

## The Exam

Destiny stared out the window as the maglev train hurtled toward its final destination on the coast. Marvelous metropolises bejeweled in a rainbow of digital displays faded into monochrome mud caked ruins of suburbia. She watched the scenes dissolve into one another and tried to see if she could identify the inflection points, where prosperity began to descend into wasteland or hopelessness showed the first signs of promise. However, with each twist of the kaleidoscope came the knowledge that she was getting closer to the end of the ride. Her stomach churned with the uncertainty of her future and what her life might look like after The Exam.

Other students seemed eager and excited about their prospects, filling the train car with a cacophony of chatter.

*I intend to be placed with the Cats, my uncle said they control robots with their minds.*

*I've heard they are intimate with droids more often than with other humans.*

*I can't wait to be adopted by the Halos, I mean, they live in outer space!*

*Isn't their leader like two hundred years old?*

*How long have you been preparing? I've been training since I was four.*

*Only 1 in 500 will make it through, and I heard that some candidates even get killed.*

Destiny fiddled with the charm bracelet her twin sister Fortune had given her before she left. Each trinket had its own story and memory. The rabbit was for that time when they snuck into a crop tower and smuggled fresh vegetables. The feather was a tribute to Carl, the dove they rescued from an abandoned nest. The pearl symbolized Fortune's determination to persevere through her brain injury and transform ugly into beautiful. Destiny hoped she'd have even a sliver of her sister's courage.

The train finally stopped and students scrambled out the doors. Destiny was the last to leave, taking every last second to consider whether or not she still wanted to continue. She didn't really have a choice though. Rejecting a summons meant living as a fugitive. She couldn't do that and still support her sister. She took a deep breath, inhaling the wet and salty air and walked off the train.

The sun had just set and the horizon was glowing like hot iron, bleeding orange and pink hues into the blue dome above. Ornate metalwork accented the chrome train platform, reflecting the final rays of light and making the whole walkway appear as if it were a golden road.

On one side of the gilded path stood the Casualty Actuarial Taskforce, also known as The Cats. They wore black armor that contoured the shapes of their muscular bodies. Their signature black helmets featured a pair of triangular tips as a nod to their moniker. Destiny took note of

their impressive fleet of vehicles, all dark black and frictionless, parked near the entrances to The Underground.

The other side featured the Health And Life Optimizers, or more commonly, The Halos. Their outfits were fitted white jumpsuits that accented their athletic physiques. The suits featured effervescent fabric that hung from their arms and gave the impression of glowing angel wings. Their ivory starship sparkled in the distance, sprayed by the prismatic droplets of waves crashing against its offshore launchpad. Destiny couldn't help gazing heavenward, wondering about life above the earth.

The whole scene reminded Destiny of an ornate chess board. The one she had at home was wooden and worn from the countless games she played with Fortune. The brain injury took away speech and some motor functions, but not her intellect. Chess was still a place she could connect with her sister. Drawing strength from the memory, Destiny walked through the procession toward the behemoth stadium known as The Cauldron.

Thousands of anxious candidates filled the stadium seats, their voices blending into a sonic fog. Destiny found her way to an upper level and as she settled in the lights went dark and the crowd silenced.

A single beam of light spotlighted the center of the arena. Doors in the floor slid open to reveal a circular cutout and a platform emerged through it, rising until it reached its target height. A select group of individuals sat on the top, arranged in a semicircle. One wore black, another white, the rest donned gray robes. Destiny counted twelve of them. Her heart quickened, these were The Sages, and this was the only time they were known to be seen outside their compound. A cold current coursed through her body, and goosebumps rose on her skin. The electricity in the stadium was palpable.

The figure in the center rose from her chair. The screens in the stadium projected her image. She had olive skin, without a wrinkle in sight. Dark dreadlocks hung to her waist. She wore black makeup around her hazel eyes in the style of Egyptian pharaohs. She raised her arms, her palms facing toward the audience.

"Welcome, candidates." Her strong and husky voice echoed through the arena and the crowd released the energy that had been building to that moment. The furor of cheers and applause persisted for several minutes before abating.

"I am Sage Sophia, humbly your *actuarium minsitratus*, and on behalf of my fellow Sages, I express gratitude for your presence."

The audience cheered again, but settled quickly, eager to hear from the legendary person addressing them.

Sage Sophia spun in a slow circle to survey the entire crowd.

“You all represent the pinnacles of humanity. You have demonstrated elite proficiency intellectually and physically.”

Destiny scanned the people near her noting many wore the insignias of their prestigious training schools. These Centers of Excellence had rigorous training programs, tailored nutrition protocols and came with hefty tuition. But passing The Exam meant your family would live like royalty. A few of the audience members were plainly dressed like Destiny and she wondered how closely their story mirrored hers.

From a young age, Destiny had both an insatiable curiosity about life and an ease of acquiring new skills. She mastered a dozen musical instruments and three languages by age seven. She competed in chess tournaments with her sister against adults three times her age. Her athletic portfolio was filled with accolades from martial arts to endurance races. Her favorite sport was basketball and whenever she needed a break from her studies or the drills of her neighborhood she would shoot hoops on the makeshift rim in the alley behind her house until her arms got tired. Her dream was to go pro, to live with her sister in a glittery penthouse apartment. Her sister’s injury disrupted things, and Destiny had come to terms with letting go of the fantasy.

The summoning arrived and revived the dream. If she could pass The Exam, she could get elite medical care and premium living conditions. She wondered how realistic her odds were against those that had been training explicitly for this purpose.

Sage Sophia continued her opening remarks, “In many ways The Exam is a mere formality. Our algorithms have already indicated to us which of you are likely to succeed. But as we like to say, *only fools are certain*. This is your chance to prove we made a miscalculation. Should you advance and join one of our societies, I implore you to examine your heart. Yes, you will be joining an exceptional group of individuals, but our charge is not to lead from above but serve from below, to be ever dedicated to our most noble mandate: *protect humanity*.”

Those last two words appeared on the screens and the crowd initiated a chant. PROTECT HUMANITY! PROTECT HUMANITY! PROTECT HUMANITY!

Destiny screamed the words with everyone else, feeling the unified voice of the masses reverberating in her bones. After a bit, Sage Sophia raised her arms to quiet the crowd.

“I will now introduce the leads of our two great societies and then Sage Sergio will instruct you on logistics. First, let me welcome Sage Solomon of the Cats.”

Sage Solomon was close to 7 feet tall. He towered over Sage Sophia even as he bowed to her in reverence. He wore the same body armor as the other Cats, except instead of a helmet, his

regalia featured a hood adorned in braided fabric that surrounded his head like a lion's mane. His skin was as dark as the suit and the hood made him almost faceless.

“Nearly two hundred years ago,” he began, the bass in his voice booming, “the climate crisis and resulting global conflict nearly made us extinct. It was the foresight of a few actuaries and engineers who developed the first catacombs that gave us a chance for survival. The conviction and courage of these pioneers convinced global leaders to lay down arms and devote the needed collective effort to create the global subterranean community we have today.”

“The Underground gave rise to the Age of Resilience which gave us a path to return to the surface, reimagining everything and rebuilding with protection against catastrophe as a central tenet.”

While he was speaking, historical images and videos accompanied his words.

“But our work is still needed. Human harmony is eroding. Factions and rifts are reemerging in various regions across the globe and threats of conflict, cyberterrorism, and even warfare are once again perils against which we must take precautions. Furthermore, cosmic radiation shreds the atmosphere and disrupts surface life in unpredictable ways. Solutions to these and other problems require creativity and fortitude, and I look forward to finding who among you has what it takes.” Sage Solomon thumped his colossal fist against his chest, “Protect Humanity!”

The crowd resumed the cacophonous echoes of the mandate. Sage Solomon’s words reminded Destiny of an unsettling episode from a couple weeks ago. Her home was in a red light district, and a religious sect known as The Purifiers came through and gassed and torched the neighborhood. There were many deaths. Her mom urged Destiny to rescue her sister, so she threw Fortune over her shoulder and sprinted out of reach of the poison fog and flames. It took days to reunite with her mother who had developed a nagging cough and now spoke with wet rasp. Could joining the Cats be the key to keeping her family safe?

Sage Solomon returned to his chair and was replaced by a svelte androgynous individual, robed in white with a golden band wrapped around their shaved head. They moved with effortless elegance, like an exquisite ballerina. They paused to take in the sea of faces before them, amethyst eyes scanning each individual.

“I am Sage Skylar, and I greet you with love and gratitude. Namaste.” The audience repeated the salutation. “We Halos remember the epoch of crises, because that was the catalyst that sent us to live amongst the stars. Surviving above the earth, surrounded by celestial energy was transformative. We became seekers of harmony and healing, and this led us to uncover many sacred secrets. All of creation and the cosmos is intricate and complex. Chaos can be found

at the microscopic level and across entire galaxies and yet we exist. Through embracing this uncertainty and with the help of Helix, our molecular AI, we unlocked cures to cancer and ways to safely support cellular regeneration. We rid the world of disease during the Age of Resilience and it seemed like we may even defeat death.”

Sage Skylar spoke softly and musically, almost hypnotic, “Alas, our hubris kept us blind. Despite our global prosperity and peace, we are in the midst of one of the worst waves of mental deterioration humanity has ever seen, including rampant addiction, mass suicides and other reckless behaviors. Our last frontier then is this: can we protect humanity from itself? I believe your spirits can come together and deliver new and wondrous solutions. Protect humanity.”

When she spoke her final words, Destiny felt as if Sage Skylar was staring straight into her soul. She had lost her father to an overdose, her mother struggled with depression and it seemed each week brought new horror stories from the residents in her neighborhood. What a wonder it would be to live and work in space, to unlock secrets of longevity, to find a way to reverse her sister’s brain damage, and maybe even bring light to the darkest places.

Once the crowd quieted, Sage Sergio took the podium. Unlike the other sages who appeared ageless, Sage Sergio was ancient. He walked with cane, back arched, and his gray beard hung to his waist, the hairs thin and frail as spiderwebs.

“In order to meet the goals of my colleagues, you must pass The Exam. For ages, our exams were intellectual challenges only,” he began in a quiet voice colored with the accent of his native language, “but once we realized that mind, body, and soul are a collective, we understood we must test physical and spiritual fortitude. Therefore, we built The Cauldron. The Exam has two phases. First, you will enter a labyrinth.”

The stadium vibrated at Sage Sergio’s cue. Below the raised stage of the Sages, hundreds of tunnel entrances opened, illuminated by phosphorescent lights.

“This maze will challenge your athleticism, endurance and problem solving abilities. At its center you will come to the second phase, known as The Moment of Truth, a personalized moral dilemma. How you respond will determine your future and the fate of one or more other humans somewhere on or above the earth. You have 24 hours to complete The Exam, and your time starts now.”

The seats emptied like fans rushing a basketball court after a buzzer beater. Destiny watched the hordes disappear into the tunnels as if there was some large vacuum pulling them into the depths. By the time she reached the stadium floor, she was the last one left. Even the Sages had retreated. She was alone under a giant glowing display that kept track of the remaining time. Time that was depleting while she hesitated.

She scanned the plethora of tunnels, so many paths, so many possibilities. She even wondered if she should abandon this crazy trial completely. She could be back home, nursing her mom and sister. She thought of her family, summoning their guidance from some invisible connection.

“Help!” An agonized voice called from one of the tunnels. “Someone please, help! Anybody!”

Destiny located which tunnel had the tormented cries, and descended. After several flights of stairs, the tunnel leveled out. Amber lamps hung on the walls and illuminated the corridor. She urgently, but cautiously, made her way toward the distressed voice.

The path ended at a chasm. There was no bridge to cross, but the route continued on the other side. The distance across was jumpable, but just barely. A thick glowing blue liquid gurgled and bubbled as it flowed along the bottom of the rift. Falling would be fatal.

The victim hung upside down on the other side. His foot had caught in a gap in the stone and his leg was bent in an unnatural way.

“Hello!” Destiny called.

“Help me!” The man yelled back.

“Hang on.” Destiny wondered what to do. She could make the jump across, but then what? He was too far to reach so she’d have to climb down to him. The rock face looked too treacherous to attempt climbing without rope. He seemed stable where he was. Maybe she should leave him there, surely there was someone monitoring the ordeal and would come by at some point. Plus, time was ticking. The more time she wasted here, the less time she had to work through the rest of the labyrinth.

“I’m starting to slip!” The man called, followed by a howl of pain as his foot shifted a few inches.

Destiny remembered seeing cords and hydraulic cables hanging from the pedestal that supported the Sages. They might be long enough to cover the gap. Hoping that they might work, she turned to retrieve them.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can!” She yelled and sprinted back up the stairs. She reached the top, soaking in sweat, pulse pounding, lungs burning for air. She started yanking at the cords and cables. With a bit of effort, a few broke free and once she amassed enough, she returned to the tunnel.

“I’m back!” She called, thankful to see that the man hadn’t yet plummeted into the goo. He didn’t respond. He must have passed out.

She worked quickly, securing the cables to the staircase rails and uncoiled them as she approached the chasm. Climbing and descending the stairs had tired her legs and she had second thoughts about her ability to make the jump. In the back of her mind she heard her sister's voice *you got this*, an echo from the moment she almost quit her last endurance race through the Andes. A sprint and a leap later, and she was across.

Destiny found a strong boulder, secured the cables, and carefully climbed down to the man. She tied some cords around him and then worked his foot free. He fell and hung limply, bathed in the blue light of the glowing slime below. She returned to the top and hoisted him to safety.

While she caught her breath and massaged her hands that ached from the climb and burned from the cables, the man groaned and regained consciousness.

"Thank you," he muttered.

"Welcome," Destiny said.

"Why did you help me?" He asked. "No one else did."

"Seemed like the right thing to do."

He grunted, "what's your name?"

"Destiny, you can call me Des if you like."

"I'm Sam, and honestly, I would have left me hanging there, like all the others did. Well, at least the ones who made the jump."

Destiny's eyes widened, "some people didn't get across?"

Sam grimaced, "a lot, actually. Came up short and were swallowed up by the goop."

Destiny felt a chill in her spine as she realized the labyrinth was fatal. There was speculation that The Exam was lethal, but no one knew for sure if people actually died. Survivors who didn't pass said that those who didn't come back were being put to work in classified missions. Nobody questioned this. They had no reason to, the mandate of the societies was to 'protect humanity,' so why would their trials be deadly?

"Can you stand?" Destiny inquired.

Sam tried, but winced as he put weight on his bad foot. He could only use one leg.

FOUR HOURS ELAPSED. TWENTY HOURS REMAINING. The announcement echoed through the tunnel.

"Go on," Sam said, "leave me here. I'll only slow you down."

"What are you going to do, just sit here?" Destiny asked.

"I think I can go hand over hand across the cables you've strung across the crevasse. I'll hobble my way up to the top." Sam assessed the tautness of the cable.

Destiny lingered long enough to see Sam succeed. He waved, and disappeared hopping into the tunnel.

Rescuing Sam had taken a toll. Destiny hoped the rest of the journey would be less taxing, but her intuition suspected otherwise. She rubbed the pearl on her bracelet for encouragement, and took her next steps deeper into the unknown.

#### 6 HOURS REMAINING

Time had flown by. Though she was burnt, bleeding and had black tar splattered all over her, Destiny was actually having fun. She was solving ciphers with incredible lucidity. She only had to backtrack twice after encountering dead ends. She had the foresight to think about transporting artifacts from one room to use in another room. The gold tooth in the skull from the room of bones was exactly the right shape and size to complete the mosaic image in the tile room. The odd jeweled scraps of metal she had been gathering along the way finally came together as a sextant which was extremely useful for getting through the room of stars. The only boring part was the two hours she spent answering old actuarial exam questions from the turn of the millennium on dated computers. Destiny was certain she had chiseled away at the time deficit she began with. But only fools are certain.

Destiny turned a corner and reflexively ducked as something swung by her head. A large axe embedded into the wall above her. Wielding the handle was a giant mechanical Minotaur. *Of course they have a freaking Minotaur in here*, thought Destiny as she scurried back to a narrow recess in the labyrinth wall, the hulking machine hot on her heels. Fortunately, the thin passage protected her from the automaton's attacks and gave her time to think.

While she strategized, another candidate came sprinting through the maze. Destiny had only seen a few others in her journey so far. None of them wanted to partner up and they were reluctant to share information. A scream and a sickening squelch painted a gruesome sonic picture of this one's ending.

A series of failed attempts by unfortunate contestants informed Destiny that the robot was lightning quick and heavily armored to the point of being indestructible. There was no way to outrun or evade it. Without military grade weaponry, no way to destroy it.

*I need you Fortune*, Destiny prayed while holding her charm bracelet, *how do I get past this thing?*

It hadn't been easy for Fortune to adjust to her new impediments. Destiny watched a dark cloud consume her sister. Despite her best efforts, it seemed nothing could cheer her up.

One morning, Destiny awoke thinking the house was on fire. A haze of smoke coated the air. She called for her mother, who answered back from the kitchen. When Destiny arrived, she

saw the worst plate of breakfast she'd ever seen: bacon burnt black, soupy pancakes, and scrambled eggs covered in a confetti of shell pieces. Standing at the stove, sporting an apron and a chef's hat, Fortune flipped another flapjack and grinned at her sister.

Destiny looked at her mom, who shrugged and smiled and pointed at the refrigerator. Magnetic letters spelled out the word SURRENDER. Immediately, Destiny understood. Chewing on the crunchy eggs, Destiny was proud of her sister for finding a way to accept her fate and in doing so finding freedom.

Surrender. The word blazed in her mind like a neon sign. Destiny squeezed out of her hiding spot and slowly walked toward the Minotaur, palms facing upward, head hung low. So far, so good, still alive. She was within reach of the robot when it snorted and stopped its foot. Trembling, Destiny dropped to her knees, showing submission. The Minotaur stepped aside.

She was going to make it. She clasped the iron handle of the door and cracked it open. On the other side was a room that was glowing blue and she could see the Sages sitting in a semicircle. She was opening the door wider when she heard the battle cry '*ATTACK!!!*' and a small battalion stormed the passageway. The Minotaur lowered its head and charged at the onslaught, and in doing so clipped Destiny's forehead with the broadside of its horns. Everything went dark.

2 HOURS REMAINING.

Destiny wondered where she was, and why she was so sleepy. Maybe she needed a little more rest. The world came and went in moments of hazy awareness. There was a vague sense of needing to accomplish something, but she could not quite place it. She was so tired.

90 SECONDS REMAINING.

The world was flashing red, alarms shrieking. Destiny's awareness finally snapped into focus. It looked like a bomb had gone off. Chunks of the walls were missing. Bodies were strewn across the floor. The mechanical guardian was crumpled and smoking. Destiny's ears rang, and her head was splitting.

1 MINUTE REMAINING.

She forced herself to stumble through the hallway toward the door at the end. To her horror, the handle had sheared off and there was no way to grip the door to open it. In desperation she banged on the door, hoping that someone inside might be kind enough to let her in.

FIVE. FOUR. THREE.TWO. ONE. END OF EXAM, STOP WHERE YOU ARE.

Destiny collapsed and sobbed, hugging her knees, her back against the door. She had gotten so close, fought so hard, and she would have nothing to show for it. She screamed and her voice echoed down the chamber.

Then the resistance against her back shifted. The door was being swung open from the other side. A familiar head emerged from behind her.

“Hey there Des, what’s got you down?”

Destiny rubbed her eyes and squinted “Sam?”

The man she had rescued at the start of this ordeal nodded as he stood over her in his gray robe, “Sage Samuel, actually. It is good to see you again.”

He helped her to her feet and escorted her into the next room. The circular chamber was bathed in glacial blue hues and Destiny felt like she was underwater. Sage Samuel limped as he walked the outer rim, making introductions to the other robed figures. Sage Stephen, Sage Shaka, Sage Suzuki...

Destiny tuned out because there were other, more horrific things demanding her attention. The Sages were attached to their chairs by a collection of wires and tubes with black fluids pumped through them. Behind each tank was a window which showed the same viscous and luminous blue sludge that ran along the bottom of the gulch. It was what floated in the fluid that upset Destiny the most. Silhouettes of bodies were suspended in the goo, but the shadows were not complete outlines. Arms, feet, hands and many other appendages took the form of melted wax, liquifying slowly.

“You’ve done well child,” said Sage Sergio, hunching over his cane in the center of the room, “are you ready for your Moment of Truth?”

“But I didn’t make it in time,” Destiny stammered, trying to make sense of what was happening.

“Well technically no,” the ancient man said, “however you were the only one to rescue Sage Samuel. And given the pace you were on before you were concussed, you deserve to be in this room.” Heads nodded, agreeing with the elder’s words. “I repeat, are you ready?”

“I guess.”

Sage Samuel placed a controller device of some kind into her hands, then returned to his own seat, and plugged in, attaching cables and tubes to nodes on his limbs and neck. Meanwhile, Sage Sergio approached Destiny, his cane clinking on the metal walkway. He looked up at her, puffy eyelids lined with purple capillaries surrounding dark black dots.

He spoke and she felt the heat of his breath, smelled its metallic scent, “The truth is that we do not protect humanity, we control it.”

Destiny shivered. The emotionless tone was unsettling. Sage Sergio didn't sound boastful, or mournful. It was simply stated as if remarking that the sky was blue or that two and two make four.

“Our original intent was protection. Our goal was ambitious. Could we eliminate all hazards, perils, ailments and illness that faced humanity? To our surprise, we figured it out. Sages Solomon and Sklyar told that story. But, there was a threat to our success, one variable that remained unpredictable. Humanity. People making idiotic decisions. Killing each other. Poisoning themselves. Blowing things up. Leaving the stove on and burning down their dwelling place.”

Machinery clicked and hissed, electronics beeped occasionally, and the iridescent slime gurgled as Sage Sergio narrated. Destiny swallowed, or at least tried to as her mouth was sticky and dry.

“The Great Stagnation took us to the next level,” he continued, “one game changer was the continuous monitoring based prediction system the Halos developed. We began to detect crimes and altercations hours before they happened, then days. We developed a watchlist of particularly volatile individuals. The Cats became a containment force, seeking out and removing these people from society. We kept them under study, and eventually developed a reconditioning program. This was so effective we deployed it to the masses. We laced food with microdoses of psychotropic chemicals. We injected messaging into films, music, school education, and even video games. We utilized cellular radiation to affect brain waves. But even then, while we had slowed the pace of degradation, there was too much to keep up with.”

Sage Sergio paused, licking his thin lips with a black tongue. Heartbeat pounding in her ears, Destiny forced herself to concentrate on what was being said. The Sages, Cats and Halos had an illustrious reputation. They were venerated, almost worshiped as saviours of humanity. The thought of them pulling puppet strings and surveilling people, detaining them and implementing behavioral modification was a bitter pill.

“Desperate for an answer, I decided to change the focus of our attention. We had largely concentrated on the derelicts of society, the ones causing all the trouble. I started to look at the prosperous ones, those who seemed to be thriving in our risk free world. It took a while to figure it out, but then I found it. Adversity. At some point or another, each successful individual had encountered a moment of hardship. Even those who were moderately successful were often the ones who didn't fully indulge in slothful life. Micro-impediments seemed to be enough to keep away the peril of self sabotage. I began to engineer challenge and difficulty at the level of communities and they began to show tremendous success and health and prosperity. From

there, we scaled up and once again humans were victims to accidents, disasters and diseases. However, this time, these things were not random, not unpredictable, but rather carefully orchestrated by the people you see in this room. The Purifiers, for example, are our creation. The attack on your home was planned by us. We are the hands of disaster, the force of destruction, and the dealers of death. The world's prosperity requires our calamities.”

Destiny's hands trembled and her knees weakened. She swallowed down acidic bile that was bubbling up from her stomach. Then a door slid open, gears grinding and groaning. Sitting in a chair similar to the Sages was Fortune. She appeared to be unconscious. Sage Sergio's bony hand grabbed Destiny's wrist.

“That was your Moment of Truth, now for your decision. This place is where we regenerate. The substance you see behind the glass is a primordial soup of engineered bacteria that decompose organic material into its essential DNA building blocks. This gets filtered and processed and reinjected into the Sages with nanotechnology that allows for regeneration. It could also restore your sister's functions. You have in your hand a button that will inject a lethal substance into the tubes and instantly kill all those who are attached to it. You would eliminate the Sages, but you would also kill your sister.”

Fortune's eyelids fluttered as she came to. Destiny could see the alarm in her sister's eyes as she tried to come to grips with the situation. Then they made eye contact. Unspoken words passed between them. They shared concern, comfort, and encouragement in a silent exchange.

Sage Sergio rapped his cane on the floor. “You have been told our secrets, you understand the heavy calculus we must do and are now in the power to join us, or end our efforts. The choice is yours.”

Destiny's mind was fractured. Part of her was enraged, and wanted to hit the button to punish the Sages for wreaking havoc on her home and family. Part of her was tempted, the prospect of healing her sister was alluring, and she couldn't deny that some part of her was enchanted by the prospect of getting her hands on the controls of the world. But that power also felt too dangerous to wield. What gave the Sages the authority to dictate how, way and where misfortune should occur? What kept them from abusing it? How did they know if they got it “right”?

While she wrestled with the ethics, she also began to think of her scenario like a chess match. She played out her moves, trying to think three steps ahead, factoring in what had transpired in the journey to this point. She felt the gaze of Sage Sergio scrutinizing her as she agonized over what to do. She stared back into his beady black eyes and suddenly she had a plan.

“You are a sick psychopath,” she scowled at the old man, “If I join you, maybe my sister is healed, but your dark deeds continue. If I kill the Sages, and my sister, maybe I delay your game of playing God for a while, but that won’t stop you. You won’t share their fate. While they are hooked in, you are not. I can only assume that you will replace them, and the blood I spill would be for naught. Besides, why would you even put them in this situation, if you did not feel that they were disposable pawns?”

Sage Sergio cackled. A smug grin distorted his wrinkled face. “Very clever. But you must still choose. Death or death? Your sister, or your fellow citizens? What are you going to do?”

“Protect humanity” she muttered, adding a choice expletive directed at Sage Sergio. She pounced and smashed Sage Sergio on the forehead with the controller she was holding. He fell to the ground, stunned. Destiny retrieved his cane and started beating him with it. She screamed as she delivered blow after blow.

Finally, the cane broke and Destiny's fit of fury abated. She inspected the carnage, her chest heaving as she fought to recover her breath. Sage Sergio lay still but there was no blood. Instead, smoke rose out of a hole in his smashed skull. His eye hung from his head, suspended by white wires.

Then, the ceiling of the room opened, and the whole room ascended. She found herself back in the center of The Cauldron. Across from her was the original pedestal, and on it the Sages were giving her a standing ovation. In fact, the entire stadium was cheering for her. The robotic Sages around her slumped in unison. Only Fortune remained animated.

“Well done Destiny,” spoke the original Sage Sergio, quieting the crowd. “Your trial was an amplified version of the dilemma I faced when I realized humanity needed adversity. I had to decide to what degree we should control calamity. We had in our hands the ability to orchestrate the fates of our fellows. But, we realized that while we may have believed we would know what, where and when to inflict disasters, our core maxim still held true. Only fools are certain. Who knows what sort of second order events would have transpired if we became the puppeteers of destruction? Instead, we decided to remain blind to chance events, to continue to pursue ways to mitigate and avoid risk. We allow humanity to be humanity, as ugly as that may become, but also as beautiful. You’ve conquered my demons. Please come forward.”

A bridge extended from her platform to the one with the genuine Sages. Destiny looked over at Fortune, who had a tear trickling down her cheek. Destiny had to compose herself, the emotions were overwhelming and her legs were unsteady. Step by step she made her way to the center stage. Sage Solomon assisted her into a gray robe. Sage Skylar draped a lei of white flowers over her neck. Sage Sergio took her hands and kissed her forehead.

“Will you accept the name Serenity?” He asked her. Destiny nodded, warmth spreading in her chest. “Congratulations, Sage Serenity,” Sage Sergio proclaimed to the audience, and then he said the words that every candidate yearned to hear, “you passed The Exam.”