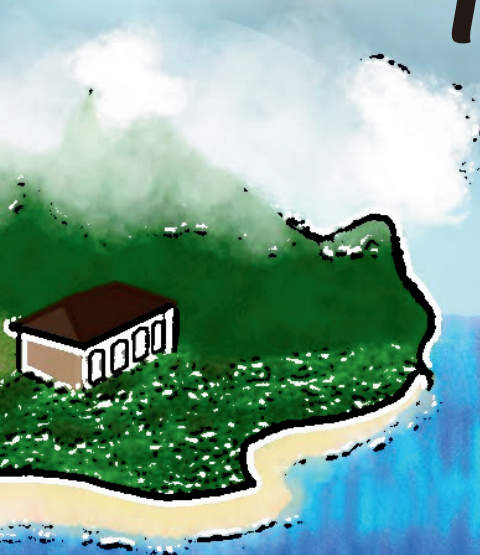


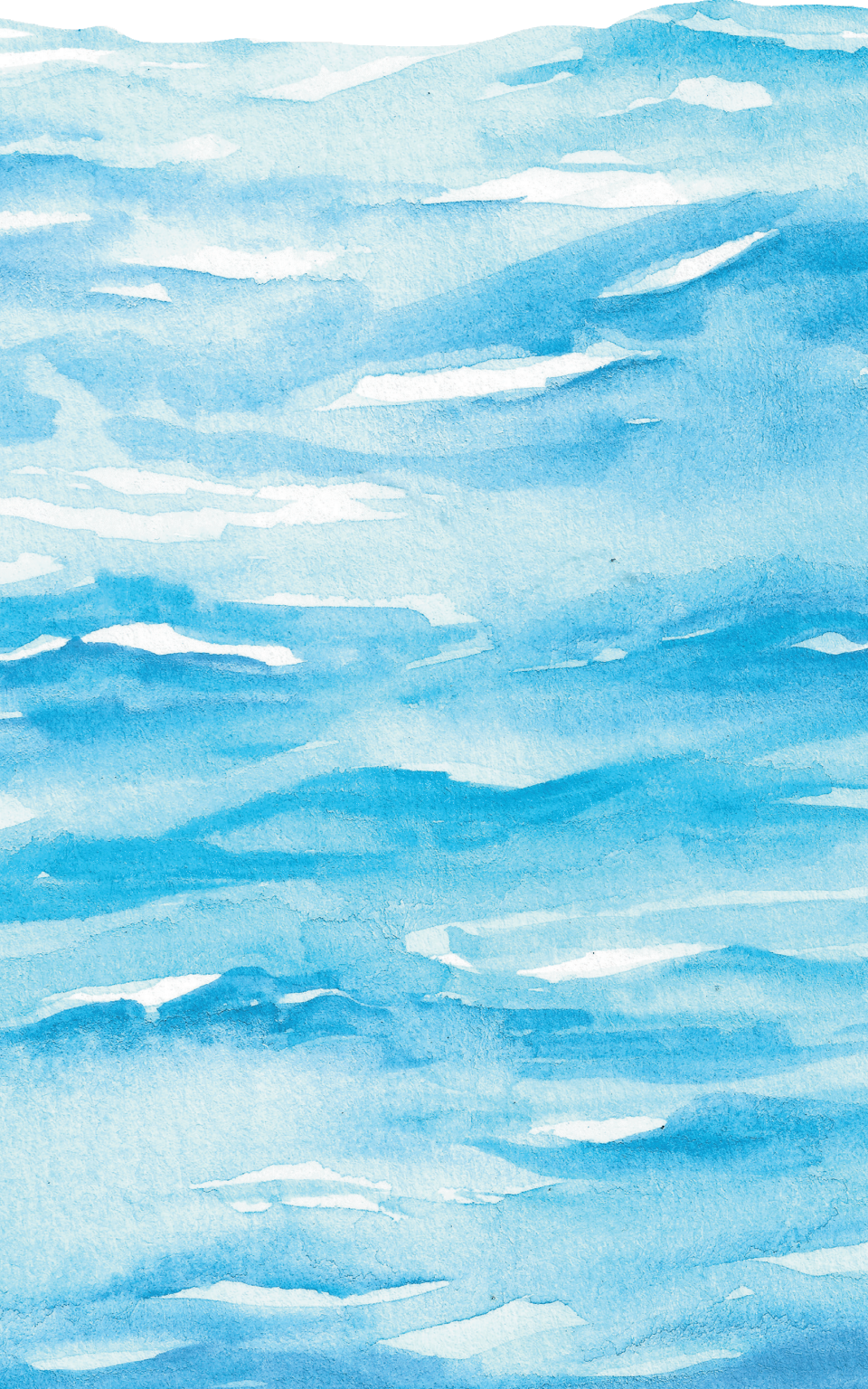
LITTLE  
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ESCAPE  
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*Little  
Palm  
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Island*



**D.M. HALL**





## CHAPTER 1: A NEARLY EMPTY ROOM

“Avra Spellman. Thank you for coming all the way here to take part in our first Children’s trial of the soon-to-be-announced Escape Island where players will be able to enjoy a week-long series of escape rooms to find all the keys to get off the Island.” Mrs. Jaya Ramsey, the clean and proper manager of Little Palm Escapes, informed Avra as she sat on the opposing side of a metal desk in an otherwise empty concrete room. Avra watched Mrs. Ramsey fold her hands in her lap as the woman spoke.

“Since you are the last to arrive, the event will start once the doors lock behind you. The rest of those who have been chosen for this event are already in the Reception Hall where everything will begin. There isn’t much else to tell you that you haven’t already read in the debrief package we sent you, but I will reiterate a few points.”

Avra bobbed her head in acknowledgement as Mrs. Ramsey continued.

“Your parents will be staying at our office building, which is on an island not far to the north of this one while this trial is completed. While you are in the various escape pods, nothing is off limits. If you think you can reach something, reach for it. If you think something is hidden in food, eat it out. Anything can be a piece of a puzzle AND some things will lead you astray. Be careful because once the doors lock there is no escape until you unlock them yourselves.”

Mrs. Ramsey regarded Avra with thinly masked disdain. “Any questions?”

Avra crossed her arms, “You have already answered my questions. I came here ready to play your game.” Avra inclined her head to challenge Mrs. Ramsey’s disapproval.

Mrs. Ramsey blinked and raised her hands up in surrender, then dropped them down to her thighs to brace herself as she stood up. "Well then, follow me and we will begin."

Avra stood up and followed Mrs. Ramsey out of the small room and down a hall. The walls were blank concrete, giving no clues to what was coming. They walked up to a set of large, black French doors.

Mrs. Ramsey turned to face Avra. "Any last thoughts?"

Avra stopped in her tracks but did not respond.

Instead, she fixed her eyes on the doors.

"All right, then." Mrs. Ramsey muttered as she pushed open the doors into the room and stepped aside. Avra looked around as she walked into the room that was a perfect recreation of a hotel lobby. Once Avra stepped through the doorway, Mrs. Ramsey swung the heavy doors shut, the sound reverberating through the hall like the final note of a solemn song. She slid the key into her pocket with a practiced motion, then tilted her chin up toward the security camera mounted high on the ceiling. With a composed expression, she raised a hand and offered a firm thumbs-up, the overhead light casting a sharp shadow of the gesture onto the polished floor. Without hesitation, she pivoted on her heel and strode down the hall, her footsteps fading into the hush of the corridor.

Mrs. Ramsey's whispered voice echoed as she walked away, "Here we go."





## CHAPTER 2: HERE WE GO

Avra looked around the room and watched seven other kids take off black blindfolds from their heads. Two looked to be more like teenagers to Avra, but the rest were probably around her perfect age of 11. Spaced evenly in an oval down the center of the room, all the kids looked at each other and around the room in indecision. Behind their loose circle was a large reception desk, a coat room, and a sitting area. Large stained glass windows ran along one side of the room. One of the boys in the circle cleared his throat, and while his palms slid against each other in a quick, energetic motion, he said, "Well now, let's get this party started. My name is Hiob, yes HE-OB and I am 14 years old. I have won medals in Karate and Gymnastics." He walked toward the center of their circle and gestured for everyone to come closer. They all took a tentative step in.

"I assume you all have some useful skills. What are they?" Hiob opened his hands out to encourage the others. Avra looked around unsure.

One of the other girls lifted her hand, fingers poised like a question waiting to be answered. Hiob's eyes flicked to her, curiosity sparking and chuckled. "Yes?"

The girl lowered her hand and drew in a deep breath, steadying herself before speaking, "I am Loreen, I am 13 and I like to make toys. I have a few younger siblings and I make the toys for them."

Hiob grinned, "Great! I am sure we will find use for you. Anyone else?"

Avra shifted her shoulders forward, "I'm Avra, I'm 11 and I know a few languages."

A second boy standing opposite Avra in the circle looked up at her curiously. Avra caught his gaze, until both of their attention was pulled to another boy in the circle.

"I am Dr. Hersh Ramsey. I am 12 years old and I will be a Doctor."

After a lengthy silence, the dark hair and tawny skinned girl standing next to him chipped in, "I like chemistry, it's like magic potions! You get to play with tiny things that make big things happen!"

Everyone waited while they watched her. Her eyes darted around in confusion for a moment until realization struck. "Oh! Also my name is Kalila and I am 10 years old."

The last unIntroduced girl in the circle snorted, pulling everyone's attention to her. "I am Agathi. I am 13 and I like fire."

They all looked at the newly introduced Agathi in various shades of shock and concern. Hiob recovered the quickest and turned to the next unIntroduced boy.

"And you?" Drawing everyone's attention to him.

"Me? I am Leo. I am 12 and I do math."

Agathi squinted her eyes at him, "Like a mathematician?"

Leo shifted his eyes to meet hers fleetingly, "Not so much yet, I have won a couple of math competitions though."

The group bobbed their heads in a spectrum of validation. The general attention floated to the last unknown in the room.

"My name's Evert, I'm 11 and I like solving puzzles and codes and the like. Being here is like living a dream."

Hiob straightened up, "Excellent, it looks like we have a lot to work with here. We don't know what we are

looking for so we should split up and start making observations. Then we can join back together and see what we have discovered."

Nods all around. Each player surveyed the room and picked a different location to inspect.

After a moment of indecision, Evert followed Avra to the reception desk. "Your name is Avra, right? And you speak multiple languages? How many languages do you speak?"

Avra and Evert reached the reception desk and let their eyes wander over the timeless and elegant design and sturdy, polished wood. A computer sat near the far end and beneath the countertop was a long row of drawers with delicate carvings on the front. Avra looked back at him, "Yes- and Four."

Evert stifled a smile as he considered this. Avra sat down at the computer and tried out a password. She was rewarded with a disruptive buzz and a large red X

replacing one of the three grey Xs below the password box. Four sticky notes stuck to the rim of the computer screen caught Evert's attention. He traced his finger across the letters, drawing Avra's attention to the note.

"Can you read it?" Evert asked.

Avra focused her gaze and pulled the sticky note off the board. "Maybe, it looks like some form of Arabic. But the letters are separated, usually they are joined like cursive." Avra rubbed her forehead as she thought.

Evert's interest piqued, "So Arabic is one." Avra looked at Evert in humour. "It doesn't make any legible sense to me. It isn't forming Arabic words and the sounds are nothing that I recognize from another

language."

"Can you write out the sounds in English? I might recognize a pattern," Evert suggested.

Avra considered him, "Alright, do you see a pen around?"



After looking through some drawers, they found a pen and a notepad. Avra wrote out the sounds and then handed the completed note to Evert. Avra watched as Evert contemplated a solution.

"As I suspected, it was an Atbash cipher hiding a...a Caesar cipher I believe." Evert laid the note on the countertop.

"So? What does it say?"

"Give me a second." Evert chuckled at Avra's impatience.

Avra leaned back in anticipation. "Alright then, go on." Avra turned back to sift through the drawer where the pen had been, while Evert took the recovered pen and transcribed the appropriate letters beneath each one. Once complete, he handed the sticky note to Avra. She straightened from rummaging through the drawer and took the note.

After scanning the now fully formed words, Avra's eyes widened. "Can it really be that easy?"

Evert smiled, "Only one way to find out. Would you do the honors?"

Evert waved towards the computer. Avra strode over to it and stuck the note back to the edge of the monitor. Avra typed JANUARIUS into the computer's keypad. The computer blinked and then changed its screen to a scene of a snowy mountain. Three icons perched at the top left corner of the screen.

"I guess whoever owns this computer is sick of the tropical beaches and good weather."

Avra hid her smile as she clicked on the icon labelled 'GUESTS'. They stared at the screen, eyebrows nearly touching their hairlines and jaws slightly dropped.





## CHAPTER 3: AN UNFORTUNATE START

Hersh sauntered into the coat room and saw Agathi shoving the hanging coats back and forth on the poles. Hersh spoke with a scoff, "Have you checked the pockets yet?"

Agathi stopped her pushing and looked back at Hersh. She wrinkled her nose, "No, no I have not. I just started looking around."

Hersh nodded superiorly, raising his eyebrows, and walked to the first coat at the end of the row. He pulled a weathered quarter out of the pocket then turned to Agathi, smiling triumphantly. Agathi scowled and plunged her hand into the closest coat pocket and pulled out a gunky mess of chewed gum. Once her eyes rested on what she was holding, she cried out in disgust and dropped the gum ball to the floor. Hersh laughed and continued looking through coat pockets. Agathi hesitantly moved on to the next coat pocket.



## CHAPTER 4: BEAUTIFUL SECRETS

Kalila walked over to the windows, stopped, crossed her arms, and stared at them. The stained glass window in front of her was a striking masterpiece, made up of four vibrant panels. Each panel told its own story in brilliant hues: deep blues, fiery reds, soft purples, and golden yellows, all blended together in intricate, swirling patterns. Sunlight streamed through, casting colorful reflections on the floor around her. After a few minutes, she pushed the bell and pen that sat at the end of the top of the reception desk further in and climbed up. Folding her legs under her, she continued her contemplation; entranced by the dancing light and the delicate beauty of the glass.



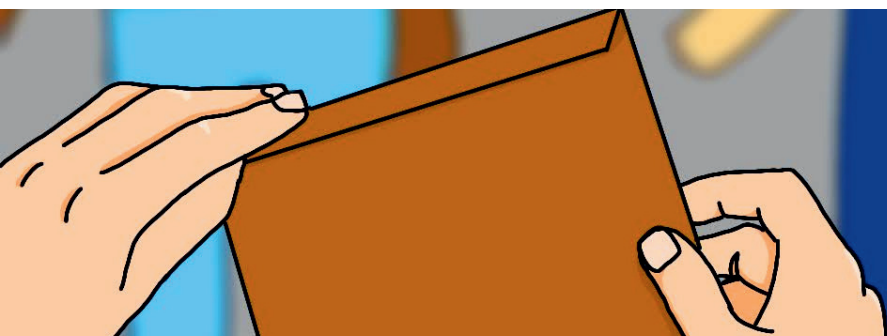
## CHAPTER 5: CAREFULLY TUCKED AWAY

Leo, Loreen, and Hiob ambled over to the couches in the lounge. Hiob carefully lifted each pillow, his fingers pressing into the fabric as he searched beneath them. He ran his hands along the sides of the cushions, feeling for anything hidden in the seams. Loreen began her inspection at the side tables. She felt along the edges, then opened a drawer and checked beneath it for anything out of place. Leo stood by the fireplace, his eyes scanning the mantel and the brickwork. He crouched down, peering into the hearth that housed the crackling fire, he noticed the grooves between the stones, searching for a hidden compartment or a loose brick.

Hiob bristled with excitement, "Aha! Check this out." Loreen scuttled over to him, "Did you find something?" Hiob turned around as Loreen and Leo gathered in. Hiob held a large, golden-brown manilla envelope still sealed in his hands.

Leo dipped his head to the side in interest, "Where did you find it?"

"It was tucked down the side of the couch. Shall we?" Hiob flipped the envelope lightly with a daring face. Loreen bobbed her head eagerly. Smiling, Hiob began to open the envelope. Leo folded his arms as he heard the unmistakable sound of Hiob tearing the top of the envelope. The sharp rip lightly echoed in the quiet room, and Hiob swiftly pinched the sides, carefully pulling them apart to reveal the contents. Leo's eyes widened slightly as he watched, his posture loosened in anticipation, which seemed to hang heavy in the air around them.



## CHAPTER 6: THEORETICALLY IMPORTANT

Avra and Evert flipped through the eight files, each one containing the personal details of the people in the room. Avra's fingers hovered over the mouse before clicking on her file, and as the screen populated with extremely accurate, almost unnervingly precise information, her breath caught. She read the details, her face slowly warming as red crept up her neck and across her cheeks. Evert remained still beside her, his presence calm yet watchful, though his eyes occasionally flicked to her flushed face. With a swift motion, she hastily exited out of her file and clicked on Evert's. The screen flickered, and a similar file appeared, matching her own in its eerie accuracy. Evert cleared his throat and reached out for the mouse. His hand hovered above hers. "May I?" Avra pulled back her hand and nodded. She leaned back in the chair and watched him click on the next profile.

"Hmm...maybe..." Evert muttered, he clicked on the other files and skimmed through them. "Look at this one. Here, she was sent to Juvenile Detention for three months. It doesn't say why she went there, though." Avra raised an eyebrow, "Don't judge what you don't know."

Evert smirked with amusement.

Avra continued, "It doesn't say why she went to Juvi so let's give her the benefit of the doubt. It's unlikely that the staff for this project didn't do their homework on her. I know one of the staff here."

Evert eyed her warily. "You know one of them?"

"Yes, that is how I got here. Is that a problem?"

Evert paused for a moment, his eyes narrowing slightly as he mulled over the thought. After a beat, he gave a casual shrug. "I guess not. Do you have any insider information then?"

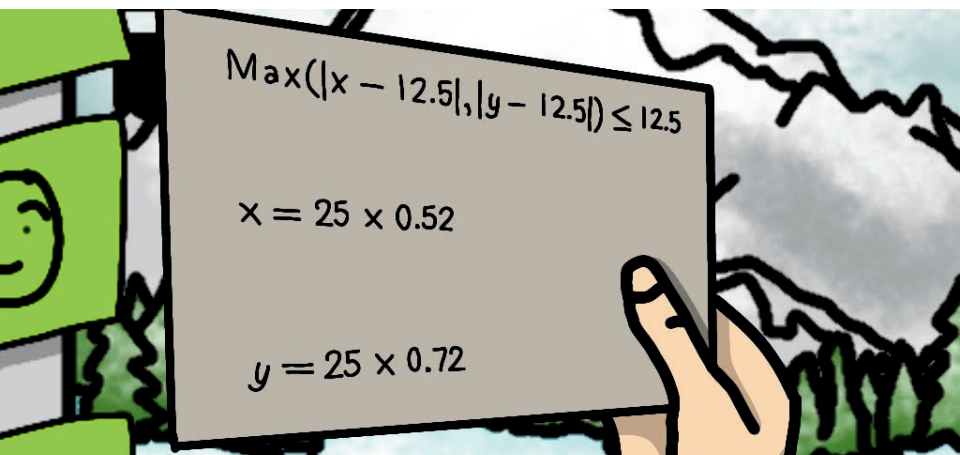
Avra snorted, "Like what?"

Evert shrugged, "Like...I don't know! Information on the layout or the different challenges, or puzzles we will face. Anything that could help?"

Avra looked heavenward in disbelief then back at Evert. “No, I didn't have any part in the creation process. My UNCLE just reached out a week ago asking if I was available because they needed one more participant. How long ago did you get recruited?” Evert raised his hands in defence, “OK, OK, I see your point.” He looked away from her face in defeat, his eyes momentarily dropping to the floor as a heavy sigh escaped him. He turned his gaze toward something—anything. His eyes landed on a corkboard behind her, its surface cluttered with an array of colorful postcards pinned haphazardly. The edges of some cards were slightly curled, some faded from years of display, while others featured bright, picturesque scenes from distant places.

“Hey, isn't that the same as on the computer?” Evert pointed at one of the postcards. Avra turned around and stepped closer to the corkboard.

“I think you are right.” Avra carefully pulled the postcard from the corkboard, her fingers pinched the edge as she held it up to the computer screen. Both the postcard and the display showed the same snowy mountain scene, the towering peaks and endless white expanse mirrored each other perfectly. Avra and Evert exchanged a look, their eyes filled with silent anticipation at where this clue would take them. The light from the stained-glass windows flickered across the card as she slowly turned the postcard over, the colors shifted with her movement. On the back was written a complicated-looking equation.



The corners of Avra's lips twitched upwards in a way that hinted at both curiosity and uncertainty, "This looks pretty advanced. Can you figure it out?" Evert scoffed, "Nope. Don't we have a math guy here?" Avra nodded and they both straightened up to look around the room for Leo. They spotted him across the room in the lounge. Avra nodded with purpose, together they straightened up as their posture aligned with their focus. They scanned the room, their eyes moving across the space, sweeping over the scattered furniture and soft lighting. It didn't take long before they spotted him—Leo was across the room, standing in a huddle with two other players. His posture was relaxed, but his arms were crossed as all three leaned in to see...something.



## **CHAPTER 7: HELP – A FRIENDLY COMMAND**

Hiob, Loreen, and Leo peered into the envelope, catching sight of five Polaroid photos nestled within. From across the room they heard a resonant feminine voice shout, "Hey Math guy! Come help us out!" All three of their heads snapped up, their attention quickly drawn to the unexpected interruption. They blinked, momentarily disoriented, before their gazes locked onto Avra, who was standing at the reception desk. She waved at them, her hand moving in a casual but unmistakable gesture, her smile wide and bright, as if the momentary disruption was nothing more than a cheerful greeting. Her presence was like a sudden burst of energy in the room, the contrast between her easy demeanor and their earlier focus almost jarring. Evert straightened up and quickly jumped in, "Sorry, she means Leo! Leo, can you please come help us over here? I believe your skill set will be beneficial." Leo paused as Hiob and Loreen cast a look his way. Leo pivoted to face them, "You two have this. Let me know if I can do anything to help." Hiob and Loreen nodded in unison, their expressions a mix of understanding and anticipation. Leo turned and began to walk toward the reception. His steps were measured but purposeful, the soft tap of his shoes echoed in the quiet room.



## CHAPTER 8: TRICKY SOLUTIONS

As Leo rounded the side of the reception desk, he said, "What's up?"

Avra passed the postcard to Leo, he took the card with a quick, almost eager motion, his eyes scanning it before glancing up at the others. Evert waved his hand in the postcard's direction, "The other clues pointed us to this. Are you able to solve it?"

Leo brought his hand to his chin as he concentrated on the equation. "Do you have a pen and paper?"

Avra handed Leo the pen, and Evert grabbed a sticky note from the stack on the desk, peeling it off with a quick flick of his wrist before handing it to Leo. He accepted both with a quiet nod. Leo's focus was already shifting as he turned toward the desk, the quiet rustling of paper filling the space. He set the items down, positioning himself with a steady resolve as he began to work, his eyes narrowing in concentration. Meanwhile, Avra and Evert moved away from him, drifting toward the corkboard. They rested their arms on the countertop and leaned in, their eyes lightly skimming the images, each one offering its own cryptic allure. Their quiet movements contrasted with the tense silence around Leo, who was absorbed in the task at hand.

After nearly five minutes had passed, Leo straightened up, "This looks like it will give us a spot on a grid. It is quite a large grid, though." He rubbed his hands together in anticipation and pulled more sticky notes off their stack and laid them out on the countertop, each note overlapping the next. Once satisfied, he drew a large grid on top and marked the edges with corresponding letters from the equation.

## CHAPTER 9: A COLLECTION OF...THINGS

After completing their hunt through all the pockets in the coat room, Hersh and the now dishevelled Agathi laid out the gum, three dollars of coins, an ID card, a roll of thread, a thimble and a note on the floor.

"Any thoughts on what to do with these things, genius?" Agathi sniffed indignantly.

Hersh snapped, "I resent your tone."

"I don't hear any ideas."

"Only a pyromaniac would take such a shortsighted view of the situation. I don't hear you coming up with any ideas." Hersh responded, attempting to hold his temper in check, but his irritation was evident.

"Ha! Pyromaniac, shows what you know. Nothing!"

Agathi snarled without missing a beat, her confidence cutting through the harsh words like they were of no consequence.

With a frustrated breath, Hersh stared, clearly incredulous.





## CHAPTER 11: OBLIGATORY MEDIATION



Sitting on the sofa, Loreen and Hiob carefully spread the Polaroids across the coffee table in front of them. The soft light from the fireplace flickered across the glossy surfaces of the photos, casting subtle reflections. Loreen's eyes lingered on one photo, tracing the words written beneath it, while Hiob leaned forward slightly, his brow furrowed in concentration. They both studied the images closely, their eyes shifting between the photos and the handwritten messages beneath, as if searching for a hidden meaning or connection. The muffled voices from the coat room grew louder, still arguing. Loreen's eyes were pulled involuntarily toward the disruption but she refocused back at the photos. Loreen cleared her throat, "Do you see any patterns or markings or anything?"

Hiob shook his head, "All of them have writing below the picture, right? Does any of that mean anything to you?"

Loreen slowly moved her head in a small, dismissive motion. The increasing commotion from the coat room caused them to break their focus once again.

Agathi's shouts echoed through the entire lobby, "WHAT IS YOUR MOTTO IN SCHOOL? CS GET DEGREES?!"

Hiob stood up and turned to face the coatroom; the pictures on the table danced away from the abrupt motion. His shoulders tensed with frustration, and his hands clenched into fists at his sides. A deep breath escaped him as the rising tension from the argument was becoming too much to ignore. His gaze locked onto the entranceway of the coatroom, his eyes narrowing with irritation, as though he could get the noise to stop with nothing more than willpower. "WILL YOU TWO GIVE IT A REST ALREADY!"

A thick silence cleansed the entire space, the air itself stilled as if time itself had paused. All eyes in the room were fixed on Hiob as he stalked toward the coat room. His movements were purposeful, sharp, like a predator zeroing in on its target. The tension in the room was palpable, everyone held their breath, waiting for whatever was about to unfold.

Hiob continued, "I mean it you two, find a new place to look that is on opposite sides of the room from each other. We haven't even been here an hour and you are already ready to kill each other! We need to be better than this!"

Hersh and Agathi looked at Hiob. Agathi's shoulders drooped slightly, her eyes shifting downward as she nervously tugged at the edge of her sleeve, the hint of shame flickering across her face. Adversely, Hersh stood rigid, his jaw clenched tight, and his eyes narrowed into a cold, unwavering glare. The disdain in his gaze was so sharp it seemed to cut through the space between them. Every muscle in his face seemed taut with the intensity of his judgment, as if he could barely tolerate being in the same room. While trying to ignore Hersh's ire, Hiob's attention was pulled to the items on the floor behind them.

Hersh bristled, "You dare—"

"What's that?" Hiob diverted everyone's attention to the pile of found things on the floor before Hersh could say anything more.

Hersh sputtered. His face flushed a deep red, and his lips quivered as he tried to speak.

Agathi eyed the items, then turned her attention back to Hiob. "That's what we found in all the coat pockets. We are not sure what it's all for or if any of it is even useful at all. We were just... debating that."

Hiob gave Agathi a wry smile before stepping closer to examine the items, "That one." He pointed to the ID card.

"What about it?" Hersh grumbled.

Agathi stiffened with frustration, her eyes narrowing at Hersh. Hiob's gaze shifted from Hersh to Agathi, his expression caught between the two. Hiob coughed deliberately and picked up the ID card. "We have a picture of this cat. We found it in the couch."

Without looking back, Hiob walked out of the coat room and back to the coffee table. Agathi trailed behind, intrigued, while Hersh glanced at the items before following warily.

"You know, I would have come to the same conclusion if I were in your shoes. You just happened to find a match." Hersh rationalized.

"YOU SOUR TOAD!" Agathi whirled on Hersh, her frustration oozing out, ready to lash out. Her hands curled into fists, her breath coming in sharp bursts, as the tension between them reignited. But before she could take a step forward, Loreen popped up between them, her presence like a calm but unyielding barrier. Agathi hesitated, her momentum halted as she came face-to-face with Loreen. For a brief moment, the fierce energy in Agathi's stance wavered, her eyes flicking to Loreen's with a mixture of surprise and frustration. She stopped just short of running into her, the space between them filled with a tense silence. All eyes in the room watched the exchange.

"Hold up! How about we take a look at the photos, ok?" Loreen suggested.

Agathi inhaled deeply, the air filling her lungs as a sense of calm crept in.

With a sharp whistle of air through her teeth, she exhaled, her body visibly relaxing. She turned her back to Hersh, shifting her focus back to Hiob, her movements measured, as she regained her composure. Meanwhile, Hersh stood rigid, his jaw clenched and his eyes locked onto Agathi's retreating figure.

A collective exhale rippled through the space, as if everyone else had been holding their own anxieties in check. One by one, the others returned to their tasks, the rustle of papers, the soft tap of fingers on keyboards, and the shuffle of feet filling the air once more.

## CHAPTER 12: THE STICKY MAP

Leo studied the sticky note map and equation with a furrowed brow while Avra and Evert had moved on to riffling through the drawers for anything they might have missed. All three stared at the intrusive sound of Agathi's and Hiob's tiff and Hiob's decisive intervention. "Wow, we have some very passionate members in our group," Avra commented with wide eyes and an uncertain smile.

Leo grinned to himself, a low snicker slipping out as he continued with the math.

Evert turned to Avra, "That's one word for it."

Leo straightened and stretched backwards. Avra and Evert exchanged a look and turned their attention to him.

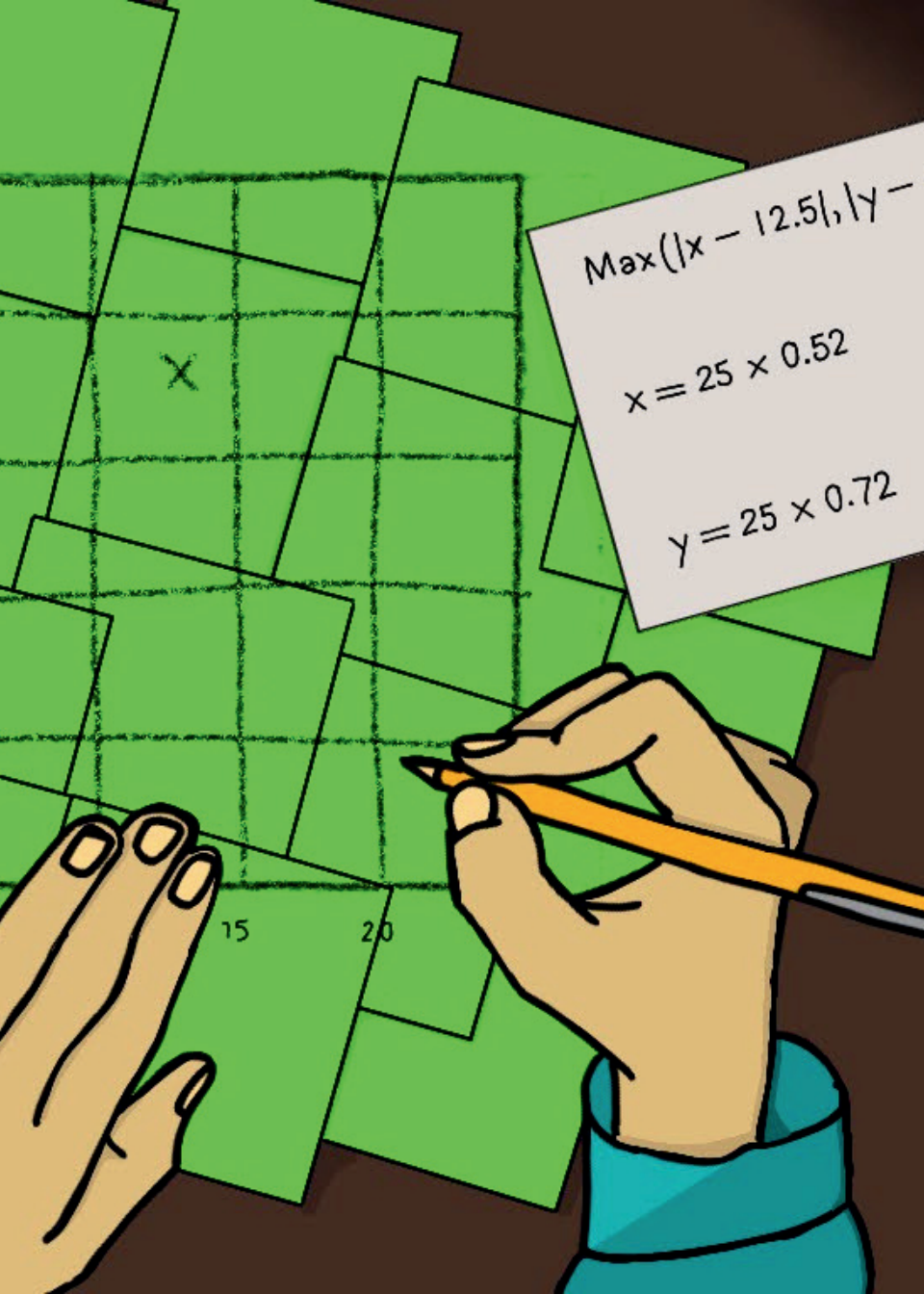
Leo took a breath in and let it out, "I think..I got it. It is a location in this room. Look-" He guided their attention, pointing to the little X in his makeshift graph.

"Look here, the edges seem to match the shape of the room." Leo pointed to the walls and then back to the note map. Evert and Avra followed his movements with their eyes. "And here, this part of the equation was tricky, but I think this is supposed to be the reception desk here. And this, I think this is the fireplace. But the equation singled out this spot here." They all studied the map briefly, then turned their attention to the room, taking in their surroundings.

"Over there!" Avra hurried to the suspected spot, her footsteps quick and purposeful, her gaze locked on the area as she approached.

Evert stepped over to the desk and picked up a clipboard. With deliberate care, he transferred the map onto it and followed after Leo and Avra.





## CHAPTER 13: TRIAL BY FIRE

The group gathered tightly around the coffee table, eyes flicking between the photos. Hiob held the ID card just above them, his gaze shifting until he spotted a match. He lowered the card, picked up the corresponding photo, and read out the phrase written below the picture.

"It says, 'flame reveals all.'" Hiob pursed his lips to one side and sat back in thought.

"That's what I always say!" Agathi celebrated.

Hiob let out a quiet chuckle. Loreen, on the other hand, laughed openly, the sound breaking through the tension in the room. Hersh's expression twisted in disgust as he scoffed, his lip curling before he snatched the photo straight from Hiob's hand. Hiob reacted instantly, reaching to reclaim it, but Hersh jerked his arm back, holding the photo just out of reach, a smug glint in his eyes.

"What are you—" Hiob protested simultaneously with Agathi's tensed, "HEY!" and Loreen's disappointed "Hersh, what—" But all their cries were ignored as Hersh darted to the fireplace and flung the photo into the flames before anyone could react. Hiob and Agathi scrambled after him. Loreen froze her eyes wide with alarm.

Their eyes remained fixed on the fire as the photo disintegrated, revealing a tiny, metallic silver square beneath the ashes. Hersh turned to the other three self-righteously.

"YOU EGOTISTICAL BRUTE!" Agathi snatched the fire tongs beside the mantel pillars and plucked the revealed square out of the fire.

Bewilderment flickered across Hersh's face, his eyes narrowed slightly, "That's clearly the next clue! I don't know why you're getting mad at me?"

Hiob stepped aside, "Good thinking Agatha, we should give it a minute. Let's take a—"

Agathi rounded on him with the heated tongs aimed at him. "My name is Agathi. THEEEEE."

Hersh swung his bewildered gaze to Hiob, who had just given Agathi credit for something he himself had done.

Hiob and Agathi studied each other's expressions. Hiob's eyes widened just a fraction, "Sorry, Agathi." Agathi blinked in surprise, then gave a small nod, her tension easing at last.

Hiob turned to face the other two, "I think we should take a look at those other items. Maybe gather everyone else and see if they notice anything." Loren nodded and looked over at Hersh, who grimaced but stayed silent.

Agathi raised the silver piece that she still held with the tongs, "Good call. I will stay here with this while it cools, you guys gather the stuff and everyone else." Agathi sank into the couch, the cushions giving slightly under her weight as she settled. Her posture was stiff to hold the glowing orange piece of metal away from herself. One by one, the rest of the group moved off to accomplish their goals, the soft shuffle of their footsteps filling the space for a moment.



## CHAPTER 14: BA-DUM BA-DUM

Avra, Evert, and Leo stood in the middle of the room between the lounge and the reception desk. Leo held the map on the clipboard. "It should be somewhere here. Do you see any breaks in the patterns on the floor or the ceiling?"

Avra lifted her gaze, her eyes tracing the contours of the ceiling as if searching for something in the patterns above. Evert and Leo both turned their attention to the floor, their eyes fixed on the tiles beneath them, lost in their own silent contemplation. The three of them seemed to withdraw into their own worlds, each absorbed in this newest puzzle.

Leo paused, "That." Leo pointed to one of the tiles on the floor.

Loreen popped up beside them giving them all a start. "We have found some items that we think might be important. Can you all come over to have a look? And share what you have learned?"

The three of them nodded, still focused on the newly located floor tile.

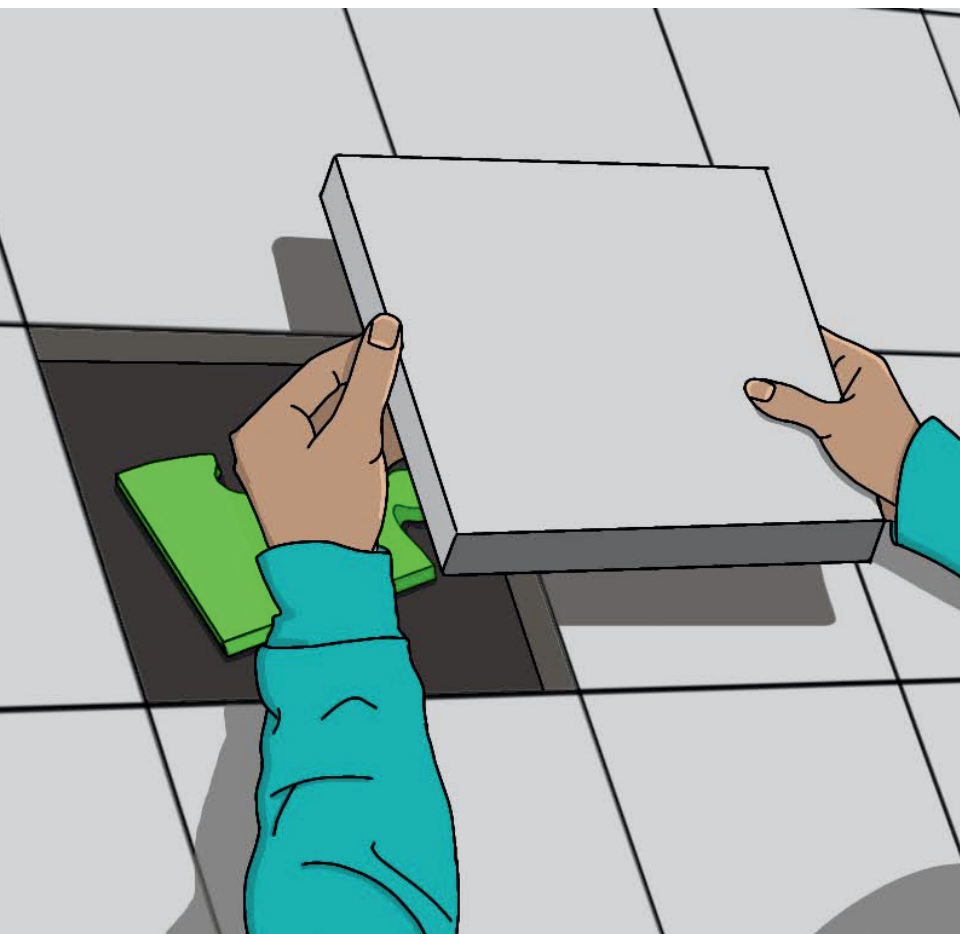
Evert angled his head towards Loreen without moving his eyes, "Yes, but I think we might have found something, so give us a second."

"Sure, once you are done." Loreen smiled as she bounced off toward Kalila at the windows.

Leo, Evert, and Avra crouched down. Leo set the clipboard gently on the ground before gliding his fingers over the suspected tile. It looked no different from the rest, except for a small chip on one corner. He tugged at the chipped corner, and the tile lifted with ease. He placed it off to the side and leaned forward, supporting himself with both hands on the floor.

The three of them leaned in to peer into the four-inch deep hole uncovered by the tile. Avra reached down, retrieving the thick green plastic puzzle piece, roughly the size of her hand. She examined both sides before handing it to Evert.

Evert examined it for a moment, then passed it to Leo, who scrutinized it carefully. The air was thick with excitement as they all stood up. Evert replaced the tile and then joined them.



## CHAPTER 15: ATTEMPTED COLLABORATION

Avra, Evert, and Leo joined the rest of the group around the coffee table. Leo placed the puzzle piece next to the rest of their collected items. Both Hersh and Loreen stared at it, caught off guard.

Hiob cleared his throat and spoke loudly so that everyone could hear him, "OK, thank you all for gathering. We have found a few items that we aren't sure about. And it looks like you have found something of your own."

"Yes, I believe this is the way we are getting out. I noticed the door has four puzzle piece shaped impressions around the handles. We haven't checked yet, but I'm pretty sure this is one of four to unlock the door." Evert pointed at the puzzle piece on the table as he spoke. A chorus of nods followed.

At the same moment, Hersh and Agathi pointed toward the coat room items, pausing as frustration flashed across their faces. A heavy silence preceded their loud, simultaneous response.

"We found these in the pockets of the coats hanging in the coat room!" Hersh called out, but Agathi's response came with such volume that it nearly eclipsed his.

"These are from the pockets in the coat room!!"

The others—Evert, Avra, Hiob, Kalila, and Loreen—looked at Agathi and Hersh, trying to suppress their laughter. Agathi and Hersh, on the other hand, fixed each other with intense glares, both silently wishing to send the other crashing to the ground. Kalila's attention drifted to the items on the table, she leaned closer and reached for a folded paper note.

Hiob's eyes caught her movement and asked, "Does that help you with the windows?"

Kalila nodded, "Yes, these shapes. I have been staring

at these shapes for over an hour now. I knew they meant something!" She spun around, nearly stumbling over the arm of the sofa. With quick steps, she made her way back to the windows. The rest of them turned their focus back to the table.

After a moment, Agathi stretched her arms up, "Well, clearly I don't know how any of this connects, so Imma see what the window girl is working on." She left the table and trailed after Kalila.

Hiob smiled as he shuffled to the side to fill the gap that Agathi left in their little circle. "Anything else spark any of you as useful?"

Avra scowled in concentration, "Not particularly."

Evert's head dipped in agreement with Avra. Leo turned toward Loreen and Hiob, "What happened with the photos you found?"

Loreen smiled, "Oh right, you didn't see. We narrowed the important card using this ID card that Hersh and Agathi found in the coat room."

Hiob shook his head, "After that Hersh here threw the photo into the fire."

"Because that is what the note said to do, and you idiots were just standing around," Hersh growled back. Loreen sighed, "That's uncalled for."

Evert raised his eyebrows at Hersh's comment.

"Is that it then? Was it all just burned to ash?" Avra nodded towards the fire.

"No, well, yes. The photo did burn away, but inside the photo was this tinfoil something." Loreen pointed to the metal square on the table, drawing all their attention.

Evert tilted his head to the side, "And?"

"And then I had to break up Hersh and Agathi's fight."

Hiob looked over at Hersh playfully. Hersh coiled in defense. Hiob gave Hersh's shoulder a firm pat, his hand lingering briefly. Hersh flinched visibly, his face twisting in disgust as he glared at Hiob's hand. With a chuckle, Hiob moved it away, a grin tugging at his lips as he watched Hersh's adverse reaction.

Loreen shifted her weight, "Actually, it was too hot to inspect right away, so we don't know what it is yet."

Leo, Evert, Avra, and even Hersh eyed the shiny square with visible interest. Hiob turned to Loreen and waved his hand in a broad arc towards the reflective metal. Loreen smiled and lightly touched the side of the metal with her finger. Not feeling any heat, she picked it up and slowly explored its surfaces.

"Oh!" Loreen exclaimed.

All eyes were on Loreen as the group leaned in, with the exception of Hersh, who feigned indifference but couldn't resist a few side glances. On one side, a detailed clock was etched into the metal. All eyes raised to look at the same clock that sat on the mantle of the fireplace.

"Something about the clock?" Avra supposed.

"Of course! The clock!" Hersh quickly made his way to the fireplace and yanked on the clock, but it didn't move. He tugged with more force, his grip tightened around the edges, but the clock remained steadfast, unmoving in its place as though it had been anchored there for eternity.

Loreen calmly walked up behind him, "Perhaps there is a detail on the picture that will tell us what we are looking for..." Loreen waited.

Leo skipped the empathy step and reached his hand out to Loreen. "Can I take a look?"

Loreen sighed, "Here." She handed the mini picture over.

Leo brought the photo closer to his face, his gaze flicking between the image and the clock before him. The decorations matched perfectly. He shifted his eyes from the mantle to the photo again, then stood up straighter. "This is it! The time is different in the picture."

Hersh stopped tugging at the clock and focused his eyes on Leo, "Of course, the time is different. What do you expect?"

Leo offered the picture to Evert, who inspected it, gave a confirming nod, and handed it to Avra. She looked and smiled. "Eight twenty-five. Can we move the hands to that time? Or is there a nob that can change it?"

Hersh's fingers moved to the back of the clock, testing the knobs one by one.



He twisted the first knob, it didn't turn. He tried the second, and again, no change. When his hand rested on the third knob, it turned gently. On the clock's face the small hand began to move, followed slowly by the larger hand, their synchronized movement almost imperceptible at first.

Loreen clapped her hands, a bright smile lit up her face. Evert, Leo, Avra, and Hiob all stepped closer, curiosity growing. As the hands of the clock clicked into place, a deep, resonant chime echoed from within the clock's mechanism, reverberating through the room. Avra and Leo jumped slightly at the unexpected sound. Evert chuckled, finding amusement in their startled reactions. Avra, however, simply raised an eyebrow, unappreciative of his laughter. Leo grinned to himself, enjoying the moment. Suddenly, a soft mechanical whir called their attention back, as a small compartment popped open from the front of the clock. Hersh reached into the compartment, his fingers brushing against the edges of the second puzzle piece. With an almost unexpected reverence, he carefully lifted it out, cradling it in his hand as if it were something deeply significant. His usual indifference was replaced by a rare moment of careful attention, his gaze fixed on the piece in his palm.



## CHAPTER 16: TURNING TABLES

Agathi balanced herself carefully on Kalila's shoulders, her arms stretched upward as she felt for the upside-down horseshoe just barely out of reach. Kalila stood still, bracing herself to support Agathi's weight, her muscles tense but steady. Agathi's fingers brushed against the horseshoe, her body leaning forward with determination as she strained to close the gap.

"Can you reach it?" Kalila huffed.

"Just about, is it possible to go up another inch?" Agathi posed.

"Maybe,"

Kalila tightened her grip around Agathi's ankles, shifting her hands for better stability. She straightened her shoulders, drawing in a steadying breath, her muscles tense under the weight. With a slow, deliberate motion, she shuffled her feet closer together, her balance becoming more precarious, but she steadied herself, determined not to let Agathi fall.

"How's that?"

"Yes, that's better. I've almost got...it." Agathi swatted at the upside-down horseshoe as hard as she could. The horseshoe swung a little and then settled back where it started. Agathi sighed heavily.

From down below, Hersh mocked, "What is going on here?"

Both Kalila and Agathi startled at the sudden disturbance, their bodies jerked in unison. Agathi's hands instinctively shot out, gripping the window frame tightly to steady herself and brace their makeshift human totem pole. Her heart raced for a moment as she regained balance. Once steady, she whipped her head around, eyes flashing with irritation as she turned her full attention to Hersh, her posture sharp with unspoken words. "Dr. Dimwit! When you see people doing amazing acrobatics, you don't startle them in the middle of their work!"

"Calm down Agathi or we are going to fall over." Kalila pleaded.

Hiob and Leo made their way to the windows. Hiob split his gaze up and down between Kalila and Agathi, "Can we help somehow?"

The boys remained on standby, ready to assist in whatever way necessary. Agathi, perched on Kalila's shoulders, looked down with a raised brow, her gaze questioning. Kalila, balanced below her, tilted her head upward, meeting Agathi's eyes. She gave a subtle nod, her face a mix of focus and determination, silently signaling her agreement. Agathi's expression softened slightly, understanding passed between them as they prepared for the next move.

"What do you propose? I am not sure how to get out of this situation here." Agathi inquired.

Leo flashed a smile and Hiob dipped his head in agreement.

"I do things like this all the time for gymnastics. First, what we are going to do is replace Kalila with Leo. He is taller, so you will get the height you need for..whatever you are doing."

Kalila's laugh echoed as Agathi's smile grew wider.

Hersh crossed his arms, "Did you even try to find a ladder?"

"Do you think every person in the world is dumb besides you?!" Agathi barked.

Hiob moved between them, "Ok, Ok, Hersh that's not helpful. Agathi, you need to focus."

"Then send Dr. Disrespect away," Agathi called down.

Hiob turned to Hersh, who crossed his arms. "You heard the lady."

Agathi snorted loudly from above.

Hersh lowered his arms in disbelief and then stomped back to the fireplace to look at the other items.

Hiob clapped his hands on Leo's shoulders, "Ok, we are switching Kalila and Leo now." He guided Leo to a spot next to Kalila. Kalila and Leo exchanged a smile. Kalila's eyes sparkled with warmth, while Leo shared a slight upward curve of his lips, barely noticeable.

Agathi called down, "Wait, I think where we are now is...hah!"

Agathi raised to her tiptoes and gave the horseshoe a sharp swipe.

It swung up and clicked into place with a loud snick. Agathi, Leo, and Hiob looked up at the upright horseshoe.

FWOOP

All four of them snapped their eyes left following the sound. Out of the window frame on the leftmost window popped a drawer. Leo walked over to the newly revealed drawer, a bright smile spreading across his face as he reached for the puzzle piece. His fingers brushed it with careful precision, and he pulled it free with a flicker of triumph in his eyes. The soft clink of the piece as it came out seemed to punctuate the moment.

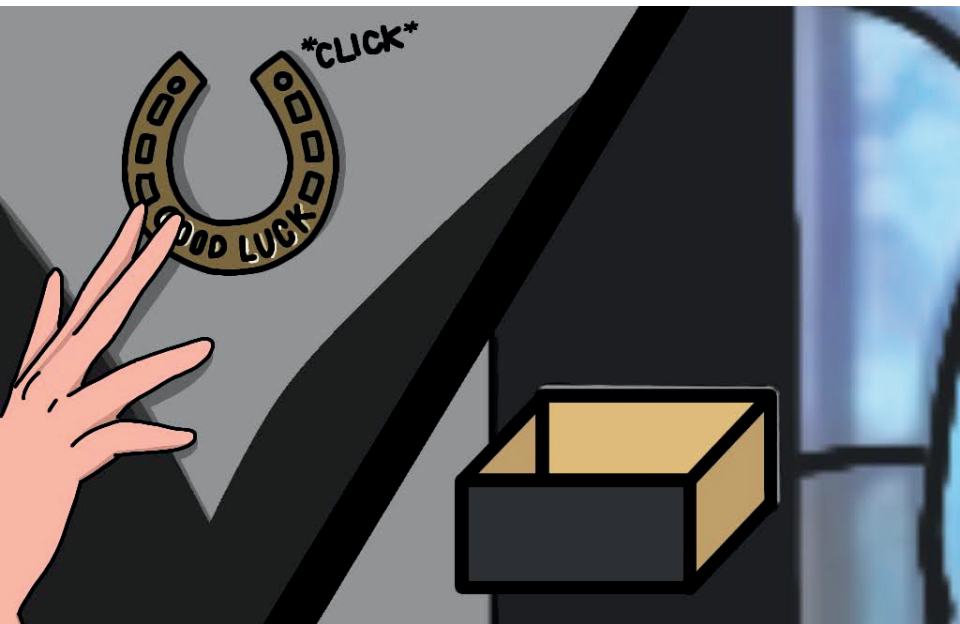
"You did it!" Leo celebrated.

Agathi howled victoriously.

"Yes!" Kalila yipped.

"Now, you can help me down." Agathi accepted.

Hiob let out a hearty laugh, the sound full of amusement as he quickly shifted into action. With a confident grin, he gestured toward Agathi, offering instructions to everyone on how to safely get her down. His hands moved with purpose as he spoke, each word measured and practical, his energy infectious as the others listened intently, ready to follow his guidance.



## CHAPTER 17: PREPONDERATED CONSENSUS

All the players stood around the coffee table, their attention fixed on the three plastic puzzle pieces laid out before them. The pieces, arranged with careful precision, seemed almost to hum with significance. The room was still, a sense of anticipation hanging in the air as each person studied the pieces, their minds working through the possibilities of what the next step might be.

"The door has four spots for the puzzle pieces. We need one more piece of the puzzle. Where do you think it is?" Loreen said as she looked around.

Avra looked down at all the items on the table. "Well, this room is sort of divided into four parts, and we found the one from the reception, the windows and the lounge area here."

"So the coatroom?" Evert postulated.

They all responded with a mix of affirmations—"Yes," "Okay," and a few nods.

Avra straightened up, her posture became more assertive as she raised her hand, pointing toward the ceiling with confidence. Her eyes sparkled with a mix of determination and clarity as she made her announcement, "To the coat room!"



## CHAPTER 18: MATH AMONG THE STITCHES

The group crowded into the small coatroom, their personal space in serious danger in the limited area, each person tried to find their footing without disturbing the others. Agathi and Kalila, however, opted to remain outside, observing from the entrance. Their eyes followed every movement in the cramped room with quiet curiosity.

"So, Hersh, other than the pocket stuff, what else did you guys look at?" With an awkward closeness, Hiob asked, almost nose to nose.

Hersh shrugged, resentful of the clothes and people around him, "Nothing, you came in and kicked us out before we could do any real looking."

Hiob inhaled, "Ah."

Avra snickered quietly before she shifted her attention to the walls, leaving Hersh to scowl after her, his frustration evident but ignored.

"It's not a big space. Maybe there's something on the walls." Avra slipped behind the coats, the fabric brushing against her as she made her way down the row. Her fingers traced along the cool surface of the wall beside her, the texture familiar. As she sidestepped further, her hand encountered a hard, metallic surface instead of the expected drywall. Her eyes widened in surprise, and she paused for a moment, adjusting to the dim light, her breath caught slightly as she focused on the unexpected change.

"I found something!" She announced.

Evert pushed the coats aside, letting a beam of light spill into the dim space. Avra squinted against the sudden brightness, raising a hand slightly as her eyes adjusted. Behind him, Hiob and Hersh leaned in, peering over Evert's shoulders with expressions of curiosity and skepticism, respectively.



"It's a safe," Hersh noted.

Evert flinched at the unexpected closeness of Hersh's voice, then chuckled under his breath.

Avra examined the safe and spotted an equation right next to the coin slot, "I think we are going to need those coins you guys found. Also, Leo should look at this."

Avra poked her head past the coats and looked for Leo. "Leo, we need you in here." She turned her head to Hersh, "I think you have done enough, can you make room for Leo? Thanks"

Hersh scoffed, his lips curling in indignation. His eyes flashed with irritation as he spun on his heel and stomped out of the room, shoulders stiff with frustration.

Leo joined them around the safe, "Another equation for me, I assume."

Hiob smiled "Do you know what to do with this?"

Avra and Evert held the coats out of the way on each side.

Leo glanced at the equation. "Two point sixty five." Hiob and Loreen gaped at Leo, wonder etched across their faces.

Leo glanced back and then shrugged. "That one is easy, I'm surprised you weren't able to get that on your own."

Hersh peeked his head in, "Well, I probably would have, but the girl shooed me out before I had a chance."

A smirk crept onto Hiob's face.

Kalila rushed away and came back to the coat room holding her hands out. "Here, I have the change."

Kalila stepped into the cramped coatroom, carefully maneuvering around the others. She handed the coins to Leo, who was kneeling beside the safe, his fingers already poised to test the slot. Without a word, she backed out again, pressing herself against the doorframe to give them more space to work. Leo shifted the coins in his palm, his lips moving slightly as he counted under his breath. One by one, he fed them into the slot, each dropping with a soft clink. As the last coin slid in, a deep, mechanical click echoed through the coatroom. The group held their breath as the safe door popped ajar. Leo gripped the handle and slowly pulled it open, his fingers disappearing into the dark interior.

Everyone leaned in as he withdrew his hand, the dim light catching on the smooth surface of the final puzzle piece. It shimmered in his palm like a long-lost treasure, reflecting the excitement mirrored in their eyes.



## CHAPTER 19: NOT UNFINISHED

Hersh, Loreen, Leo, Evert, Avra, Kalila, Hiob, and Agathi gathered in a line before the imposing black French door. Its intricate crimped design radiated outward from a golden centrepiece, where four identical puzzle-piece-shaped impressions waited to be filled. Hersh took a deep breath and stepped forward, carefully inserting the first puzzle piece into the door. A low hum of gears shifting and clicking filled the room as the lock disengaged. He stepped back, watching in anticipation. Leo followed, stepping up to place the second piece. The gears turned once more, their sound a rhythmic click that echoed softly as he moved back.

Kalila was next, stepping forward with purpose. She slotted her puzzle piece into the door, and the gears shifted again, this time with a deeper resonance. She stepped back, her eyes glimmering with excitement. Avra, with a determined look, approached and placed the final piece into the door. This time, the gears sang, their clicks forming a harmonious ping-pong rhythm before the final note rang out with a deep, resonant gong.

The heavy door creaked and swung open, revealing a lush tropical landscape that seemed to pulse with life. Towering palm trees swayed gently in the warm breeze, their leaves rustling in soft harmony with the distant sounds of waves crashing against the shore. Vibrant flowers of every hue—bright reds, purples, and yellows—spilled from tangled vines that wove through the dense foliage. The air was thick with the scent of saltwater and sweet, tropical fruit, mingling with the earthy fragrance of damp soil.

Beyond the vivid greenery, a pristine beach stretched out, its white sands

sparkling under the golden sun, meeting the deep blue of the ocean that glittered like liquid sapphire. The sky above was a perfect azure, unbroken except for a few wispy clouds drifting lazily by. It was as though they had stepped into another world, a serene paradise untouched by time.



## **EPILOGUE: KALEIDOSCOPIC COMMUNICATION**

Kalila and Agathi stood in front of the windows, their gazes drawn to the kaleidoscope of colour painted there. Kalila still held the note from the coat room, the paper slightly crumpled from being clutched in her hand.

Agathi stood next to her, pen poised over the paper she'd grabbed from the reception desk. She scribbled quickly, capturing every word Kalila said, her handwriting neat and deliberate despite the urgency in the air. Her brow furrowed in concentration as she wrote, occasionally glancing up at Kalila, her expression a mix of curiosity and quiet determination. "aich."

Agathi scribbled an 'H' after a string of letters and read it out, "Right what is wrong in the North?"

"There is more." Kalila focused her eyes on the windows.

"What else?"

"That's a G-O-O...hmmm...D. I'm getting faster at this." Kalila smiled.

Agathi smiled back, "Good, for both."

Kalila and Agathi sidestepped to see the next pattern.

"L...U...C...K"

"Good Luck? Ghee thanks riddlers." Agathi mocked.

Kalila stepped back from the windows, taking in every detail, "I think 'good luck might be part of the clue."

Agathi shot Kalila a confused look.

Kalila laughed. "Right the wrong in the north? That could mean northern direction, but that's..." Kalila pointed in a northern direction across the room away from the windows.

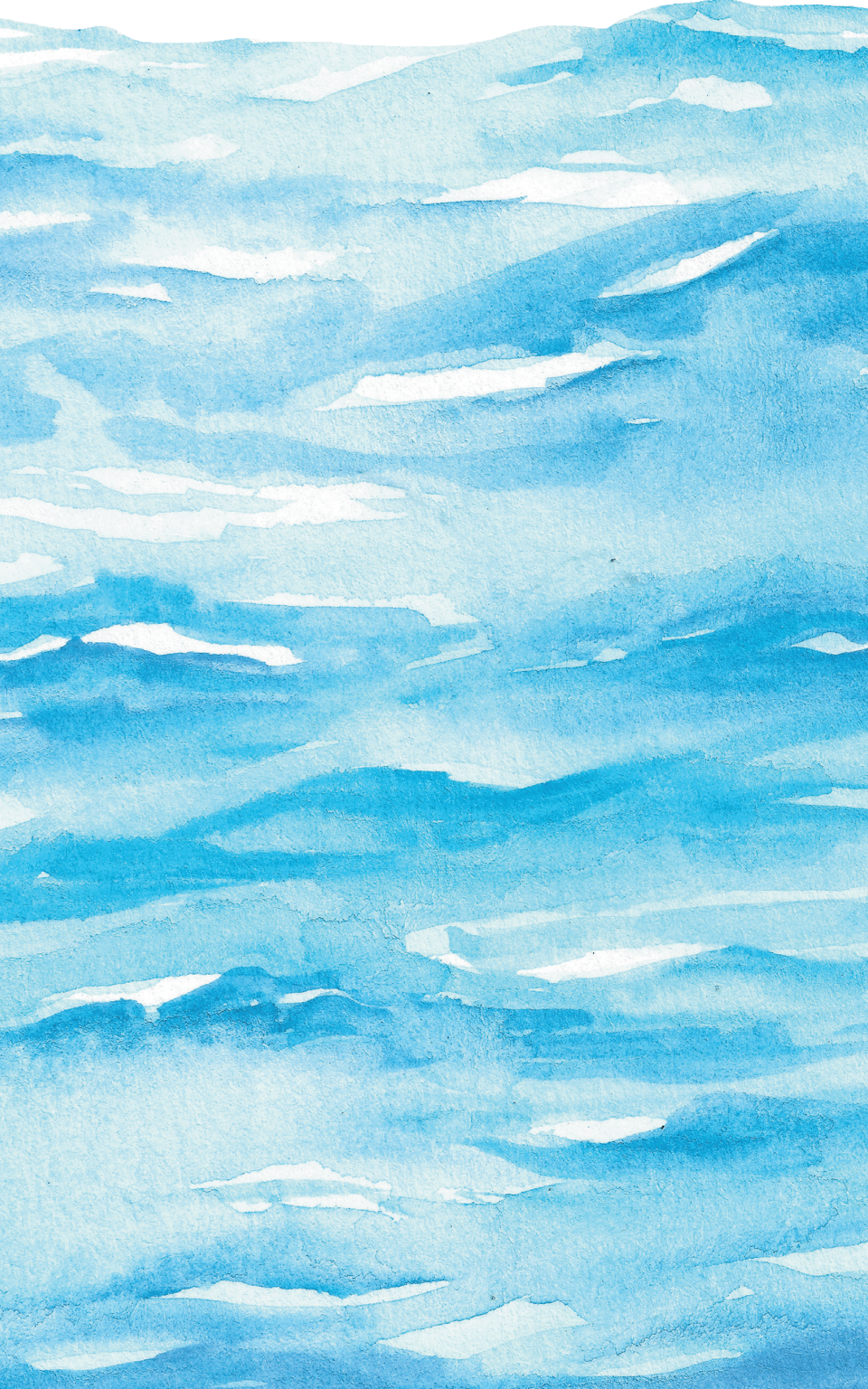
"Or it could mean up," Agathi suggested.

Both of them looked up, their attention caught by the upside-down horseshoe positioned between the two

center windows. The steel shape blended in against the grey wall, almost as if it were not meant to be noticed. They exchanged a glance, their faces lighting up with a quiet, shared understanding.

Kalila lowered into a sumo squat, her legs wide and steady, grounding herself to support Agathi. With a small grunt, Agathi climbed onto Kalila's shoulders, her hands gripping tightly for balance. Shakily, Agathi straightened up, her legs wobbling as she reached up towards the horseshoe. Once Agathi stabilized, Kalila stood. The tension in her body was palpable as she stretched higher, trying to steady herself while Agathi held the window frame for support, both of their eyes locked forward on the task at hand.





Avra steps into a locked room, knowing the only way out is to solve the puzzles hidden within. But she's not alone—seven other kids, each with a unique skill, are trapped alongside her. Hiob, a martial artist, takes charge, while Avra, a polyglot, teams up with Leo, a math whiz, and Evert, a codebreaker, to crack the room's secrets. Kalila, a chemist, uncovers hidden details, Loreen's teamwork proves invaluable, and Agathi's love of fire sparks both solutions and trouble. Then there's Hersh—stubborn, skeptical, and unwilling to play along, refuses to cooperate until absolutely necessary.

They all signed up to test the world's most elaborate escape room island, but knowing doesn't make it easier. With each room more difficult than the last, tensions rise, alliances shift, and the line between game and reality begins to blur. Can they work together to escape? Or will their differences keep them locked in forever?

Little Palm Escape Island is a thrilling tale of strategy, intellect, and collaboration, where every decision could mean freedom—or captivity.

