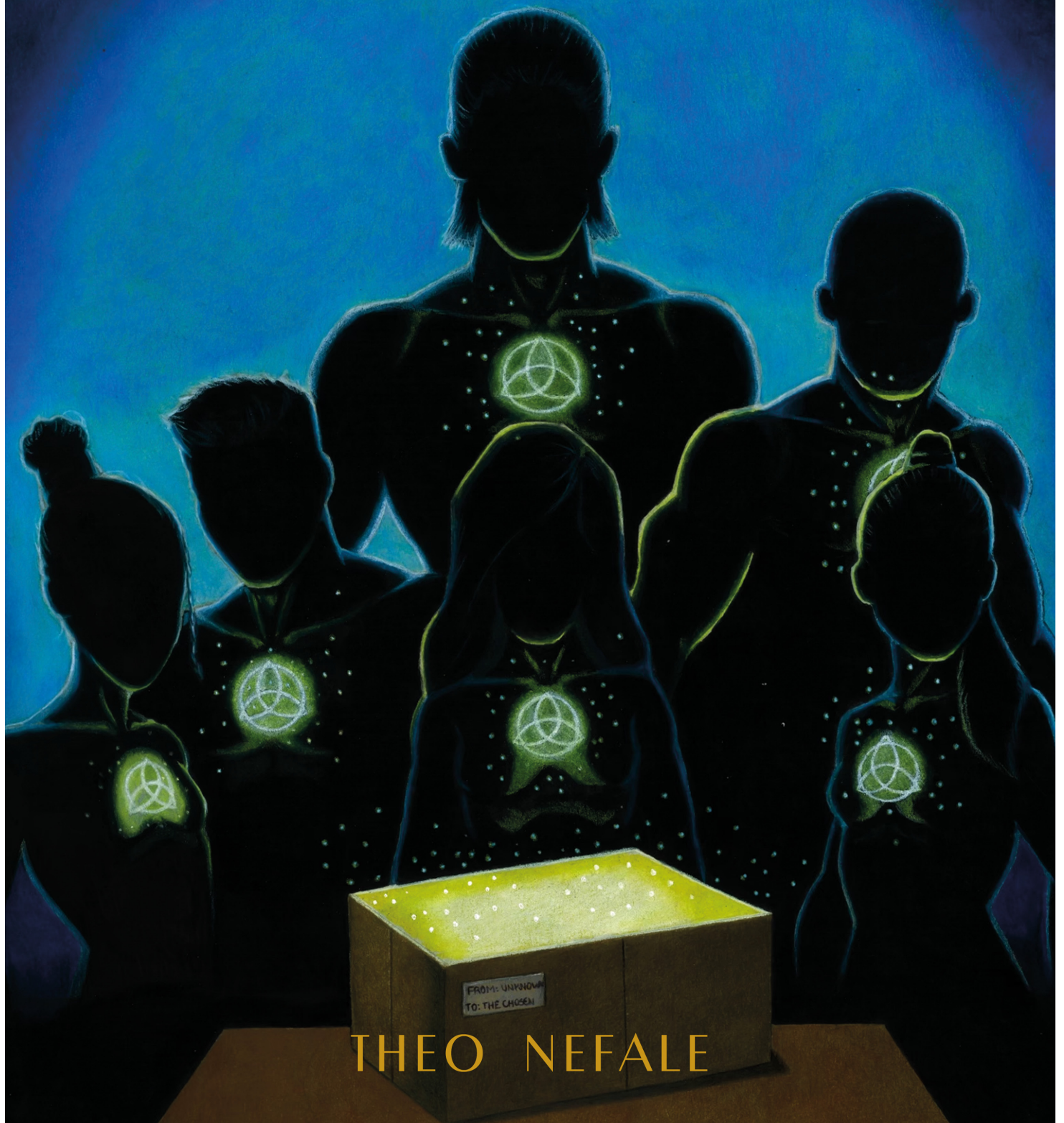


THE CHOSEN

BATTLE WITH A CERBEROSIAN PRINCE



THEO NEFALE



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Part I

**Six Packages, Six Journeys,
One Big Wooden Door**



CHAPTER 1

THE PACKAGE

With a sudden jolt to his body, he opened his eyes. His heart was racing, his shirt was drenched, and he couldn't see anything. He could feel his body trembling, while drops of sweat ran down his arms and torso. For a brief instant his body felt paralyzed. He took a moment to calm himself down, to figure out where he was. A few minutes later, he gradually began to regain the ability to move his limbs. As he removed the sheets off his damp body, he got out of the bed and staggered towards the light switch. He could finally see his surroundings; it was all familiar to him, not so much the bedroom but the experience itself. As he walked to the bathroom, still half asleep, he looked into the mirror. *Now I won't be able to go back to sleep*, he thought to himself. He hadn't been able to sleep through the night for as long as he could remember.

Walking back to his bedroom, he was clearly wide-awake. He grabbed his phone from underneath the pillow and checked the time. It was 2:37 a.m. He took a deep breath, held it in for a few seconds, and exhaled. He sat on his bed with his hands on his head in frustration. Trying to figure out what to do next, he decided to go over to his desk. He took out his notepad and started to write.

When he glanced at the clock, he realized the time—it was morning. The birds were chirping, and the sun had started to pierce through the blinds. He'd been writing all night. *Wow, that was quick.* Writing always centered him; it gave him a sense of calm, a sense of peace. Putting his notepad away, he started to get ready for the day.

"TRISTAN."

"TRISTAN."

His uncle called for him from the kitchen. He preferred to go by TJ, but his uncle's formality was never to be questioned.

"Coming, sir," he called back.

"You don't wanna be late, so you betta get goin'."

"Yes sir, I'm almost ready."

Today was actually a big day. TJ had received multiple early offers from colleges around the country—full-ride scholarships, guaranteed. TJ had just come off the best season of his high school football career, achieving his best numbers, as a junior. He led his team to the national championship, was an All-American, and the recipient of multiple "best player of the year" awards. He was one of the most sought-after quarterbacks in the country. The reason today was particularly significant was because he

had appointments with USC and UCLA. Being a native to Southern California, a local college was a logical choice, and it didn't hurt that these two colleges were two of the best colleges one could attend, at least in California.

Yet with all that he had going for him, all the opportunities that awaited him—opportunities that 99% of his peers would kill for—TJ was undecided, and not just about which college to commit to. He couldn't stop thinking about his future. Everyone expected him to go to college, through a football scholarship, and maybe go pro if everything went according to plan. For his uncle, and everyone else in his life, it was automatic.

"Make sure you have gas in the car."

"Yes sir."

"You got everything you need?"

"Yes sir, I'm good to go."

"OK, I'll see you later then. Good luck."

"Thank you," TJ responded.

He got his backpack from his room, along with his car keys, phone, and wallet. As he opened the front door of the house, he saw a brown box on the porch. It had no information on it, except his name on top, written in black marker. Getting mail wasn't anything unusual for TJ; the stacks of letters on the unused dinner table were proof of that. What was a bit strange was the informality of the package. No college logo—or logo of any kind—no return address, no stamp, not even TJ's home address, which would be required to mail any package. It did have his name on it, so he knew the package was at the very least intended for him. With curiosity getting the better of him, TJ dropped all his

stuff, picked up the box, and took it to his room. Before he could pass the doorway, he heard his uncle calling out to him from the living room:

“Tristan...”

Not wanting his uncle to see the box, he stuck his head around the wall, just enough for him to see his uncle’s face.

“Yes sir,” he responded.

“Why are you still here? You’re gonna be late! You can’t start off by giving a bad impression to either of these schools, regardless of which one you choose. Just because you got options don’t mean you can do as you please. You still gotta follow the rules.”

“Yes sir, I just forgot something in my room.”

He turned around quickly into his room before his uncle continued with the lecture. For a moment he had forgotten about the intrigue of the package. He put the box down on his bed, grabbed a pair of scissors, and sliced through the middle from one end to the other. He paused. *What if it’s not something pleasant?* But between the curiosity that consumed him, and the uncle in the living room who was about to call out his name again, TJ decided to open the package.

At first all TJ could see and feel was a whole lot of white package cushioning. Eventually getting to the center, it was another box. This time a smaller box, about the width of his size 13 sneakers. Unlike the brown box, this box looked better—it looked *fancy*. Not only in its appearance, but in its texture, too. It felt strange, very smooth, yet with a subtle bit of coarseness to it. It was unlike anything he had ever

seen before. It wasn’t made of cardboard; it had a marbly texture to it, and yet... it looked like a small cardboard box.

After a little hesitation, TJ opened the peculiar-looking box. Inside were a Watch, a credit card, and a passport. *Curiouser and curiouser*, he thought to himself. *I am so surprised, that for this moment I quite forgot how to speak good English.* He snickered to himself in amusement, as he wondered why that line came to his mind as it did. The credit card had his name embossed on it, and likewise with the passport, it had a current photo of him, with all his details. “What is going on here?” he said aloud. None of it was making sense to him. As he removed everything from the box, to ensure he wasn’t missing anything, he noticed there was a note inside. It read:

“*DESTINY AWAITS IF YOU CHOOSE TO ACCEPT*”

Hyatt Regency Kathmandu, Nepal.

May 30th, 18:00.

“This is crazy,” TJ exclaimed. The absurdity of the situation overshadowed the cheesiness of the quote. Just as he was about to sit down to take it all in, he remembered he had a life-changing decision to make in a few hours. So, he hurriedly took everything from the package and put it in his backpack. And of course, he put the credit card in his wallet. He ran outside to his car, but as he was about to close the front door, he realized he almost forgot to say goodbye to his uncle. “See you later, sir,” he yelled. Before he could even hear his uncle’s response, he slammed the door and ran to the car.

Taking a deep breath, he attempted to process everything. He opened his backpack and dumped the contents onto the passenger's seat of his car. There it all lay—his future—to be determined in the next few moments. He couldn't do both, could he? A large part of him hoped he could, but he knew he had to choose one. On one hand, he had the opportunity of a lifetime, a full-ride scholarship to the college of his choosing, something he had worked towards his entire life. On the other hand, a mysterious package that came out of nowhere, filled with more question marks than answers, a location he knew next to nothing about, yet intriguing enough to make him consider following up on it. For all he knew, it could all be a prank. But his friends weren't capable of pranks of this magnitude, were they? He quickly grabbed the passport and credit card and started analyzing them. The problem was that he had never owned either of those two items, so he had no point of reference. *How do you know a passport is real*, he started typing into his phone. He spent the next 30 minutes in his driveway trying to investigate the authenticity of the passport and the credit card. It was all legit. Well, this entire situation was very suspicious, but everything of importance was up to standard, internet standards at least.

He made up his mind: *I'm going for it*. He put everything back in the backpack, started his car, and drove out of the driveway. He decided to leave his car by his friend's place until he returned. Not knowing how long this trip would take, he thought it would be easier, and cheaper, not to leave it at the airport. He remembered his uncle's month-long rants about how ridiculously expensive it was leaving

the car at LAX a few years ago when they had gone on a family vacation. Before he left his friend's place, he asked him to cover for him in the off chance his uncle would call asking for him. TJ's plan was to tell his uncle that he would be going on a pre-summer training camp with the team, a camp that would be used by the team to confirm the players they actually wanted on the team. *When they have a large pool of great players, they use this camp to choose the cream of the crop...* "OK, that sounds good," he said. Knowing his uncle's perceptive and meticulous nature, he knew his story needed to be airtight.

Once he had his story straight, and his friend was on board, he opened his ride sharing app and booked a ride to LAX. Surely enough, within a few minutes the driver pulled up the driveway and TJ was on his way to the airport.

Unfortunately, Friday afternoon in LA, headed to the airport, was always going to be a nightmare on the freeway.

"We're gonna have to take the 105 to the 405. There's no way of avoiding this traffic," the driver said.

"No problem," TJ replied. "I'm in no hurry".

He knew this would give him more than enough time to process everything that was happening.

"OK, first things first: text Uncle Seymour." This took a while, as TJ had to choose his wording carefully, running through his story over and over in his head, making sure there were no plot holes. When he was done texting his uncle, he put his phone back in his pocket. With his head against the thick, warm car window, TJ stared out at the partially stationary cars on either side of them. As he gazed into the distance, looking at the vast construction on

the one side, and the exceptionally tall skyscrapers on the other, TJ actually started thinking about the trip. “Nepal... Nepal...” He had no idea where that was. Feeling a slight sense of shame for not knowing, he took out his phone and started looking it up.

His search engine showed a host of images of the place. *Looks pretty exotic*, he mused. *Beautiful landscape, and it looks like this place has a lot of mountains. The architecture is nothing like we have here in the U.S.* “Where is this place though?” he said out loud. As he scrolled further down the page, he realized Nepal was a country in Southern Asia neighboring India. “I need to get more info about this place. Good ol’ Wikipedia time,” he said with a chuckle. He skimmed through the basics until he spotted something familiar: “Mount Everest! That’s why this place is significant.” He sat there quietly for a few moments. “Hmmm...” He didn’t want to jump to any conclusions, but it was difficult for TJ not to think about the possibility of this trip requiring him to go up the mountain. *I mean, who goes to the great Mount Everest and doesn’t go up the mountain? But from where this hotel is, to the mountain, is quite a distance away, so...* He stopped himself mid-thought, and decided not to get ahead of himself, yet continued reading about the area.

“We’re here,” the driver said.

“Wow, that was quick. How long did that take us?”

“That took us about an hour and fifty minutes”.

“Really. Man, that felt like a couple minutes.” TJ started to get his things together. He didn’t realize how engrossed

he had become by all that Nepal reading. It had moved from anxious, concerned reading to a curious fascination.

“Thanks, man,” TJ said to the driver

“You’re welcome,” the driver said as he drove away.

TJ stood in front of the international departures entrance. As people passed by, entering and exiting through the automated sliding doors, TJ stood by the entrance without movement. It was almost as though he couldn’t see anyone else. He was allowing the moment to sink in. He was also giving himself time to think it all through, one last time. “You gotta commit, TJ. You gotta commit,” he said, trying to both motivate *and* convince himself to keep going. With the resolve to keep moving forward, he now had to figure out which airline would get him to Nepal. He went to one of the information desks and was directed to one of the airlines offering flights to Nepal.

“Hi, I’m in need of assistance. I need to get to Kath... Kath-mandu... Nepal?” TJ said with a puzzled look on his face (and the certainty that he butchered the pronunciation).

“Yes sir, let me have a look and see if I can assist you with that,” the ticket agent responded, as she laughed ever so softly.

TJ felt a little embarrassed at that moment. It didn’t help that he had never been outside of the country before, so his self-consciousness was quite high, though he would never let it show. In fact, this was going to be his first time on a plane. Although he had been around the country, his school sports teams always used the bus or the train. And despite the fact that he lived close to LAX, and had seen and heard many planes depart and land, he had never been on one.

“Did you have a specific arrival and return date, sir?”

“Yes, I need to be there by 6 p.m. this Sunday. And it will be a one-way flight.”

“Oh,” the lady said with slight bewilderment. “That might be a little tricky with such short notice, especially with the time zone differences between our two countries. Let’s see what we can do, though.”

TJ immediately realized the ticket would require some form of payment. All sorts of questions ran through his mind: *Was that credit card active? Did it have any money? If so, how much? What happens if you order an airline ticket and don’t have the money to pay for it? Is it like a restaurant where they’ll make you wash dishes? What’s the equivalent of dishwashing at an airport?*

“We have one flight that matches your exact requirements, sir. It departs at 11:50 p.m.”

“Great,” TJ replied, masking his anxiety with a smile.

“Um... Unfortunately, there’s only one seat left... And it’s in business class,” the lady pronounced.

She wasn’t saying it with any sort of judgement. She could sense his travel inexperience and slight reservation in their interaction. He had a single backpack, wearing jeans with a pair of Jordan’s, a no-name brand jacket, with a Lakers snapback. He didn’t necessarily shout “money.” She was more concerned about him being unable to get to his destination than his inability to pay for a business class ticket. In her line of work, she had learned to never judge a book by its cover.

“How much will that be?” he asked while taking out his wallet.

“Ten thousand two hundred and fifty-one dollars, sir,” she responded.

“Here you go,” he said, handing her the credit card, as his smile started to look like it was agonizingly forced.

“Before I run that through for you, sir, I need your passport to get all your information”.

Oh, come on, really? Just put it through already, he thought to himself. His anxiety levels through the roof.

“Of course, here it is,” he said. His agonizingly forced smile had transitioned into an emotionless, straight face.

With fixation solely on the card machine, TJ waited as the lady entered all his details. She finally swiped the card. The receipt started printing, and the lady handed the credit card, the passport, and the flight ticket to TJ.

“Have a wonderful trip, sir.”

“Thank you so much,” he replied.

He walked away with a great sense of relief knowing it was over. After making his way through security, and eventually finding the right terminal, he sat down and waited until it was time to board. It was 9:35 p.m.

He wasn’t hungry. His last meal was breakfast back at the house. But it had been a remarkably eventful day. One where his mind had been preoccupied by things that were slightly more important than food. So maybe not so surprising. *I’ll eat on the plane,* he thought to himself.

As he took out his phone to check the time, it reminded him of one of the other items in the package, the Watch. Since opening the package, he had not thought about the Watch. He hadn’t looked at it, he hadn’t put it on, but he simply put it away in the backpack.

Now taking out the Watch, he started to analyze it. It was entirely black, with black straps and a square face. The face of the Watch was just big enough to fit within the margins of his wrist, and it looked like a smartphone when turned off or locked. The Watch had no buttons to operate it, no matter which way he turned it. He just couldn't make heads or tails of it.

He put the Watch back in his backpack, zipped up the backpack, leaned back on his chair, tilted his head back, and closed his eyes. He stayed that way for a few minutes.

Opening his eyes, he gazed up at the ceiling. He noticed the detail. It was nothing fancy, not quite what he expected, even though he didn't know what to expect. He saw only two types of lights, both hanging from white, lengthy cables. The first was cylindrical, with an opening at the end where he could see the light bulb. The other had a half spherical design that covered the entire bulb, which still managed to radiate surprisingly bright light. For every three set of parallel lights, there was a horizontal pillar, which sat at about a 30-degree angle, separating the lights. It was a sort of crimson red, and it sat at about a meter in length, stretching all the way to the either side of the building in its width. There were a bunch of white structural poles that made up the rest of the ceiling "design." *That's pretty bland for such an internationally esteemed airport*, he thought. He had no interest in the design of the airport. He was merely trying to kill time, and maybe more importantly, trying not to let his mind run wild thinking about what might potentially await him on the other end of this trip.

The PA system was readied for an announcement:

Good evening, passengers. This is the pre-boarding announcement for flight QR740 to Doha. We are now inviting those passengers with small children and any passengers requiring special assistance to begin boarding at this time. Please have your boarding pass and identification ready. Regular boarding will begin in approximately 15 minutes. Thank you.

As everybody at Gate 152 began to shuffle themselves towards the boarding counter, TJ remained seated. A few other passengers stayed in their seats, too. TJ took a moment to people watch. He noticed one guy in particular, wearing a navy blue, pinstriped suit. Something about him caught TJ's attention. He had a phone in his hand, and the only time his eyes weren't on the phone was when he was moving forward. He had a wireless Bluetooth headset in his ear. He appeared to be a businessman of sorts. An *LA Times* paper, opened to the Business section, was lying on the guy's carry-on bag beside him. There was something about his demeanor that was a bit off, though. TJ kept watching him. The man was older looking, perhaps in his late 40s or early 50s. TJ could clearly see this man steadily making his way to the front of the line. A little nudge here, a subtle shove there, and the man in the navy blue, pinstriped suit was at the front of the line. Needless to say, his not-so-discreet expedition included knocking down a little kid's candy bar. To top it all off, his interaction with the gentleman checking the boarding passes had no greeting, no thank you, and no acknowledgement there was a person in front of him.

Annoyed by the actions of the man in the navy blue, pinstriped suit, TJ rolled his eyes and shook his head as he stood up to start heading to the back of the line.

“You saw that too, huh?”

The comment came from the girl sitting to his right. He had noticed her earlier; she had apologized to him when her bag hit his leg as she was sitting down.

“Saw what?” TJ replied.

“The jerk old man in the suit,” she said in a forceful tone. “Don’t you just hate it when people who *think* they are important, think they can do what they want, when they want? It’s so annoying.”

“Um... yeah.”

For a moment he had forgotten about the actual incident, since he was taken aback by this random girl, passionately going off at a guy who wasn’t even there anymore.

“Sorry,” she apologized. “It just annoys me sometimes, and I see it so often at airports.”

“It’s cool. I get what you’re sayin’.”

He really did. His football achievements had allowed him to encounter schools from all ends of the economic spectrum. The wealthier private schools often had the best teams, since they could “afford” the best athletes—sports scholarships—and TJ could recall on several occasions where the wealthy parents were treating others, who weren’t from the same circles, as though they were less than. Many of the kids would do the same. He had so many negative experiences with spoiled rich kids, that to him they were all the same. Young or old.

“So, where are you headed?” the girl asked.

“Well, the flight is headed to Doha, so...”

“No, man, I mean where’s your final destination?” she giggled as she responded.

“My final destination is Nepal—if *we* make it.”

“Ha-ha, *Final Destination* reference?”

“You’re the one who used those words,” he said with a slight grin.

“Yeah, yeah... I must say I did enjoy that franchise, though.”

“So, is it the fact that people die in exceptionally gruesome ways that you find appealing, or do you just like death?”

“OK, smart guy,” she said as they both laughed.

“What about you? Where is your final destination?”

“I’m headed to India. A friend of mine is getting married.”

“Wow, that’s cool.”

While they were talking, TJ noticed that they were almost at the front of the line. He had become quite intrigued by the girl. She had green eyes, with a slight hint of blue. The contrast between her eyes and her olive skin was near perfect. Her dark hair matched her dark clothes, and yet, as dark toned as her clothes were, she was stylish. This he concluded, in his limited knowledge, and perspective as a guy who was clueless about fashion. As they got closer to the front, he was trying to figure out how to get her name and possibly her number before it was time for them to board. He knew the probability of them sitting next to one another was highly unlikely.

“So... did you notice that they made a mistake on our boarding passes? It’s pretty bad,” he said.

“Really? I didn’t notice. What is it?”

“Look again, closely. You’ll see it.”

Taking out her boarding pass, she started looking for the mistake.

“Do you see it... *Zoey*?” he asked with a grin on his face.

“No, I can’t...” she paused for a moment. Looking up and seeing his grin, she realized what he had done.

“You think you’re slick, don’t you?” she said as she grabbed his boarding pass to see his name. “*Tristan*! I can’t believe I fell for that.”

“So... can I get your number?”

Smiling back at him, she said, “You know that song, by Meghan Trainor. The one where she mentions a two-letter word a lot.”

“OK, OK,” he said.

They both laughed and smiled at each other, while maintaining eye contact.

“NEXT.”

They were at the front of the line. She went before him. As she handed over her boarding pass, TJ hoped she would wait for him so they could continue talking. When she was done, she turned around, winked at him, and walked into the plane. As soon as she walked away, he noticed the gentleman at the boarding counter pick up the microphone to make an announcement:

This is the final boarding call for passenger Daniel Smith booked on flight QR740 to Doha. Please proceed to gate 152 immediately. The final checks are being completed, and the captain will order for the doors of the aircraft to close in approximately five minutes’ time. I repeat. This is the final boarding call for Daniel Smith. Thank You.

The moment he put down the microphone, TJ handed him the boarding pass, then ran to the plane, hoping to catch Zoey before she took her seat. As fate would have it, a young lady *was* waiting for him; only it was one of the flight attendants.

“Of course!” TJ said.

As the flight attendant showed him to his seat, he kept looking back at every seat he passed, hoping to see her as he walked towards his own seat. He remembered that he was in business class, and realized that he probably wouldn’t see her again.

“This close. I was this close to closing with her,” he said as he took his seat.

Slamming his fist against the armrest, he decided to close his eyes and sit in silence for a while. He thought back to the time he had with Zoey in the boarding line.

In his haste and frustration, he hadn’t taken notice of his surroundings. The soft gentleness of his seat awakened him to the comfort of business class.

“So, *this* is what 10 grand looks like,” he said in awe, with a hint of disgust.

They were in a Qatar Airways Boeing 777-200LR. The seats were 180-degree reclining flatbeds. They had a wood-like finish to them, with some delicately done blue lighting along the sides. The airhostesses even offered pyjamas for the long flight. A menu followed the PJs. Looking at the menu, passengers had the option of taking up to a seven-course meal. Of course, TJ took all seven courses.

Once he was done eating, he had the option of watching a movie, listening to music, reading a book, or sleeping.

Looking back at the day he had, one that had been both physically and mentally draining, he chose to start the trip with some sleep. Before going to sleep, he quickly checked the on-flight status of the trip to see how long the flight would be: 15 hours and 35 minutes. With that motivation, he fell asleep.

The remainder of the flight involved a repetitive cycle of sleep, watching a movie, listening to music, reading, and sleeping. Since these were brief moments of sleep, he didn't have to face the familiar struggle of trying to sleep through an entire restless night.

With most of the passengers fast asleep, the lights and PA system suddenly turned on for the captain's announcement:

Ladies and gentlemen, we are now getting ready for our decent into Doha. We are expected to land at 3:45 a.m. local time, two hours later than our scheduled time. Once again, we apologize for the unexpected delay before our departure. It is currently 3:30 a.m. local time. It is 32 degrees Celsius in Doha, with the weather expected to be mostly sunny for the rest of the day, with slight winds. We wish you a pleasant stay in Doha, and we hope to see you again soon. On behalf of all our crew, thank you for choosing to fly with us this evening.

TJ sluggishly began to wake up, opening his eyes. Everyone else seemed to be as groggy as he was. The lights were quite sharp, almost piercing through the retina. As they received instructions to ensure their seats and tray tables were in an upright position, TJ gathered all his belongings, making sure he wasn't leaving anything behind.

Once the plane landed, the business class passengers were allowed to exit first. TJ had to move quickly, as his

connecting flight was already boarding. The airhostesses were standing at the exit, thanking everyone for flying with them and wishing them a wonderful day. As TJ approached the exit, one of the airhostesses stopped him for a brief moment. She handed him a note, then swiftly continued with her farewell routine, as if nothing was amiss. Perplexed by what had just happened, he quickly opened the note to see its contents:

212-634-3077
Hope to hear from you
Z.

"No she didn't," TJ said to himself. "Yes," he exclaimed as he ran to the other side of the airport to reach his boarding gate. He wished he had the time to wait for her, but given the flight delay, he had no choice but to run to catch his connecting flight.

He made it before they closed the gate. He felt relief that he managed to avoid the embarrassment of hearing his name called out over the PA system. He was still within the allocated boarding time.

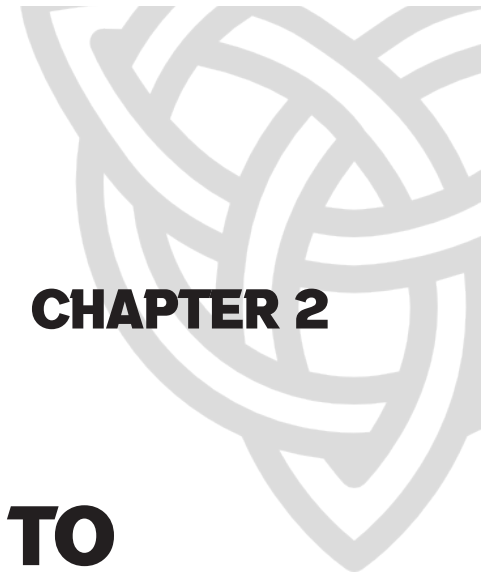
As he made his way to find his seat, he was a little less distracted this time. He was able to pay attention to the difference between economy and business class. This plane was smaller than the previous one. Besides the size, all the other features were the same.

He didn't spend much time focusing on where he was, though. It was all starting to sink in. His mind was on his destination. He had a few good distractions along the

way, but now it was becoming real. Overwhelmed by his thoughts, he tried to give his mind a break.

Unfortunately, he couldn't get much sleep on the flight. The only exception was the 20 minutes he did get during the flight's ascent, and that was because of his body's exhaustion from the previous flight. As much as he wanted to sleep during this flight, to give his mind a brief rest, the influx of thoughts denied him that luxury. His brain was in overdrive. Overdrive that was driven by speculation rather than fact and knowledge.

He kept thinking about being in a foreign land for the first time. Being in a strange environment. *How different will it be? To what extent will I stand out as a non-native? Who will I be able to trust, and how will he know whom to trust?* Once again he asked himself about the legitimacy of this whole thing. He remembered reading up on one site that many locals knew how to speak English. He wasn't sure if it was specifically in Kathmandu, or other parts of Nepal. He thought about all the movies he had seen where tourists were taken advantage of by locals, particularly Americans. Food was another stress point. *What do they eat in Kathmandu? How will my stomach react to the local cuisine? What if I fall ill while I am in Kathmandu? Medical services. Do I have coverage? What is the quality of the health professionals?* These questions would continue until the plane touched the ground.



CHAPTER 2

JOURNEY TO SAGARMATHA

Five hours of persistent questioning and concern. He didn't have a single moment of brain inactivity. Amidst his distractedness, TJ had missed all the in-flight announcements. They had landed in Kathmandu, and it was time to exit the plane. The passengers had been handed arrival papers to complete, which TJ had forgotten about. He took a few minutes to fill them out, but missed the business class exits. This resulted in him being caught in the masses of people who were headed to baggage collection. Fortunately for him, he didn't have any checked luggage, so he avoided the pushing and shoving by the luggage conveyor belt. It was crowded and chaotic.

Once he was done with the immigration queues and currency exchange, he had to figure out how to get to

the Hyatt Regency. He was directed to the exit, where he would be met by swarms of taxi men. The moment he said “*namaste*,” they knew he was American. It was a lose-lose situation, really—anything he said would have exposed him as one who was not a local. At that point, they surged at him like a wake of vultures surrounding a dying corpse.

“I need to get to the Hyatt Regency,” he shouted over all the voices.

“1,500 rupees,” one man said.

“1,200 rupees,” said another.

“1,000 rupees!”

A few others shouted out a few more amounts, trying to give the most attractive, yet still profitable amount from the clearly young, relatively inexperienced, American tourist.

Trying to recall all the tourist tips he had read before arriving in Kathmandu, he drew a blank. The pressure of being in a new country—with people speaking a language he couldn’t understand, outrightly trying to take advantage of him—was a little too much for TJ to handle. He decided to go with the driver who was closest to him.

As the driver guided TJ to his car, pushing through the crowd that continued shouting to get TJ’s attention, he started to question himself. *What did I get myself into?* He just wanted to see himself away from the sea of noise, the unapologetic invasion of personal space.

Getting into the car, he slammed the door. He dropped his backpack beside him, took a deep breath, and exhaled forcefully.

“Thank you so much,” TJ said.

“You are welcome, sir. The Hyatt Regency, correct?”

“Yes, correct.”

“My name is Sudip.” His enthusiasm was a little overwhelming, but TJ appreciated it as it calmed him down, somewhat.

“Hey Sudip, my name’s TJ.”

“Pleased to meet you, TJ. Is this your first time in Kathmandu?”

“Yeah, it is.” He was still trying to catch his breath from his ordeal a few minutes ago.

As they made their way through the streets, TJ saw a lot of small cars on the road. They were the same type of car as the taxi he was in. He noticed many of them were Suzukis, though he couldn’t tell you anything else about them, the year or model. It wasn’t as crowded as some of the pictures he had seen online. There were many people on scooter-type bikes, like mopeds. He also noticed a large number of microvans. They looked like they could carry eight or nine people, max. As one of the microvans drove alongside them, he tried to count the number of passengers. At some point he thought he counted 16 people. *Surely that wasn’t right?* He also saw vehicles that were similar but slightly bigger, which the locals called minibuses. They had guys holding on from outside the vehicle, from all sides.

By the time he had arrived at the hotel, his neck was in pain from all the visual scanning—moving his head from side to side, looking ahead, behind, and all around him from inside the car. He was absolutely fascinated by this place, how different it was from home.

"We are here. That will be 1,500 rupees." Sudip had noticed TJ's near panic attack when they were outside the airport. He hoped to take advantage of that.

"Sudip, did we not agree on 1,000 rupees?" TJ said taking out his wallet.

Sudip looked back at him and smiled.

"Thank you, Sudip." TJ handed him the money, smiled back at him, and got out of the taxi.

Before he drove off, Sudip counted the money. It was 2,000 rupees. He rolled down the window and shouted, "Thank you, Mr. TJ!"

TJ smiled and raised his arm to acknowledge him, as he made his way to the entrance.

It felt like he was in a different city, or at least a different part of the city. And yet the hotel was *in* the city. It was as though they were surrounded by a mini forest. The trees had a distinct, bright green color, chartreuse-like but not quite that bright. It was halfway into spring in Nepal, so the plants were at their prime. The architecture of the hotel was similar to what he had seen online when he was researching the city. One of the hotel employees would later inform him that this particular hotel had an architectural style that was inspired by the Nepalese pagoda style, a building design that was common in the Southeast and East Asia region.

It was all very pleasing to the eyes. It also had a very serene feel to it. All the stress he had experienced half an hour ago was but a blur at this moment.

He entered the hotel and went directly to the front desk.

"Hello sir, how can we help?"

"Hi, my name is Tristan Lewis..."

This was the moment of truth. Over 10,000 miles travelled. Forty-plus hours. Two red eyes. And harassment by local taxi drivers. Now was the time for the big reveal.

How funny would it be if he said, "Sorry sir, we don't have your name in our system," he thought to himself in a moment of anxiety and fear.

"Yes, Mr. Lewis. Here is your key card, sir. You will be in the executive suite, on the seventh floor."

"Thank you," TJ replied.

"Once you are settled, sir, your presence is requested in the conference room by 18:00."

Fifteen minutes to go up to the room, take a shower, and gather my thoughts. "Let's do this," TJ said to himself. He hadn't taken a shower since he left LA. Moving as quickly as he could, he went to his room. When he was done with everything, heading back down to the conference room, he realized he was a few minutes late. He hoped that wouldn't be a problem. But he didn't know how that would even be a problem, since he didn't know what to expect.

When he reached the door, he started to feel a little nervous. Yet he also felt a slight sense of relief. He would finally find out what was going on. He took a deep breath, exhaled, and opened the door.

He saw a large table in the center of the room with a few people seated around the table.

"Hi," said one girl. "My name is Luciana, but everyone calls me Ana. I'm from Argentina. What's your name?" Her hand was outstretched, waiting to shake his hand. Ana was short, had brunette hair tied up in a ponytail, and was wearing glasses.

“Hi, I’m TJ.” Looking around as he greeted back, he was still trying to figure out what was going on.

“Hello, my name is Tumelo.”

“But you can call her Tumi,” Ana said in excitement. “Right, Tumi?”

“Yes, Ana—”

“And I’m Pippa,” said another girl. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Howdy, mate. The name’s Ethan,” a guy around TJ’s age offered. He was the tallest amongst them, with a medium build. He was wearing board shorts and flip flops, which TJ found a little strange given the chilly Kathmandu weather.

“Hi,” TJ responded.

They had all gotten up from their chairs to come over and greet him. All except one guy. He remained seated. He looked right at TJ but didn’t move. As everyone else went back to take their seats, TJ decided to go over to the guy and say hi.

“Hey, I’m TJ.” Internally, he was quite annoyed that the guy wasn’t showing any interest.

“I’m Fang. Like tongue, with an F. Never fang, like hang,” he said sternly.

“OK...” TJ took a seat. It was the only open chair.

“So, all six chairs are occupied. It looks like everyone is here,” said Ana.

She had this high-pitch voice that was borderline annoying. She also seemed so hyper. Maybe he was tired, or maybe being in a room filled with strangers was making him unsettled. Everyone had a strange name. They all spoke with a funny accent, and they were just *different*. Two of

them had emotionless expressions on their faces, the other two had half smiles, and the younger looking one wouldn’t stop smiling, or talking.

“So, what’s next, guys?” It was Ana again.

They all had a slightly perplexed demeanor about them. Yes, they had been there longer than TJ—though he didn’t know how much longer—but they also kept looking around, as though expecting something to happen, or someone to come out and explain everything.

One of the hotel staff knocked at the door and requested permission to enter.

“Come in,” Ana shouted.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Dinner is ready.”

A few employees came in with several carts that had silver chafing dishes on them. The setup was that of a buffet, where each one could serve themselves.

Before leaving, the first hotel employee announced, “Once you are done having dinner, the shuttle will be waiting for you all outside. Thank you.”

“Thank you,” some of them responded.

They all made their way to the buffet line. There was a variety of food on the line, with much of the menu being local cuisine. Smells of cardamom, turmeric, and other strong spices were lofting in the air. They approached each station with a combination of hesitation and intrigue.

“You people are taking too long, excuse me.” Fang was familiar with some of the food, so he went ahead of them and served himself.

They were too flummoxed by the food to even notice Fang push by them. They all stood there for a good couple of minutes.

“What is all of this?” Pippa asked.

“Oh, I know. This is chicken *choila*. This one is spicy potato salad. This is the Nepali *momo*. Beef pea curry, *gwar-mari*...” Ana kept listing the names of most of the foods that were in front of them and describing what was in each one. They would come to realize that Ana was smarter than her demeanor and age made her seem.

Once everyone had negotiated individually what they were willing to try out (and what they weren’t), they sat down and had dinner.

“So, what’s the deal with everyone?” TJ asked.

With the silverware clanging on the plates, and the sound of music coming from the lobby and the courtyard area, the silence in the room wasn’t necessarily awkward.

“What do you mean?” Ethan replied.

“I mean, who are you guys? Like, why are you all here?”

“Oh... Well, I received a package. Inside the package was a passport and credit card with my information. A note in the package said something about destiny. I saw an exotic location. I had never been. And here I am!” Ethan said.

“So, you all got a package?”

“Yeah...”

“With a Watch, a passport, and a credit card?”

“Yeah, mate, we’re all in the same boat,” Ethan confirmed.

“Huh...” TJ let out a breath of air as he continued to process everything. He had so many more questions he wanted to ask.

They continued having dinner. They didn’t know each other, so no conversations were going on at the table. Occasionally they would ask one another to pass a cup, a drink, or a utensil. But that was it. There were also moments where Ana would ask a random question or give a did-you-know fact with great enthusiasm about Kathmandu that no one else knew.

Once they were done eating, they all went back to their rooms to get ready. It was an opportunity to bring anything they thought they might need. Having no additional information apart from the departure time *still*, no one knew what to expect.

It was a cool Nepalese evening, around 10 degrees Celsius, so everyone was dressed warmly as they made their way to the shuttle, everyone except Ethan. Their chauffeur was standing outside, waiting for them by the hotel entrance.

“Good evening, my name is Dhanraj. I will be your driver for the duration of your stay in Kathmandu. Before you enter the vehicle, I have been instructed to tell you to make sure you have your Watches on at all times from this point onward. Thank you.”

“Thanks, Dhanraj,” Ana said.

Everyone else followed suit, acknowledging and thanking Dhanraj as they got into the shuttle.

“Sorry, everyone, I didn’t think we’d be needin’ ’em,” said Ethan as he ran back up the stairs to collect his Watch.

Everyone else had their Watch on them. In fact, they all chose to take everything with them, leaving only a few items of unimportance in their rooms.

“Got it!” Ethan said as he returned from his room. He laughed as he apologized to everyone for delaying their departure.

“So, where are we going, Mr. Dhanraj?” asked Tumi.

“I am taking you to the airport.”

“Airport? What’s happening at the airport?” she asked.

“I don’t know, Miss. I just get the destinations, and make sure the passengers get to that destination.”

The streets weren’t as busy in the evening. It even seemed like a different place as they drove past the buildings. Over the horizon, the sunset was sublime. The silhouette of the buildings looked like a classic painting, while managing to capture the character of Kathmandu. They all had their eyes locked on their surroundings. The miscellany of views and experiences were a pleasant delight: a religious temple on the one side, a government building on the other, mixed in with an art museum and a visibly peaceful park, alongside some tantalizing local and international cuisine. The food not only looked good; the smell of the oriental spices, fused with the aroma of the many meats being grilled, almost tempted them to ask their driver to stop. This was Kathmandu at its finest.

There was no conversation in the shuttle. Perhaps it was the night time making everyone feel nostalgic. Or they were simply missing home. For a moment, they had each forgotten about the foreignness of their experience. Unbeknownst to them all, the tranquility of that ten-minute ride was a misrepresentation of what lay ahead.

“Here we are,” Dhanraj announced.

“Wow, that was significantly quicker than the drive to the hotel,” said Ethan.

Pippa gave Ana a little nudge. “We’re here, Ana.”

As they got out of the shuttle, Dhanraj handed them over to the care of another gentleman. He wasn’t as friendly as some of the other locals they had interacted with. He said nothing but “follow me.” It didn’t sound like he knew much English. He did conduct himself with some authority as he walked through the airport. TJ thought he must have been some sort of official. It was refreshing not having to experience any of the airport hassles they had to deal with in the past 48 hours. No check-ins or anything of that nature.

The guy they were following opened a door for them, which led to the runway. He said “thank you” with no expression on his face, then turned around and left.

There was a tiny aircraft ahead of them. A man standing outside looked like the pilot.

“Um, is that what we are flying in?” asked Pippa.

“That thing looks like it will get blown away by one of my farts,” said Ethan.

“Really, Ethan, you couldn’t have phrased that any differently?” Tumi said with bemusement.

Fang started walking towards the aircraft.

“Guess there’s no turning back now,” said TJ.

Everyone else followed.

“Good evening. My name is Sumesh, and I will be your pilot for this flight. Welcome aboard.”

“This is a charter flight,” said Pippa.

“What makes you say that?” asked TJ.

“Well, we’re the only ones on this flight.”

“OK.”

TJ didn't actually know what a charter flight was, but not wanting to expose his aeronautical inexperience, he chose not to ask any clarifying questions.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is your captain speaking. We would like to once again welcome you all onboard. The time is 19:45, and we are scheduled to land in Lukla at 20:10. We would now like to ask that you please fasten your seatbelts and secure all baggage underneath your seat or in the overhead compartments. We also ask that your seats and table trays are in the upright position for take-off. Thank you. Enjoy your flight.”

“Enjoy my flight? This thing feels so unstable,” Tumi said as the plane took off. She gripped onto the armrests with her body rigidly pushing against her seat. She could feel her body moving from side to side. The rattles outside were faint but loud enough for Tumi to hear, increasing her unease.

“Did you know that this particular aircraft is a Donnier DO 228? It is a STOL utility aircraft. STOL stands for ‘Short Take-Off and Landing.’ It is ideal for airports in mountainous regions. So, we are as safe as we will ever be in this type of aircraft.”

“Ana, I know you're trying to help,” Tumi replied, “but nothing you say will put me at ease right now.”

“Sorry, I was just trying to help,” she said looking dejected.

“OK, OK... Tell me more.”

Ana continued telling them about the aircraft and the airline they were using, describing the history of both in

detail. A 25-minute flight was not sufficient for Ana to cover all the content she had to share with everyone.

“Oh no, we're here. Sorry, Ana, you'll have to continue your story another time,” said TJ.

“Ah no. OK.” She didn't notice the sarcasm in TJ's tone.

As they exited the aircraft, a guy dressed in snow pants and a snow jacket was waiting for them at one of the airport entrance doors.

“Oh my word, it's freezing here!” Pippa said. She was the first one to exit.

They all followed with the same reaction, shivering as they ran towards the entrance. It was -3 degrees Celsius.

As they ran towards the door, a group of men walked towards the aircraft. They were collecting a large number of bags. Each guy came back carrying two sizeable bags individually.

“Welcome to Tenzing-Hillary Airport in Lukla. Come inside.”

“That's so much better!” Pippa said.

“Yes, it is a little warmer inside, but it is still quite cold everywhere else. Hi, my name is Dorjee, by the way. I will be your expedition leader. Please, follow me. You will be briefed when we get to the Lodge.”

The entire group got into three Jeeps: one for the visitors, another for the gentlemen carrying the bags, and the last for the bags themselves. The drive to the lodge only took about five minutes, as it was located on the other side of the airport.

Dorjee led them to the conference room so they could receive a full briefing. The guys carrying the bags followed and entered the room along with them.

“As I mentioned earlier, my name is Dorjee, and I will be your expedition group leader. The men who have been carrying your bags will be your sherpas for the expedition. For your convenience, each one of you has been allocated your own personal sherpa, who will guide and support you throughout your entire journey. And before you ask, yes, they all speak English.”

Everyone laughed.

“You have paid for the premium package. This means you will receive the best crew, with the best equipment. The bags they have been carrying are yours. We received your measurements a few weeks ago, so we have tailored your gear according to your respective sizes.”

Ana turned to one of the sherpas and opened the bag, digging through everything.

“Ana...” Pippa said, reprimanding her.

“It’s OK. Please, all of you find your bag. It has your name on it. Your sherpas have made sure all your equipment is there. Please take it out as we will run through the equipment list and explain the purpose of everything.”

“You see, Ana, that wasn’t your bag,” Pippa said.

“I’m sorry,” Ana replied as she searched for her bag.

The sherpas had two nametags on their jackets, one with their own name and the other with their climber’s name. Everyone introduced themselves to their sherpas, and the sherpas did likewise. Before Dorjee continued with his briefing, they took a moment to check their gear, making

sure it fit right and that it was all there. None of them had ever been trekking, so this was all new and exciting for each one of them. Even Fang, who had been quiet and expressionless for most of this trip, was wearing a slight smile and interacting with his sherpa, asking questions.

“OK. So, before we go through the equipment list, I want to discuss the itinerary with you first.” Dorjee had a presentation set up, with a few pictures and clips along the way. He dimmed the lights and began the presentation:

“You will be attempting a feat that not many have the privilege of accomplishing: conquering Sagarmatha, or as it is known to you all, Everest. As of last year, roughly 4,000 climbers have successfully made it to the summit. Some multiple times. I have been up there 11 times. Unfortunately, with the many successes, there have been many failed attempts, and at times some fatalities. There have been at least 300 known deaths. The good news is, with your uniquely tailored expedition, you will have a large crew in place, ready to assist and make this as smooth of a trek as possible. Let me make something clear though: This is a very, very challenging experience. Your body will be pushed to the limit. Your senses will be in overdrive most of the time. You will feel like quitting more often than not. But *when* you do push through all those challenges, when you get to the point where you *will* yourself through each life-draining step—when you are at the summit of Sagarmatha—it will all be worth it. There is no better feeling than knowing that you are on the highest point on earth, literally on top of the world. Whether you are lying lifeless, or standing in strength, atop that glacial, snowy,

piercingly freezing mammoth rock, you will be a victor, a champion.”

Dorjee was charismatic and vibrant. With every word that came out of his mouth, he had them sucked in and glued to everything he said. He made even the most life-threatening experience sound like a trip to Disneyland. None of them exhibited fear on their faces. Dorjee had managed to put them at ease, giving them a reassurance that they were in great hands and a wonderful journey awaited them. Then he discussed the itinerary:

“Before we get there, though, we need to prep you guys. You will need to go through a process of acclimatization. That just basically means getting your body physically adjusted to the mountainous environment. That alone will take about a month. The good thing about the acclimatization process is that you will actually be climbing the mountain. It will involve going up and down the various camps, with Base Camp as your starting point. Once that is complete, we will attempt to trek up to the summit. That should be about seven days to the top, and another six back to Base Camp. Including the 10-day trek to Base Camp from the lodge, that puts us at a total of about two months... Welcome to Sagarmatha.”

They all had a look of disbelief across their faces. Standing motionless, they couldn't believe what they were hearing. Seeing as none of them were climbers, or climbing enthusiasts, they had no idea how long it took to get up the mountain.

“Two months!” TJ exclaimed. “I thought this would take three or four days, a week at most.”

“Wow, two months in snow,” Tumi said anxiously.

“Can we still choose to opt out, and like, go home?” Ethan said, half joking, half speaking honestly.

Even Ana was caught off guard. She hadn't realized they would be completing the entire summit.

“Is Ana even old enough to climb up Everest?” TJ asked.

“Yes! I'm old enough,” Ana protested. “The youngest climbers to make it to the summit were both 13. A boy and a girl. I'm 14, TJ!”

“No, I didn't mean it like that, Ana,” he said as he and a few of the others tittered. Her ferocity was unexpected and threw him off a little.

“I was just concerned about you, that's all,” TJ said.

After giving them some time to let it all sink in, Dorjee called for their attention. He pulled up a slide with their detailed itinerary. He also had the sherpas give the climbers their own printout of the itinerary.

Sagarmatha Itinerary:

Day 1-11: Walk to Base Camp (Day 11-18:
Stay At Base Camp)

Day 19: Climb up to Camp 1

Day 20: Back to Base Camp (Day 20-22:
Stay At Base Camp)

Day 23: Climb up to Camp 2 (Day 23-24:
Stay at Camp 2)

Day 25: Back to Base Camp (Day 25-28:
Stay at Base Camp)

Day 29: Climb up to Camp 2 (Day 29-30:
Stay at Camp 2)
Day 31: Climb up to Camp 3
Day 32: Back to Base Camp
Day 33-44: Rest Days
Day 45-51: TREK UP TO THE SUMMIT
Day 51-56: Back to Base Camp
Day 57: Back to the Lodge

“Any questions?”

“Nah, it’s pretty self-explanatory for the most part,” TJ replied.

The others nodded their heads in agreement.

“Great. If you have any questions, feel free to ask me anytime. And your sherpas are adequately equipped to answer any of your questions, too.”

It was 22:40. Dorjee could see them slowly starting to fade. He still had a few more things to cover but realized it would be of no benefit if they couldn’t retain any of it. This was an unusual circumstance for Dorjee and his crew; they didn’t normally organize expeditions for a crew that consisted entirely of non-climbers. He quickly realized that he would have to adjust his regular methodology.

“OK, we’ll end it there for tonight. I advise that you all get a full night’s rest, as we have a long day tomorrow. See you all at 07:00.”

They gathered their stuff and made their way to their rooms.

“Oh, I almost forgot. I have been instructed to tell you all to make sure you have your Watches with you, as you will need them at the summit.”

They continued walking to their rooms while trying to figure out where their rooms actually were. They hadn’t had the chance to go to the front desk; all they had were their keys with the room numbers.

“Have you noticed that they keep saying ‘we have been instructed?’” TJ whispered. He wasn’t saying it to anyone specifically but directing it to the group as a whole as they were walking towards the elevators.

“Yes, I noticed that, too,” Pippa replied.

“Noticed what?” Ana said loudly.

“Keep it down, Ana,” Pippa responded. “That they keep saying, ‘We’ve been instructed.’”

“Maybe they lured us here so they could experiment on our bodies... Maybe they want to turn us into robots. No, puppets. Robot puppets!” Ethan said, as he fluctuated his voice.

Fang rolled his eyes and decided to take the stairs to his room.

“Dude, you’re so silly,” Tumi said between laughs.

“There’s no such thing as robot puppets, Ethan,” asserted Ana.

“No, but seriously, who are these people who are willing to spend so much money and go through so much trouble for this? To what end?” asked TJ.

“Yeah, why would someone go through so much trouble, for robot puppets?” Ethan said.

“Bruh... really?”

“OK, that’s a sign that it’s time to go to bed,” Pippa affirmed.

Some of them waited for the elevator, while others took the stairs.

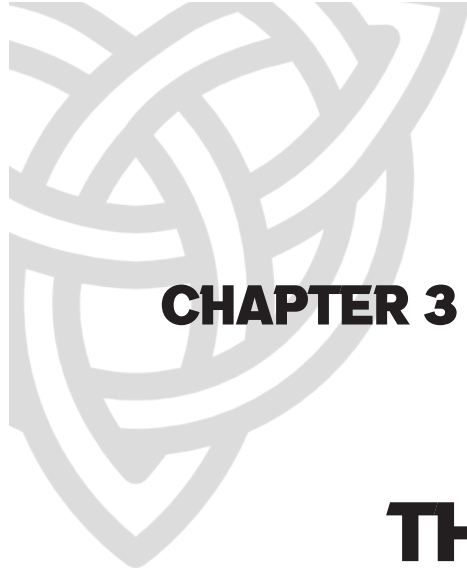
“Goodnight, Pippa. Goodnight, TJ. Goodnight, Ethan. Goodnight, Tumi.”

“Goodnight, Ana,” they all said together.

As TJ walked to his room, he kept thinking about those words: “We have been instructed.” When he got to his room, he took out everything he had received throughout the trip and tried to find something that could provide some insight. The Watch, the credit card, the passport, boarding passes, hotel receipts—anything to shed some light. He didn’t know what he was looking for. He didn’t find anything. *We’ll find out soon enough, I guess.* Throwing himself on the bed, in part frustration, part exhaustion, he tried to go to bed. If sleeping through the entire evening was a challenge back home, what more it would be in an unfamiliar environment. He tossed and turned. He opened his eyes. He knew he wouldn’t be getting any sleep.

He decided to go up to the roof. He had never seen the night sky look so beautiful. So much detail, contrast, depth, color. The innumerable stars were shining bright, with the sparkle of each individual star, like a multicolored diamond floating in the sky. The backdrop: a deep blue, with shades of purple, violet, a touch of light blue, and a subtle hint of black. One could hardly notice the darkness of night. For the first time he appreciated the vastness of the galaxy, the enormity of the universe. So far-reaching, so continuous. Seemingly infinite. Simply exquisite.

“Not a bad way to spend an interrupted night of sleep,” he said as he lay on the roof of the lodge. Nature was never TJ’s “thing.” Whenever some of his friends would invite him to go hiking, he would always pass. Living close to LA, he knew there were many mountains that were a short drive away. But he was never into that. Even going to the beach. It was fun, but the ocean was just *a whole lotta water*. It just wasn’t his “thing.” This experience, though, was a little life changing. It made him feel centered, calm. The only other time he would feel like this was when he was writing.



CHAPTER 3

THE SUMMIT

A low-pitched screeching sound got TJ's attention as the door to the roof slowly opened.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

He looked up and saw Tumi by the door. She had long, black braids. She was neither short nor tall, and was wearing jeans, paired with a stylish African print shirt.

"It's OK," he said. "I was just taking a breather up here. Couldn't really sleep."

"Oh, OK. Let me not disturb you then."

"No, it's cool. Please come on over. There's more than enough roof."

She sat down on the other side of the roof. It wasn't a big roof. They sat there for some time, in silence. Each in their own thoughts.

"Mind if I ask you a question?" said TJ.

The Summit

"Go ahead."

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from South Africa. Why do you ask?"

"Well, your name. I've never heard that name before. And your accent. Sounds different, like British, or Australian or something."

Since his first encounter with everyone, he had tried to figure out where they were all from. He had deduced they were from different parts of the world. Ana mentioned that she was from Argentina. Ethan and Pippa had strong accents that were easily recognizable. Ethan's was Australian, and Pippa's was British, though he couldn't figure out which country specifically. And he had noticed Fang's backpack when they were travelling to the airport; it had the Chinese national flag on it. So Tumi was the only one he couldn't crack.

"Well, I actually get that a lot. Particularly when I travel outside Africa."

"Your accent sounds cool, though. Even though you don't talk a lot, whenever you do, sounds cool the way you pronounce things."

"Thanks," she said as she chuckled. "What about you? Where are you from? Well, I know you're from the U.S., but like, where?"

"How do you know I'm from the U.S.?"

"Am I wrong?"

It was the first time TJ and Tumi were spending time alone together. Everyone on this journey was a stranger. Connecting with someone felt good.

"I'm from LA."

“That’s cool. That’s one place I’d like to visit one day.”

“It’s overrated. Nothing to write home about really.”

“Everyone says that about their hometown, though.”

“Well, one great thing about LA... A handsome young man, who is extremely athletic, and is quite articulate and intelligent, can be found there.”

“Wow. Well, that’s officially my cue,” she said, starting to get up.

“Later, Tumi.”

He stayed out on the rooftop for a little while longer. Between the refreshing, scenic experience, and the light-hearted conversation with Tumi, TJ thought he’d attempt to get some sleep. It was successful.

Despite his night-time sleeping struggles and his sluggish starts to his days, TJ somehow always had energy to get through the day like any other person. Today was no different. Making his way to the conference room, he felt ready for the challenge ahead. He wanted to prove his athleticism. Not to anyone else, self-proof. He knew this would be a demanding experience, but he had no doubt in his mind that he would conquer the mountain that had defied many.

Let’s get this, TJ! he said to himself.

As he entered the conference room, he wasn’t late, nor was he the last one like last time. In the room was Dorjee and his team of sherpas. Fang was standing by his sherpa, expressionless as always. Ana was talking to her sherpa, oozing with enthusiasm in everything she said and did. TJ walked over to Dorjee and greeted him, turned to Fang, greeted him, and before he could greet Ana, she ran up to him and said hello. This early in the morning, he expected

to be annoyed by her, but the adrenaline running through him made him feel untouchable. He went over to his sherpa, greeting him, too, and waited for the others to arrive.

Pippa and Tumi followed shortly after. Ethan was the last to arrive, only a few minutes late.

“Sorry, everyone,” Ethan said as he hurried across the room.

Dorjee addressed them, recapping what they had discussed the previous evening, and covering what they didn’t get through. The morning incorporated both information briefing and pre-climbing training. Dorjee handed over the remainder of the session to his team of sherpas. Each lead sherpa had their own group of porters and sherpas who would be dedicated to each individual climber. They took some time discussing food, diets, clothing, gear, oxygen, communication, and climbing terminology. Without their sherpas, the inexperienced climbers had no chance of success. They were as much of a lifeline as their oxygen tanks.

Once the final touches of their preparation were complete, they were ready to leave. Rounding everyone together, Dorjee gave this announcement:

“A final reminder. There is no cell phone coverage up in the mountains. So, this will be your last chance to communicate with family, and anyone else of importance in your life. You will be disconnected for the next two months.”

“What!” Pippa exclaimed. “What about my streaks?”

Dorjee and the rest of the sherpa crew had befuddled expressions on their faces. The climbers were shaking their heads, with combinations of laughter and exclamations of frustration.

"I thought you said this was a premium package. You'd expect some sort of high-quality connection up on the mountain, right? So, like, no Wi-Fi?"

"Seriously, Pippa?" TJ said.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand what you mean when you say 'streak,'" Dorjee replied.

"She is talking about a Snapstreak," Ana said.

"Snapstreak?"

"I apologize, Dorjee. They are talking about an app on your phone. It's a social media thing," Tumi explained.

"Oh..."

"It's OK. It's not a biggy. She's just being petty," TJ said. "Please continue what you were saying."

"Petty... Don't be mad because you're not connected," Pippa responded.

"I'm plenty connected."

"Right."

Dorjee was still confused, trying to figure out what the conversation was about.

"First world problems, first world brats. Am I right?" Ethan said looking at Fang.

With no response, Fang maintained his stance, keeping his eyes ahead of him, awaiting further, productive instructions.

"Well, I was saying this is your last chance to contact people back home if you need to."

Once the *streak* exchange was over, everyone took a moment to contact family and respective loved ones.

For TJ, it was a matter of keeping up with his falsifications. As far as his uncle was concerned, TJ was at a football

camp, where his nephew was likely to be selected onto the team. Claiming everything was going well, he added that the coaches would be taking away their phones for two months so they could focus on training. *There's no turning back now*, TJ thought to himself. He felt he couldn't tell his uncle the truth at this point. Perhaps when he got back. Or maybe never. He had two months to decide his course of action—now was not the time.

Once they were finished contacting those whom they needed to contact, they began to get ready. Putting on all their gear, they made a final equipment check with their sherpas.

"I have one final message to share before we leave. I have been instructed to let you know that '*Your questions will be answered upon reaching the summit.*' I assume you know what that means."

None of them reacted. It was almost said in passing. They were all still concluding their conversations with loved ones. Those who were already done were too engrossed by their gear and equipment.

The journey began. The walk to Base Camp was the first step. Dorjee led the group from the front, setting the pace. The climbers followed behind him along with their sherpas beside them. At the tail end were the porters, chefs, and medical team.

Each climber had been given the opportunity of having their own porter who carried their gear. All the climbers gladly accepted that offer. The thought of trekking the Himalayan mountains was challenging enough in itself. Adding the strain of carrying one's own bags and equipment

was an unnecessary challenge, especially if given the opportunity to receive assistance.

Five minutes into the walk to Base Camp, TJ felt he could do it on his own. He was second in order from the front, behind only Dorjee. His motivation was seeing Dorjee. As Dorjee walked, TJ felt a great sense of admiration and respect for him. He saw Dorjee as a man who was proud of who he was and what he was doing. A man who was conquering nature—without the assistance of others. TJ wondered why the sudden depth and self-reflection. One thing was clear, though: He could do what Dorjee was doing. He could be the man Dorjee was. Or who he perceived him to be.

As a result of his internal epiphanous experience, TJ asked his sherpa to give him his equipment. He was going to carry it himself. Against the objection of the sherpa, he still went ahead with it. The athlete in him, perhaps more so the star athlete in him, couldn't allow otherwise. They all looked at him as though he was crazy, as though he was being superfluous.

After the first stop, Fang decided to carry his own equipment, too. The rest of the climbers continued exercising their privilege of having a porter carry their equipment.

"You all seein' this pissing contest?" Ethan said.

Fang and TJ were slightly ahead of the others, behind Dorjee. Ana was at the back with the rest of the crew, while Ethan, Tumi, and Pippa stayed in the middle of the group.

"Pride comes in all shapes and nationalities, I guess!" Tumi replied.

"You'd swear there's a title belt waiting for them at the top of the mountain," Ethan said.

The three of them laughed. Laughing and talking was becoming a little tougher, slowing with every breath. It wasn't unbearable. It *was* noticeable. The temperature was slowly dropping. With every village they passed, with every day that passed, they were gradually going higher. It wasn't so much the distance as it was the altitude. The distance *was* far. Sixty-two kilometers. But that distance, spread out over ten days, at a fair pace, is manageable. Even for the least among athletes. The altitude—that was the real challenge. This acclimatization journey was all about the altitude. Giving the body time to adjust to the difference in the air. The higher they got, the thinner the air became, making breathing different to what it was lower down the mountain.

The first few days were tough for first-time climbers, but they all made it fairly well. Ana struggled a little, but she was still feeling strong going into day five. Each day of travel consisted of anywhere from three to six hours of walking. With the porters carrying their bags and equipment, it made the trek a slightly less strenuous experience. In fact, there were moments where the climbers got to enjoy the local culture. During the rest days, they were able to walk around the villages and experience first-hand the life of the Nepalese mountain natives. One positive side of the altitude was the scenery. The views from these villages were incredible. They were surrounded by swarms of green. Green trees, green plants, greenery all around. Along with the beautiful vegetation, the mountain peaks were just as

prominent; topped with thick, white snow, they were just as sublime. The local villages consisted of Asian style architecture, with a lot of brick and stone buildings, with colorful roofs, differing slightly in style from one village to the next. They were met with very warm welcomes and greetings from the locals.

The rest days were an opportunity to soak in the beauty of the nature that surrounded them.

As they entered the second half of the journey, things started to get a bit more challenging. They needed more rest breaks, more frequently. TJ and Fang were faring well. Pippa, Tumi, and Ethan had to push themselves. Ana was really struggling.

“Oy! Hold up, mates!” Ethan shouted to the group ahead.

Dorjee made his way back to see what was going on. Ana’s sherpa gave him an update of how she was doing. They spoke to one another for a few more minutes.

“Ana, your body seems to be struggling with acclimatizing,” Dorjee said.

She was breathing heavily. Her goggles became foggy. She looked down, with her head sagging, not making eye contact with anyone.

“Do you want to go back?” Dorjee asked her.

She started sniffing.

“Ana,” Pippa said as she held her hand. “Everything will be OK.”

Ana started crying.

“Is there anything we can do to make this final leg easier?” Tumi asked Dorjee.

He took the other climbers to the side. Pippa remained with Ana while the rest of the crew awaited the course of action.

“Can I be frank?” Dorjee said.

“Please...” they responded.

“We can give her oxygen. That will give her a little more distance. But if she is already struggling this early in the journey, she probably will not make it all the way.”

“So, what are our options?” TJ asked.

“Well, you either send her back and complete the trek yourselves. Or you can attempt to keep going with her. Or you could all turn back and try again a few days later.”

“We can’t let her go back on her own,” Tumi said.

“Er... We can’t?” TJ responded.

“Yeah, she’s all alone in a place she’s not familiar with.”

“We don’t know each other. It’s not like we’re a family!” TJ said.

“Don’t be an idiot, mate.”

“Wait, so you guys want us all to go back, because the little girl bit off more than she could chew?”

“Pippa,” Tumi called her over.

“Yeah?”

“Well, we basically have three options. Either Ana returns to the lodge and we continue climbing. We turn back with her and try later. Or she gets oxygen and we keep going,” Tumi said.

“Obviously we can’t let her go back on her own.”

TJ flung his arms in frustration.

“Whatever. Do what you wanna do.”

“We’ll take a vote, three votes majority.” Tumi led the vote.

TJ and Fang voted against taking Ana with them. Ethan, Pippa, and Tumi voted in favor of taking her with them.

So, they gave her oxygen and kept going. Ana was so preoccupied with her weakened body and inability to breathe that she didn’t notice any of the conversation that happened a few steps away from her. Her sherpa administered the oxygen, and they were on their way again.

The oxygen seemed to do the trick. She now kept up with the rest of the group. TJ and Fang continued to lead the way, behind Dorjee. Even though they took more rest breaks than the average group, they maintained a steady pace. The incident with Ana only set them back a few hours. Thus, they were still moving according to schedule. They were a few hours late each day, which meant they had to cut down on their sightseeing, but they were reaching their required distance daily.

Upon reaching Base Camp, they all celebrated, as it was their first accomplishment together. It wasn’t a major achievement, given that most of the people that attempt to reach Base Camp usually do. Yet, the reality that they did not know each other, and were first time climbers, was something to be taken note of. The girls went over to Ana and gave her a hug.

“Well done, Ana. We’re so proud of you,” Pippa said.

“Yeah, you really showed how much character you have. Good job, Ana,” added Tumi.

“Put it here, Ana,” Ethan said as he lifted his open hand in the air for Ana to give a high five.

Pippa went over to TJ and Fang, who were inspecting their equipment.

“You two better go over there and say something nice to Ana. I’m sick of this macho crap.”

Fang was the first to go to Ana. With an expressionless face, he said, “Well done.”

“Thanks, Fang,” she said with a hint of excitement, as she strained to speak.

A few minutes later, TJ went over to Ana and sat beside her. He took a moment before saying anything.

“I’m sorry, Ana. I know I’ve acted like a jerk a few times. It won’t happen again.”

“It’s OK, TJ. I know you’re not a bad guy.” She leaned in for a hug.

He followed through. He kept it very short. As he pulled back, he said very softly, “Well done.”

“Thanks, TJ. It means a lot coming from you.”

As they continued getting settled, Dorjee addressed them:

“Great job, everyone. We have made it to Base Camp. This might not seem like much of an accomplishment, but it is the first step nonetheless. The next step will be some rest and relaxation, followed by *a lot* of hard work. Until then, though, take the time to enjoy the mountain. Enjoy the thin air. Embrace the cold, snowy weather. We leave for Camp 1 in seven days.”

The time of rest and relaxation went by quickly. That week was actually a pivotal part of the acclimatization process, where the body has an entire week of adapting to the air and the new rhythm of breathing.

When the first day of climbing up to the various base camps had arrived, all the climbers were rested and ready to take on the remainder of the preparation climbing. They had about two weeks of climbing up and climbing back down the mountain, moving between Base Camp and Camps 1, 2, and 3.

The climbs were fairly routine. Dorjee was a great sherpa; his climbing regiments were always designed uniquely for the group he had in front of him. For an inexperienced climbing group like this one, with the resources he was allocated, he took the safe and steady approach. After the incident with Ana on their way to Base Camp, Dorjee gave her as much support as possible. He instructed her sherpa to monitor closely her oxygen intake, giving her as much as he could, without giving too much for her body to cope with. He also had to manage TJ and Fang's eagerness, encouraging them to push themselves, while reminding them of the team dynamic. With all the climbers given the option to have their sherpas carry their equipment for them, again Pippa, Tumi, and Ethan did not think twice in taking that option. All in all, everything was going as expected for Dorjee.

The days came and went: Base Camp to Camp 1. Overnight stay. Camp 1 back to Base Camp. Three-night stay at Base Camp. Base Camp to Camp 2. Two-night stay. Camp 2 to Base Camp. Four-night stay. Base Camp to Camp 2. Camp 2 to Camp 3. Back to Base Camp. Three straight weeks of climbing. When they got back from their final climbing exercise, from Camp 3, they were exhausted. Physically, mentally, and emotionally. Dorjee gave them

12 days of recovery before they would attempt the actual Summit of Everest. They could think of nothing else but warmth and sleep.

"Hey, you guys have done a great job! I have never come across a group with as little experience as you guys, who made it through the acclimatization process the way you did. You truly handled it like seasoned climbers. Enjoy your recovery."

TJ gave a nod in acknowledgement of what Dorjee had said; that was all he could will his body to do at that point. Everyone else lay on their backpacks, motionless. With the wind gradually picking up, they lay outside for as long as they possibly could before they had to go to their tents. Many of their body parts felt frozen. Pippa and Tumi helped Ana to her tent, and lay next to her for a few hours into the night as they spoke words of encouragement to her. She cried for most of that time. The boys went to their own tents and crashed.

As each day passed, and as they edged closer to the day of departure, they began to come together as a team, somewhat. Helping one another around Base Camp. Taking a little more interest in each other. Calling each other by name. The longer they stayed out in the Himalayan mountain peaks, the more everyone else was a stranger, with the only real familiarity being one other. On the eve of their departure, TJ gathered everyone together.

"Hey guys. Just wanted to take this opportunity to apologize for the times I acted like an idiot. In the heat of the moment, I know I tend to verbalize some unfiltered thoughts, that may seem insensitive. I'm sorry, and I hope

you may find it in you to forgive me in future if I do it again.”

“If?” Tumi interrupted.

“Yeah, *if*,” TJ replied, giving a slight grin.

“*When* you do it again, we’ll think about it, mate,” said Ethan.

“You just keep that ego in check, and we’ll be good,” Tumi added.

“I second that,” said Fang. “Third, fourth,” the rest of the team agreed.

“OK, I get it, I get it,” TJ said as they all laughed. “This is actually why I wanted to speak to you guys. We have become more like a team in the past few weeks, and less like a group of strangers forced to be together. Even though we don’t know what awaits us at the top of the mountain, we are working towards a common goal. Whatever happens after the top of the mountain, I hope we maintain a more than cordial interaction. That’s all I wanted to share.”

As soon as TJ was done, Ana stuck her arm in the air and bounced excitedly as she waited for someone to acknowledge her.

“Yes, Ana,” said Pippa.

“Can we play a game?”

“A game? Why?” TJ asked.

“Because. You were talking about how much closer we are now. It’s just so we get to know each other better.”

They were all a little hesitant.

“We’re not that close,” Ethan said under his breath.

Fang snickered.

“Oh, you heard that?” Ethan didn’t know whether to be more surprised about how loud he had said that, or the fact that he had made Fang laugh—really that Fang laughed at all.

“What did you have in mind, Ana?” Tumi asked.

“Well, we could all go around the circle, asking one question that everyone had to answer. It could be about anything. Something fun, that also helps us know more about each person.”

They each took a moment to think about a question.

“Ooh, I’ve got one,” Pippa exclaimed. “Name your celebrity crush. No. Name two celebrity crushes. Yes, we have time for two.”

“Really?” TJ asked.

“Yes, really,” Pippa snapped.

“Good question, Pippa,” Ana responded.

“Thanks, Ana,” she said as she smiled. “OK, I’ll go first. My celebrity crushes are... Liam Hemsworth, and Zayn. So dreamy!”

“Who are they?” TJ asked.

“What? You don’t know two of the hottest men on the planet.”

“No, I don’t know two of the hottest men on the planet.”

“Liam, my future husband, is the younger brother of Chris Hemsworth, who you all probably know as Thor from the Marvel movies.”

“Oh, so Thor...” TJ responded.

“No, Chris Hemsworth is Thor. Liam Hemsworth is his younger brother.”

“Who, Loki?”

“Aarrgh.”

Ethan and TJ laughed.

“Thor is Chris Hemsworth. Loki is someone else, I don’t know who plays him, and I don’t care. Liam Hemsworth is Chris Hemsworth’s brother in real life. He played Gale Hawthorne in the *Hunger Games*. Him and Katniss grew up in the same city. They were friends.”

“Oh, that guy.”

“Yes. He also recently played one of the lead characters in the sequel of *Independence Day*. So hot.”

“Wow, could that have taken any longer,” Ethan said.

“That should not have been that complicated,” Tumi added.

Pippa proved to be very passionate about this topic. Her excitement was not to be deterred by the boys and their jokes, or any of their seemingly absurd remarks.

“Okay, so that’s Liam. Zayn... Oh, Zayn, he used to be in One Direction. He left the band, which was devastating, but as a solo artist he has just been amazing.”

“Amazing? He’s been OK,” Ethan said.

“You know this Zayn guy?” TJ asked.

“Yeah, unfortunately. My little sister is a huge fan, too.”

“Thanks, Pippa. That was great,” said Ana. “I know so much more about you now, just from that answer. See, this is fun.”

“This *is* fun,” Pippa replied.

Ana put up her hand. “Can I go next?”

“Sure.”

“My celebrity crushes are Justin Bieber and Tom Holland. They are both so cute, and so talented.”

“Good choice, Ana,” Pippa said.

“Do I need to explain who Justin Bieber is?”

“Nah, we all know who that is. Right?” TJ said.

“Even I know who Justin Bieber is,” Fang responded.

“Tom Holland is Spiderman. He’s just amazing.”

“Nice one, Ana. I’m not gonna lie, I’m often jealous of Zendaya,” Pippa said. “This is so much fun. Who’s next?”

“OK, I’ll go.” Tumi thought about it for a moment.

“Let’s see. I’d probably go with Diggy Simons, and Jessie Usher. Diggy is a singer, and known for being Rev Run’s son. Rev Run is from the ol’ school hip-hop group Run DMC. And then Jessie, well, he’s not like that famous, but he starred in this show on Cartoon Network called ‘Level Up.’ And he’s in the Shaft movie. He’s too fine.”

“Short and sweet, good job, Tumi,” TJ said. “I’ll go next. Staying with the Marvel theme, the girl Pippa doesn’t like, Zendaya, and Zoe Kravitz from the *Divergent* series—oh, and she’s the daughter of Lenny Kravitz.”

Dorjee came up to them mid-conversation and reminded them of their long journey ahead. They would need to rest well in order to make it through the tough climbs they would be making. In their brief moment of laughter and relaxation, they had actually forgotten about what lay waiting for them in the next week. Spending a little over a month in the Nepalese mountain had made them forget how much of a feat they would be attempting—one that only a few had successfully accomplished.

As they made their way to their tents, TJ called out to Ana, “Great game, young Ana. I had a lil’ fun taking part.”

"Thanks, TJ," Ana said with a wide smile on her face. She then turned back and yelled at Fang and Ethan, "I haven't forgotten about you two. We'll continue this tomorrow."

They both continued walking, shaking their heads as they retreated to their tents.

At the crack of dawn, Dorjee woke everyone up. It took them all a few moments to get ready. Once they were ready, they all went outside. Their bodies shivered, endlessly. With the heavy clothing and gear on their bodies, they made their way to the meeting point. The rigidity of their limbs, as they walked from their tents was strenuous, yet pain free. As they stood before Dorjee, awaiting further instructions, the whistles of the freezing wind were a taste of the conditions that lay ahead.

"You've made it to the final leg. All that's left is the actual Summit. Today marks the beginning of a life-changing experience for you all. As challenging as the past weeks have been, the following days will determine the worth of that pain and sacrifice."

"Finally. Let's do this," TJ exclaimed.

"Yeah, we're ready," Ethan added.

Their eagerness was evident. Dorjee was impressed to see their enthusiasm to begin the climb. In most cases the nerves overshadow the excitement. His respect for this group of young climbers continued to increase with every passing interaction. Unbeknownst to him, though, their positive outlook had very little to do with the climb itself. They were looking forward to finally getting answers to the many questions that accompanied their journey.

"I'm loving the energy, guys. Before we begin, let's make a final equipment and gear check with your sherpas. And I would like to remind you all that you have the option of having your sherpa and his team carry your gear. In fact, for the Summit itself, I always recommend that you utilize that option if you can afford it. Which you guys can, so please do."

All the climbers took Dorjee's recommendation. Except TJ. As soon as Dorjee had finished making that recommendation, TJ had picked up all his gear and stood beside Dorjee, indicating his readiness to begin the hike.

"Are you sure about this, TJ?" Dorjee asked.

"Yes sir. I'm good."

"OK then," Dorjee replied. Remembering TJ's trek to base camp, Dorjee had seen enough to feel comfortable with his decision. He just preferred to err on the side of caution.

Not to be outdone, Fang followed suit.

"They're at it again," Tumi said to Pippa, who rolled her eyes in response.

"These two fools," Ethan said.

Ana was preoccupied with getting herself in the right frame of mind. She kept checking and rechecking her equipment and gear with her sherpa. She even had a little mantra that she would say to herself to keep calm: "Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving forward."

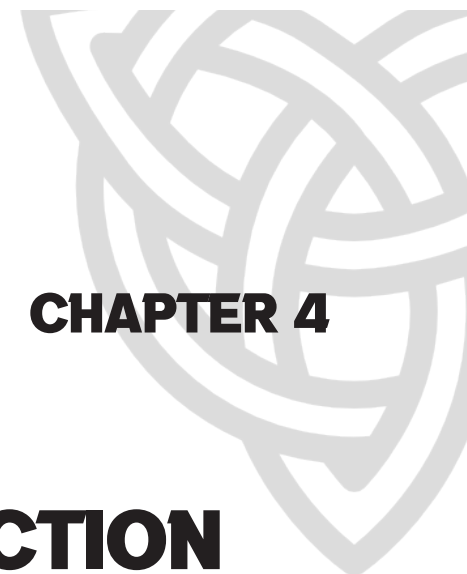
Pippa and Tumi walked towards her.

"You've got this, Ana," Pippa said.

“Yes, don’t worry. We’ll be with you every step of the way,” Tumi added.

“Thanks, guys. It means a lot to me.”

Once they were all ready, Dorjee led them to Camp 1. The climb from Base Camp to Camp 1 was relatively hassle free. They climbed at a steady pace, with the tail end, Ana and the sherpa crew, keeping up without much struggle. Even the infamous Khumbu icefalls were overcome routinely, mainly due to Dorjee and his sherpas good work and expert skillset. With Fang and TJ right behind Dorjee, setting the pace, it was no surprise that the two boys felt they could keep going immediately once they had arrived at Camp 1. Dorjee had to constantly remind them that they were climbing as a team, not as individuals. His words were met with great appreciation by Pippa, Tumi, and Ethan. Though they were keeping up, they were conscious of Ana and the fact that she needed more time. The temperature at Camp 1 remained steady at -25 degrees Celsius. The wind speed was bearable. They stopped at Camp 1 for some time so everyone could rest and regain their energies. Dorjee checked in on everyone. Once they were ready, he led them through to camp 2.



CHAPTER 4

1ST PROJECTION

They were on their way once again. With the icefalls behind them, the climb to Camp 2 was more of a formality. Fatigue would begin to kick in, but within a few hours, upon arriving at the camp, they would have two days of rest and recovery. Having left just before sunrise, and now almost half a day later, they were safely at Camp 2. The second of five.

With one thing on their mind—sleep—they dropped all their stuff, changed out of their climbing gear, had dinner, and went straight to their tents.

After two nights at Camp 2, they moved on to Camp 3. The climb was challenging, but they made it without any major issues. With a few stops in between, everyone pulled their weight, and the crew made it through as a team. They spent two nights at the Camp and then moved on to the next one.

Once again starting just before sunrise, Dorjee gathered them all together, and they departed. The climb to Camp 4 proved to be much more challenging than any of the others. Climbing Everest is all about altitude. The body's ability to adjust to the change in altitude will determine success or failure. Reviewing the various elevations, Base Camp was 5,400 meters (17,500 feet). Camp 1 was 6,100 meters (20,000 feet). Camp 2 was 6,500 meters (21,300 feet). Camp 3 was 7,400 meters (21,300 feet). Camp 4, the destination camp at this part of their journey, was 8,000 meters (26,000 feet). The amount of exertion on their bodies, in contrast to Base Camp, was already at a level just under 2,600 meters more than they had become accustomed to.

Breathing in nearly half of the oxygen they would normally get back at regular sea level, they were struggling. Even TJ and Fang began to slow down. Dorjee had to keep shouting out words of encouragement, motivating them to keep going: "Almost there," "One more push," "Dig deep," "It will all be worth it when we get there," "Come on, guys," "We're almost there." Ana started to falter, significantly so. Her sherpa yelled out to the front because the gap between them and the rest of the crew was becoming wider and wider. The snowfall was steady, with winds moving sharply enough for everyone to feel the unscheduled stop. Dorjee made his way to the back of the pack, asking Ana how she was feeling and if she could keep going. As that conversation continued, the girls went to support Ana, and the boys waited.

"I knew this would happen," TJ said in frustration.

"You need to cut your crap, mate," Ethan responded, getting close to TJ.

"I'm just saying what everyone is thinking."

"Don't assume you know what we're all thinking. Some of us have a heart. She's a lot younger than the rest of us, of course she won't keep up with our pace."

"Exactly, she can't keep up. Now, I like her and all, but she's beginning to slow us down. And if she can't handle it, she needs to go back down. For her own safety, too."

"He's got a point," Fang said.

They were all breathing heavily. Their argument caused even further strain on their lungs and oxygen intake. Everything they said came out slower, and more staggered.

"Fine, whatever. We all know she's making our lives more complicated. Every stop means our bodies get more tired... Which means we struggle that much more to breathe. Which in turn means we now risk our own lives," TJ said.

"So, we're good, mate?" Ethan said with a stern look.

Dorjee interrupted the moment of intensity between the two, giving them an update on Ana:

"Ana needs extra oxygen and a bit more time to rest and recover before continuing."

The girls kept giving her support, talking to her, giving her hugs, making her laugh, and reminding her she wasn't alone. The break was helpful for them, too. Sitting down for as long as they did made them realize how tough the climb was on their own bodies. With that stop, Ana was able to keep going. She still struggled, but she eventually made it to Camp 4. They all did.

Two nights at each Camp was Dorjee's standard. Camp 4 was no different. The morning of their final departure—the final journey towards the great Summit of Mount Everest—TJ woke up early. As exhausted as he was from the past six days, his brain, as always, wouldn't give him a break. He knew he needed more sleep, but he was used to taking what his body would give him. He made his way from his tent to the general tent, where they all would gather to eat, visit the doctors, contact family—only in the event of emergencies—or just hang out. That early in the morning, no one was usually up. As he opened the tent, he found Fang in there, sitting on one of the couches.

"Can I join you?" TJ asked.

"Sure."

TJ sat on the couch next to the one that Fang was sitting on. A seat separated the two. They sat there for a few minutes before anyone said anything.

"Tell me, man, why'd you come here?" TJ said.

Fang paused before responding. "Honestly," he said as he took another pause, this time longer than the first. "There's something I have to prove. To my family. To my father."

He had some emotion on his face as he said that. Not much, but enough for TJ to notice. He wanted to ask more, but he knew that was probably all he would get from a guy who rarely expressed himself.

"What about you, stars and stripes? What made you 'accept' the so-called destiny?"

The way he phrased the question made TJ chuckle.

"You know, I asked myself the same question before I left home. I guess I'm on a journey towards self-discovery."

They looked at each other. Fang shrugged a little.

"I know, heard it the moment the words left my mouth. It's very cheesy. But it's true. I just feel like I don't know who I am at times. The past two years of high school have been the same deal. Wrestling with the same question."

They sat there for a while, saying nothing else to each other. It was strange. There was always a tension about their interactions. They didn't hate each other; they just weren't fond of one another. Neither of them could figure out why, but from the moment they met, something was off. In the same breath, they had a respect for each other that was evident. There was something in the way they pushed each other. The others saw it as petty competition. It was something else, something different. Yet they couldn't describe or define it.

"Morning, guys." Dorjee walked in with a few of the sherpas.

"Morning," they both replied.

"So, are you guys ready for today?"

TJ quickly and eagerly responded, "Man, I've been ready the moment I found out we were climbing Mount Everest."

"That's good to hear," Dorjee said. "Let's hope everyone else shares your excitement."

Dorjee spoke to the sherpas in what could have been Nepali or Hindi. They gathered around a table, discussing what seemed to be quite important. Looking at the time, Fang and TJ stood up to go to their tents so they could get ready. They could hear movement from the other tents. Everyone else was awake. Ready for the big day, they went

to the main tent to wait for their final instructions from Dorjee.

“Once again, good job on making it this far. It was not without its challenges and hurdles along the way. But now you are one step away. *You* have done all the work. *You* have put your bodies on the line. Now *you* are ready to make the Summit.”

All the climbers were feeling inspired, receiving another impassioned speech by Dorjee, their fearless guide. It did the job; everyone was excited and ready for the great Summit.

Dorjee then paused before his next statement: “This is as far as our journey goes with you guys.”

The room was filled with puzzled expressions. There was a moment of silence before they responded.

“Wait. What?” said Pippa.

“This is as far as our journey goes. As in all of us? Or... like...” TJ said in confusion.

They were surprised at what they had just heard. They stood there in silence. Looking around at one another, they were trying to figure out what was going on.

“We have been instructed to go no further than Camp 4, as you guys are to complete the final leg yourselves, just the six of you. Once you get to the top, you will receive further instructions.”

“There you go again with the ‘we have been instructed’ business,” said TJ. “Who has instructed you? Why have they instructed you? And when will we get all our answers?”

“Well, he just said we’ll get our answers at the top,” responded Pippa.

“No, he actually said we will receive further instructions,” Tumi said.

“Exactly, we don’t know if we’ll get any answers up there or not. Who’s to say we won’t be sent on another wild goose chase when we get there?” said TJ.

“Geese are actually fun animals to chase around. Tricky lil’ buggers, but once you catch ‘em, they’re cute and cuddly, making the chase worthwhile.” Ethan said.

You could hear a few snickers coming from some of the climbers. Those who didn’t find that comment amusing were slightly annoyed, given the news they had just received. Neither of them could wrap their minds around the idea of having to climb without any of the sherpas. As they looked back to their climb thus far, it was difficult enough *with* the guidance and assistance of the sherpas. Attempting it without them sounded like guaranteed failure.

“Thanks for that, Ethan. Can we get back to the seriousness of what Dorjee just told us,” said TJ.

“You guys will be fine, I promise,” said Dorjee. “We have climbed with you for a little over a month now. We have prepared you for this. It’s one last ascent. You can do it. You really can. You just need to work as a team, and support one another.”

They all looked at each other with a hint of uncertainty. They were not completely convinced they could do it. Some doubted their own ability, while others doubted the abilities of others. Picking up on the uncertainty, Dorjee tried to reassure them:

“This morning the sherpas and myself discussed the route you will be taking. We’ve mapped out your path with

beacons along the way. It will be clearly marked. While you guys were resting the past two days, a few of us went ahead to go through the path beforehand. To ensure everything was OK for you guys. Trust me, we have set you up for success.”

They all took some time to discuss and plan their climb. Everyone pitched in. Asking questions and giving suggestions, they started to sound a little confident. They would all carry their own equipment and gear, with exception to Ana. TJ and Fang would divide her stuff into two bags, which they would then each carry accordingly. (This helped ease Ana’s anxiety a little. She had been in a panic since the moment she heard the news from Dorjee.) Fang would lead the way, with TJ bringing up the rear. They agreed to go at a steady pace, one that would be comfortable for everyone. They were ready. Thanking Dorjee and his crew one last time before they left, they were on their way.

It was a long climb. To say they were going at a slow pace would be an understatement. They were being over-cautious in every step they took. Staying extremely close to one another, they were moving as a unit. Fang and TJ signaled to one another in frequent intervals. They were all on the same page, probably for the first time since they met. They were making steady progress, passing the demarcated beacons as promised by Dorjee. Any feelings of anxiety and fear that they had when they left were starting to fade with every step they took, with every meter they conquered.

They began to see parts of the mountain’s peak. They knew they were close. Wind speeds were at their fiercest. Dorjee had mentioned that the wind and snow would

become extremely worse when they got closer to the top. Referred to colloquially as the “death zone,” it was without a doubt the toughest part of the climb. As challenging as it was with the worsening conditions, they all knew it was a sign of their proximity.

“*Let’s go. We’re almost there,*” yelled TJ. “*Let’s give it everything we got.*”

He used every ounce of energy in him to give that last shout. They were so close together in their movement that they all heard him. Fang gave a signal of confirmation from the front, lifting his arm, and pointing to the peak. The pace had become extremely slow, painfully sluggish. They couldn’t help it. Their legs felt as though they were sinking deeper and deeper into the snow with every step, as though they were falling into a hole. The equipment they were carrying had begun to feel like bricks of gold that were being pulled towards the ground by an invisible magnet. With everything they were going through, it was almost like they really were climbing towards a treasure of gold.

“STOP!” TJ called out.

Everyone looked back.

Ana, who was in front of TJ, had slipped on one of the rocks. They all scrambled to check on her. TJ was holding Ana’s hand, as he was the closest to her. Pippa went over to her, leaning in close to speak to her and see how she was doing.

Not only was this predicament taking time, but their bodies were getting out of rhythm. The rhythm of moving. They were cold, exhausted, and drained, both physically and emotionally. Ana started crying. But unlike the

previous times the group had to stop on her account, TJ and Fang were not annoyed. Instead they huddled close to her. TJ encouraged her, telling her how much he admired her courage and confidence. His words were echoed by the rest of the team.

“We’re almost there, Ana. But we can’t get there without you. We don’t want to go up to the top without our most favored member,” TJ said.

Ana began to stand up, with the help of TJ and Pippa. They continued moving.

They could feel the fatigue on their bodies from that last stop. They were moving as a team, but they were moving slower than before. Their minds willed them to take each and every next step. Their legs felt as though they were receiving delayed instructions from their brains. Yet they were moving. As a team. They were making progress.

At this point in their climb, they were all looking down at their feet, ensuring that every step counted, that they didn’t drag their feet, or misstep, resulting in them falling over. The only one who had to garner the strength to look ahead was Fang, since he had to make sure they were still headed in the right direction. When Tumi, who was behind Fang, looked ahead to see how far they were, she saw Fang’s outstretched arm. It took her a moment to figure out why he was doing that. The joy that filled her heart when she realized they were at the top was unparalleled to anything she had ever felt. She snatched Fang’s arm and pulled herself towards him as hard as she could. A loud thud followed, as she fell to the ground lying on her back. The others followed in a similar fashion. When TJ got to the top, he gave

Fang a big hug. They both proceeded to lie on the ground after that. Breathing heavily, they stayed in those positions for some time. Ana and Pippa cried. The emotion was uncontrollable, for all of them.

TJ was the first to get back to his feet, not because he wanted to, but he was anxious to receive the next set of instructions. Was there someone waiting for them at the top of the mountain? Did they have to look for him or her? Was there a clue of some kind, another beacon perhaps? As he perused the area, first with his eyes, before any physical movement, he came across other successful climbers’ personal effects, left behind as a sign and proof of their accomplishment. Going back and forth, surveying the peak from left to right, he couldn’t see anything of significance that might lead them to the next step in their journey. In his state of exhaustion, he wasn’t as frustrated as he would normally have gotten in that situation. Staying in the same position felt relaxing, restful.

Suddenly, he spotted something—the only thing that looked out of place on the mountaintop. It appeared subtle at first, but as he continued looking around, it became clear that it didn’t belong there. He slowly made his way over. He wanted to be certain it was something before he spoke up. His eyes were fixed on a part of the mountain, a part of the snow-covered rock, that wasn’t completely covered in snow. The closer he got to the rock, the more he began to see an outline of an image, what looked like the shape of a dagger. Once he was close enough to see the image, he heard a clicking sound on the ground. He felt the ground beneath him move slightly. When he looked down, he noticed he

was standing directly on top of a circular-shaped surface. He shouted across to the others, "I found something."

They staggered towards him. While waiting, he tried to examine the surface he was standing on. It appeared to be some sort of marble material. He had very minimal feeling in his feet, but the texture felt rough. He knew this because of the resistance in his boots when he scraped it along the surface. Moving his eyes back to the initial rock that drew him to this area, he put his hand on the rock. He was doing this so he could feel what looked like an indentation in the rock, a dagger-shaped indentation. Only, the snow all fell on the ground the moment he touched the rock. It had become like the rest of the rocks on the mountain that didn't have snow. TJ tried to find more. More clues. Or symbols. Strange-looking rocks. Something.

On either side of him, he noticed the same circular-shaped surfaces on the ground. They were positioned a few steps away from him, but slightly ahead of where his was positioned. It was only when Fang stood on top of another circular surface that TJ realized there was one for each of them, and they formed a circle.

"Are we all supposed to step on these?" asked Tumi.

"Yeah, I think so," TJ replied.

Tumi and Fang stepped on the surface. They were followed by Pippa, who was followed by Ana. Ethan was the last one to step on the circular-shaped surface since he was helping Ana get to everyone else.

"Now wh—"

Before she could finish speaking, Tumi was interrupted by a loud noise.

With a sudden jolt, she began to sink into the snow. Looking around her, she noticed everyone else was also going down. As she kept descending, she could no longer see anything. She couldn't move either. It was a strange experience. It became apparent to her that she was actually going into the mountain itself. She kept moving down at a steady pace, like she was in an elevator. Smooth, consistent, sturdy. Unable to rely on her sight, she paid careful attention to the surrounding noises. It sounded hollow, like they were in a cave.

"Are you guys still there?" TJ yelled.

"Yes," they all responded.

"Can anyone see anything?" TJ asked.

"It's pitch black," Pippa responded.

"Same here, mate," said Ethan.

"What is going on?" TJ said softly under his breath.

They remained in the silence for a while, each internally asking their own questions, wondering what was happening, and more importantly, what was coming next.

Finally, a light came on. As they looked around at one another, they could see a light shining on each individual. The light appeared to be in the form of a cylindrical tube from the ground to the top of the cave, surrounding each of them perfectly. They eventually realized that there was a mini platform in front of them, in the center, with all of them surrounding the platform equidistantly.

As they were surveying their surroundings, attempting to make sense of what was going on, almost out of nowhere, a figure appeared before them. He had a towering presence about him—as tall as the tallest basketball player they could

think of. Yet, he wasn't lanky. Because of his long robe-like attire, they couldn't see his body. He appeared to be the width of an oak tree trunk. There was also a radiant shimmer around the man. It wasn't overpowering, nor was it blinding. Yet it was distinct enough for them to notice.

He began to speak:

"This is your final chance to change your mind and go back home. From this point onwards, if you choose to continue, there is no turning back."

His voice was sonorous, almost intimidating. Not that any of them paid much attention to the detail in his voice, not in that moment. They each took a little time to ponder what he said. Even if they were scared, surely this was too unique of a situation to pass up.

"I'm in," TJ yelled.

"Me too," followed Fang.

Seconds later, a few more made up their minds.

"Count me in," said Tumi.

"Same here," said Ethan.

Pippa and Ana took a minute to think it through. What did it mean when he said, "There is no turning back"? To what extent would this commitment affect their lives? In reality, none of them knew anything about what was going on. It was a catch twenty-two moment; in order for them to get more information on what this endeavor would entail, they needed to commit first, blindly commit.

"Why not," said Pippa.

"O-O-OK," Ana stammered.

With the final confirmation, the man continued:

"For you to be receiving this message, it means the worst has occurred. It means we have been overcome, and are in need of assistance. For as long as you have been alive, you have known one world. A world where the earth consists only of the human beings that inhabit it. This is only partially true. Though there is one earth, there are actually two realms. Firstly, the physical. This is your normal world, normal life as you know it. You call this earth. Then there is what we call the R.O.E., the Realm of Entities, where we live."

"While life goes on regularly in your realm, there is an ongoing battle in ours. Sireletsians and Cerberosians have been at war for millennia. Cerberosians have been trying to take control of and destroy all inhabitants of your realm. We, the Sireletsians, prevent them from being successful. Unfortunately, through an inexplicable lapse in judgment from one of the Sireletsians, we were deceived, resulting in the Cerberosians infiltrating one of our locations. This led to our capture and subsequent lock up. Unbeknownst to the Cerberosians, we have a built-in fail safe, in the unlikely reality of our capture. If all six Sireletsians of Earth are captured, all at the same time, six packages are released across the planet. These packages are updated frequently to ensure their present-day relevance. As you all know in each of your packages was a Watch, a credit card, and a passport. You six have been hand-picked by each of the six Sireletsians. It is not by chance that you are here. It is no mistake that you received a package. You are Earth's last hope. You are the Chosen."

"What we will need you to do is to find us and free us. Unfortunately, this will not be an easy task, given the fact that after this message the Cerberosian army will now know that

you exist, and they will try to stop you at all costs. So, in order to prepare you for this task ahead, we have set up various destinations for you, where you will receive everything you will need to be informed and well equipped. For now this is all I can say. This is all we can reveal.

“Good luck, and we hope to see you soon, in person.”

He was done. As suddenly as he appeared, he disappeared. They all stood in silence, taking everything in—where they were, what the mysterious man said, what lay ahead.

A few moments after the man was done speaking, their Watches turned on. Almost in a trance-like state, they were all motionless. Yet they could feel something happening to them. Their hands began to quiver. Something was moving inside them—in their bloodstream. It wasn’t painful, though. From her shortest strand of hair to her pink painted toenails, Pippa could feel movement. She felt different. While they were all perplexed by what they were going through, Ana couldn’t stop smiling. There was a peaceful, calmness to the foreign experience. Even in their daze, they could all relate to her response. None of them felt threatened or fearful. No anxiety. When all was said and done, it actually felt... good?

They regained control of their bodies. Lifting their hands, they each took a moment to analyze themselves. Looking at their hands, back and front, they could find no alterations. Looking at the rest of their arms, followed by looking at their legs, and around the rest of their bodies, they were fine.

“What just happened?” Ethan asked.

No one responded. They were still trying to figure out everything that had happened in the past 15 minutes.

“No, like, for real. What just happened?”

“Bruh...” TJ responded.

“That was the weirdest thing I have ever experienced,” said Tumi.

“That was awesome!” said Ana.

“Wow,” Fang responded in amazement.

“So many questions,” TJ said.

With a slight rattle, they slowly began to go back up. Their surroundings were no longer as significant or as intimidating as they once seemed. All they could think about was the man in the cave. And the strange feeling they felt in their bodies.

As they reached the top of the mountain, they were immediately welcomed by the swift mountain-top breeze. Yet it felt different.

Suddenly, Fang spoke, “Hey, did you guys notice our Watches. They’ve got a bunch of numbers. It’s not just the time.”

“Yes, you’re right, Fang. They seem to be showing our vitals,” Tumi noted.

“Wait, are our bodies really that warm right now? How is that possible?” Pippa asked.

“Yes, I’m not cold anymore,” said Ana.

“Yeah, come to think of it, me too,” Ethan responded.

“Woah, it shows our oxygen levels. And if you swipe to your left, you can see the rest of your vitals,” said Fang.

“I feel good right now,” exclaimed TJ. “I could climb Everest one more time, and then some.”

After taking a moment to draw some results from all the information, Tumi added, "What we experienced down in the cave, I think we got like a type of energy boost. It's as though our bodies were rejuvenated."

"Well, these numbers are indicative of a person who is at their peak performance," said Ana. "Like an athlete who has just performed a few warm-up exercises, getting their body ready for vigorous activity."

"*Voice command*," Fang yelled abruptly. "This is a smart Watch, and it has voice command." Fang continued fiddling with his Watch.

"*Good afternoon, Fang. Welcome to your personalized RCPU. You have activated the voice command on your device. What would you like to name this device?*"

In what was clearly a rare moment, Fang smiled from ear to ear. He was excited like a little boy on a Christmas morning ready to open his long-awaited gift.

"I will name you..." Leaving everyone waiting in anticipation, Fang left a dramatic pause. The others weren't waiting in anticipation as much as they were figuring out their own devices, themselves thinking of a unique name. "Darius."

This was met with silence, a few of them looking perplexed.

"Um, Darius? But why?" asked TJ.

Fang laughed. "It's a character from one of my favorite games, LOL."

"There's a game called Laugh Out Loud?" Ana asked with even greater confusion.

"Do you people know nothing about gaming? LOL is short for League of Legends."

"OK, that makes more sense, I think," TJ said.

They spent the next few minutes figuring out their Watches, how they worked, what they were capable of, and how to customize them.

After much silence, Tumi said, "Is no one else baffled by how we feel? No more shortness of breath, fatigue, or feelings of cold? Like, we *just* climbed Mount Everest. How are we feeling this good?"

"There's a lot that doesn't make sense about all of this," TJ responded.

"Can our Watches not tell us anything?" asked Pippa.

"I've already asked. Darius only knows as much as the Internet can tell him."

"Did you just refer to your Watch as a 'him'?" Pippa asked.

"Yes. I did," responded Fang, with a smirk on his face.

"Mate, if I had known all we needed to do to get that stick out your butt was to give you a talking Watch, I would have given you my smartwatch the day we met. I mean, you know these were invented years ago, right?" said Ethan.

"Darius, please explain to this simpleton that you are much more than a *smart watch*."

"*I am a Realms Central Processing Unit. Through this device, I am connected to multiple networks, satellites, and my immediate physical surroundings. All of your devices are connected, which means I have access to all the information that your device has. That is how I know that you are Ethan, blood type B, current body temperature 37.2 degrees Celsius.*"

“Thank you, Darius,” said Fang. “Smartwatch...” he said, shaking his head as he continued to learn more about his Watch.

“Wow, you’re very fancy aren’t you, Pinkie Pie?” Ana said, speaking to her Watch.

“You named your Watch *Pinkie Pie*?” TJ said.

“Yeah, she’s my favorite little pony.”

“Little pony?”

“Yeah, from the show *My Little Pony*.”

“That’s an adorable name,” said Pippa.

Ethan laughed.

“What did you name your Watch?” Ana asked Ethan.

“Sidekick.”

“That’s it?” Ana said.

“I don’t see the need for fancy names. It is a watch after all.”

“Oh, gosh.” Pippa rolled her eyes.

“What about you guys? What did you name yours?”

“I named mine Athena,” said Tumi. “She was the Greek goddess of wisdom, and like a ton more. I love what she represents, a strong, powerful woman.”

“That’s so cool, Tumi,” Ana responded.

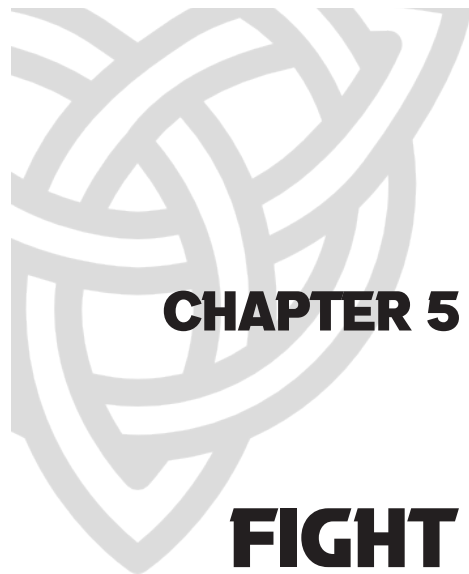
“I named mine R2,” TJ said with a smirk on his face. He waited for someone to ask for an explanation.

“R2?” asked Tumi.

“Yep. As in R2D2, from Star Wars. Because this device will be like my own personal R2D2.”

“That’s so clever, TJ,” Ana replied. “What about you, Pippa?”

She tried to avoid the question, pretending as though she didn’t hear what Ana was saying. Before Ana could ask her again, Fang figured out something new about the Watch.



CHAPTER 5

FIGHT OR FLIGHT

The group continued exploring their Watches—customizing them, learning how they worked, communicating with them. Fang led the way, figuring stuff out first.

“There’s a small compartment inside the Watch. If you push down on the face, you’ll hear a clicking sound, and the face will pop open,” Fang said.

They all tried it, pushing down on the face.

“What is this?” TJ asked.

“It’s an earpiece. It allows you to communicate with your device, without having it respond back out loud for everyone else to hear,” Fang explained. “With the devices being linked up as Darius mentioned, we should also be able to hear each other, and communicate with each other. The more I learn about these Watches, the clearer it is that this is some advanced technology.”

Fight or Flight

They tried out the earpieces, talking to one another, giving commands to their Watches, and getting more and more familiar with the Watches.

Fang had tried asking his Watch about the man and the message, to no avail. The Watches were limited to information about the realm they were currently in, accessing all known information. For any additional information, they would have to wait. Wait for what exactly, they didn’t know yet.

Fang continued fiddling with his Watch. What he had been successful in accomplishing was turning on the navigation function on the Watch. This would prove helpful once they would begin their descent back to base camp. TJ was quick to remind them that they needed to be on their way. With their energies revitalized, and the weather no longer being the factor that it was because of the mysterious experience in the cave, they were all ready to go back down.

As they made their way down, they noticed that everything felt different. The ground felt soft, as though they were stepping on candy floss. Like a Sunday afternoon in the spring, the weather felt spectacular. The gear and equipment were light, like a strongly inflated balloon. Their energy levels were equivalent to those of a toddler on a sugar high. Two hours ago, they felt like death—now they were brand-new creatures. They could take on anything thrown their way. Their mountaintop experience—more accurately, secret cave experience—had added a twist to this journey that none of them could have anticipated.

Led by Fang, who was led by Darius, the group journeyed back to Camp 4. Their spirits were high. Not only

were they feeling refreshed and rejuvenated, but for the first time on this trip, they had received an answer to *one* of the many questions they had had. They still needed more questions answered, but at least they knew why they were there, and what they were there for. The team chemistry at this stage was the highest it had been their entire time together. The way they were feeling in that moment, some of them might have even gone as far as using the word “friends.”

“At this pace, you should be arriving at Camp 4 in 5 hours and 47 minutes.”

“Thanks, Darius,” Fang replied, before relaying the information to the rest of the team.

“You’re welcome, Fang.”

Much of the journey down to Camp 4 involved the group talking to their Watches and playing with them. They exchanged various tricks and features they would each figure out. It made the trip go by swiftly.

As always, Fang figured out some distinct features and capabilities of the Watch before the rest of the team. Triggered by some of the comments made by one of the others, he realized there was more to these Watches, not so much as what they could do, but what they were. What seemed to be casual fun with a new gadget was actually a significant bonding experience. The Watches were designed to be more than just aids to the group. The Watches’ ability to give a detailed breakdown of each individual was more than just due to its technological advances. There was an organic component to the Watch. When the underside of the Watch was in contact with its owner’s skin, there was a physical fusion between the two. There was a chemical

exchange. Their energy injection was in fact a result of that fusion, between their Watches and their arms.

“What are you, Darius?” Fang whispered.

“I am a Realms Central Processing Unit. Through this device, I am connected to multiple networks, satellites, and my immediate physical surroundings.”

“You know what I am asking, Darius?”

“That’s all I can disclose at this stage, Fang.”

“Whatever,” Fang exclaimed. He then gave a brief pause. “Who am I kidding? I can’t be mad at you. You’re awesome.”

Five hours and 47 minutes later, they arrived at Camp 4. They were expecting to find Dorjee and the sherpas waiting for them. But the camp was empty. They took a moment to look around: Everything was set up for them, the fridge was stocked with food, the medical equipment was all there, their tents had their bedding, and everything was left in order. They found a note awaiting them in the general tent:

If you are reading this, it means you made it to the top of Everest. Congratulations! And if you made it to the top of Everest on your own, the descent will be no problem. We will have the camps ready for you upon your arrival at each one, with everything we would normally provide for you. We will be waiting for you at Base Camp. Well done, and see you in a few days. Dorjee.

“Aww, that’s so sweet,” said Ana.

“I know, right?” responded Pippa.

“I guess he really did believe in us,” TJ said.

“Well, you know what they say: Potential is identified by the weak, but nurtured by the brave,” said Ethan.

“What are you talking about?” Pippa responded.

“Yeah, darlin’, you know what they say. Potential is identified by the weak, but nurtured by the brave.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Tumi responded.

“Yeah, it does... It means... Um... You have potential, and you have someone who can identify it... And you have... brave...”

“Just quit while you’re ahead,” Pippa said before Ethan could finish.

“Wow. These conversations are extremely exhausting,” Tumi responded.

“Yeah, that’s our cue,” said TJ as he walked to his tent.

The rest followed suit. Despite their unexpected burst of energy, they were all fatigued, needing rest.

Each in their own tents, they were individually reflecting on everything that had happened. It was as though their minds were in sync, and they were all thinking the same thing at the same time, but they were alone. Such was the nature of this experience. The moments of self-reflection were swiftly followed by snoring (some louder than others), but they were all asleep.

With a sudden jolt of his body, TJ opened his eyes. He gave himself time to recover. Today it took about 20 minutes. It would fluctuate between 10 and 20 minutes, depending on what he did the previous day, where he was, and a host of other factors that he didn’t know or care about. He just wanted it to stop. But it never did. It happened every night. It never skipped a night. Only ever at night. He sat up on his mattress and stayed there for a while.

Since he had left home, he realized he had not thought about it, besides the moment he last contacted his uncle.

But he didn’t miss home. Nothing about his life made him long to go back. There was no one he loved enough to be motivated to go back home for, to go back home to. He loved his uncle, but their relationship wasn’t one filled with emotion. His uncle took care of him and provided for him. TJ obeyed his uncle, never disrespected him, and helped out where he could and when he was needed. He liked his friends. He would probably classify them as friends by association, maybe even acquaintances, rather than deeply bonded friends. They were his boys, no doubt. But sometimes he felt he didn’t belong. He felt like an outcast. A very popular outcast. He longed for genuine friendships, genuine relationships. Unfortunately, no one could ever find out how he felt. He would not allow it.

“Always the same... always the same,” he said to himself.

He wouldn’t be able to go back to sleep, his body wouldn’t let him, so he decided to get dressed and go to the general tent. It was almost sunrise anyway.

Fang was sitting on one of the couches, drinking a cup of coffee when TJ walked into the tent.

“Morning, stars and stripes.”

“Good morning to you too, sunshine. You’re getting friendly.”

“Sunshine?” Fang said. The resentment in his voice was evident. He hated nicknames.

“Yep. And now, your reaction has made me love that nickname even more.”

“You will not call me that.”

“You’re up early in the morning, every morning. And you have become very cheerful lately... Sunshine.”

“I don’t care. You will not call me that.”
 “OK, OK. I like not beefing with you.”
 “Good.”
 “We’ve been cordial lately, so I won’t jeopardize that... Sunshine.”
 “TJ.”
 “I’m sorry, it’s too good not to at least say one last time,” TJ said as he laughed. “I’m done, I swear.”
 Fang was unimpressed by TJ’s humor. The more he thought about it, though, the more uncertain he was about what to make of those comments. He knew there was some truth to what TJ was saying. Fang had noticed that he had become friendlier than usual. It was unlike him. He wasn’t as stressed or under pressure. He was freer. More relaxed. And he liked it. He liked that side of himself.
 They continued talking. Their conversations were becoming more natural, more authentic. They had become comfortable with one another, trusting almost.
 It was always quiet outside. Peaceful. One of the perks of being that high on the earth, no one else was there.
 They began to hear a low whistling sound outside. It was faint, but consistent, and slowly getting louder.
 “Did you hear that?” said Fang.
 “Yeah, I did.”
 The twosome made their way outside to investigate the noise, but before either of them could even try to figure out what the sound could have been, there was a loud crashing sound—an explosion.
 The boys were both knocked back. Fang slammed into the couch, with TJ falling onto one of the tables. Within

seconds there was another explosion, followed a few seconds later by a third explosion. Fang and TJ scrambled, trying to take cover. Their ears were ringing.
 “What’s going on?” TJ exclaimed.
 They heard screams from the tents outside.
 “We need to help the others,” Fang responded.
 They slowly proceeded to the general tent entrance—what was left of it—to see what was going on outside. While they were walking, Fang remembered Darius.
 “TJ... Darius can help us.”
 “What?”
 “Talk to your Watch. It can help.”
 They both activated a feature that could scan the surrounding environment. Using it to see what was going on outside, they took a moment to evaluate the situation. The display on the Watches showed a 2D representation of where they were. They could see six blue dots. Two in one corner, and four dots on the opposite side of the two dots. The four dots were close to one another, but split, two on one side and two on another.
 “These two must be us,” Fang said.
 “Yeah, and these four must be the other guys. Maybe one of the girls is with Ana, and the other with Ethan.”
 TJ suggested they split up, so they could ensure the others were OK. There hadn’t been an explosion now for about 5 minutes. When TJ and Fang were outside, they found that everything was destroyed. It smelled like melted snow, rocks, and soil, and burnt metal, all at once. At that high altitude on Camp 4, there was actually nothing else

besides their tents and the mountain. No one else. They couldn't figure out the source of the explosions.

They hurried and found the others unharmed, in their tents. Fang got to Ethan, who was with Ana. She had been crying ever since the first explosion. TJ found Pippa and Tumi together. Both were frazzled but unharmed. After helping them up, they exited their tents and went back to the general tent.

"What is going on?" Pippa asked.

Fang figured out how to use Darius to analyze the aftermath. Darius analyzed everything: The size of the holes in the ground. The size of the damage on the tents. Darius even sampled the ground and pieces of metal that he found lying around. Darius could process various materials and determine their elements and material breakdown. It was a thorough evaluation.

"It is confirmed. This is Cerberosian material."

"Cebe-what?" Fang asked.

"Cerberosian. This is not material from your Realm."

"What do you mean this is not from our Realm?" Tumi asked.

"Oh, this must be what the gigantor-looking old man was talking about, from the cave," Ethan responded.

"Yeah, but he didn't say nothing about explosions," TJ said.

"What does this mean, Darius?" Fang asked.

"Being at this high altitude, there was a very low probability that they could track you guys."

"Track us?"

"Yes. The moment your Watches were activated, they became live in your Realm."

"Live..." Tumi said.

"Yes. All non-earth material is visible to entities from the ROE. So when your Watches became active, the Cerberosians could track your location."

They were all confused, taking a moment to try to understand what Darius was telling them.

"Wait... So if they could track us from the moment you guys were switched on..." TJ was trying to figure out what he wanted to say. "OK, so why did they only try to blow us up this morning?"

"It is part of the fail-safe system the Sireletsians put in place to make it difficult for the Cerberosians to find you guys. In this case, it seems as though they put a 12-hour delay on your location."

"12 hours?" Tumi asked.

"Yes. So because you guys haven't moved since your arrival back at Camp 4 last night, they were able to determine your real-time location."

"So, in other words, we need to keep moving, constantly," TJ said.

"Why didn't you tell us any of this before it happened?" Ethan asked.

"In order for the fail-safe plan to be effective, only the Sireletsians leader knew what it would look like. The details are being unraveled as they happen. I am able to decipher them as they happen, but not before."

"For a so-called super smart Watch. You're pretty useless then, aren't ya, mate?"

“Don’t confuse your inability to understand or appreciate Darius’ genius with his overall inability, or shortcomings,” Fang responded.

“Whatever, its so-called genius couldn’t protect us from potential harm, so I don’t know how useful it is.”

“Enough guys. If what Darius said is true, then we need to stop yapping and get moving,” Tumi said.

“Did you really just say yapping?” Ethan asked.

“Yes, Ethan, I did.”

“We *do* need to get going,” TJ interjected. “Let’s all go back to our tents and collect our things.”

As they continued to make their way down the mountain, they were all on edge. They didn’t know what to expect: Would there be another attack? Was the first one even an attack? Were they being chased down? The mood was tense. There were hardly any conversations happening amongst them. TJ and Fang kept surveying their surroundings, looking back and forth, at one another, communicating through their eyes as they kept moving, trying to make sure they were safe.

After the attack, and with the knowledge of their 12-hour window, the team decided to move at a faster pace. As opposed to covering one camp each day, sleeping one night, then moving to the next camp, they decided to cover two camps each day. They made it to Camp 3 without any problems. It was tough, but they all managed. They rested for a short time, then started moving again. After hours of walking, some of them were getting tired.

“Could we please slow down?” Ana said.

“Stop, mates!” Ethan called out.

“What’s wrong?” TJ asked. “Is everyone OK?”

“Can we stop for a little bit please?” Ana asked.

“It’s not safe. We need to keep moving.”

“I’m with Ana. I need a break,” said Pippa.

Ethan and Tumi nodded their heads in agreement. They were feeling tired, as the adrenaline and special boost from the mountaintop had worn off. TJ looked at Fang, slightly frustrated, but he understood that they couldn’t keep going at that pace.

“We *could* use a break,” Fang said.

Ethan dropped his bags and started setting up. He wasn’t going to wait for any confirmation. The girls followed, dropping their bags. TJ conceded.

“Let’s at least get a better sense of how far we are from Camp 2,” TJ said.

“Darius, how much further to Camp 2?” Fang asked.

“*3 hours and 40 minutes.*”

“That’s still quite a distant that needs to be covered. We can’t stop for long. And the sun sets in a few hours,” TJ said.

“Cool, let’s take an hour rest for a little bit,” Ethan said.

“We can do 30 minutes, max,” TJ responded.

“Only 30 minutes?” Pippa said.

The others were also surprised by the short time given.

“I know we’re tired, but we don’t have the time,” TJ said.

“Guys, TJ is right. We can’t afford to be caught out in the snow after sunset. We will literally freeze to death,” Fang affirmed.

There were a few grumbles, but everyone agreed with the 30-minute rest.

During the break, TJ and Fang were discussing the 12-hour concept. Darius said if they did not move for 12 hours their location would be known to the Cerberosians. Does that mean the clock would reset the moment they moved, or was it cumulative? Did they have to move for 12 hours at a time for them to have another 12-hour period of not moving? Or could they just move for one minute every 11 hours 59 minutes? They could not figure out the exact science behind the theory. And Darius' explanations didn't seem to give them the clarity they needed.

"That's time, people," TJ said.

"No. That couldn't have been 30 minutes," Pippa replied.

"I know, right?" said Tumi.

"I do wish we could rest a little longer, but we just don't have the time," TJ said.

"Time is not on our side," Fang added. "One might even go as far as saying time is *literally* not on our side. Get it..." He snickered.

That caught everyone by surprise. Fang never made jokes. He would laugh at a few things here and there, when Ethan was being ridiculous, or when Ana was being super excited, which inadvertently annoyed some of them, or when someone said something so funny that the whole group laughed. So, everyone sort of surprisingly glared at him, as though they were waiting for an explanation.

"What?" Fang said. "I have jokes."

At which point, everyone burst out in laughter.

"It must be the altitude. It's got to be," Ethan said.

"Nothing else makes sense," TJ added.

Fang shook his head a little, with a smirk on his face, and began to lead the way. "Let's go." He tried to say that with his usual stern tone, but he didn't convince anyone.

"Thanks for that, Fang. That made my day," Pippa said.

"I think it's because you really, really like us, that's why you have become so comfortable and friendly," Ana asserted. Fang didn't respond, but his smirk turned into an actual smile. He walked away even quicker, so no one would see his facial expressions.

They all began to gather their gear and equipment.

"You could say he gave us the *pick me up* we needed to get going," Ethan said.

"Oh, Ethan," Pippa responded. "They really need to shift the bar in Australia on what passes as funny."

"And we're back to normal," TJ said.

Everyone laughed. It really was a pleasant little break. Not only did they manage to take a much-needed break physically, but their laughter as a team allowed them to strengthen their bond, drawing them closer to one another.

A 30-minute break turned out to be perfect timing. They arrived at Camp 2 minutes after the sun had set. It was enough time for their bodies to walk through the cold for a short distance before it was too cold to be outside.

They went straight to their individual tents. Tumi and Pippa rotated out every night as one of them would sleep in the same tent with Ana. They noticed over time that when she had someone with her, to comfort and reassure her, she would do a lot better the next day. She was a little more confident, and a lot less anxious.

Fang notified them that they had to leave sometime before sunrise if they were to miss the 12-hour movement window. The earlier wakeup call was met with an overwhelmingly positive response. The cold weather, with the constant strain on the body, resulting in fatigue and straight up tiredness, meant waking up early was always a drag. Everyone wanted to spend a few more minutes in their sleeping bags. It was like hitting the snooze button on their phones. Except, the threat of waking up to traumatic explosive sounds, feeling the ground trembling around them, and seeing hurling objects all around them was nothing in comparison. They happily agreed to the early wake up call.

It wouldn't be as cold in the morning as it was at night. So they could walk through the morning cold, although just barely. It would still be very cold, but their Watches were able to regulate their body temperatures just enough for them to get through the first two hours of the morning as the sun was rising.

They all fell asleep shortly after entering their tents.

They woke up to a loud noise in their ears. There was a rhythm to the noise, but the rhythm was foreign to them. It was so loud that it felt like it was right next to them, inside their tents. Some of them tried to cover their ears with their pillows, but that didn't help. It was early, cold, and still pretty dark outside. It was hard for them to move, and they couldn't really see around them.

"What in the world is that noise?" Pippa asked. "Make it stop."

It was loud. They couldn't make out whether it was a song or just a very loud and annoying noise. The sound was

harsh to their ears because they had all been asleep, so it made it sound louder than it actually was.

After a couple of seconds trying to figure out what the noise was and where it was coming from, they realized it was coming from their Watches. All of their Watches. A few of them managed to turn off the sound, but some of them couldn't get it right. They started hearing laughter coming from outside the tents.

Fang and Ethan were laughing. Fang was snickering, while Ethan was beside himself in laughter. It turns out Ethan had wanted to pull a prank on the team for a while now, but he had been struggling to figure out what to do, and when to do it. He decided to get some help from Fang, and they realized there was an opportunity with the Watches. Fang had figured out a function on the Watches that allowed them to sync a specific sound to play on all their Watches simultaneously. So Ethan chose the most annoying sounds he could think of, got the Watch to compile a mix of those sounds, and asked Fang to get them to play at the same time in the morning to wake everyone up.

"It... came... to... me... last... night." Ethan could barely finish the sentence because he was laughing so hard.

"Are you serious right now?" TJ said.

"This is not funny," Tumi responded.

Ana found it slightly amusing (once she was awake). She decided to get ready and not think much of it.

Pippa, on the other hand, was not amused *at all*. She was livid. She quickly put on her snow jacket and pants, just enough so she didn't freeze outside. She switched on the light function on her Watch and chased after Ethan and

Fang, throwing any object she could find nearest to her. Fang pointed out to Pippa that Ethan was the mastermind, resulting in Pippa focusing solely on Ethan.

"Sorry, Pippa. I thought this would be funny," Ethan said laughing as he ran away from her.

"Do you think it's funny now?" Pippa asked.

"I mean, you see how you look right now, right?" Ethan chuckled.

He was faster than Pippa, so she never really got close enough to hurt him with the objects she threw at him.

"Aargh, you suck, Ethan," Pippa said.

"Sorry, Pippa. I promise I won't do anything to make you angry, today."

"Whatever. We both know that's not true." She decided to go back to her tent and get ready.

"Thanks for being a sport, mate," Ethan said, as he went over to Fang for a fist bump.

"You got it, mate," Fang said. He went in to reciprocate the fist bump and winked at Ethan as he went back to his tent to get the rest of his stuff.

"Woah, mate, I'm starting to like you. You got a little funny in you, don't you?"

Once everyone was ready, the team continued to move, making their way down to Base Camp. It was still dark out, as they had to leave before sunrise to beat the 12-hour window. Led by Fang and Darius from the front, the team were on their way. Their Watches had a flashlight function, which could be set to very bright. This illuminated their path, as Darius continued to give direction and best route options along the way. The remainder of the journey to Base

Camp was uneventful, to the delight of the team. They had a few moments where they stopped for rest breaks along the way, but they maintained a steady and relatively fast pace. This allowed them to keep moving for most of the day. And before they even knew it, they had arrived at Base Camp. They could see movement and activity from a distance.

"We made it," Pippa exclaimed. "We finally made it."

Ana had been the main reason the team had to stop for rest breaks along the way. But Pippa was always just as relieved whenever they took the rest breaks. Her body was only just surviving the team's fast-moving pace.

They were all relieved and excited to finally be back, back on regular ground, back to regular altitude. Even though they knew Base Camp was still a little higher than their usual breathing levels, it was their starting point, which meant they made it back to the starting line. They had conquered the mountain—and made it back down to tell the tale.

Upon arrival at Base Camp they were welcomed back by Dorjee and his team, as promised in the note left at Camp 4. The team all went out to them and helped them with their gear and equipment. And it was a relief for them all. Even TJ and Fang accepted the help from their porters, letting them take their bags and equipment.

There was a freshly prepared meal in the main tent, with decorations all over, and congratulatory messages for the team. They all sat down and dug into their food. For the first time they could stop. Not just slow down but come to a complete halt. They could just *be*. They thought of nothing else but the moment they were in. All they had

on their minds was the food they were consuming, having other people around taking care of them. There was no impending danger, no imminent threat to their lives. They were able to celebrate their accomplishments. They received answers to the many questions they had. They climbed Mount Everest. They made it to the Summit. They made it successfully back to the bottom. They had each forged a genuine bond with the other five strangers they had met when they first arrived. All in all, it was a great moment. What was roughly a 30-minute mealtime felt like hours upon hours.

Once they were done eating, Dorjee asked for everyone's attention. There were a few things he needed to discuss with them before they left Base Camp and continued their journey.

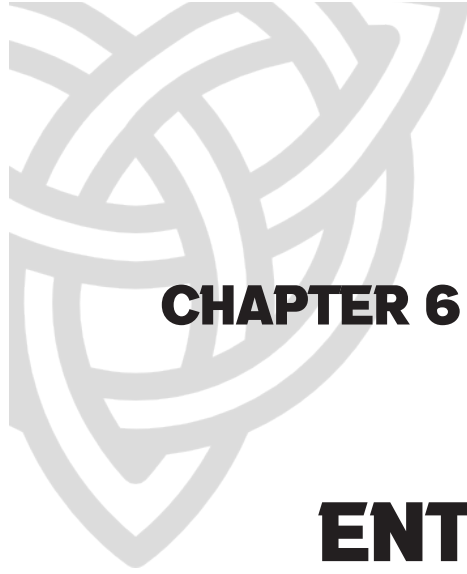
"I would like to formally congratulate you all for this massive accomplishment," Dorjee said. Before Dorjee could continue, his team all stood to their feet and gave a loud round of applause. It was coupled with cheers, whistles, and loud chants of congratulations in their respective native languages. The climbers had made an impression on the locals and Dorjee's team of sherpas. Not only had they become fond of them, but they had great respect for what they achieved.

"Yes, give it up for these young people. They fully deserve it," Dorjee said while the appreciation continued. They let it go on for a while, and then Dorjee continued:

"I want you to know that you really do deserve this kind of response. You were all amazing these past two months. We have watched you and come alongside you from the

day you arrived at the hotel to today, where we are standing here in celebration of your success. We have seen many people—older than you, more experienced climbers than you, folks who have come in knowing one another—who have failed. And yet you kids have come in here, not knowing one another, first-time climbers, and you have successfully conquered the mighty mountain, Chomolungma. Thank you for giving me the privilege of seeing you all grow as individuals, and as a team. We are extremely proud of you. I am extremely proud of you. You are by far my favorite climbing group that I have ever had the privilege of leading, and remember, I have been doing this for many, many years."

Towards the end of his speech Dorjee began to tear up. When he noticed Ana's tears flowing down her cheeks, he decided that he had said enough. Pippa's tears were also coming down, though not as fiercely as Ana's. The others were just as moved, as they each had individual moments of internal reflection. This was an outstanding achievement by any standard. They all felt it. And Dorjee gave them time and allowed them to bask in their glory. Hearing Dorjee's words and seeing the response of the team actually meant a lot to all of them. This was the greatest achievement of their young lives.



CHAPTER 6

ENTERING THE FORBIDDEN

Once all the emotions had settled, and everyone had gathered themselves, and hugged who they needed to, they were able to refocus on Dorjee.

"I know this is sad. And even though this does mean our journey together is ending, the journey continues for you guys."

As Dorjee finished saying that, a man they hadn't seen before got up from where he was seated and stood next to Dorjee.

"I would like to introduce you to Theophilus. He will be assisting you with the next part of your journey."

"Hi everyone. It's a pleasure to meet you all. I must say, I have heard a lot about each one of you, and I have been anxiously and eagerly looking forward to meeting you all."

They all had noninteractive expressions on their faces.

"Oh, and you can call me Theo."

It wasn't that they were intentionally being rude, or unresponsive. They were all still recovering from the emotion of Dorjee's heartfelt words. The reality was slowly sinking in that they would never see Dorjee and his team again. They had spent two months with strangers who became family, in a foreign land—people who cared for them and looked out for them like real family. In what they would describe as one of the toughest experiences of their lives, they didn't go through it alone. They had Nepalese family: Dorjee, and his team.

"I'm so sorry, Theo, is it?" TJ said.

"Yes, that's correct."

"Could you please give us a minute. The goodbyes are still a little fresh. I don't know how well everyone can pay attention right now."

"Of course. I completely understand. Shall we try again in about 15 minutes?"

"Thanks," TJ responded.

This gave Dorjee and his team an opportunity to clear the room. This also made way for another round of goodbyes, hugs, and tears.

"I am so sorry, but unfortunately, we do need to get going," Theo said. "We have a long journey ahead".

"Long journey?" Pippa said. "Wait, who is this again?" she said turning to Tumi.

"I think he said his name is Theo. I can't remember his full name," Tumi responded.

It took a few moments for the team to give Theo their full attention. Dorjee assisted in those moments to get them to actually pay attention.

"Thank you," said Theo, "Please gather and pack all your belongings. We head out at 22:00 sharp."

"We're leaving tonight?" Ana asked.

"22:00 hours?" said Ethan.

"That's in an hour, though. Why can't we sleep here, and leave in the morning?" Pippa asked.

"As you are aware, there is a target on your back," said Theo. "Every minute spent not moving is a minute closer to being found. It is better to keep moving. As quickly as we can."

"Wait, how do you know about that time? And that we are being chased?" TJ asked.

"I will answer all your questions when we are en route, I promise. Right now, please conclude your goodbyes, grab your possessions, and let us get going."

The tone in his voice got a little sterner than it was. Though they had only had a few moments of interaction, Theo's general demeanor seemed to be a pleasant one. Yet there was an urgency about him in this moment. He wanted them to leave, and quickly.

Everyone finished saying goodbye. They all went up to their rooms to get the remainder of their belongings. It did not take them long. They went through their final round of thank you's and goodbyes, and they reconvened in the lobby to meet with Theo for further instructions. Given the multitude of emotions they had been experiencing over the past few days, it had not dawned on them that there was

more to come. And perhaps that was a good thing, as they were focusing on the moment at hand.

Theo addressed them collectively. He thanked Dorjee and his team for their assistance and getting the climbers to that point. He highlighted the critical role they played in getting the climbers ready for what they had accomplished, and for what was to come.

"For the next part of the journey, we will be going airborne again," Theo said.

"Airborne?" TJ responded.

"Yes, airborne. As in, taking flight. Catching some clouds. Climbing to even higher altitudes," Theo said, chuffed with himself.

"I think it's too soon to be making altitude jokes, sir," said Pippa.

"I apologize, Pippa. You will see that at times I have a dry sense of humor."

"Yeah, you do, mate," Ethan said under his breath.

"Hey, that's not nice," Ana remarked.

"Well, it's true. And I mean, he said it, not me. I just agreed with him."

"What's that, Ethan?" Theo asked.

"No, nothin', mate."

"I don't see any vehicles out here," Tumi said. "How will we be getting to the airport?"

"Well spotted, Miss..." Theo responded.

"Oh, my name is Tumi."

"Well spotted, Tumi. We will not be going to the airport."

"But you said we are flying," TJ responded.

"That is correct."

“So...”

“Ah yes, you must all be wondering how we will be travelling from here to our next destination then,” Theo said, taking his cellphone out of his pocket. He navigated on it for a few seconds, then placed it back in his pocket. Within seconds, right in front of where they were all standing, an aircraft appeared. They all had a flabbergasted look on their faces.

“This. Is. Amazing!” Fang said. “This is next level, super advanced tech you must be using, Theo.”

Theo had finally received his first fan. He didn’t let it show, but the hostile welcome he had received had gotten to him a bit, although he understood the nature of the situation. Theo was trying to build a relationship with each member of the team as quickly as possible. They had a long journey ahead, and much of that journey would require the team to spend a lot of time with Theo.

“This is our means of transportation, ladies and gentlemen,” Theo said. “I present to you, the AAMBA005.” The aircraft was a sight to behold. It was about the size of a private jet, though it looked nothing like a private jet or any traditional plane. It looked like a hybrid of aircrafts one might see in a sci-fi movie. It was made up of a variety of metal panels on the outside, with a large glass in the front, covering the nose of the aircraft, all throughout the front and upper portion. Its wings had a sharp, sleek design and carried impressive-looking engines underneath. A few lights subtly illuminated the contours of the aircraft, while still maintaining its stealth-like presence.

“This is quite the work of art, I must say,” Tumi responded.

“Man, I do feel reassured knowing we are travelling in that,” said TJ.

“It’s so pretty!” Ana added. “Can we go inside?”

“Please, be my guests,” Theo said walking towards the aircraft.

The excitement of the aircraft, for a brief moment, took their minds off everything that had happened. They took a final look behind them, taking it all in. Two months ago they arrived at this unknown location, not knowing what to expect. They endured their own respective journeys and sacrifices to get here. They didn’t know one another. They were forced to bond and get close with five strangers. They had to push their bodies to the limit and risk their lives, all while trying to get as many answers as possible. And yet, this was only a part of this mysterious journey. And so they waved one last time to Dorjee and his team as they made their way into the aircraft. The aircraft closed behind them, and they were airborne.

Theo made sure to give them some time to get settled in the aircraft. He had hoped they would get comfortable, chat amongst themselves for a little bit, and then he would address them. It wasn’t even five minutes before they were all out cold, as to be expected, given the day they had had. Days, really. Their bodies were both physically and emotionally drained. Theo decided not to wake them up. He knew the flight ahead would be quite a long one, so he chose to let them rest.

During the flight the aircraft experienced some turbulence. Looking back from the cockpit, Theo checked how everyone was. TJ was the first one up. He immediately went to everyone else's seats to see if they were all OK.

"Looks like everyone's good back here," TJ said.

"Good," Theo responded. "It wouldn't be a great start if I lost or injured any of you."

"What was that?" TJ asked. The second part of Theo's remark was said under his breath, so TJ didn't actually hear him.

"No, nothing, just glad everyone is safe. You know how this turbulence can be," Theo said. "Are they still asleep, though?"

"Nah, it looks like everyone is getting up," TJ said. "We must have been tired, 'cause we've been out for a while."

"You all must have been very tired indeed, because you were asleep for a long time."

"Are we there yet?" Ana asked, as she rubbed her eyes.

"No, Miss Ana, we are still in the air. We will arrive shortly, though."

The rest of the team began to wake up.

"If I may request everyone's attention for a moment. I would like to officially and respectfully introduce myself to you all. My name is Theophilus Archibald Foster. I come from a long lineage of Caretakers. My father before me was a Caretaker. And my father's father before him was a Caretaker. My role from here on in will be to be your Caretaker."

"Caretakers?" Ana asked.

"Yes, Caretaker." Lifting his arm and displaying an emblem to them, he said, "Our family crest is the first thing handed down to us from our family when we become of age. With this family crest comes a tremendous amount of history and honor. Our family's primary role in the greater picture that is life is to serve by caretaking. Ours is to ensure you can all take your place in the world. I am here to guide you in the path of stepping into your destiny. As my fathers did before me. And my offspring will do with the next generation of The Chosen. I have access to certain information in advance. Information that not even the Guides have access to. This is part of the fail-safe mechanisms that were put in place in the event of the "Guardians" being captured. As with the Guides, I also get information as we go along. We don't have access to all the information at any given time. Having said that, I do have access to all the information that has been stored by my ancestors before me. A library of books, consisting of all that they each experienced."

"I have so many questions," Ana said.

"For the sake of not overwhelming you with information, I will stop there. I will share more as we go along. But I'm more than happy to answer any questions at any point throughout our journey."

"How long are you going to be with us for?" Ana asked.

"I will be with you for the remainder of the journey," Theo responded.

"How much longer of the journey is left?" TJ asked.

"That all depends on how long it takes you as a team to get ready."

“Do you mean, like, for us to reach our next destination, or, like, journey as in for the remainder of this mysterious experience as a whole?” Pippa asked.

“I mean ‘for the remainder of this mysterious experience as a whole,’” Theo said.

“And you’re saying you can’t tell us how long that will be?” Tumi responded.

“That is correct. That is the part that will be determined by how long it takes you all to go through everything.”

“Go through everything, what’s everything?” Ethan asked.

“There are various aspects of the journey that you will have to go through. Part of it has to do with the fact that the Guardians have had to put together a number of fail-safes, for your own safety, and for the plan to work.”

“Fail-safe?” TJ asked.

“Yes, fail-safe. The Guardians cannot have the Destroyers know that there is a team that is in place on the Earth that is working on freeing them.”

“Oh, yes, this is from the message we heard in the cave, from that Gigantor thing, person,” Ethan said.

“Oh, you have already received the first message. That is excellent,” Theo said, with evident excitement in his voice. “Which means you would have also activated your Guides, is that correct?”

“Our guides? Are you talking about the Watches?” Pippa responded.

“Oh, they came in the form of Watches. Splendid. I was rather curious to see what form the Guides would come in. May I see them please?”

Fang quickly got up and showed Theo his Watch.

“This is Darius. Say hi, Darius.”

“Hi Theo.”

“Amazing. You can fully customize and personalize them,” Theo said. “Guides come in varying forms from generation to generation. They take the shape of objects that blend into everyday life, so as not to draw attention or suspicion to their advancement and sophistication. These are spectacular.”

“They don’t seem to be able to tell us everything, though. There are questions we ask which they don’t know the answers to,” Ana said.

“That is part of the fail-safe infrastructure that the Guardians have put in place to stage a comeback against the Destroyers. They have given the Guides access to some of the information, and they have also given access to some of the information to the Caretakers. The third part of the fail-safe is in the various tasks and stages that need to be completed. Such as receiving the first package, making it to the first destination, and accomplishing the first challenge.”

“So, how many more packages, or tasks, or challenges are left?” Tumi asked.

“As I mentioned earlier, I do not know the answer to that question. In the past the tasks have varied in number, scale, and range of difficulty.”

“Oh, wait, so this has happened before, this scenario when all the Guardians have been captured at the same time?” Tumi asked.

“No, never all of the Guardians at the same time. Throughout history there have been moments where

individual Guardians have required the assistance of their Chosen humans for assistance with defending their region from Destroyers. Typically, a Guardian will have a series of tasks through which they would establish contact, trust, and ultimately a verification of whether the individual they have chosen is deemed worthy of the title or not. This happens every few centuries, as there is always an attack from the Destroyers. Every millennium or so, you see a multi-region attack from the Destroyers, where it involves a number of Guardians and their Chosen. My family's role throughout the years has always been to provide support for the Chosen. This is the first time that all the Guardians are in trouble at the same time. So, to answer your question, Miss Tumi, no, this has never happened before. There have been instances where smaller-scale events have happened, from which I do have insights and we will be able to draw from. But, unfortunately, as with you all, I am experiencing much of this for the first time."

"OK, thanks, Theo," Tumi replied.

"My apologies for the very long answer. There is so much that I can imagine you all wish to know. There is almost as much that I am still figuring out."

"No, thank you. Clearly this is also a journey of discovery for you, too. And honestly, it makes me feel a little better that there is someone else going through this for the first time, with many questions, and answers coming with time."

A few of the others nodded their heads in agreement.

"I promise, I will do my best to give as many answers and as much clarity and assistance as I can. It's what I'm here for," Theo added.

"Thanks, Theo. We appreciate it," said TJ.

"Mate, so you're like a butler. You are, like, our butler," Ethan said, as he chuckled. "Yo, and you've got the accent to match." Ethan changed his accent, "*Hi, my name is Theophilus, of the British battalion, and I am here to humbly serve you.*"

"You are such an idiot, Ethan. Stop it. That is very rude," Pippa said. "I'm sorry, Theo. Don't mind him. He has a problem. There is something seriously wrong with him."

Ethan continued laughing hysterically while Pippa kept reprimanding him and telling him to stop.

"OK, OK. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. You know me. I was just having a laugh."

A few of the others laughed it off. They had just come from a serious moment of asking questions and receiving a lot of information from Theo. They actually appreciated the light moment.

"Not a bother," Theo responded. "Perhaps we can take this opportunity to take a breather. We can continue with the questions a little later."

Some of the team took the opportunity to get a bit more sleep. Theo had told them that they weren't too far off from their destination. Those who didn't sleep took the time to reflect on the journey.

The aircraft began to descend. With the descent, they all looked outside. The aircraft had clear glass panels on the

side that allowed those onboard to see outside, but those that were outside could not see into the aircraft.

"It's so beautiful," Ana said.

As they steadily dropped their altitude, the view became clearer and clearer: a great sea of green expanse. As they got closer, they could see the silhouette of mountains in the backdrop. Closer yet were a plethora of trees. The horizon was filled with verdant landscapes. Then, they began to see a string of grey and brown. Consistently within the green spaces, they could see an ongoing narrow-like structure. It became clear that it was made of brick and stone. Kilometer upon kilometer continued the path of stone. Along the way there were sections that had protrusions. As they came even closer, they noticed that it was a wall—a very long wall.

"Welcome to China, ladies and gentlemen," Theo said.

"Of course, this is the Great Wall of China," said Pippa.

"The Great Wall of China is said to be over 20,000 kilometers long, having been in existence for more than two and a half thousand years," Ana said in excitement. She went on to cite more facts about the wall to the team. When she got excited about something, she would go on for a while. The team was getting used to her, as they were getting used to one another and some of what they would classify as quirks. This was one of Ana's quirks. Yet, as was often the case, most of them didn't know half the info Ana would share with them. This time it was coming in handy, as the team didn't know much about the Great Wall, with the exception of Fang.

"Did you hear that, mate?" Ethan said as he went over to Fang. "You know Ana will school even you, mate, about your own country."

"Honestly, Ana probably knows more about all our home countries!" Fang responded. They all laughed. "Go on, Ana."

"Thanks, Fang! You know, I really do enjoy learning and talking to people about things they might not know about," Ana said. She continued telling them about the Great Wall and the various cities it stretched across, and she even knew about the respective local cultures.

"Wow, that's very impressive, Ana. Most of what you've shared I heard growing up, in my childhood, especially at school. A lot of which you can find on the Internet. I'm impressed at how much of the deeper knowledge you knew, though. How do you know all of this?" Fang asked.

"I love learning. I really do. And somehow I never forget what I learn. All it takes is reading or hearing it once, and I'll always know it," Ana said with her usual excitement. "And there is a lot of information out there, across the world, about the world. We just need to look for it, and be interested in it."

At this stage in their conversation, it was just Fang and Ana. The rest of the team had either gotten into their own side conversations or were looking outside at the scenery before them.

"Touchdown, ladies and gentlemen," Theo said. "Please leave all your belongings in the aircraft. We will be back later to collect everything."

The place was beautiful. Buildings upon buildings ran across the premises. And it was a massive area. The architecture of the buildings, and the walls, was magnificent. Unique to the Asian region, most of the buildings were made from indigenous wood. There was a combination of structures that were one level high, with a few larger ones that were two or sometimes three stories high. The roofs and eaves decorations consisted of stunning colors and designs, captivating to the eyes from a distance. Embedded between some of the buildings were lush, green trees, mixed in with a variety of stone and bronze statues, along with a variety of animal decorations also scattered across. The painting and artwork across the walls were something to write home about. Some of these decorations included imperial drawings of dragons and phoenixes, what they referred to as Suzhou garden motifs, and they also had some geometric motifs. As if that was not enough, the numerology and symbolism seen throughout the place was endless.

“Where are we?” Ethan asked.

“The Imperial Palace of China. Also known as the Forbidden City,” Ana said in awe. “Theo, are we really going to go inside?”

“Looks that way, Ana,” Theo affirmed.

“Is this the place that we often see in, like, the martial arts movies and stuff?” TJ asked.

“Oh, yeah, this does look a little familiar,” Tumi said. “I remember as a kid my family loved to watch those movies”.

“With the lips that weren’t synced whenever they spoke English,” TJ said.

“And they had amazing fight scenes,” Tumi added. “Oh, the fond memories.”

Tumi and TJ went on for a moment chatting about the memories they had of various martial arts movies set in Asian locations. The conversation kept going for a while as everyone slowly got off the aircraft. While they were still speaking, Theo asked for their attention as he introduced them to a lady who was standing by the exit of the aircraft. She was wearing a long robe that went all the way down to her legs. It looked like a silk material, resembling a gown, with some floral print on it.

The lady didn’t say a word. She stood with an upright posture and an expressionless face. She had the kind of look that reminded you of a strict school headmistress, who tolerated no shenanigans and was a tough disciplinarian.

The lady did not move. After Theo had drawn their attention to the lady, he did not move or say anything either. It took them a while to pick up on it, but the lady was waiting for them to stop talking and give her their full attention. With puzzled facial expressions, they looked around, looked at one another, looked at Theo, and looked at the lady.

There was complete silence. The lady didn’t move or say anything for a few minutes, which felt like hours. The lady then gave a bow to the team, turned around, and started walking.

Theo began following the lady, in silence. The team naturally followed behind Theo. The lady moved at a brisk walking pace. She looked like a woman with purpose. As they approached a flight of stairs, two rows of men stood

on either side of the stairs. They looked like guards. They wrapped all around the side of the building, which looked like it stretched as far as a kilometer away on either side.

As they were walking up, they noticed that no one was speaking—throughout the whole compound. There was complete silence. It was a new experience for everyone on the team, you could see it from their demeanor. They were all looking around them, trying to figure out what was going on. Everyone but Fang. He kept his head and body straight up, looking ahead, following after Theo and the unknown lady.

They began climbing up a set of stairs.

“Aren’t we supposed to be getting an opportunity to rest before we go into the next part of the journey? These stairs are brutal,” Ethan said, with his best attempt at a whisper. Unfortunately for him, it was almost as loud as his usual voice. Ethan may have been the one who spoke up, but a few of the other team members were thinking the same thing.

The lady stopped abruptly as soon as Ethan began speaking. Theo and Fang stopped almost as instantly as the lady did, while the rest of the team stumbled into one another.

The lady didn’t turn around. They waited in silence.

“What’s going on?” Ethan asked.

Theo and Fang looked back at Ethan. The girls were still gathering themselves from the aftermath of colliding into one another. Theo had a more gracious and understanding look on his face, one that said, *They don’t know the rules and conduct yet*. Fang on the other hand was staring daggers at

Ethan, as his face was saying, *You can surely see at this point that there is no talking*.

Ethan stood upright, head facing the same direction as the lady, and he gestured with his hands that he was done talking. The girls kept their heads facing down, yet also up straight with their bodies ready to go.

The lady began walking again, as fast a pace as before. After about 15 minutes of navigating various sets of stairs, corridors, and courts, they came to a stop. There was a lady standing in front of a big, wooden door that was the size of the buildings surrounding them. The lady they were following bowed before the lady standing in front of the big door. Theo and Fang followed suit. The rest of the team figured that’s what they had to do, and they too bowed their heads.

“Good morning.” Unlike the previous lady, this lady spoke to them. “Please,” she said gesturing with her hands for everyone to stop bowing.

“My name is Huanzhu, and this is Peiling, our faithful group’s coordinator around the compound. Pardon her, she is a woman of few words, and high expectations. She just wants to make sure we honor the code, and we honor those who have gone before us.”

“Good morning, Mrs. H. It is a pleasure to finally meet you. Though we always hoped we would never have to meet,” Theo said.

“It truly is unfortunate that the day has come, one might say perhaps inevitably so,” Mrs. H responded. “Well, we are here to serve at the order of the Almighty.”

“That indeed. The legacies of our families, and the many honorable men and women that have gone before us, are the reason we are able to play our part.”

The two spoke amongst themselves before Mrs. H continued addressing everyone else.

“Well done on making it this far. Every time you make it through to the next part of the journey, you are one step closer to being ready,” Mrs. H said.

“Ready for what again?” Ethan asked.

“Ready to take on the Destroyers, and free the Guardians.”

“Oh, this is what that big dude from the cave was talking about, right. So... who exactly or what exactly are these Destroyers? And what exactly do they destroy?”

“At the beginning of existence as we know it, Guardians and Destroyers were at war with one another. Destroyers’ main objective is to destroy all creation, to corrupt and contaminate the purity and goodness of creation. While the Guardians have the mandate of defending and helping preserve the true Essence of creation.”

“Woah, no lies, but that sounds epic!” TJ said.

“That actually does,” Tumi echoed.

“It may sound like stuff from a fairy-tale or a movie, but it’s devastating. Every once in a while, the battles between the Destroyers and the Guardians get intense, and despite the Guardians’ attempts to keep things as least chaotic as possible, given the destructive nature of the Destroyers, it gets very bad.”

“So, if these powerful and non-human Guardians couldn’t fight against and defeat these horrible creatures

you are describing, what are we expected to do?” Pippa asked in a slight panic.

“Now, that is a good question, young lady,” said Mrs. H. “Part of the answer to your question lies in your presence in the Forbidden Kingdom, behind this big, wooden door.”

“The answer is always ‘after this,’ or ‘once you’ve done this well,’ or any other difficult yet never-ending thing,” TJ said in frustration.

“It will be over sooner than you realize,” Mrs. H responded.

“I mean, remember how climbing Mt. Everest ended up feeling once we got to the other side, despite the fact that it felt like it took forever. This will probably be like that,” Ana said.

“So, yes, well done for making it this far,” Mrs. H said. “My role in your journey towards readiness is to facilitate your combat training.”

“Um, did she just say combat training?” Pippa asked looking around. “As in, like, fighting?”

“Yes, Pippa, that is correct.”

“As in, with our hands?”

“Yes, Pippa, with your hands. And with other members of your body.”

Pippa was still in shock, surprised at the prospect of learning how to fight. Pippa had grown up in what many would refer to as a sheltered life. Of the entire team, Pippa was the one member of the team who came from a wealthy family. Generational, trust-fund kind of wealth. So she never had to learn how to fight or take care of herself in the “combat” sense of the word. Her anxiety, given her background, was

not too surprising then, especially when you consider that she was taught more how to be a lady, and how to conduct herself as a woman of class and elegance, than having to do the mundane, “getting your hands dirty” kind of activities.

While Pippa was not keen at all about learning how to fight, the rest of the team was. The thought of undergoing formal combat training was a very exciting one for many, especially TJ. As one would imagine, each of them came from different backgrounds, and as such had varying degrees of “combat experience.”

“You will be with me and my team for 30 days. You will train for all 30 of those days. Your bodies will be pushed to the limit like never before. You will literally be fighting for your lives.”

Mrs. H concluded what she was saying, opened the big, wooden door, and walked through. As her words began to sink in, and they slowly looked around at one another, it dawned on them what this leg of the journey would entail. With Theo looking on from a distance, Mrs. H primed to put them all through the wringer, and the echoing silence of the most inner courts of the Forbidden City, these six young, answer-seeking travelers from across the world stepped through the door to find out their fate—and all that would come with the Cerberosian Awakening.



Part II

The Cerberosian Awakening