

Capture the Flag

My phone buzzed in my gray sweatshirt, and through its cracked screen I read Mya's text: "*Hid it behind the cheap cereal-no one will go there!*" I texted back a quick "Cool", and announced to the rest of the group.

"Alright, Mya hid the flag at the 7-11, within the boundary. She's headed back this way now, and we need a plan to find Vertex's flag," I called out to the group of thirteen kids before me, each with an orange "Team Fulcrums" armband.

"Where could Vertex's flag be?" Aria, my next-door neighbor asked. She started the competition against the neighborhood over-Vertex-since it was the last week of summer and she was trying to finish her bucket list before school started. Who knew her grand summer dream was a neighborhood battle of capture the flag? So a few advertising posters around the two neighborhoods of interest, and four days later, a letter appeared in Aria's mailbox accepting the challenge, along with a list of sixteen kids willing to participate and their ages, and a phone number to text. The only kid with a phone and parents allowing them to text an unknown number was Brant, who was fifteen. Through text, we decided a date, time, boundaries for the flag, and rules: no crossing major streets, no alliances or spies with the other side, no altering the flag, no neighborhoods or houses, and no making you spend money.

"Let's split into teams to find their flag," Gabrielle began. "Brant, organize teams. Edward?" I looked up. "You and I are going to the public library; I have a feeling their flag's there." She was already pulling up her bike's kickstand when I asked, "Why the library?" She either ignored me or didn't hear me-probably the former, knowing

Gabrielle. I climbed onto my own bike and followed her down the road, past the swarm of Fulcrum groups riding indifferent directions, their orange wristbands glaring in the blazing summer sun.

"Why the public library?" I repeated, slightly out of breath, the warm sun beating down on me and my warm sweatshirt I had on.

"You have to be quiet, so there's hardly any team coordination. It's pretty big there, and you could get pretty turned around in the adult section, *and* Veronica-my friend on the Vertex team-has an aunt that works there." She was matter-of-fact and confident with her reasoning, so I trusted her. Not to mention that without neighborhoods, Vertex probably hid their flag at the edge of the boundaries like us. I locked our bikes against the bike posts, since Gabrielle was already rushing inside the library, auburn braid bouncing against her back.

When I strolled into the library, I was greeted by the crisp smell of books and the sound of pouring water from the massive basins of water in the heart of the library. I remembered Gabrielle's comment about the adult section and figured she'd be there, so I made my way down the winding ramp down the grand central fountain. I scanned the area thoroughly, avoiding the weirded-out faces of the students there who'd come to study. After my unsuccess, I followed a hallway to what I thought had to have been an exit. My black Vans clacked against the gray tile, and I began to consider that I was about to walk into a janitor's closet or something. Then I saw it. A giant, pulsing, magenta-and-navy blue rimmed void.

"A portal," I whispered to myself in awe as I stared at the galaxial void in front of me. I turned around to see if anyone else was seeing what I was seeing. The hallway I'd

walked was longer than I'd thought, and the students in headphones and blue light-blocker glasses couldn't have cared less about the random hallway I'd followed. Turning back, I couldn't believe myself when I had the strong urge to test my hand in the portal; who knows? I could get sucked in there or something if I touched it. I rarely listen to myself. I stepped forward and eased my hand into the center of the portal. My hand completely disappeared into the metallic pool, and while my palm and wrist felt compressed and heavy in the liquidlike portal, my fingertips felt free and warm open air. Pulling my hand back to me, I felt slight resistance like I was pulling it through sludge, but my hand otherwise came back untouched. So I did what any thirteen-year-old kid would do: I closed my eyes and ran through.

I felt like I was swimming through metal and water at the same time at first, then pulled myself through all the way and felt open air to my panicked self's relief. I blinked my eyes back into focus to see a grand cathedral...or *something*. I had no idea what I was looking at, with its massive marble pillars, gold accents, and rows and rows of red velvet chairs. I whipped around to make sure the portal was still there, to find a regular-looking door half-open where it once was. Above it, a duct-taped lime green Vertex flag and a sticky note. I pulled both off, and read the note: "*Hey Fulcrum, welcome to Carnegie Hall, New York! Sorry it's a little out of the boundaries; or is it?*" I laughed to myself and took in the beautiful hall around me, tucking the little flag into my sweatshirt pocket. With a deep breath, I ran through the portal-turned-doorway and opened my eyes to the Huntington Beach Public Library once more.

"That was way cooler than 7-11," I breathed to myself, and with a last look at the portal, raced back up the ramp. I whipped out my phone and called Gabrielle.

Our bike wheels squeaked at the turn at the bottom of Edward's hill as we raced back to base.

"A portal?!" Gabrielle repeated after minutes of silence aside from our labored breaths.

"I know! To *New York* of all places! If we don't win this, I'm pulling the 'it was out of boundaries' card."

"Don't do *that*."

"I won't...because we're gonna win!" We turned past the neighborhood, and I held the green Vertex flag above my head in triumph to a cheering crowd of Fulcrums.

"They've got our flag!" Gabrielle exclaimed, squinting to see four Vertex team members running with our flag.

"They're going on foot; we'll win!" We forced open the 7-11 doors, which chimed an electric *ding dong* and scrambled to the cereal aisle, where we shoved Vertex's flag and took photo evidence of our proof. During our triumphant celebration, all I could think about was my next trip to the library.