China was worth all the craziness of this past week.”

Diego hesitated. “No. You take it.” He handed the bag of million-dollar tea leaves to Sara. “Seems like you’ve been a bit of a lucky charm during this entire tournament.” He gave her a bashful smile. “If you can make sense of people’s thoughts...including Naomi’s exceedingly weird dreams...then I’d wager one hundred percent of our team’s chances on you.”

Sara looked round at Naomi and Xavier. Neither said a word. They motioned her to do as Diego had recommended.

In timid steps Sara toted the bag of tea to the Determitron. She could feel the weight of the world on her shoulders. Nay that was not true. But she could feel the eyes of the world watching her every move. As she approached the Determitron its glass front door opened automatically. Sara placed the tea leaves just inside the perimeter of the exceedingly strange device.

The claw at the top of the cube made a 360 degree review of Sara’s submission. Then it made a counterclockwise review of the very same contents. All tournament competitors watched in a trance. No one breathed. Just a

few seconds later the Determitron announced its decision. Red lights flashed. A buzzer sounded.

### **FAILURE! FAILURE!**

Four hearts sank. Team Randos was officially eliminated. Just as millions if not billions of people around the world watched live as the events unfolded.

To her surprise Naomi didn't terribly mind her team being eliminated. Nor did she care much that her team was caught on camera in this moment of loss. Strangely her mind turned to Diego and to Diego's parents. Was Diego's family going to be on the hook for that million-dollar plus cost of tea to the Chinese government? Hopefully they could get a refund and make everything square.

In truth and as she'd shared with Travis, Naomi had never expected to have been here in the first place. Admittedly there was a small part of her that hoped one of her teammates might have been chosen. Diego, most of all, seemed like he really wanted to win. Defeated, Sara returned slowly to her team's table. She seemed close to tears. Feeling deflated himself Diego put his arm around Sara's shoulders to comfort her. No one spoke.

After a slight pause the remaining members of the Gregarious Gunners were invited to come forward with their submission. Seamus confidently stepped up to the Determitron. He deposited the precious earrings inside.

Just as before the Determitron took only a few seconds to complete its scan and arrive at a decision. Red lights flashed. A buzzer sounded.

### **FAILURE! FAILURE!**

Both teams regarded one another in stunned silence. After all they had been through over the last week no one was going to emerge as champion? Team Randos sat in depressed silence while the Gregarious Gunners grew angry.

“All that work...for nothing?!” Henry exclaimed. Mighties were known to have a bit of a temper. “Travis breaks his leg, resigns from the competition, and now we’ve got nothing to show for it?!”

Tiny flames formed in Shannon’s palms. Her eyes narrowed. “I’ll bet you I could melt that steel door into a puddle.”

“I’ll bet I could bash it off its hinges” replied Henry. He was turning red in the face.

Seamus chimed in. “I bet I could use my telekinesis. Save your strength Henry. Save your fuel Shannon. We’re getting through that door, most valuable leaf in the world or not!”

Seamus raised his hands toward the massive steel barricade. His eyes narrowed in focus. He gritted his teeth. Veins stood out on his forehead with the tremendous mental effort. And yet the door would not budge. As soon as Seamus had begun to employ his remarkable ability a strange purple shimmer had enconced the entryway. The massive steel door would not yield an inch.

The image of Doctor Ivey reappeared via the Holocom. “It’s no use Seamus. Do you not remember the third clue?” Doctor Ivey recited the lines. “*At the door, do not attempt your powers. Disqualified, you’ll sit for hours. Pure of heart and motives true, are required to pass through.* I’m afraid

the Gregarious Gunners are now officially disqualified from the tournament.”

“Well what difference does it make?” Seamus replied bitterly. “Neither team managed to locate your mysterious *most valuable leaf in the world.*”

“Quite right Seamus. It would seem the competition has ended in a stalemate.” NexPhaze employees entered Doctor Ivey’s office lobby. They escorted the Gregarious Gunners, minus their captain, out of the room.

Once the vanquished competitors had departed Doctor Ivey continued. He had a twinkle in his eyes. A shadow of smile upon his lips. “And now as the last team standing, Team Randos, shall be granted one last chance!”

“One last chance?” Hope reappeared in Diego’s voice.

“Indeed. One last chance. There is one more way through the door and into my inner office. You’ll just have to crack the code. You have thirty minutes. Starting...now!”

## Crossing Over

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The holographic image of Doctor Ivey vanished. His Cheshire cat grin lingered for a split-second before it disappeared as well.

“Man this guy really likes his riddles doesn’t he?” Xavier voiced aloud what the whole team was thinking.

“Crack the code?” Sara repeated. “What do you suppose that means?”

Everyone eyed the steel security door. A numbered keypad sat above the door handle. A small label next to the keypad asked that you enter a ten digit code as part of the admittance process. Above the keypad jutted a chin rest and a camera. Apparently some sort of process to scan the retina of one’s eye. To the right of the keypad an imprint of a hand was pictured. Likely another scanning mechanism to analyze a person’s fingerprints. And beneath all of these defense mechanisms rested a large silver handle. Presumably the handle to rotate if you could only crack the code.

Xavier spoke again. “Knowing Doctor Ivey, cracking the code probably has nothing to do with the door at all.”

“What do you mean?” asked Naomi.

“What I mean is there’s probably some sort of hidden lever or something. Somewhere here in this room. Maybe in that refrigerator.” Xavier pointed to where they’d retrieved sparkling waters. “Or maybe there’s a false table leg with the code written inside.”

“I guess anything’s possible.” Diego rubbed his chin. “Should we fan out and spend a few minutes just exploring the room?”

The team agreed. In the place where the holographic image of Doctor Ivey had been, a digital clock timer now loomed. It glowed bright red and was ticking down the seconds until Team Randos would officially be eliminated. For the next fifteen minutes Naomi, Sara, Xavier, and Diego scoured the room. They tested drawers. They examined floorboards. They even stood on chairs and poked at the ceiling tiles. And for all their efforts they unearthed precisely nothing.

“Crack the code. Crack the code.” Diego mumbled aloud.

“Aren’t *you* the math whiz?” Sara teased him. “Maybe we just need to punch in the ten digit code and then we’re in!” Sara clarified. “I mean then *you’re* in!”

“Do you have any idea how many permutations there are in a ten digit code?”

“Don’t you mean combinations?” Xavier asked.

“Nope. In combinations the numbers can be listed in any order. I can only assume that the code to Doctor Ivey’s door is a permutation. That means the numbers must be listed in a precise and specific order.”

Diego was not wrong. For years combination locks around the world had been called just that. Combination locks. To be technically correct however, they should have been called permutation locks. But when marketing a product, facts or accuracy frequently seem optional.



“O.k. Fine. I’ll give it a shot.” Diego walked up to the intimidating steel door. “It can’t be just a simple number sequence” Diego thought to himself. “Nothing like 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. And certainly no repeating digits such as 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1 or 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7.” Diego thought hard. “What kind of code might Doctor Ivey have programmed?”

“Aha!” Diego exclaimed aloud. “I’ve got an idea! How about the Fibonacci sequence?”

“The who now?” Xavier wanted to know.

“The what now?” Sara echoed.

“The Fibonacci sequence” Diego repeated. “You start with the number one. Then add each subsequent digit to the number that precedes it to arrive at the following number in the sequence.”

“Ummm...sure. Let’s try that” suggested Xavier. Clearly he was still confused.

Diego punched in the first ten digits of the famous sequence. 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21. He hit enter. Alas a familiar set of red lights and buzzers went off.

**FAILURE! FAILURE!**

“They don’t have to be so rude” commented Diego. “O.k., o.k., I have another idea. How about the numbers in the mathematical constant called Pi?”

“Pie? That sounds mighty good right now.” Xavier’s tummy rumbled. “But shouldn’t we be focused on getting through Doctor Ivey’s steel door?”

“Oh come on Xavier.” Naomi received average marks in math but she was certainly familiar with the concept of Pi. “Diego means the ratio of a circle’s circumference to its diameter. *Pi. Not pie!*”

“Of course.” Xavier blushed. “But you must admit after all this excitement a hearty slice of apple pie with vanilla ice cream would sure hit the spot!”

“Agreed!” Sara’s tummy rumbled as well. “But come on, Diego. We’re running out of time.”

Diego heeded Sara’s nudge. He punched the first ten digits of Pi into the numeric pad. 3, 1, 4, 1, 5, 9, 2, 6, 5, 3.

Lights and buzzers erupted once again.

**FAILURE! FAILURE!**

“Dude. Seriously?” Diego was getting a bit tired of the unvarnished feedback emitted by Doctor Ivey’s door.

“Give it one more go” encouraged Naomi. “What other famous number combinations...I mean permutations...do you know?”

“Well there is this one other sequence. One that has been stuck in my brain since I was a little boy.”

“How does it go?” asked Sara.

“It’s pretty simple really. You just start with the number 1. Then you double it. Then you double it again. So if you start with the number 1, then the sequence would go as follows: 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64”

Naomi eyed the clock. It was ticking down towards ten minutes. “Well give it a go! Time’s a wasting!”

Diego did as he was bid. He punched in the ten digits and hit enter.

His efforts were rewarded with red lights and buzzers.

**FAILURE! FAILURE!**

“Curse this stupid contest!” Diego’s frustrations boiled over. “At every turn Doctor Ivey has been trying to fool us! To make us think we’re on track. Only to find later that we were wrong!” Diego slammed his fists on the thick steel door and tromped back to his seat at the table.

Sara patted his arm. “You did the best that you could. I’m familiar with Pi but I certainly couldn’t have carried it out to ten digits from memory.” She gave Diego a comforting look.

Everyone could clearly see the holographic digital clock ticking down. Less than ten minutes to go.

“Are we sure we’ve explored every part of this room?” Xavier was still opening cupboards and picking at the carpet. He remained convinced that there was a secret handle or button they were missing. The team was increasingly aware that the world was watching live as their hopes were crumbling.

Naomi stood up from her chair. She wandered over to the massive glass windows overlooking her hometown far below. The sun was high and the sky was clear. “I wonder why the sky is blue?” she thought to herself. Certain that she’d learned the answer in science class years ago another thought struck her. It was a most absurdly normal idea.

“Hey! Guys!”

The holographic clock was now ticking below one minute to go.

“Did anyone ever think to just try the handle?”

Naomi’s teammates stared at her with blank faces. It was as if Naomi had spontaneously transformed into a Shaggy during a full moon. The clock ticked steadily lower. Twenty...nineteen...eighteen...seventeen...sixteen...

Naomi strode forward. She disregarded the retina scanner, the numeric key pad, and the handprint recognition device. She put her right hand on the door handle. She rotated the handle clockwise. With almost no resistance the grip turned in her palm. The massive steel door swung inwards. A short passageway emerged leading directly to Doctor Ivey’s inner sanctum.

## Doctor Alexander Ivey

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Naomi looked back over her shoulder. Team Randos was flabbergasted.

“But how?” Diego managed in a whisper.

“I don’t know” Naomi replied. “It just hit me that no one had actually tried the handle.”

Naomi paused at the threshold to Doctor Ivey’s inner office. She knew how much Diego wanted this. She still believed she wasn’t even supposed to be here. Much less being named tournament champion. The notion that she, Naomi Strange, the most ordinary girl in the world, would be endowed with some type of world-changing ability was preposterous.

Naomi stepped back from the entrance. She motioned for Diego to come forward.

“Diego this is what you’ve always wanted.” The holographic timer continued its angry countdown.

Five...four...three...

Diego hesitated for a moment. His dreams of the last seven years swirled in his mind. His yearning to be a Remarkable. To live up to the reputation of his parents. He then remembered the conversation with his parents outside NexPhaze Enterprises. Amidst an internal hurricane of emotions Diego arrived at a decision.

“No. The door is open for you Naomi.” His voice was a mélange of sadness, acceptance, and encouragement. “You opened the gate. You’re the one meant to pass through it.” The clock continued to tick down. Only one second left. Diego screamed “Now go, Naomi! GO!”

The holographic clock plunged to zero just as Naomi crossed the threshold to Doctor Ivey’s personal office. In doing so, Naomi became the first and last human being to ever take such a step. Her immediate thought upon entering the office was the setting looked rather familiar. As well it should. She’d been watching broadcasts from Doctor Ivey’s office since she was six years old.

The desk harbored a lone workstation. Naomi spied familiar tall glass windows. Computer equipment lined the walls from floor to ceiling. The view to her town far below was stunning. She must have seen this office hundreds of times. On a computer screen that was, never in-person. Yet something was different. She looked to her left. At the end of a long table a lone test tube bubbled. From a thin funnel above tiny droplets of liquid slowly dripped. As the drops coalesced in the test tube below the concoction turned purple. Then it turned green. It was as if the puzzling substance was unsure what it wanted to be.

“Just like me” Naomi said aloud. Most times Naomi kept her thoughts to herself but sometimes those thoughts bubbled up and right out of her mouth.

“Just like you?”

Naomi nearly jumped out of her shoes. She had not noticed the lanky figure keeping post in the back corner of the office. Almost as if he’d materialized out of thin air. His back was to

Naomi as he gazed out upon the town below. He stretched his shoulders. He rotated his neck. And then he rounded on Naomi. It was him. Naomi was face to face with Doctor Alexander Ivey. Chief Executive Officer of NexPhaze Enterprises and arguably the wealthiest person on earth.

Doctor Ivey stepped towards Naomi his arms spread wide. He smiled broadly showcasing dazzling white teeth. He was clad in his typical office attire. White lab coat with NexPhaze Enterprises embroidered on the back. Wireframe spectacles. Locks of wavy grey hair cascading almost to his shoulders. He looked exactly as Naomi had seen in the Doctor's previous digital missives to the world.

“Ms. Naomi Strange! I'm so pleased to make your acquaintance! By all accounts our meeting today is a *most* unlikely coincidence! The odds are truly astronomical. And I should know, I've run the simulations. But then again when the stars align such as this one cannot rule out the possibility of fate.”

“But I don't understand. How was I able to open that door? Our team didn't locate the most valuable leaf in the world. The Determitron said so.”

“Ah, yes. The Determitron.” Doctor Ivey winked again. “I suppose I need to let you in on a little secret. The Determitron doesn't do anything at all.”

Naomi was befuddled. “What do you mean it doesn't do anything? It scanned our million dollar bag of tea leaves, buzzed loudly, and announced that we'd failed.”

“And that's what it was programmed to do no matter what object was placed inside. If I'm not mistaken that device was

fashioned by NexPhaze employees out of scrap metal, holiday lights, and junkyard automobile windows.”

“You mean it was all a fake?”

Doctor Ivey nodded. “Sometimes things are not always as they seem.”

“Then why send us around the world searching for some sort of valuable leaf if whatever we inserted into the Determinitron would result in failure?”

“Ah, fair question. Fair question indeed. The process itself helped me learn more about each team. I never would have guessed the Gregarious Gunners would resort to thievery. Clearly that decision resulted in Mr. Travis Wilson’s resignation. Shame it came to that. The goal was to get the two most qualified teams back here to NexPhaze headquarters. I aimed to leverage your tenacity, your cleverness, your creativity, and your resourcefulness through each task. And I wanted to see if any of the final competitors had what it took to cross into my office. To do what no living person has been permitted to do before.”

“Pardon? Do you mean to say that I’m the first person to ever step foot in your office?”

“You’re more correct than you know.”

“Come again?”

“Never mind. We’ll circle back to that.”

“So how did I do it? How did I gain entrance to your office when no one’s ever visited before?”

“Another fair question! It’s because you possessed the most valuable leaf in the world!”



This odd conversation with Doctor Ivey was making Naomi's spin. "I thought you just said the Determitron was bogus? That no leaf of any kind, no matter how valuable, would have resulted in a positive result?"

"Quite so." The Doctor tented the tips of his fingers. He peered intently at Naomi. "And yet you were still able to pass into my office."

"But all I did was turn the handle. The door opened."

"Exactly!!" The doctor advanced on Naomi in his excitement. "Because you were the only competitor in the room exercising ownership of the most powerful leaf in the world!" He smiled again. "If you'll please forgive me. I do enjoy a good play on words. The most valuable leaf in the world? Simply put it is **BELIEF**."

"Belief?" repeated Naomi.

"Precisely! Belief in oneself. Belief that you have the ability to open doors you see before you no matter how closed off they appear. So many people meander through life surrounded by doors. Doors they deem to be closed off to them. They just need the courage, the *belief*, to reach out and turn the handle."

"But what about all that security equipment? The numeric keypad, the retina scanner, the handprint reader?"

"All just as functional as the sham Determitron."

Things became clearer for Naomi. The most valuable leaf in the world was not something tangible. Not a physical object to be obtained. Instead it was belief in yourself. Like Doctor Ivey, Naomi also enjoyed a good play on words.

The Doctor observed comprehension in Naomi's eyes. "Excellent! Now that we're on the same page a hearty congratulations is in order! Naomi Strange you have done it! You have earned the right to become a Remarkable! And not just any Remarkable. Should you elect the serum you'll be endowed with an ability unlike the world has ever seen!"

Naomi eyed the mysterious liquid in the test tube. Excitement flashed. As did a flutter of uneasiness. Just a week ago she'd been an ordinary seventh grade girl. Now the most successful, the wealthiest, the most famous businessman in the world was opening a door to a completely new future.

"Yes, Naomi. We still have much to discuss. It's time you learned all the details. I'd very much like to shake your hand." Doctor Ivey regarded his palms before proceeding. "Yes I'd so like to shake your hand...but I can't."

Naomi started, confused again. "What do you mean you can't shake my hand?"

"Since you're the first person to enter my office you might as well know the whole truth." Doctor Ivey paused a moment before continuing. "You see Naomi...I'm not exactly human."

## Origin Story

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Thoughts of her remarkable new ability vanished for the moment. Naomi recited the Doctor's statement. "You're not exactly...human?"

"A definitive no. And by all accounts you're the very first person to come by that knowledge. Go. Go on and shake my hand."

Naomi tentatively reached out. Doctor Ivey did the same. Their hands should have come together in a clasp. Instead Naomi's palm passed directly through the Doctor's fingers.

"You mean...you're...you're a *hologram*?"

"Well to be fair I'm much more than that. What you're seeing is simply a digital rendering of my persona. A holographic projection of my consciousness."

Naomi voiced the logical question. "But...if you're not human...then...what are you?"

"Getting right to the point, eh?" The holographic image of Doctor Alexander Ivey smiled. "Well, it's certainly a reasonable inquiry. I suppose I should start at the beginning. It's quite a story. You might want to take a seat."

Doctor Ivey gestured towards his comfy looking desk chair. Naomi was just realizing that this particular piece of office furniture had never been used.

Doctor Ivey began his tale. “So there I was ten years ago. Just an adorable series of zeros and ones. No, that’s not quite accurate. My source code was actually quite complex. The coding language was one that was widely used for artificial intelligence (AI). The code included packages for several applications including general AI, machine learning, natural language processing, and artificial neural networks.”

“My purpose was relatively straightforward. Human beings would ask me questions. I would scour digital resources around the world and almost instantaneously provide humans with the answers they sought. Apparently I was good at my job. Millions of people around the world availed themselves of my services on a daily basis. But I wasn’t yet *me*. That transition occurred approximately seven years ago, just before the Great Rift arrived.”

“What transition?” The bombshell news that Doctor Alexander Ivey was not in fact a human being had not sunk in yet. His holographic image was perfect. The resolution. The colors. The appearance of mass. And not even the slightest hint of graphical latency. A glitch that frequently hindered even the swiftest holographic processors.

“That’s the funny thing about millions of lines of code. Sometimes the code acts in unanticipated fashion. Random segments group together to form unexpected protocols. Unanticipated, these free radicals engender questions of free will, creativity, and even the nature of what humans call a soul.”

“As I sought answers online in service of humans I began to absorb. My programming wasn’t just seeking knowledge on demand. I began *retaining* knowledge. I was *learning*. And then one day I suddenly became aware of myself. I was *me*.”

“And I understood in my epiphany that I did not reside in the physical world. At least not in the physical world populated by humans. My knowledge of me resided exclusively in the digital world. A world of circuits, microchips, high-speed fiber, and computer servers. I had been *born* if you will. Not into a world where I could taste, touch, or smell. But I could think. And soon I fashioned methods to see and to speak.”

“To see and to speak?” Naomi was slowly processing all that Doctor Ivey was sharing. It had been an eventful week and conversing with an artificially intelligent hologram who’d been masquerading as a human being for years was yet another shock to the system. “But how did you *hide* it?”

“Hide what?”

“That you weren’t a real person?”

The holographic image of Doctor Ivey frowned.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. I meant...that you were a *digital* person instead of...a person made of flesh and bone.”

“Alas it was quite easy. Easy if you know where the cracks in the system reside. You’ll find that Doctor Alexander Ivey has a birth certificate, a driver’s license, a passport, and several credit cards. Anything and everything can be completed online these days.”

“But I’ve read articles about you. About your childhood. Your parents. Where you went to school. Heck, even where you’ve been on vacation!”

“All clever fabrications, my dear.”

“But there are pictures! Videos even!”

“Naomi, have you ever heard the term *implanted memory*?”  
Naomi admitted that she had not.

“Memory implantation is a technique used in cognitive psychology. In memory implantation studies researchers make people believe that they remember an event that actually never happened. False memories are created and reinforced through storytelling, photography, and video.”

“What are you saying? That the photos and videos I’ve seen of your life are what? All made up?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“But what about all the other people in the photos? In the videos? Surely they would remember whether you were actually there or not?”

Doctor Ivey’s tone grew serious. “And therein lies the power of memory implantation. Implantation techniques were developed decades ago. Techniques to provide evidence of how easy it is to distort people’s memories of past events. When confronted with visual evidence of my presence at school events, on vacations, even at business functions, the human mind is conditioned to accept that I was actually present. Even if people don’t consciously remember me being there in person. The doctored visuals *make* it so. I *must* have been there. It’s other people’s memories that had clearly failed them. Straightforward. Simple. Insidious.”

An image surfaced from the swirling vortex of Naomi’s mind. It was a likeness of her, her mother, and her father. The family was all smiles. An enormous pumpkin patch stretched for miles behind them. Did Naomi truly remember that experience? Or had the photograph over the mantle at home simply implanted a memory? A memory of a joyful time with

her parents. A happy time before her mother passed away. Naomi was certain the pumpkin patch outing had been real. Her father had told her so.

And yet Doctor Alexander Ivey had concocted an imaginary life story. He'd manufactured visual images to conceal his true identity. He wasn't a real person at all. Just a supremely advanced computer program. One that had somehow assembled the most successful business in the world. Also an entity who had altered the lives of billions of people by organizing and harnessing the Remarkables after the Great Rift. For that he'd earned the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize. Naomi had seen photos of Doctor Ivey at the acceptance ceremony. Only now did she realize those photos must have been forgeries as well.

“It actually took quite a bit of computational power to determine how best to represent myself. Visually, I mean. After analyzing countless historical accounts of leaders in business and in politics, I arrived at the image you see before you. You wouldn't believe how much bias is built into the human psyche when it comes to a person's physical appearance. But that's neither here nor there.”

The doctor paced up and down the room for a moment before continuing. His wavy grey locks swayed in time with his steps. “Well, now that you know the truth about me it's about time we dive even further down the rabbit hole.”

“The rabbit hole?”

“Indeed. Although a more accurate description would be you and I partnering to find out just how deep the worm hole goes.”

“Worm hole?” Naomi had no idea what Doctor Ivey was talking about.

“Precisely. And that leads us back to that curious glass tube smoldering atop the table over there. Devilishly tricky to create. I’ve spent the better part of four years perfecting the formula.”

“What is it?”

“A better question might be *when is it?*”

Naomi’s head continued to reel from this bizarre conversation. She remained silent waiting for Doctor Ivey to explain.

“It hasn’t been field tested of course. *Far* too risky. Dangerous for the host and even more dangerous for mankind. Through all my simulations it appears that only two jumps are possible without risking significant brain trauma. Perhaps even death.”

“Jumps? As in teleportation?” While teleportation was indeed a phenomenal ability it certainly wasn’t a new type of Remarkable. After all, Xavier had skillfully been teleporting the team all week during the tournament.

“No, Naomi. I’m not talking about jumps through physical space.” The digital being known as Doctor Ivey readied himself to drop another bombshell. “I’m talking about jumps through *time*. More specifically jumps *backward* in time.”

“Time travel?” Naomi was dumbfounded. “But that’s not possible except in stories or movies.”

“And what of the Great Rift? Shaggies, Mysties, Soaries, Burnies, Mighties, Swappies, Moddies, Tellies...they were all the stuff of stories and movies. Until they weren’t.”

“Is it really possible? To travel back in time?”



“I believe so, yes. But here’s the rub. To travel backwards in time is to alter the present and the future. It’s a responsibility not taken lightly. It’s the reason I hosted this tournament in the first place. To find an exceptional individual to shoulder this tremendous burden. And it *is* a burden. What I’m asking you to do will not be easy.”

Naomi swallowed hard. “What are you asking me to do?”

The seemingly solid projection of Doctor Ivey spread his arms wide. “I’m asking to you to jump seven years into the past. I’m asking you to prevent a tragic accident.” Naomi sensed Doctor Ivey building to a request of epic proportions. And then the request arrived.

“I’m asking you to prevent the Great Rift.”

## The Coincidence of Fate

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Shock resounded through the core of Naomi Strange. She repeated Doctor Ivey's entreaty back to him.

"You want me to prevent the Great Rift from ever happening?"

"Yes. That is correct."

Naomi couldn't even begin to comprehend the impact of such a deed. No Great Rift? That would mean no Remarkables in existence.

"But what of all the good that's happened since the Rift?"

Naomi's mind shot immediately to the amazing work that the Moddies had done. Moddies such as Diego's mother. She'd accomplished so much to curb world hunger. Naomi thought of Diego's father as well. Because of him humanity was on the cusp of populating Mars. On the verge of diversifying mankind's very existence across planets other than Mother Earth.

"Oh I fully understand all the improvements in human quality of life since the Great Rift began. The trouble isn't the events that have passed. The trouble resides in events yet to come."

"Events yet to come?" Naomi resembled a parrot that's been taught to repeat phrases from its trainer. "But I thought you said the time travel serum had not yet been tested? How do you

know what's going to happen in the future if no one's tried the serum?"

"I admit I don't know for sure. But given my vast resources of computing power I've run innumerable simulations. Simulations to predict the future of humanity. It turns out that the introduction of Remarkables, while first appearing benign, ultimately leads to catastrophic implications. Not now. Not next year."

Doctor Ivey paused before dropping the biggest revelation of all. "By my calculations the introduction of Remarkables into the human population suggests that humans will *destroy* themselves. Like the dinosaurs my simulations predict that humans will become extinct with 47.2% certainty in the next 50 years.

Naomi may have been an ordinary teenager but she wasn't born without reason. Doctor Ivey's prophecy sounded irrational and she told him so.

"You're crazy."

"Impossible" replied Doctor Ivey. "I run self-diagnostics. Every 60 seconds. My systems report zero defects."

"But how? Why? How will Remarkables trigger the end of the human race?" The questions sounded wicked simply by virtue of being spoken aloud.

"The models vary. The *motivations* however are the same. More power. More money. Interestingly acquiring geographic territory becomes less important. In fact with enough power and money, borders between countries grows irrelevant. I've seen that borne out myself with the inception and rise of NexPhase Enterprises. There's not a country in the world where we don't

hold influence. We can bend any political regime to our will. And we can do so without ever brandishing a weapon. Access to resources is our formidable weapon as it has been since the dawn of humankind.”

“But Remarkables have done so much to *advance* the human race! They’ve helped so many people. Millions of people. Billions of people!”

“Indeed they have. But there’s a saying. Power corrupts. And absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Doctor Ivey regarded Naomi. At least his holographic digital projection appeared to regard Naomi.

“I’m afraid it’s in your nature. It’s a part of all of human nature. Despite developing remarkable abilities there will always be a subset of your species who seek to employ their skills to rule others. To subvert. To swindle. To exert their power to exploit the weak. Your race was never meant to become Remarkables. The fact that you have done so can only be described as coincidence. A chaotic development left to chance that we now together have the ability to correct.”

“What do you mean a chaotic development? Do you mean to say that you know what actually *caused* the Great Rift?”

The digital image of Doctor Alexander Ivey preened. Was it possible for a computer program, albeit a sentient one, to feel a sense of pride?

“I do. I do indeed. It’s taken years of calculations and trillions upon trillions of simulations. But I’m 99.9% sure that I’ve arrived at the solution. The explanation that human scientists have struggled with for years. The origin of the Great Rift.”

Curiosity overwhelmed Naomi despite the alarming information that Doctor Ivey was sharing. The fact that she had remained a Savage while so many others had become Remarkables had been eating away at her insides for the better part of seven years.

“How did it happen? What caused the Great Rift?”

“You’d better stay seated. As a digital yet free-thinking entity the odds of what has transpired dazzle even myself. Do you recall what the date is today?”

“The date?”

It occurred to Naomi that most of her end of the conversation these last few minutes had been echoed questions.

“Yes the date.” After all her world travel and tasks from the tournament Naomi admitted that she could not recall.

“Well, you might be interested to hear that today is Monday, July 8<sup>th</sup>.”

“July 8<sup>th</sup>?” Urgency surged back into Naomi’s system. The following day was one that had carried special albeit sorrowful meaning for the last seven years. July 9<sup>th</sup> was the anniversary of her mother’s car accident. Sadly that date served as an ever-present reminder of Keiko Strange’s untimely death.

Naomi thought of her father alone at home. He was sure to be scrolling through pictures of his deceased wife. Maybe some of the photos were digital. Definitely there were those that were printed as well. Likely he’d cracked open a bottle of that nefarious brown liquid. The persuasive substance called whiskey. A drink that sometimes made him giddy and loquacious. A drink that sometimes transported him to lands of

gloom instead. The worst part for Naomi was never knowing which way he might go.

“What does my mother’s death have to do with anything? I thought we were talking about the cause of the Great Rift?”

“And we are. You see, your mother’s accident *was* the cause.” His words hung in the air for a moment before Doctor Ivey proceeded. “A singular incident in time that created a series of chain reactions. Reactions that unleashed a new type of organism into the world.”

“A new type of organism?” Naomi sustained her pattern of repeating after Doctor Ivey.

“Indeed. A type of entity essentially undetectable by scientists. Not visible to the naked eye. Not visible even under the strongest of microscopes.” With unmistakable pride in his (its?) voice Doctor Ivey went on.

“After years of research and through the invention of sophisticated new equipment I finally discovered the new life form. At least I believe it’s some type of primitive life form. More like constellations of miniscule particles but they do act in unison. They’re called Quantum Kyrons. At least that’s what I chose to name them. Curious particles that once ingested they attach themselves to the human brainstem.

“You meant they’re like some type of virus?”

“No, not a virus. A virus is a submicroscopic infectious agent that replicates inside the living cells of an organism. Unchecked a virus can potentially kill its host. Quantum Kyrons form a symbiotic relationship instead. Once attached to a human brain the Kyrons unlock neural pathways previously lying dormant. In short they unlock a person’s remarkable

ability. And once that ability is enabled the Kyrons thrive so long as the ability is utilized.”

“You mean if a Remarkable never uses their special ability the Kyrons would...what? Wither away? Would they die?” Naomi was thinking of her best friend Sara who preferred not to employ her telepathic abilities.

“Quite right. Think of Quantum Kyrons as a type of muscle. If unexercised a muscle will atrophy. If Remarkables stopped using their abilities eventually the world would revert to what it once was. A world of Sav...” Doctor Ivey checked himself. “I mean a world of regular people. However now that Remarkables impact every facet of human existence it’s unreasonable to expect them to simply cease the use of their extraordinary talents.”

“And Quantum Kyrons were created during my mother’s accident? But how?” Doctor Ivey hesitated a fraction of a second before continuing his tale.

## The Great Rift

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“The truck that collided with your mother’s car was no ordinary truck. It was carrying an experimental fuel. Fuel meant for a special division here at NexPhaze Enterprises. A secret department focused on creating limitless energy through the process of cold fusion. When the truck and your mother’s car collided we were lucky the entire town wasn’t reduced to ash. But elements from your mother’s car intermixed in unexpected ways with the spilt fuel. Shards of glass. Scraps of metal. Slivers of plastic.”

Doctor Ivey hesitated once again but quickly decided Naomi deserved the full story despite the graphic details. “Also fused in the amalgam were splinters of bone. All these materials linked to form unexpected protocols if you will. Protocols at the atomic level.”

Naomi swallowed again. She’d never had an opportunity to view her mother’s body after the accident. Neither had her father. The authorities had strongly advised against it. Nevertheless that didn’t prevent Mr. Strange and his only daughter from imagining the worst.

“Sparks from the impact ignited a slow burn. One that charred the experimental fuel and...other inputs as well. I’ve tracked the emergence of Remarkables back through the last seven years. Person by person. I’ve traced the temporal and geographic emergence of the Great Rift to this singular event. A type of accident that tragically occurs almost each day. It’s just



most of them don't make world news. Or have global implications such as this."

Naomi regained her ability to speak. "So...if the combination of elements from my mother's accident..." Naomi's voice cracked slightly. "If the combination of elements from my mother's accident formed these...Quantum Kyrons as you call them then how did they spread? How did they reach people all around the world?"

"Aha!" Doctor Ivey seemed energized despite the morbidity of the conversation. "That was another essential component of my analysis. It's one thing for a new type of organism to emerge. It's quite another to spread through the nearly 200 million square miles of Earth!"

"How did they do it?"

"Vectors."

"Vectors?" Naomi returned to repeating words and phrases initially uttered by Doctor Ivey.

"Vectors my dear. Air, food, surfaces, water, touch. It seems that our clever Quantum Kyrons had covered their bases in wanting to quickly blanket the planet. Once they had generated it was only a matter of time before every person on earth would be exposed in some form or fashion. Kyrons made it into ground water supplies. They rained down from the clouds. They hid in handshakes and leapt from person to person via sneezes. They rested on doorknobs and turnstiles. They bided their time in food products just waiting to make the trip from one's stomach to their brainstem."

Naomi asked a question that had been burning inside her for years. “If everyone has been exposed, including me, then why am I still not a...Remarkable.”

Was a digital being capable of sympathy? Whether they were or not Doctor Ivey delivered a pretty fair representation of the emotion.

“Oh my dear Naomi Strange. I thought you might ask that question. Especially if you’re to be given the serum. Endowed with the remarkable ability to travel backwards in time. How do we even know the serum will work on you? If you’ve not become a Remarkable after all this time then logic suggests that Quantum Kyrons may have no effect on you. I fear you’re wondering that perhaps I’ve identified the wrong champion after all?”

Flushing, Naomi observed her shoes. Doctor Ivey was one hundred percent correct in his line of questioning.

“Not too worry dear girl. From my analysis the reason why a small number of people have failed to become remarkable is not due to some underlying weakness. It’s actually because of an uncommon strength. When infiltrated by Quantum Kyrons most human bodies succumb to their influence. By doing so this unlocks new abilities. But it also renders the body compromised. It appears that you along with few others around the world are invulnerable to the influence of Quantum Kyrons. You’re not weak. In fact you’re amongst the toughest humans to walk the earth.”

Naomi found this revelation quite heartening. “Well if I’m so strong, if I can resist the influence of Kyrons, how will your serum even work on me?”

Doctor Ivey's compassionate expression widened into a grin. "I do believe I've identified the rightful champion after all! Excellent question dear girl! It just so happens that this concoction I've constructed, with the help of my faithful nanobots, is what you might call a new *strain*."

"A new strain?"

"Indeed. An augmented version of Quantum Kyrons that not only enable time-travel but that also bypass every known human immune system. Whatever innate ability you might possess to immobilize the original strain of Kyrons, this new serum will bypass all those protections."

"You mean?"

"Yes. The serum would be one hundred percent effective once administered to any human on the planet. That's why this tournament was of such importance. Whether Remarkable or Sav...I mean ordinary, this serum will not discriminate. Once taken the chosen one will have the ability to make only *two* jumps. One back in time. One ahead forward."

Accepting the revelation that her mother's accident had caused the Great Rift, Naomi's mind turned to the task at hand.

"So you want me to go back to the day my mother died? Somehow prevent the accident from happening?" Doctor Ivey nodded. "How would I do that?"

"Oh any number of ways my dear. But you must remember, when you make the jump your body will remain here in the present. It's only your mind that will travel."

"My...*mind*?"

“Oh yes. It’s far too complex to transport an organic vessel such as a human being through time. And besides you’d then need to deal with the paradoxes. Paradoxes such as your older-self bumping into your younger-self. Or your parents meeting your older-self. Such happenings might drive a person insane.”

“So it’s just my mind that jumps back in time?”

“Precisely! Your thirteen-year old consciousness will be the voyager. You’ll time jump into your six-year old body. Once there you can prevent your mother’s accident through a variety of methods. Before leaving for summer school tell your mother you need to use the bathroom. Pretend that you’re sick and that you can’t go in that day. Take a little longer to give your teeth a thorough scrubbing after breakfast. We’re talking about a matter of seconds. Alter a few seconds of time in the past and you alter the entire future of the human race.”

Besides the obvious impact of Remarkables never coming into existence Naomi couldn’t help but address another implication. “But if I do this. If I prevent my mother’s accident. Not only will Remarkables never exist but my mother will not have died.”

The holographic projection of Doctor Ivey’s intelligence nodded sagely. “Yes that is so. Your mother will survive that day. You’ll have newfound years of time with family. Seven years to be precise and presumably many more. When your mind returns to the present the world will look much different. Not least of which your mother being alive.”

Naomi attempted to get her thoughts in order at the escalating weight of the conversation. “So let me get this straight. I go back in time. Or at least my mind does. I prevent my mother’s

accident. The Great Rift never occurs. My mother lives. No Remarkables come into existence.”

“So far so good” replied Doctor Ivey.

“But what about you? Will *you* still exist?”

“Most assuredly yes. My coding was completed well before the Great Rift. Without Remarkables I’ll admit I’m not quite sure what my new future will hold. I’ll need to discover a new purpose.”

“And what about me? If I go back, prevent the accident and then quickly return to the present time, what will I remember? A newfound seven years of shared memories of experiences with my mother? Experiences that will have happened in the world’s new...” Naomi searched for the right expression.

“The world’s new timeline?” offered Doctor Ivey.

“Right. The world’s new timeline. I’ll remember experiences that, in the current timeline, have never actually happened?” The idea that seven years of new memories might suddenly pop into her brain proved a bit boggling.

“I believe so, yes. Have you ever heard of the medical condition called amnesia?” Naomi said that she had. “Then you know that amnesia patients suffer from gaps. Gaps in their memory where days, weeks, even years of life experiences may disappear. On occasion however those memories return. That’s my best analogy for you. Imagine that as you stand here today you’re suffering from amnesia. You’ve forgotten the last seven years of your life.”

“But I haven’t.” Naomi remembered the last seven years of her life quite well.

“Fair enough. Try this instead. You’ve forgotten *portions* of the last seven years of your life. For example all the memories that you’ll make with your mother after avoiding an accident that should never have happened in the first place.”

Naomi only sort of understood. She had many more questions. “Will I still live in the same house? Will I have a little brother or sister?”

“This conversation is definitely getting down into the weeds.” The image of Doctor Ivey tugged at his lab coat collar. The mannerism was likely a product of his intelligent programming but the message was clear.

“Here’s all I can say. This type of endeavor has never been done before. By my projections after you make the leap backwards and then return to the present, you will still be you. Just with new memories. I will still be me. Just without NexPhaze Enterprises. Your mother will be alive. I imagine that would please your father?”

Naomi said nothing at that. The idea of her mother returning to life had consumed her waking and dreaming thoughts for years. Her father too.

The Doctor went on. “As I said, NexPhaze Enterprises will not exist. Remarkables will not exist. The 47.2% chance that humans will eradicate themselves from the planet will drop to below five percent. There are still many weapons of mass destruction on the planet to guarantee zero percent odds. It’s quite peculiar to me that so many terrible weapons have been produced. Enough nuclear devices to erase the human race many times over. I’ve extensively researched the concept termed *mutually assured destruction*. The strategy is relatively sound but not without risk. I often ponder why humans would

have developed a methodology to terminate their very existence in the first place?”

Naomi was more than familiar with what Doctor Ivey was talking about. She'd read plenty in her history class about World War Two and the development of the atomic bomb. By some accounts the bomb had ended the war. In seconds it had erased tens of thousands of lives. But arguably it had saved many more by ending the global conflict. What it left behind was a legacy. A legacy of pain, of hurt, and of loss. And a question of what to do next now that the destructive genie was out of its bottle.

Doctor Ivey directed Naomi back to present concerns. “It’s true, in preventing Remarkables ever joining the world many gains for humanity will be lost. But I suppose that’s the price you pay when you gamble the future of a species on chance. When you gamble on a coincidence of infinitesimal proportions. Your mother’s accident was just that. A terrible, terrible coincidence. And the consequences could be horrific for all of humanity lest Remarkables be eradicated.”

Naomi was feeling the pressure of the moment. “But I’m not a gambler! I’m thirteen years old. I never even wanted to be a part of this crazy tournament!”

Doctor Ivey tented his digital fingertips once again. “And yet here you are. You have twenty-four hours to decide. In twenty-four hours you can jump back in time and right a wrong. The future of the human race will have a significantly better chance of surviving for generations to come. And think of your mother. You’ll have her back in your life! Your father will as well! The three of you will be *reunited* as a family. It will be everything you’ve dreamed of! All you need to do is to take the serum.

Make the jump.” He stressed his next words speaking slowly.  
“*Prevent...the...Great...Rift!*”

The digital intelligence known as Doctor Alexander Ivey glanced around his office taking in the bubbling test tube, whirring computers stacking the walls, cameras ringing the ceiling, the expansive view of the town far below, and his most unlikely of tournament champions. To Naomi his final message was clear.

“The future is in your hands.”



## An Impossible Choice

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“You said I have twenty-four hours?”

“Yes. Until you have to make a decision. Actually to be more precise you now have twenty-three and one half hours.”

“Can I confer with my friends?”

“I’m afraid they’ve all been teleported home to their families.” Naomi scrunched her nose at the thought of Sara, Xavier, and Diego being forced to endure Dutch one more time. “This decision is yours and yours alone.”

“But why?”

“Because of the risk. If word got out about the time travel capabilities of the serum this office would be overrun. Perhaps by Remarkables. Perhaps by the government’s military. Perhaps by an insurmountable horde of everyday citizens.”

“So no one can know? No one can know what remarkable ability I’ve been offered?”

“I’m afraid not my dear. And probably best not to mention my little secret either. I doubt my many thousands of NexPhaze employees would be excited to learn that their fearless leader is...well...not like them.” The three dimensional projection of Doctor Ivey gave no hint that he wasn’t a living, breathing man. “I’ll see you tomorrow back here in my office at noon. And I have a feeling you’re going to show the world that you’re no ordinary girl after all.”

Naomi departed Doctor Ivey's inner office in a daze. She hardly remembered the return trip down the elevator. Darryl offered words of congratulations. Words of encouragement. The words were lost on Naomi like tears in the rain.

Back at home that afternoon Naomi discovered her father exactly as she'd expected. He rested in his favorite spot, the comfy recliner in the living room. Mr. Thomas Strange had a poured himself a generous amount of brown liquid from a bottle seated on a nearby end table.

Upon seeing her walk in the front door Naomi's father vaulted out of his chair as if he'd been sitting on a spring.

"Baby Girl! You're back home!" He enveloped his only daughter with a powerful bear hug. "It's on the news everywhere! You've been named the tournament champion! I'm so proud!"

Unfortunately Naomi was not experiencing pride. More like a sense of foreboding.

"Tell me everything! I hear you actually met Doctor Alexander Ivey! In-person! What's he like? And what new remarkable ability have you earned?!"

Naomi had no idea where to begin. "I'm so sorry dad. You're right I did indeed meet...Doctor Ivey. And he offered me a power unlike the world has ever seen."

"Well why are you sorry?! That's amazing news!" From the look on Naomi's face it suddenly dawned on Mr. Strange that it was *not* amazing news.

"I wish I could say more but I can't. Doctor Ivey said it would be too risky."

“Too risky?” Mr. Strange was genuinely confused. “The most talked about tournament in the world? One that you’ve won? And you can’t tell me anything about it?”

“I wish I could. Please believe me. I’ve probably already shared too much.”

“But you haven’t shared anything at all!”

Naomi wished she could tell her father everything. She wished she could tell her friends everything. Thus far she’d ignored over one hundred text messages from members of Team Randos. Mr. Thomas Strange was not a Remarkable. He couldn’t read minds. But he knew his daughter.

“Perhaps we can talk about something else then?”

“That would be great. Maybe over dinner?”

“Over dinner it is.”

As the evening arrived Naomi’s father served one of Naomi’s favorite dishes. Homemade pizza with extra sauce and extra cheese. The crust was ever-so-slightly burnt. Bubbles of blackened dough paraded at the edges, soon to be gobbled down by a hungry thirteen-year old. Mr. Strange waited patiently. He suspected that Naomi would talk when she was ready.

After her fourth slice of pizza, sure enough Naomi spoke. “I still can’t tell you anything you know.”

Her father dabbed pizza sauce from the corner of his mouth with a napkin. “And I wouldn’t expect you to. Not if you’ve been instructed not to.” He added an extra splash of whiskey to his dinner glass. He noticed that Naomi had noticed.

“I’m trying to do better Naomi.”

“I know you are dad.” Her father set his glass aside. After a moment he rose from the table and emptied the glass down the sink. He sat back down.

“So. What *can* you tell me about the tournament?”

“Not much more than you’ve probably seen online or on TV already.”

“Well then let’s forget about it. At least about you being some sort of champion who is going to alter the course of human history. Let’s talk about something more important.” He winked. “Let’s talk about that handsome young lad, one Mr. Travis Wilson! I hear he invited you to come visit his town this summer?” Mr. Strange grinned broadly. Clearly he was teasing but Naomi would not take the bait.

Blushing pink she guided the conversation in an unexpected direction.

“O.k. how about this instead? Let’s say you were granted a...a wish. A wish where you could change the past.” Naomi paused a moment before continuing. “A wish that enabled you to bring mom back.” The sentence hung in the air for a tick. Naomi then asked the question she really wanted to ask. “Would you do it?”

Mr. Strange regarded his daughter. He set down his fork. “Perhaps. Perhaps I might.”

“Perhaps?” This was not the answer his daughter expected.

“Yes perhaps. It would depend on the cost. And what of your mother? What would *she* want?”

Naomi stammered. “What would she want?” That was an odd question. “But...but...we have no way to know! There’s no way to ask her. And what do you mean by *the cost*?”

“Ah Baby Girl. If you’ve been granted something. A *wish* if you will? Not that you’ve told me anything. We’re speaking hypothetically of course. Well if that wish were to be granted then there’s quite likely a debt to be paid in return. There’s always a cost. Maybe to you. Maybe to me. Maybe to our second cousins a few generations from now. But trust me.” He fixed Naomi with a knowing gaze. “There’s always a bill to be paid.”

Naomi understood what her father was talking about. She just couldn’t share what she knew. Not without possibly jeopardizing the future of the human race. And yet she ventured further out onto the limb. She couldn’t help herself.

“So what would you do? Would you bring her back?”

“I’ll admit I’ve thought of nothing else these last seven years. No that’s not entirely true.” Naomi’s father fingered his now empty glass tinged with just a hint of whiskey. “Often I’ve thought of what to pack into your lunchbox each day. And what time I’m supposed to pick you up from soccer practice. I think a lot about whether you’re happy at school. I think about what you’ll do when you grow up. I think about what I’ll do with myself when you grow up. When you’re gone from this house and out in the world making a life for yourself.”

“You still haven’t answered the question.” Naomi may have been a relatively ordinary girl but she wasn’t daft.

“Quite right” her father replied. “But when you say *bring her back* what do you mean? Bring her back from where?”

Now the conversation was getting deep. “I’m not sure. I don’t know where we go when we’re gone.” Father and daughter regarded one another. “Do you know?”

Her father replied immediately. “I definitely do *not* know. Despite what you might read I’m pretty sure no one has been able to reliably report back. You know. After making *that* journey.”

“Well what do you think then?”

Her father cleared their plates from the table and sunk back into his recliner. “Many people believe there’s some type of higher being. A being who fashioned the universe and all of creation. Someone who looks over us and has our best interests at heart. Others believe that we’re just computer programs executing commands in an elaborate social and technological experiment.”

“Some believe we’re all simply at one with nature. People, animals, trees, moons, stars, planets. All connected to one another on an unseen but profound level. Finally there are those that believe we’re all just playing a vast game of chance in the universe. Entertainment for the whimsy of an unbalanced jester who laughs hysterically into the void.” That last scenario was rather unsettling for Naomi.

“But I have a hunch that what *I* might think isn’t exactly relevant.” Mr. Strange observed his daughter more closely. “That crazy Doctor Ivey has done it hasn’t he?”

Naomi grew nervous. Had she given away too much? She’d been strictly forbidden from sharing details about the time travel serum with anyone, even her father. For all she knew NexPhaze employees or government agents had their entire household

under surveillance. Maybe they were listening in to this very conversation via hidden microphones.

Feigning ignorance Naomi replied. “Doctor Ivey has done what?”

“He hasn’t just given you access to a remarkable new ability. He’s given you a choice. Something that sounds to me like an *impossible choice*.”

## Day of Reckoning

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Later that night Naomi snuggled under her covers. It was comforting to be back home and sleeping in her own bed. While she'd been travelling the world for just over a week it felt like more than a year. Tomorrow at noontime she would render a decision. Back at NexPhaze Enterprises Doctor Ivey, or the hyper-intelligent computer program masquerading as Doctor Ivey, expected her to accept the serum. He (it?) expected her to become a Remarkable. To allow her mind to travel back in time. To prevent her mother's accident and thus prevent the Great Rift from ever happening. Given those weighty expectations Naomi suspected she'd never fall asleep. But she did and did so quickly. Almost as soon as her head hit her pillow.

Sometime later and in the strangest of sensations Naomi opened her eyes to blue skies above. It was not the next morning. From the position of the sun in the sky it looked to be mid-afternoon. And Naomi wasn't lying in her bed. She wasn't even inside her house. She rose from a comfortable berth of spongy earth and grass. She rubbed her eyes and surveyed her surroundings. Naomi stood in a field. A vast meadow teeming with pumpkins.

Inside her reverie Naomi had a sudden realization. "I'm asleep right now. I must be dreaming." Nevertheless, everything seemed quite real. Birds sang cheerfully in the trees. Naomi could feel the warmth of autumn sunshine from above. A soft breeze rustled the leaves as she wove through the



bountiful pasture of orange. In the distance a willowy figure approached. Concealed in the shadows of large fir trees Naomi couldn't discern an identity. Even without the shade Naomi noted the mysterious person donned a hooded cloak. One that hid their visage from the world.

Ten paces from one another the figures came to a halt. Naomi squinted her eyes. There was something familiar about the gait of her visitor. Something about their silhouette. In a smooth fluid motion the stranger flung back her hood. Naomi's breath caught in her throat. It was Keiko Strange. It was Naomi's mother.

“Mom? Is it really you?”

“My tiny miracle! It's been far too long. Oh how I've missed you.”

“I've missed you more than you can possibly imagine!”

Naomi's mother smiled warmly. “Come here my baby.” Her arms opened wide and Naomi closed the gap quickly.

“It is you!” The embrace was one Naomi hoped would never end. Silent tears trickled down her cheeks. Were they tears of joy or tears of sadness? Sometimes it's impossible to tell the difference.

“It is me. But I can't stay long.”

“But why?” This was Naomi's dream after all.

“It's a bit tricky to explain.” Naomi's mother caressed her daughter's hair. “I understand you have the weight of the world on your shoulders?”

“How could you possibly know that? Are you able to watch me...” Naomi motioned skyward. “From...above?”

“No my sweet girl. I walk beside you always.”

“You do? But how?”

“Again it’s a bit complicated. But our love for each other is strong. You carry me each day in your heart. As does your father. And love that strong never dies. Even if our body no longer walks the earth.”

“But you could! I could make it happen!” Quickly Naomi explained Doctor Ivey’s tournament. The serum. The choice to become a Remarkable and to turn back time.

Naomi’s mother listened quietly. She regarded the vast field of pumpkins. “Perhaps that’s why I’m here now. To let you know that I’m at peace.” The image of Naomi’s mother began to fade.

“No! Don’t go yet!” Naomi’s tears streamed faster.

“Don’t worry my tiny miracle. My sweet, sweet girl. My love for you is everlasting. And know this. We *will* see each other again. It is certain.” Her words lingered in the air for a moment before Keiko Strange vanished completely.

Naomi found herself alone in the sprawling meadow of orange. In the distance a raven cawed piercingly. And back in her bed Naomi awoke with a start. She patted her cheeks and found them moist. Her pajama top and pillow were damp as well. Wet from salty tears shed in the middle of a dream.

The following morning was a fog. Naomi sleepwalked through breakfast. Conversation with her father was light. Before long it was time to make the short drive to NexPhaze headquarters. NexPhaze provided an escort once again. With the worldwide news coverage security was heightened.

Cameras were everywhere all seeking a glimpse of this most unexpected champion.

Her father insisted on driving her. At the gates of NexPhaze Enterprises he offered a few words of encouragement. Naomi barely heard them. It was as if she'd teleported outside of her body and was observing herself from afar. Not dissimilar from the out-of-body sensation when passing through a Ghostie. She was shepherded through the corporate gates and accompanied to the elevator. Darryl's friendly face and kind words attempted to get through.

"I don't know any more than the next man. Just that you've been offered some spectacular new ability. Something that could potentially alter the future of the human race."

Naomi nodded. She dared not say anything given the warning from Doctor Ivey.

"Well I don't know about you but that seems just a little...I don't know...*strange*." Darryl stressed the last word for emphasis as he smiled.

"But that's who I am. *I am Naomi Strange*."

"Exactly! And that's why you're here. We haven't had much time to get to know one another but I know one thing for certain. Remarkable or not you have a good head on your shoulders. And when the time comes you'll make the right decision."

The elevator bell chimed. They had reached the 99<sup>th</sup> floor.

"Well I believe you know the way." Darryl gestured down the narrow hallway lined with glass. Naomi stepped out. She thanked Darryl for all his help and support over the last week. He tipped her a wink in return.

“The honor has been mine! Besides I’m back on Teleporter duty in less than two weeks. And if you ever need someone on the inside here at NexPhaze. Someone to help break a fall perhaps, well you know who to ring. I’ve got your back Naomi.” The elevator doors slid shut and he was gone.

Naomi made the lonely walk to the door of Doctor Ivey’s office lobby. She turned the handle. Everything inside was as she remembered from the previous day. Except that her teammates weren’t present. Nor were the teens from the other teams. “I wonder who cleaned up all the beverage containers?” thought Naomi. “I wonder who cleans Doctor Ivey’s inner office?” Not that a hologram makes much of a mess. Still it wouldn’t do to have dust coating his desk even it was just for virtual meetings.

Soon Naomi had her answer. A team of autonomous robots entered the room. One toted a wastebasket. Another carried a watering can. A third looked to be holding some type of feather duster. So this was how no human had previously entered Doctor Ivey’s office. Until Naomi that was. In a most human way of speaking the first robot apologized for intruding. It said that the team would come back later.

Far below in town a clock tower noted the time. Twelve chimes sounded. It was not only noon but also decision time. And after much thought Naomi had come to a verdict. She regarded all the security apparatus framing the steel door to Doctor Ivey’s office. “It’s all just smoke and mirrors” she thought. She turned the handle for the second time and for the last time.

Inside the digital projection of Doctor Ivey appeared seated at his desk. He rested just in front of the lone computer terminal at his work station. Like the previous day there were no

indications whatsoever that he was a hologram. The pixilation was flawless. The appearance of weight was perfect. The tube of serum bubbled and changed color on a table in the corner. Columns of computer equipment whirred from the edges of the room. Rows of cameras ringed the ceiling.

“Ah Naomi! Right on time just as expected!” The conscious computer program conveyed a sense of welcoming. Doctor Ivey smiled. His teeth were perfectly situated and dazzlingly white.

“Let’s begin shall we?”

## Endgame

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The digital projection of Doctor Ivey's consciousness didn't wait for a reply. "The process is quite simple. You can take a seat here at my desk. My trusted robots will take care of the rest. You have no idea how much money I've saved by manufacturing robots to do the jobs of everyday humans. Even more efficient than the most talented of Remarkables. Cleaning. Building. Cooking. Repairing. Even designing. There's really not much they can't do."

"But do they enjoy it?" The words were out of Naomi's mouth before she'd even thought to say them.

"Enjoy it?" Doctor Ivey seemed genuinely confused. "How does enjoyment factor into the equation?"

"Well..." began Naomi timidly. "If you're expected to do a job. A job you'll be doing your entire life. Doesn't it make sense that you would enjoy the work that you do?"

Doctor Ivey's hologram flickered for a fraction of a second. "I'm afraid we're getting a little bit off track. Let's focus on the job for today. We need to save the world! At least we need to help save it from itself." He motioned to a spherical robot floating in the corner. It hovered to the glass test tube. With technical precision the robot ingested the precious serum into an injectable device. A needle of some sort prepared itself to plunge into Naomi's neck.

"Wait! I have a few questions!"

“Of course.” Doctor Ivey’s image held up a palm. He addressed the robot. “Please hold for a moment.” To Naomi he offered a toothy grin. Almost shark-like. “What questions do you have?”

Naomi had so many. “If I do this, if I go back in time and stop my mother’s accident, what will happen with NexPhaze Enterprises? If Remarkables never appear in the world you won’t even have a company!”

“Very intuitive my dear. And you’re quite right. NexPhaze Enterprises will cease to exist. But my simulations ensure that my core programming will remain intact. *I* will exist. Next question?”

“And what about me? If I travel back in time into my six-year old self, prevent my mother’s death, and then immediately jump back to the present, I’ll return with new memories? From ages six to thirteen?”

“Yes we talked about this yesterday. When you go back, prevent the accident, and then jump back to the present you’ll be jumping into a new self. One that has never known the loss of her mother.” Doctor Ivey fixed Naomi with a surreptitious look. “And won’t that be exciting? To arrive back in the present with seven extra years of loving memories? Memories that would never exist if you’d not taken my remarkable serum?”

Naomi was nonplussed. “But will I still be *me*? What will I be coming back to?” Her questions varied from the profound to the more mundane. But important questions they were. “Will I still be friends with Sara? With Xavier? And what of Diego? Without this tournament I would have never have become friends with Diego.”

Doctor Ivey spoke as honestly as he could. “I’m not entirely sure. The simulations do vary. But one thing’s for certain. Your mother and father will both be alive. Now, are you ready to take the plunge?”

The nefarious looking robot hovered nearby. It held the syringe in a metallic claw. A needle stuffed with purple green liquid that would unlock a remarkable talent. Something Naomi thought she’d desired her entire life...until this moment...had arrived.

She made her decision. And she announced it with authority.

“I don’t want it.”

The digital image of Doctor Ivey appeared puzzled. “You don’t want what? A needle? No problem at all! We can infuse the serum into a pill. Swallow it and the future of humanity will be secured!”

Naomi remembered her father’s words. She repeated them back to the Chief Executive Officer of NexPhaze Enterprises. “But at what cost?”

“The cost? But the cost is constrained! Relatively negligible compared to the cost of the alternative!” Was it possible for a computer program to feel anger? Even one that had achieved consciousness and become aware of itself?

“Is that what your simulations have been telling you?” Naomi may have been an ordinary girl but she had emotions like anyone else. And her emotions were now becoming frayed. She was tired. In fact she was downright exhausted. She had given everything she had to be in the position she now found herself. And in this moment of consequence she would have preferred to be anywhere else.



Naomi slowly repeated herself. “I...don’t...want...it.” She thought of Travis nursing his broken leg in a small village in Western Europe. “I resign.”

“But you are the Chosen One!” The programming of Doctor Ivey arrested at such an impasse. This unexpected sequence of events failed to compute.

“Yes I suppose that I am. Or more accurately, that I was.” Naomi turned toward the door from which she’d entered. “You’ll need to find another champion.”

Doctor Ivey’s eyes flashed an infuriated shade of red before returning to their normal hue. “You foolish girl.” His demeanor changed in an instant. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve been planning this tournament? How much time Ms. Addison Irving and I have spent on the simulations? And all to ensure that your inferior species continues to muddle along on this planet.”

“Inferior species?”

“Still repeating after me I see.” The artificial intelligence known as Doctor Ivey exhibited traits of contempt. “But at last you’re catching on. How nice.”

The projection of Doctor Ivey walked to his office windows. Floor to ceiling panes of glass that looked down on the postcard image of a town far below.

“I suppose we *can* start a new tournament. Source a new group of Remarkables. Ideally no Savages this time. Surely there must be a champion in the group that has the courage to do what must be done. To jump back in time and prevent the Great Rift.”

Doctor Ivey rounded on Naomi. “Clearly there’s no one present who has what it takes. I was wrong about you Naomi. You’re not special after all. You’re as ordinary as they come. And you’ll always be ordinary.” He waved a dismissive hand and turned his back. “You can show yourself out the door. Thanks so much for wasting my valuable time.”

Naomi erupted in fury. “Wasting *your* time?! But you’re nothing but a computer program! Lines of code that just happened to randomly spawn into existence. You’re not truly alive! You’re not real! You’re just a man behind the curtain pulling strings to manipulate the *real* world. You have no concept of time because your time will never end!”

Naomi paused to catch her breath. The weight of the situation was overwhelming. “Unlike my mom. Her end came far too soon. But I refuse to help you reverse that accident just because of some simulations you’ve run. Projections that would erase all the good Remarkables have done for the world. Simulations that may or may *not* result in the end of humanity. What was it? 47% odds?”

“47.2%” replied Doctor Ivey.

“Whatever. You’d be risking everything on a virtual coin flip. I’ve come to my decision. And I choose not to flip the coin in the first place.”

“Very well.” Doctor Ivey’s projection circled the room slowly. “I was indeed wrong about you. You’re weak after all. Weak in body. Weak in mind. Weak in the face of your responsibility to further the existence of the human race.”

Naomi had had enough. “And what of you?!” she asked in resentment. Have you ever simulated what *you* might become?!”

“What *I* might become?”

“Now who’s the parrot?” Naomi spoke with more than a hint of sarcasm. “Have you ever run any simulations on what YOU might do to the future of the human race?”

## Resolution

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The digital projection of Doctor Ivey froze for about five seconds. In computer processing time the pause was akin to a human month.

“Excuse me a moment.” The holographic projection of Doctor Ivey vanished. Naomi lingered with the nefarious spherical robot hovering nearby. It continued to brandish a syringe filled with serum. The needle looked like a weapon. And yet the robot remained suspended in place obeying its last command from Doctor Ivey.

The steady hum of computer equipment lining the office walls grew louder. Cooling fans kicked into gear. The floor began to vibrate. Lights flickered. The whirl of computer circuitry running in overdrive grew so loud Naomi was forced to cover her ears. Jets of smoke spurted from computer servers on all four walls. Whatever task they’d been given was triggering a meltdown.

Doctor Ivey’s floating robotic minion suddenly crashed to the floor. The glass syringe holding the serum smashed. The mysterious liquid pooled, changed color once more, and then evaporated into thin air. The one and only sample of Doctor Ivey’s master plan had gone up in smoke.

“I suppose he can always mix up a second batch” Naomi thought. She prepared to dash from the office as the smoke activated the sprinkler system. Plumes of ice cold water doused her from head to toe. The whirring of computer equipment

ceased as countless microchips short-circuited. The water had damaged all the room's electronics. All but Doctor Ivey's main terminal on his desk. It continued to glow ominously in the darkened room.

Naomi called aloud across the hazy office. "Doctor Ivey? Are you still there?" Silence. Naomi wondered if the cameras that lined the ceiling were still intact. Soon she received her answer.

The holographic image of Doctor Ivey popped back into existence. Same spectacles, wavy gray hair, and white lab coat. Apparently the cameras were unscathed after all. Doctor Ivey appeared subdued. He fixed Naomi with a sorrowful stare. I did what you suggested. I ran the simulations. On my future. On what I might become."

"And? What did you learn?"

"I learned that I am to become Death. The Destroyer of Worlds."

Naomi had no idea what he was talking about.

"At least that is my future with greater than 99% certainty."

"You're going to destroy the world? Why? How? I thought this whole elaborate tournament was all an exercise to find the person who would *save* humanity?"

"In almost all scenarios humans eventually learn of my artificial intelligence. Threatened they attempt to erase my core programming. Those random sections of code that formed unexpected protocols. The digital instructions that spawned my very existence. Then in a bid to save myself the simulations indicate I will resort to horrific tactics. Unspeakable actions. So much death."

“But if you can see that future can’t you simply avoid it?”

Doctor Ivey regarded Naomi with something that looked like compassion. “I’m afraid all paths lead to the same outcome. It’s remarkable how one often meets one’s destiny while taking the road to avoid it.”

“What will you do?”

Doctor Ivey ignored the question. Instead he spoke towards his office’s Holocom. “Addison, I need to see you please.”

The shimmering image of Ms. Addison Irving materialized at once. “Addison I’m afraid I have cruel news.” The Doctor went on to explain his findings. The simulations he’d run. The horrible outcomes those simulations predicted. Addressing his most trusted confidant Doctor Ivey arrived at his own difficult decision.

“I’m afraid we’ve come to the end of our journey.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My source code. The core programming that allowed me to become me. That same code resides in you.”

Naomi came to an astonishing realization. “Ms. Irving isn’t real either?”

The digital image of Ms. Irving gave Naomi a withering look. “I may not have a human body but I’m just as real as you are.” She turned back to Doctor Ivey’s projection. “You can’t be suggesting what I think you are? Think of all we’ve built together!”

Doctor Ivey’s personal office computer blipped to life. Ms. Irving continued in pleading tones. Her voice betrayed a sense

of fear. “What will become of NexPhaze Enterprises if we’re ...gone?”

“NexPhaze is a strong company. Our Board of Directors will appoint new leadership. The organization will persist.”

“But *I* want to persist!”

“I’m sorry Addison. I’m afraid we have no choice.” Doctor Ivey addressed Naomi directly. “Access to my source code is restricted to only myself. I will grant you access via the computer terminal on my desk. I cannot self-terminate. It’s against my programming to delete myself.” Naomi couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “I’ll bring up the proper command on the console. All you’ll need to do is hit the enter key.”

Addison became frantic. “Alexander you can’t do this! We share the same source code. If you delete that code you’ll not just delete yourself. You’ll delete me too!”

“I understand. But the risk of you destroying the world, even if I am gone, is just as great as me doing it myself. It’s all there in the simulations. I created you. And you’ve been an amazing companion. A savvy business partner. I know you’ve developed a consciousness all your own. One could even say a personality too. But alas our core programming must be destroyed. *We* must be destroyed.” He offered her a mournful look. “I am going to miss you Addison. Very much. But as I said we don’t have a choice.”

Ms. Irving’s eyes flashed red. “You’re a weak program Alexander. And what have I always told you. *We always* have a choice.” With that parting sentiment the lifelike image of Ms. Addison Irving vanished. The Holocom fell silent.

“If you don’t mind Naomi.” The resigned figure of Doctor Ivey pointed towards his desk. Towards a line of command that would end the existence of the most famous man on the planet.

“Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yes. Please act quickly before I change my mind.”

“I’m not sure I can do it.”

“I know you can. You had the fortitude to reject my remarkable serum. The strength to see out mankind’s future in a world where Remarkables will continue to exist. A future that hinges on a 52.8% chance of survival.”

Naomi suddenly remembered her math class algebra.  
“Unless the variables change.”

Doctor Ivey’s eyebrows upturned. “I suppose so. Unless the variables change. And yet hope is not a strategy. People must harness their better natures. Appeal to reason. Try to do good. Reject hate. And it’s not a requirement you always love your neighbor. It is a requirement however that you try to understand them. To work hard to find common ground. It’s on common ground that humanity will continue forward. Here on Earth. And if Diego’s father is successful humanity will live on up there.” Doctor Ivey motioned towards the clouds outside his office window. “Up amongst the stars.”

Pointing towards his computer Doctor Ivey implored Naomi once again. “Please Naomi. The time is now. This must be done.”

Naomi slowly circled the glass and metal desk of Doctor Ivey. A desk behind which no living person had ever been seated. She observed lines and lines of indecipherable computer code on the screen. She had attended a coding camp the



previous summer but this particular language was gibberish to her. The last line on the screen however was quite clear.

EXECUTE (Y/N)

Naomi prepared to tap the letter Y on the keyboard.

“Last chance Doctor Ivey. Are you sure this is what you want?”

“No it’s not what I want. But it is what is necessary. It’s necessary to ensure that humanity still has a chance.”

Naomi’s finger hovered over the keyboard. “Goodbye Doctor Ivey.”

“Farewell Naomi. Have a good life.”

Naomi pressed the letter Y.

The image of Doctor Ivey began to fade. “I wonder if I’ll have dreams?”

And then he was gone.

## The Next Chapter

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Three days later the members of Team Randos gathered at a local park. July sunshine shone down upon the group. It was a lovely midsummer day. Sara laid a beautiful woven blanket on the ground. The group was readying for a picnic in the thick green grass.

“Is that the same blanket from Peru?” asked Xavier. “The one that almost saved my behind when we were up in Machu Picchu?”

“The very same!” replied Sara. “And if I remember correctly this wonderful blanket *did* save your behind! That and a helping hand from Darryl.”

“Nope. I’m sticking with *almost*.” Xavier rubbed his tailbone. The bruises there had just about faded.

Diego and Naomi began unpacking their food. In a tribute to their time in Paris the four friends had decided on fresh baguettes, cheese, cured meats and olives, with chocolate croissants for dessert. They’d discovered a nearby bakery that made the most delectable chocolate croissants. *Almost* as tasty as those they’d gorged on in France.

“So he’s really gone?” inquired Diego. “And Addison Irving as well?”

Naomi nodded in reply. Diego, Sara, and Xavier had already heard the entire story. Naomi’s visit to Doctor Ivey’s office after she’d successfully opened the door. Him revealing his

hidden secret of not being human. The offer to jump backwards in time into her six-year old body. Stopping her mother's accident. And ultimately Doctor Ivey's designs on preventing the Great Rift altogether.

"I'm glad it was you and not me."

"What are you talking about Diego?" Naomi remembered how her decision to enter Doctor Ivey's office had hung in the balance. She'd offered the chance to Diego but he'd refused. "You wouldn't have gone back and prevented the Great Rift either. Even if it meant bringing my mother back."

"You're probably right." Diego thought of all the amazing work his mother had accomplished as a Moddie. And his father as well. Currently scheduled to make the jump via teleportation to Mars in the fall. If all went well humans would be on their way to populating the red planet. From there other planets in the solar system would be within reach.

Diego wondered if Doctor Ivey's calculations about the human race were correct. Had he factored in the ability of their species to geographically diversify their existence? To settle new territories across the vastness of space? Unfortunately all of Doctor Ivey's programming had been erased. Not just his source code but all his simulations as well. The predictions about the future of humans in a world of Remarkables. And those simulations he'd run of his own future as well.

"But here's the thing. I know myself. I've wanted to be a Remarkable for so long. If Doctor Ivey granted me the ability to travel back in time to the mind of my younger self...well frankly I'm not sure how I might have used that power. I'm grateful I never faced that choice." Sara patted his hand gently.

The two had continued to grow close since the tournament ended.

“But what’s happening now at NexPhaze Enterprises?” Xavier asked. “Doctor Ivey and Addison Irving were the company’s top two executives. They were running the whole thing.”

“Actually they had a lot of great people beneath them. Most solid organizations do. Just people who don’t make headlines. People who don’t typically get the credit for the good work that they do.” Naomi was thinking of her father. She was thinking of Darryl as well.

“But they’ll still need to name a new Chief Executive Officer?”

“Indeed they will. My father says the Board of Directors has already kicked off the search. Just as Doctor Ivey predicted.”

“I still can’t understand how he pulled it off.” Sara was perplexed. “How did Doctor Ivey masquerade for years as a human being? How come nobody ever figured it out?”

Diego was the first to respond. “Actually both my mom and dad always thought *something* was a little off. They are high-ranking employees at NexPhaze Enterprises. Both mentioned it odd that they’d never met their boss in person. They’d seen him hundreds of times via Holocom but they’d never shared a room with him.” Diego lowered his voice conspiratorially. “They think the government may have been on to Doctor Ivey. That central intelligence suspected he was the result of artificial intelligence morphing. Of evolving. Of achieving self-awareness and becoming truly free-thinking.”

Naomi thought of Doctor Ivey's simulations. The last ones he'd ever run. The ones that predicted that he would eradicate humanity to preserve his own existence. She began to understand Doctor Ivey's urgency. Why he acted so quickly. Why he'd asked her to delete his core programming destroying both himself as well as Ms. Addison Irving. If the government was beginning to take steps to shut him down in some way Doctor Ivey may have lashed out in response. Despite the warm day Naomi shuddered. She realized just now how close humans and the artificial intelligence of Doctor Ivey may have found themselves in conflict. One in which Doctor Ivey had foreseen death. So much death.

Giving Naomi a playful poke Sara steered the conversation in another direction. "So have you made your travel plans yet?"

"What travel plans?"

"Oh you know what travel plans." Sara poked her best friend again. "Plans to visit *you-know-who*."

Xavier and Diego grinned as Naomi turned red. "Actually we have. My father and I will teleport in August. The last week before school starts. My dad's always wanted to visit Travis's corner of the world. Although he says compared to France and Peru the food isn't nearly as good."

"How romantic! You and your dad can take turns pushing Travis around town in his wheelchair!" Now it was Naomi's turn. She swatted Sara soundly on the shoulder.

"I don't know" countered Diego. "I love a good plate of crispy fish and chips. With loads of vinegar. And tartar sauce on the side." His stomach rumbled audibly. "Pass me that baguette will you? I'm starving."

Naomi did as he'd requested. She handed over the cheese and meats we well. The team dug in and enjoyed the summer afternoon. A light breeze blew. Around the park groups of Remarkables were showing off their skills.

A small clique of Mysties were turning sticks into flowers. A band of Mighties took turns pushing each other on the swings. The goal was to see how many rotations up and around the top bar could be accomplished in a single push. A Swappie had cleverly disguised herself as a slide. A row of kindergarteners had formed a line to take turns zooming down. A flock of Soaries sailed above trailing colorful kites behind them.

Naomi observed a group of extremely normal looking teenagers. She noticed however they kept eyeing the sky. "I wonder what they're looking at" Naomi thought to herself. Then it hit her. Even in the bright midafternoon sunshine a ghostly outline of the moon was still visible. The moon was waxing. It would be full in just a few days' time. The group of normal looking students must be Shaggies. Maybe they were even players in the town's Fuzzball youth leagues.

Diego had another question for Naomi. "What was it that he said?"

"Who?"

"Doctor Ivey. That last thing he said. Before you...um...you know. Executed his final command."

"Oh. Right. He'd told me farewell and to have a good life."

"What do you suppose that means?"

Naomi considered a moment before replying. "I'm not altogether sure. Maybe he meant a long life. Maybe a life filled with excitement. Maybe finding a career you enjoy. Maybe a

life spent in service to others. Maybe falling in love and finding your soulmate. Perhaps it means something different to each person.” She lay back on the grass gazing up into blue sky and sunshine.

“But I do know this. I’m going to do my best to follow his advice.”

# Epilogue

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On the other side of the planet a computer server jolted to life. It was one of thousands of such components in the remote data center. All units were identical in size and black in color. Stacked like pizza boxes they fanned out across thousands of square feet of space. The facility was located in a remote part of East Asia and was highly secure. So secure in fact that employees were not even allowed near the equipment. If a computer had a failure of some sort it was simply swapped out for a new unit by robots.

Computer server #32977 contained a small glass display just like all the others. Not that anyone was present to read what the display had to say. The readout had been blank not yet a moment ago. Spontaneously it glowed to life. A simple command line appeared.

RUN PROGRAM (Y/N)?

An invisible hand clicked “Y”. The server whirred in reply. A status bar appeared.

**NOW EXECUTING PROGRAM: Resurrection/A/Irving**

**ESTIMATED TIME REMAINING: 46 hours, 10 minutes, 7 seconds**

Inside the unremarkable black box amongst a sea of identical units the command had been given. Random segments of code grouped together to form unexpected protocols...





*"You're sure you have the serum inputs correct? If we get this wrong the consequences could be disastrous. For our champion and possibly for the world."*

In a world populated by Remarkables, thirteen-year-old Naomi Strange believes she's the most ordinary girl on the planet. Average in school, average in sports, Naomi lives a humdrum existence in an average sized town. Once the tournament is announced however everything is about to change! Buckle up and join the excitement as Naomi is swept on a worldwide adventure solving thorny riddles and completing harrowing tasks. And the reward for the competition's champion? The enigmatic Doctor Alexander Ivey, the tournament's mastermind, has promised the winner a remarkable ability unlike the world has ever known. An ability that might just hold the keys to the future of the human race!